

**PERFORMING CULTURES:  
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE THEATRES IN  
POST-COMMUNIST PRAGUE**

by

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The presence of English-language theatres (ELTs) in Prague in the nineties coincided with the ongoing transition to a market economy in the Czech Republic, as the English language itself became increasingly the international language of business and culture. Under Communism, Czech theatre had been highly political through veiled protests against the system of power. After 1989, Czech theatre began moving into spheres of commodification and tourism. How the ELTs in Prague negotiated their place in a shifting society reveals a performance of identity. The ELTs tracked the turning points in Czech post-revolutionary history of the 1990s.

The history of the ELTs has been constructed through personal and telephone interviews and emails, as well as reviews, articles, manuscripts and production videotapes. Companies analyzed include North American Theatre, Small and Dangerous, Black Box International Theatre (which began its life as Studio Theatre), Exposure, and Misery Loves Company. Structurally, this investigation covers three distinct periods of the Czech transition: the optimistic early nineties; the mid-nineties, when the market economy flourished along with increasing instances of corruption; and the late nineties, when disillusionment affected the Czech Republic and most of the ELTs vanished.

ELTs in Prague primarily used four production strategies: 1) representing the Performer's Culture; 2) representing the Host culture in English; 3) bi-cultural and/or bi-lingual productions, including nonverbal work, collaboration with Host culture theatre companies, and multicultural casting, and 4) presenting plays about culture clash. Theoretical underpinnings for this study include intercultural performance theory, reception and semiotic theory, historiography, and theories of globalization and cultural tourism.

The achievements and disappointments of the ELTs reveal underlying principles of production and reception applicable not only to Eastern Europe but to any region with a growing

English-speaking subculture. Findings include the observation that production strategy and mission are less significant than the cultural and economic contextualizing of the production company. Curiosity about the English language dwindles as its usage grows. ELTs that were most successful worked structurally with strategy number three in terms of performance venue, schedule and style, contributing to the cultural life of the city rather than self-consciously using theatre to cross borders.

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## PREFACE

The joy of writing a history of living subjects is the ability to do research at a beautiful site like Prague's Café Slavia, overlooking the Vltava River across from the National Theatre. However, sifting a coherent narrative from conflicting memories and impressions was often challenging. At times it seemed that everyone involved in a production had a conflicting view. Finally I had to limit my interviews and primary sources in order to start on the work itself, though I continued to solicit corrections and contacts by email. Use of the internet and email made tracking subjects down much easier than it would have been otherwise (and is itself a fascinating site of globalization), and my subjects were often very generous with their time and materials, but I am aware that there are yet perspectives and documents that I was unable to obtain.

Many individuals allowed me to borrow for extended periods their scrapbooks, photographs, videotapes, writings and personal journals, especially (but not limited to) Randall Lyman, Laura Zam, Raphie Frank, Deborah Morrison<sup>1</sup>, Richard Toth, Victoria Jones, Leah Gaffen, Christopher Lord and Jesse Webb. I am particularly indebted to Elizabeth Russell of Black Box, who had very organized archives with which she trusted me. Nancy Bishop first invited me to work with Black Box in the summer of 1997. Because of her openness, I have also been able to consult my own journals and memories for that period. A grant from the Andrew Mellon foundation for pre-doctoral dissertation research enabled me to spend the autumn of 1998 and all of 1999 in Prague, where I was able to conduct many interviews, use the archives of the Divadelní ústav (Theatre Institute), and continue my work with Black Box. The Divadelní ústav continued to assist me, both personally and through their online database, after I left Prague. Kent Thompson of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival graciously allowed me a paid leave of

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<sup>1</sup> In the interests of clarity for the reader, I refer to interviewees primarily by the names they were known by in Prague, rather than using subsequent married names; hence Victoria Shobris rather than Victoria Dougherty, Victoria Jones rather than Victoria Toth, and so on.

absence from my job as literary manager and director of the Southern Writers' Project in 2003 to work on this project. My translators, Ondřej Skovajsa, Jana Strasiková, Gabrielle Forrest, and Sylva Ficová have been invaluable. Paul Kail photocopied a mountain of materials; Lori Fly assisted with tape transcriptions. My brothers Stephen and Matthew pitched in with copy-editing and electronic conversion. My father Leo Orel first piqued my interest in the internationalization of Czech theatre through his reminiscence of his study of *R.U.R.* at Boston College. Set designer William Hollister, still resident in Prague, has been an invaluable witness and friend. The late Dr. Jarka Burian's emailed correspondence, as well as his books on Czech theatre, has shed light on cultural nuances.

