



UDK 792.02(437.31) "199"

DOI 10.51937/Amfiteater-2024-1/76-110

Abstract

The paper examines the interrelation between the political and the comic in the Czech theatre of the early 1990s. It identifies different approaches taken by proponents of various theatre generations to reflect upon the burning issues of the post-communist society during the first years of the social transition. The author argues that the position of performing the political in Czech theatres' repertoires was not as minor as often claimed. A number of theatre makers of the middle generation and the youngest "postmodern" generation did make attempts to criticise the status quo in their productions. One of them, Petr Lébl's remarkable production of *Naši naši furianti* (Our Our Swaggerers), staged at the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague in 1994, is analysed in detail.

Keywords: the political, comedy, Czech theatre, 1990s, post-communism, Petr Lébl, *Naši naši furianti*, Theatre on the Balustrade

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The Comic and the Political in the Czech Theatre After 1989

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Comedy has often been interwoven with the political on stage.¹ According to the cultural theorist Vladimír Borecký, the social context represents an inevitable structural feature of the comic. In terms of content, the comic relates to social and cultural realities, including different social statuses and class, racial, ethnic and national differences, often employing the polarisation between superiority and inferiority (143). In this study, I will focus on the issue of performing such a polarisation on stage and conceptualise such a process as performing the political. In doing so, I will draw on the concept by the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who – while understanding politics as a “set of practices and institutions through which the order is created” (9) – defines the political as “the expression of a particular structure of power relations” (17). This study will analyse how particular power relations related to current social and political issues are performed in theatre and which aesthetic strategies, including the comic ones, are used with what effect on audiences.

As a case study, I will use the Czech theatre of the early 1990s, i.e., during the post-1989 social transition. I will analyse the interrelation between the political and the comic in productions of the newly emerging Czech plays and also in the so-called postmodern Czech productions of the early 1990s (I will explain the usage of the term “postmodern” in the Czech milieu in the next section of the article). In doing so, the production *Naši naši furianti* (*Our Our Swaggerers*) will be analysed in more detail. Directed by Petr Lébl, a “postmodern” enfant terrible of the 1990s’ Czech theatre, it premièred at the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague in 1994. Shortly after the division of Czechoslovakia, Lébl settled on the canonical 19th-century play *Naši furianti* (*Our Swaggerers*), which commented on the Czech national character.

¹ The article discusses topics briefly presented in a chapter of Radka Kunderová’s forthcoming book from Routledge. This study is partly based on research conducted within a project which received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 837768.

Reconsidering the Political in the Post-1989 Czech Theatre

As in many countries of the former Eastern Block, theatre had a significant oppositional role in the late 1980s Czechoslovakia. A growing share of Czech theatre makers were becoming increasingly hostile towards the country's authoritarian regime and covertly voiced their criticism in their productions, often communicating their discontent "between the lines", e.g., through metaphors, so as to bypass censorship. The pro-democratic social role of theatre seems to have culminated in 1989, during the so-called Velvet Revolution that brought down the supremacy of the Communist Party. At the time, theatre makers were involved in shaping the emerging democratic public sphere by calling strikes (in collaboration with university students), organising demonstrations and participating in establishing what soon became the leading pro-democratic political movement. Subsequently, some of them rose to high political positions – a case in point is the playwright Václav Havel, a former dissident elected Czechoslovak president in 1989.

Immediately after the revolution, the Czech theatre repertory experienced a flood of performances of the previously prohibited plays. Most frequently, titles by Václav Havel were premièred, e.g., his plays were staged in seventeen theatres during 1990 (Vodička 557). Such a repertoire was considered highly political since, above all, it was perceived as criticism of the regime that had just been overthrown.

According to the currently prevalent historiographical narrative, the situation of Czech theatre changed dramatically in the early 1990s: faced with financial difficulties and declining audience numbers, theatre abandoned its interest in social and political issues. Czech theatre is, therefore, commonly said to have suffered a crisis and largely lost its political clout (Vodička 557–560). Historians claim that early 1990s theatre gravitated towards a more lucrative, entertaining repertoire and dramaturgy of private issues, often staged within the "postmodernist" aesthetic framework. According to this version of events, post-1989 Czech theatre alienated itself from public affairs and forfeited its former capacity for shaping broader social discourses.