This project has deeply benefited from the attention of my committee, Dr. Kiki Gounaridou, Dr. Tom Rimer, Dr. Kathleen George and Dr. Nancy Condee, to compositional style, production analysis, intercultural theory and Slavic culture. Committee chair Attilio A. Favorini has always been available with constructive feedback and advice. Finally, I am profoundly thankful to my mother, Beverly Orel, who now knows this subject nearly as well as I do through her many weary hours as transcriptionist and copy-editor.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre is a point at which the intellectual and spiritual life of the human community crystallizes. It is a space in which the community can exercise its freedom and come to understanding. — Havel, "International Theatre Day," Prague, 27 March 1994

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Prague became a destination for a large group of “Yaps” (the media’s nickname for “Young Americans in Prague”), who formed an expatriate American community that was often compared to the "lost generation" of the twenties. The presence of English-language theatres (ELTs) in Prague in the nineties coincided with the country’s ongoing transition to a market economy in the Czech Republic. Much of that transition centered on embracing and rejecting Americanization, as well as Britishization, as the English language itself became increasingly the international language of business and culture. The ELTs, mostly founded by idealistic young teachers of English from America, Canada and Great Britain, both resisted and exploited this trend.

The concept of English-language theatre in non-English speaking countries was not invented in Prague in the 1990s. Some, like the Geneva English Drama Society (GEDS), have existed for many years; GEDS was founded in 1922. The English Theatre of Vienna has been operative since 1963; Vienna is also home to the International Theatre of Vienna, founded in 1980. The Suburban Players of Argentina have been active since 1963. Berlin is home to Friends of the Italian Opera/The English Theatre (despite its name, not an opera company, but an English-language theatre company), founded 1990, and the Grundtheatre, founded 1991. The Madrid Players in Spain have been operative since the 1970s. Many others exist; with new ones forming all the time, as English becomes ever more entrenched as the language of international business and popular culture. The Prague ELTs are of particular interest because of their timing, appearing as they did so soon after the revolution in a country that, unlike Germany, had not had a large base of English-speakers. They are also of interest because of the deep social meaning

that theatre as an institution has in the Czech lands. The English-speaking community of Prague in the early nineties primarily came to participate in a cultural shift. They used theatre deliberately to try to build bridges, before their own expatriate community and that of their host community had approached equilibrium, let alone stability. Ordinarily, ELTs are founded by long-term residents, often in collaboration with schools or local professional theatres. Immigrant theatres in all languages typically arise to ease expatriate homesickness and teach new citizens the customs of their new home, but expatriates in Prague were there by choice rather than dire economic need or political oppression. They knew they could return home at any time, and their theatre often eased not homesickness but ambivalence about their very presence in Prague. How the ELTs in Prague negotiated their place in a shifting society, and how they were received, reveals a performance of identity that was always ambivalent, and that altered as the 1990s progressed. The ELTs tracked the turning points in Czech post-revolutionary history of the 1990s. Although their founders were not Czech, the theatres were subject to all of the conditions impacting other arts groups and businesses in Prague in the nineties, often finding them even harder to overcome, as these companies did not usually receive state support. Some, like Black Box, received grants from the city of Prague, and Misery Loves Company benefited from many of the subsidies made to its host Czech company, Kašpar. In the early part of the nineties, just as the country experienced a wave of optimism, the ELTs benefited from the love of America that seemed to pervade the city.

In the mid-1990s, as the country experienced a fruition of privatization as well as scandals and revelations of corruptions, the ELTs also began operating on a more professional basis. Companies that had begun as teacher-driven community theatre struggled to become professional organizations. Some benefited from the higher standards brought to bear on English-speaking enterprises in general; others floundered and suffered the same overextension of resources that beset many new enterprises in Prague. In the late 1990s, as the Czech Republic struggled through what President Havel described as a "*blbá naladá*" (bad mood), the ELTs also experienced disillusionment and decline. Beset by problems from within and without, the ELTs changed leadership, altered their missions, or folded altogether. Attempts at mergers that would have shared resources failed. Though at one point Czech critics viewed their work as the next

German theatre in Prague—i.e., a vibrant and permanent subculture—by 1999 all of the ELTs of the nineties had essentially vanished.<sup>2</sup>

What does their presence in Prague reveal about Czech society, American idealism, intercultural possibilities, and the rise of a global economy? In this volume I investigate the histories of these groups and their intercultural activities, as well as contextualize them in the growing English-language subculture in Prague. Their achievements and disappointments reveal underlying principles about ELT production and reception. The lessons learned from the ELTs of Prague are applicable not only in Eastern Europe but to any country with a growing English-speaking subculture.

English-language theatre companies such as North American Theatre, Misery Loves Company, Black Box, and Exposure used theatre to build bridges and explore identity, both their host cultures' and their own. Their strategies of intercultural collaboration and investigation tended to cluster around four basic approaches, which I have called "ELT production strategies": 1) re-presenting Performer's culture, by producing recent hit plays, or plays that explored typical aspects of Performer's culture; 2) re-presenting Host culture (in this case, Czech), often for English-speaking tourist consumption, by producing Host culture plays in English translation; 3) bi-cultural and/or bi-lingual productions (often of plays or stories well-known in the host culture), including nonverbal work, clowning, collaboration with Host culture theatre companies, and multicultural casting, and 4) re-presenting plays that specifically addressed issues of culture clash. Drawing on intercultural theorists Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, Marvin Carlson and others, I analyze the companies' individual projects as well as their organizing principles to uncover how closely they fulfilled their ideals.

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<sup>2</sup> The fate of Misery Loves Company is debatable; a group led by Daniel Fleischer-Brown under that name continued until 2001, but the original founders of Misery Loves Company objected to his use of the name. Fleischer-Brown changed the troupe's name to Miloco in 2001. It is of course not uncommon for performing arts groups to continue with altered missions and no connection to former personnel. Misery Loves Company was an ensemble-based group; since Fleischer-Brown's company had no members of that ensemble nor their approval it seems a historical truth that the mid-nineties troupe Misery Loves Company had vanished in Prague by 1999.

## SECTION 1.1            LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION

When I set out on this journey in 1997, I was aware of only two English-language theatre companies in Prague: Black Box and Misery Loves Company. I had planned to include a section on the English-Language Initiative (E.L.I.) at Divadlo Archa, a section on the English version of the Czech musical *Dracula*, with attention to the rise of Western musicals, largely unproduced in Communist Czechoslovakia, in post-Communist Prague. I also planned to investigate educational theatre, and to investigate the use of English in tourist theatres. As I immersed myself in the study, I discovered that the work of the two companies extant in 1998 rested on several companies that had folded but left significant traces behind. These companies included Peter Krogh's North American Theatre, Elizabeth Russell's Studio Theatre (the immediate precursor to Black Box), Victoria Jones' and Clare Goddard's Small and Dangerous (which merged with Misery Loves Company to become Big Knees), and Richard Allen Greene's bilingual company Exposure, later run by Mark Corner and Michael Halstead. In consequence, I have chosen encyclopedic inclusion only for those companies that most directly originated and created the ELT "scene" in Prague. It seemed more in keeping with a project of tracing ELT activity against the transitions in Czech society to track several of the companies as they adjusted to different periods rather than try to cover all of them superficially. In particular, Black Box and Exposure went through distinct changes of leadership and styles that fundamentally altered their approaches to their work and their position in Czech society.

While commercial musical theatre, theatre-in-the-schools and tourist theatres are all elements of the general cultural scene in Prague; they also encompass such different horizons of expectation and production that a full history of each would be a volume in itself. An article that I wrote on Divadlo Archa for the journal TheatreForum, published in Summer/Fall 2001, covers that Czech venue for international and multicultural theatre; I draw on it herein for relevant information about Archa's work but otherwise have not included Archa in this investigation. The English-language Initiative at Archa exists in dialogue with the ELTs, and certainly is a bonus to the English-speaking community in Prague, but is not per se an ELT. Although tourist theatres in Prague often make use of English, particularly in song-lyrics that blend Czech and well-known English phrases, they reflect not the ELT scene but the growth of international tourism, and are not included here. Nor does this study investigate the full scope of ELT in the

schools. Educational theatres that did not grow out of an existing ELT are not covered, including the Bear Project, led by David Fisher, which tours Czech schools, and Christopher Cowley's early-90s company *O Nesmrtelni Chrousta* ("On the Immortality of the Beetle"), which performed in English but was comprised entirely of Czech students from Charles University. Leah Gaffen's English-language work in the schools is touched upon because of her work with Misery Loves Company.

I have included [production charts](#) of the companies I cover in this investigation in the appendix. The charts list plays produced, dates and venue. I did not include a full cast and crew list for each production but did include significant appearances. In the second appendix I provide brief overviews on two individual directors, one production and one company that were not included in this investigation. Their work played in dialogue with the work of the ELTs, although they were not working in the same model. Their work tended not to reflect as overtly the turning points in Czech history as did the productions by the ELTs, whose organization was often more dependent on Czech infrastructure than a single director's one-time presentation needed to be.