However, I argue that the position of performing the political in Czech theatres' repertory was not as minor as is often asserted.² A number of theatre makers aimed to grasp the new societal situation and provide a critical reflection on it.

The Political and the Comic in Emerging Czech Plays

In newly written plays, the political has usually been interwoven with different modes of the comic. Play texts with a powerful comic dimension were even more successful

² More on this polemical view in Kunderová ("Crisis?").

than those without one. Perhaps the most successful production of the early 1990s, from the perspective of the critics' appreciation and the number of reprises, is *Blaník* (*Blaník*), written by Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák, which premièred at the Theatre of Jára Cimrman in 1990. This play was partly written at the turn of 1988 and 1989 and finalised after the change of the political regime (Šťastná 16). It is based on a playful demystification of the Czech national legend of the Blaník Knights, who represented an army of heroic warriors resting in the mountain of Blaník, always ready to ride out and save the Czech nation should it come under threat. The play performs the knights and other Czech representatives as ordinary figures, mostly conformist, opportunistic and deadly passive. Moreover, the Czech national saint, St. Wenceslas, is portrayed as an egoistic, lazy and mostly absent ruler. Though the authors originally targeted their criticism to the situation of the communist regime, it kept its relevance. The comic contained in the production was multilayered, starting with a plebeian, almost vulgar humour and ending with a highly intellectual one. According to the critic Josef Herman, one could perceive the production either as an essay on the philosophy of Czech history or as a straightforward cabaret comedy. In his view, the audience chose the second option. He argued: "... the reluctance to deduce connections is probably a defence against the danger of recognising oneself in Cimrman's typology of Czech characters"³ (4). In Herman's view, the audiences were not willing to absorb the criticism addressed at their own weaknesses and leaned in for entertainment at someone else's expense. I believe that, especially for this reason, the production gained extreme popularity (it is still in the ensemble's repertoire).

Such a tendency of the audiences to prefer more easygoing modes of the comic to merciless social satire can be found in the reception of a number of productions at the time, including Lébl's *Naši naši furianti*, as I will show later. In the case of another highly successful production of the 1990s, the retro-oriented musical *Hvězdy na vrbě* (*Karel David: Stars upon a Willow*, premièred 1992), it was especially the nostalgia for the "golden sixties" together with simple satire of arrogance and silliness of the nomenclature representatives, that won the interest of the audiences and also an appraisal of critics. Both also applauded⁴ a grotesque portrayal of the post-1989 Czech society in the production *Nahniličko* (*Medium-boiled*, premièred 1995) based on a play by Jan Kraus. On the one hand, the production included social criticism of the Czech narrow-mindedness, immoral behaviour during the communist era, current mafia-like practices in business, etc. The critic Vladimír Just appreciated such a dimension, arguing that "... it is indisputable that, unlike most other plays, the self-evident absurdity and grotesqueness as a basic tone is not a self-serving (generational?) gesture, but rather serves a mercilessly analytical diagnosis of social and human relations in a way that few cultural projects after November 89 do" (4).

³ Translations from Czech used in this study were translated by RK.

⁴ The play was awarded second prize in the 1994 Alfréd Radok Award competition for best drama.

On the other hand, the audiences seem to have enjoyed especially the more accessible dimension of the production based on a farce-like image of an elderly married couple absorbed in their repetitive banal fights, leaving the sociocritical level behind.

Indeed, it seems that humour, which would satirise and question more fundamental features of the post-revolutionary reality, was not welcomed much by society at the time. An argument for such a claim can also be seen in the critics' and theatres' disinterest in the play *Růže pro Markétu aneb Večírky revolucionářů* (*Roses for Margaret, or Parties of Revolutionaries*, 1990) authored by the later famous novelist Michal Wievegh. Immediately after the Velvet Revolution, his play dared to satirise the role of – in general adored – students in it. Employing a form of a conversational (tragi)comedy, the author criticised the egoism and personal ambitions of some students put above the common good and likened their post-revolutionary practices at the Czech universities to communist ones. Perhaps also because of the intensity of such criticism, Wievegh's play failed in the competition for the best Czech play to which the author submitted it (Kubíčková 2009) and was not staged until 2009.⁵

Looking at these examples of plays which dealt with the current social situation using different registers of the comic, it seems that the audiences strongly preferred more gentle comic modes to the severe ones and accepted grotesque and satire in case it was aimed at characters they did not identify or sympathise with. Following Zdeněk Hořínek's thinking on comedy, such an approach seems natural:

The disposition for a comic experience can be blocked in the perceiver if he/she is affected by something that he/she considers to be an essential component of his/her personality or social position: if innermost convictions, profession and life goal, status, political or otherwise group affiliation are perceptibly attacked. (*Knihy o komedii* 204–205)

Therefore, according to Hořínek, one is capable of laughing at himself/herself only to some extent, as long as his/her own integrity is not in question. Exactly in these terms, Czech theatre-goers seem to have enjoyed the comic experience as long as it did not threaten their integrity.

Besides the plays that reflected upon Czech society's situation in a predominantly light-hearted tone, rare attempts at a rather serious reflection on the status quo emerged. These were accompanied by great expectations of the theatre milieu since a new (serious) play was intensely desired to bring light to the complex and challenging post-1989 situation and to orient the audiences.⁶ Perhaps also due to the over-stimulated anticipations, critics' evaluations of new plays were predominantly negative and disappointing.

⁵ At the National Theatre in Brno, Reduta stage, directed by Thomas Zielinski.

⁶ Such expectations were expressed, e.g., at the debate of theatre people organised by president Václav Havel in 1994 ("Od českého divadla...").

Typically, the new play texts were accused of being dichotomous and having an insufficiently powerful effect on the audiences. On the day of the Velvet Revolution's fifth anniversary, the National Theatre in Prague premièred a new play called *Nobel* (*Nobel*), written by renowned 1980s playwright Karel Steigerwald. Portraying current Czech society, he drew attention to the issue of how the communist past still influences the present and how powerful figures of the past regime still hold power. The playwright characterised his piece as a "comedy", but such a genre-characterisation was not quite accurate. According to the literary historian Milena Vojtková, the play combined elements of absurd drama, grotesque, farce and satire and included numerous allusions to works by Kafka, Havel, Albee and Ionesco. The scholar argues that the language construction of the play came close to anti-drama, lacked dramatic tension and was based on the thesis that it was necessary to come to terms with the past and to take responsibility for it (35–36, 39).

The director Ivan Rajmont followed the playwright's vision of the societal situation as a chaotic decay in his staging, which did not overcome the weaknesses of the play. Though the critics appreciated the endeavour to deal with adversarial issues of the time, they mostly criticised the dichotomous form of both the play and its production and their superficiality. In reviewer Zdeněk Hořínek's view: "Common current problems are taken up in that trivialised form, as we read about them daily in the newspapers, without a deeper focus and intervention, without particularising concretisation, without taking the matter to extreme consequences. The resulting impression of the production is therefore an unwanted paradox: burning issues leave the viewer cold" ("Ještě jednou Nobel", 5).

Also, from the audience's point of view, the production was not very attractive, despite the fact that its cast included popular actors.⁷

Similarly, dissenting response met the next eagerly awaited production – *Podivní ptáci: tragikomedie* (*Strange Birds: Tragicomedy*, premièred 1996) by another playwright who gained his reputation in the 1980s, Antonín Máša. It was staged once again at the National Theatre in Prague. The play oscillated between naturalism and symbolism and, without much sense of humour, contrasted a rotten, corrupted universe of the post-communist media, arts and business on the one hand and a private, rather isolated life in a village, surrounded by the comforting nature, on the other. Even in this play, the communist past was portrayed as a powerful agent of the present. For instance, the protagonist, whose telling name was Aleš Hero (Aleš Hrdina), faced criticism from his son Marek for his public refusal of the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia:

⁷ The production was in the repertoire for only one year, reaching twenty-three reprises (Online archive).

ALEŠ: [...] What a person will not do for the happy smile of his children.

MAREK: (suddenly makes a violent lunge) For example, he gives his resignation in the newspaper and then takes a seriously stupid formal questionnaire and writes there that he does not agree with the entry of troops.

ALEŠ: (stiffly) Sorry! With the occupation of their homeland.

MAREK: My communist homeland. Tremendous heroism, Mr. Hero. Did you respect those communists so much that you wasted twenty years of your life because of them?

ALEŠ: I respected myself, Mark, not them. [...]

MAREK: A child needs to grow up well and have enough, Dad.

ALEŠ: I only know now, Mark, I swear. I used to think, stupid me, that I wouldn't be able to look you in the eye today if I acted like a whore back then. (Máša 80)

The critics found such an elaboration of the current societal situation inaccurate and passionately refused the production as dichotomous, bitter and out of touch with reality. The critic Josef Mlejnek argued:

I do not claim that it would not be possible to subject our current specific “universe” to criticism by bringing some of its postulates to ad absurdum or by pointing to timeless values that we shy away from and cannot avoid in the final reckoning. I do not claim that something similar is excluded in advance as an ideological construct, coming either from the right or from the left, and that art does not belong to see the apparent and real chaos of the current “reevaluation of values” in more universal vanishing points than instructions on how we could “acquire” as quickly as possible. However, this is not (not even by mistake) the case with Máša's *Strange Birds*. I lack a minimal degree of depersonalisation in them, and there is not even the slightest trace of elementary credibility in the characters, who do not even behave as if they were “from life”, let alone that there is even a trace of some promotion or fateful typification in them. (188)

Clearly, the critic welcomes criticism of the profit-oriented Czech society, but he does not find it in Máša's play, especially due to completely unconvincing characters. Neither the reviewers nor the audiences were attracted to the title.⁸

Generalising these examples, it seems that Czech critics welcomed the performance of harsh social criticism on stage, however, the aesthetic quality of the plays written by representatives of the older generation did not manage to meet the critics' criteria. In this context, the audience's lack of enthusiasm for such titles seems logical – the spectators were not attracted to the productions of poor artistic quality.

The youngest generation of theatre makers, usually identified as “postmodern”, took a different approach to performing in Czech society. The term “postmodernism” gained substantial currency in Czech theatre discourse in the mid-1980s as a terminological

⁸ The production was in the repertoire for about a year and a half and reached twenty-nine reprises (Online archive).

borrowing from theories of architecture and literature and was commonly invoked to denote new deconstructive tendencies emerging in the work of amateur theatre groups Doprapo, Pražská pětka and Ochoťnický kroužek. Typically, the ensembles that were labelled as “postmodernist” did not explicitly address political issues on stage due in part to the continued existence of censorship. Therefore, this up-and-coming aesthetic acquired a reputation for being apolitical (Kunderová, *Eroze autoritativního diskursu* 95–100) and stayed on well into the early 1990s, when former amateur directors established themselves as prominent figures of professional Czech theatre, Petr Lébl being one of them, alongside Jan Antonín Pitínský and Vladimír Morávek.

Czech “postmodern” theatre has generally been associated with genre-blending, formal experimentation, emphasis on style and metaphor, and deconstruction of both the plot and the coherent interpretation of a production. As for the comic aspect, irony, playfulness and parody have often been listed.⁹ A number of features of Czech “postmodern” theatre aesthetics seem largely to match the attributes of postdramatic theatre as famously described by Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999).

Though less directly, compared to the theatre makers mentioned above, the representatives of the “postmodern” generation did reflect on the status quo of the early 1990s as well. The director Jan Antonín Pitínský wrote the play *Pokojíček* (*The Little Room*, premièred 1993), a tragic grotesque with horror-like features and elements of psychological drama (Hruška 596). The play introduces relations in a degenerated family, non-functioning communication among its members and a literally deadly effect of parents’ toxic patterns on their offspring. The repulsive family portrait could also be interpreted as a synecdoche of the post-communist Czech society, in which the heritage of the communist past torments the young generation. Petr Lébl, who directed the world premièred of Pitínský’s work, added numerous references to contemporary life, such as a poster of Michael Jackson on the wall in a girl’s room and in doing so, he amplified the play’s relation to the current social reality.

Even more importantly, Pitínský authored the play *Buldočina aneb Nakopnutá kára* (*Bulldogness, or the Kicked Cart*, premièred 1995) in which he reflected upon the emerging capitalist era of the 1990s (Pitínský, “Autorská poznámka” 905). He used a form of a horror-like folk play based on drastic grotesque comedy and portrayed the Czechs as utterly greedy, bloody and irresponsible, living in a perverted world without any moral limits. The production was directed by another prominent figure of Czech “postmodern” theatre, Vladimír Morávek. It was performed in the style of fairground theatre, based on grotesque folk humour as well as alienation effects (Korejs 5). It premièred on a studio stage of one of the Czech regional theatres. Unlike *Pokojíček*,

⁹ Such comic modes have also been listed in the anglophone literature on “postmodernism”, e.g., in Linda Hutcheon’s works as stated in Gantar (75).

which was performed at a high-profile Divadlo na zábradlí in Prague and praised by reviewers, it did not receive much attention.

To summarise, it appears that the “postmodern” generation did not ignore the reflection of contemporary societal issues but employed a more stylised and figurative language than the older one. However, critics usually did not pay attention to the political dimension of the “postmodern” productions since they focused on their aesthetic level.

The Comic Conflicting the Political in Lébl's *Naši naši furianti*

If we look at Lébl's *Naši naši furianti* in this context, it turns out that it was probably the most obvious and significant “postmodern” attempt to criticise contemporary Czech society in the early 1990s. Therefore, I will pay detailed attention to how Lébl performed the political and what role the comic played in this production since his approach was significantly different from the ones applied not only by directors of the older generations but also by Lébl's “postmodern” contemporaries.

Generally speaking, in Lébl's aesthetic, one could easily point out a number of attributes listed by Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre*, especially visual dramaturgy, non-hierarchy, simultaneity, semantic density, plethora, musicalisation and physicality. In contrast to most “postdramatic” directors, however, Lébl did not deconstruct the play text. On the contrary, drawing on a meticulously close reading, he typically developed numerous playful, often intertextual, associations and allusions.

Lébl's work has been theorised by several Czech theatre scholars, most notably by Zdeněk Hořínek (“Metafora a metonymie...”) and Jan Císař (“Setkání dvou věků”). However, the political aspect of Lébl's work has been mostly overlooked until recently (Lukáš 2015). It is fairly safe to assume that Petr Lébl, in fact, held a critical attitude towards the rule of the Communist Party – it is no coincidence that he was an active participant in the revolutionary events at the Prague Theatre Faculty (Lébl and Král 64–65) and directed a pro-democratic happening *Žádné násilí* (*No Violence*) in November 1989 (Lukáš 127). Lébl openly declared his stance concerning the relationship between theatre and the political in the early 1990s. In an interview, he said: “... when a person proclaims they're doing political theatre. It's as if they said they were doing a blue blue colour” (Lébl and Tučková 27). This confirms that he indeed regarded the political dimension as an integral part of theatre, even if his work has rarely been perceived in this way. Arguably, his production of *Naši naši furianti* reveals his standpoint more clearly than his other productions.

Lébl's decision to stage *Naši naši furianti* reflected the sociopolitical climate of

the early 1990s. Apparently, he conceived the intention to stage the play in early 1993, immediately after the division of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of an independent Czech Republic (Prchalová). Lébl settled on *Naši furianti*, a canonical 19th-century play written by Ladislav Stroupežnický in a realist style, which premièred at the National Theatre in Prague in 1887. Set in a 19th-century Czech village, the plot revolves around a dispute over the election of a new night watchman. The play satirised Czech society, especially Czech villagers, and emphasised their stubbornness, narrow-mindedness and pride. The 1887 premièred sparked a controversy (*Dějiny českého divadla III* 219–220), owing to the fact that the playwright subverted an idealised, pastoral image of the Czech country, established during the Czech national revival movement of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the playbill, Petr Lébl prefaced his introduction by quoting the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who exhorted the Czechs to recognise and mend their flaws, to do away with the “lingering small-mindedness plaguing our life as a nation” (1). Collaborating with playwright Lenka Lagronová, Lébl adapted the original playtext (Stroupežnický, Lagronová and Lébl), directed the production and also designed the set. In his production, he followed and amplified Stroupežnický’s sarcastic view of the Czech identity and added topical references to current social and political issues. The adaptation also underscored the immorality of the rural community: while, in the 19th-century play, the head of the village council shoots a hare – as in, the rabbit-like animal – while poaching, in Lébl’s production, he accidentally shoots a man called Hare – and the community decides to conceal the murder from police investigators. Thus, the villagers become accessories to a capital crime and sharing this secret and guilt further strengthens their communal bonds. What might be implied here is an analogy between the perverted loyalty of the village community on stage and the corruption and criminal practices that accompanied the transformative social processes of the 1990s, particularly with respect to the privatisation of state property.

When directing the production, Lébl employed a number of aesthetic strategies related to the comic. Zdeněk Hořínek identified the following principles: intertextuality, quotation, irony, hyperbole, blasphemy and parody, all of which he linked to “postmodernism” (*Naše furiantství* 4). Therefore, it is obvious that the political was intensely interwoven with the comic on stage. For instance, Lébl deconstructed myths about Czech greatness by ironising several commonplace emblems of Czech national mythology, including the legend of the Blaník Knights. However, he did so in a different manner from the Theatre of Jára Cimrman. In Lébl’s production, one of the main characters, the military veteran Bláha, represented one of the Blaník Knights. Clad in heavy medieval armour, he embodied a purely clumsy and anachronistic figure whose comic nature was compounded by numerous physical extempore. Lébl

also parodically employed the 15th-century Hussite war song “Ktož jsú boží bojovníci” (Ye Who Are the Warriors of God) quoted from “Má vlast” (My Homeland), a 19th-century symphonic poem composed by Bedřich Smetana.¹⁰ Both played an iconic role in constructing the Czech national identity.

Moreover, the director challenged the image of Czech society as nationally and racially homogenous. He emphasised the Jewishness of the characters of the innkeeper and his wife, who even performed the Czech national anthem on stage, again, with comic, or rather tragicomic overtones, since the publican played the melody on beer mugs. Lébl also added German lines to the part of one of the lead characters, the head councillor, hinting at the pre-1945 German population of the Czech lands or, alternatively, the period of German domination of Czech culture between the 16th and 19th centuries under the rule of the Habsburg Empire. The staging also broached the subject of race: Lébl cast a Guinea-Bissau-born black actor in the minor role of a village teacher, raising the issue of racial plurality and also the issue of the Czechs’ relation to otherness and foreignness. At the time, xenophobia was hardly a rare occurrence, due in part to the country’s forty-year isolation from the more ethnically diverse Western countries.

In 1999, the Czech sociologist Jiřina Šiklová commented on the condition of the 1990s Czech society in a way that largely corresponded to the issues Lébl performed in his production:

Whether we want to or not, we Czechs will have to get used to living with people of different races, customs, and religions. Perhaps our fear of everything foreign is what makes us insist that the traditional relationship between men and women be maintained within the model of the family. [...] In a way, our attitude is not so far from the attitudes of Islamic fundamentalists. Any group that feels threatened tends to hold together and emphasize its “differentness” with the help of various symbols.

It was precisely those symbols that received an ironic treatment in Lébl’s production.

Moreover, the issue of femininity and the social position of women, as well as the somewhat fluid relation between gender identities, was highlighted – also through cross-gender casting – in the production. Lébl situated the issue of women’s emancipation at the intersection of multiple perspectives. The ambiguity of performing femininity in the production concerned the fact that foregrounding the feminine element in the play could not be perceived as a wholly supportive or even feminist gesture. Such an approach to the political can be labelled as deconstructive since it initiated and performed dynamic competition of various perspectives and mindsets.

In any case, the very act of drawing attention to the agenda of women’s social position seems to have been political itself, especially considering the social climate of the

¹⁰ More on music in Lébl’s production in Cvrčková (2016).

early 1990s. At the time, feminist issues were being sorely neglected by the Czech public discourse even though some crucial matters, such as women's social status, were far from settled. In the early 1990s, women were earning 25 per cent less than men – an inequality that persisted despite the change of regime (Havelková 202).

In other words, it is beyond question that Lébl's production tackled important social issues of the day. In 1994, he was among the first theatre makers, if not the very first one, to put xenophobia, gender and women's social position on the public agenda. But to what extent was Lébl's innovative contribution to the public debate noticed by the public sphere? Lébl's young audiences likely understood these efforts. However, when reading reviews of *Naši naši furianti*, it is obvious that most reviewers either completely overlooked or attached little importance to the social and political poignancy of the production.

The reviews were predominantly concerned with matters of aesthetics and whether Lébl's "postmodern" treatment was a good match for Stroupežnický's canonical material. The political elements were barely commented upon; if so, such remarks were rather passing and vague. One of the rare characterisations of the production's both political and comic dimensions was published by the critic Petr Pavlovský: "[Lébl's production] ... is full of grotesque, hurtful comedy, which hits its target like a carpet bombing" (10). However, the critic did not specify which target Lébl hit. In other cases, remarks on the sociocritical layer of the production were offhand and superficial. Casting a black actor with a foreign accent was only briefly commented on as an extravagant gesture or just a joke. Only occasionally did the reviewer see a reference to the phenomenon of foreign guest workers called *Gastarbeiter* (Pavlovský 10). As for Lébl's emphasis on the Jewishness of some characters, only one critic, Jana Machalická, briefly linked this emphasis to a criticism of xenophobia. However, she did not appreciate the way in which he did so since she found it over-simplifying (4). Regarding the issue of femininity and feminism, the critics discussed the production's emphasis on female characters, but they mostly did so only superficially and negligibly. Some argued that the production staged matriarchy (Pavlovský 10), while others claimed that it "cast a new light on the relations between masculine and feminine power in what is seemingly a patriarchal order" (Hořínek, "Platný pokus o klasiku" 9). Generally speaking, it is obvious that the reviewers did not give serious consideration to the social and political dimensions of the issues at hand. Why was it so?

Firstly, I argue that most of the critics did not consider xenophobia, gender identity or women's social position as major items on the public agenda – it is as if their enactment on stage slipped their attention, which may also be due to the fact that these issues were marginalised in the public debate at the time.

Secondly, I ascribe the omission to the reviewers' unfamiliarity with the innovative treatment of the political as present in the production. During the communist era, the political in Czech theatre was articulated in neat dichotomies, "us" versus "them", while in Lébl's production, it attained pluralistic, heterogeneous and deconstructive qualities.

Thirdly, and this is closely linked to my previous point, I believe that the critics were unable to process the political when performed in a postmodern/postdramatic aesthetic code which was still relatively new to them and hence not easy to decipher. As I have already mentioned, Lébl staged the social issues with a high degree of ambiguity, rendering it hard to translate into the language of the established discourse.

This ambiguity was even multiplied by the light-hearted comic tone of most of the performance, which seems to have overshadowed the more critical layers of the work. That was especially the case when a less experienced, typically rural audience participated in the performance (Erml 10). The society, as portrayed by Lébl, was perceived as humorously foolish rather than menacingly corrupt and depraved. Audiences seem to have been captivated by the vitality of the community performed on stage, and their laughter became rather a celebration of the collective sharing of the given moment and the less problematic version of reality and the Czech identity. The exhilarating comic dimension was heavily involved in creating a strong bond between the actors and the audience. The experience of theatre's liveness and togetherness generated pleasure in the spectators and might have weakened their willingness to take a rational distance, which would apparently be necessary to stimulate rather unpleasant self-reflection.

If we take a different perspective, the pleasing mode of reception might have stimulated a critical reflection at a more general level. According to Hořínek, comedy instantly includes a certain amount of criticism:

Comedy defends the natural rights of life and ridicules all manifestations that damage, maim, paralyse and threaten life. It laughs – with sympathy – even at the essential human narrow-mindedness and inadequacy, which is the opposite of joyful vitality. [...]: manifests sense through nonsense, order through disorder, fullness through partiality. [...]

Humour as an attitude towards the world is, in this sense, both a critical knowledge [...] and an essential guarantee of human integrity. (*Knihy o komedii* 145–146)

Perhaps audiences of the time most needed the reinforcement of one's own integrity within the joyous shared experience of a theatre event. That would indicate that the Czechs' integrity was rather vulnerable then.

To conclude, Lébl's production proves that despite the existing narrative of the 1990s Czech "postmodernist" theatre being rather apolitical, its representatives did handle political issues on stage, even if these were not always recognised and understood. The

comic played an important role in this process. If we look at its relation to performing the political in the context of overall developments in Czech theatre at the time, it appears that the audiences preferred comic productions. In doing so, a rather kind, consensual mode of the comic represented an acceptable prism for reflecting upon the recent past and present. Such a perspective did not threaten the integrity of the audiences, and that seems to have been of crucial importance.

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