[Christopher Lord's](#) medieval pageants and poetic dramas involved many of the personnel from the ELTs, and were widely attended. Director [Peter DuBois](#) never founded a company, but his deconstructions and experiments also existed in dialogue with the work of the ELTs, and he directed a production in Black Box's third summer festival. A description of the production by a one-off company called [Re: Kvést](#) of Peter Brooks' *The Birds* is included because it achieved an international and multicultural aesthetic that so many of the ELTs claimed to pursue.

[Artists for Prague \(AFP\)](#), the company included in the appendix, did work on a similar model with the other ELTs, but the goals and structures of musical and commercial theatre are too different from the goals of the other ELTs to include AFP in the body of this study. I have included an overview of Artists for Prague (AFP) in the appendix. AFP had a particularly large impact both on the ELT practitioners, and on the Czech theatre scene. Many of the Czech actors involved in founder Jesse Webb's productions of *A Christmas Carol* and other musicals have gone on to larger careers in Czech musicals, particularly in the "first Czech musical," the 1995 production, *Dracula* (whose English-language version was directed by Ewan McLaren, one of Misery Loves Company's founders). Webb played Javert in the first Czech production of *Les Misérables* in June 1993, and was a Prague celebrity whose activities were covered not just in



the English-language newspapers and in theatre reviews in Czech media, but also in Czech tabloids and general interest magazines like Vlasta, a women's magazine complete with recipes, knitting instructions and gossip.

[Chapter Two, "1990-1993: 'This is the Time When all Americans Are Good'"](#), covers the first ELTs in Prague: North American Theatre, which folded after one year; Studio Theatre, which evolved into Black Box Theatre; the international student theatre "squat," Asylum, which lasted only six months but lingered in memory as the lost Atlantis of English-language theatre; and the new-play company Small and Dangerous, which under the name Big Knees merged with Misery Loves Company in 1994. The companies reflected the euphoria and optimism of their Czech host culture, even after the "Velvet Divorce" of 1992, which split Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Culture", covers the rise of professionalism and ambition in the ELTs, often with an unfavorable reception from Czech critics 'when the product onstage did not match the glossiness of their marketing. The chapter continues the history of Black Box in its most prolific period, during which it formalized a two-pronged mission to present Czech plays in English for tourists in the summer (when Czech theatres are dark), and contemporary English-language plays during the winter season for Czechs and expatriates. It also experienced its first change of leadership. This chapter also traces the development of Exposure, Richard Allen Greene's bilingual company, which attempted a more formal mode of organization from its inception. Exposure too saw its leadership change.

[Chapter Four, "1994-1996: 'The role of the American Community in Prague cultural life cannot be disregarded'"](#), also covers the middle nineties, but focuses exclusively on Misery Loves Company (MLC). MLC achieved a strong reputation with Czech critics and worked very closely with its host company Kašpar, and could not easily be compressed into a chapter with Black Box and Exposure. Unlike any other ELT, all of its productions ran in true Czech repertory style, some staying in the repertoire for well over a year; it also functioned as a true ensemble, with a company of actors and directors who worked collaboratively together. One of its most significant productions, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, was in fact a co-production with Black Box; in the interests of space and cohesiveness it is included in this chapter—Black Box's input in the show was primarily administrative rather than artistic. This production received a great deal of attention from Czech critics. Both of the chapters that deal with the middle nineties

demonstrate the ELT response to the scandals and corruptions that began to emerge in the Czech Republic.

[Chapter Five, “1997-1999: ‘Now that Dunkin’ Donuts was there, our job was done’”](#), describes the disillusionment and decline of the ELTs at the end of the century, reflecting the cynicism and depression of much of Czech society, as the revealed corruptions became a fact of life. Black Box under the leadership of Nancy Bishop established itself as the prominent English-language theatre in Prague. In productions of Brian Friel’s *Translations* and Steven Berkoff’s adaptation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Bishop began collaborations with Czech actors and designers that helped restore the company’s reputation. At the same time, the company experienced a growing divide between Bishop and her Board of Directors. Misery Loves Company’s founding artistic director, Richard Toth, returned to America in the summer of 1997, and with him went most of the forward motion of the ensemble. By the end of the nineties, all of the established ELTs in Prague had folded. In this chapter I consider their demise and aftermath, as well as look at alternative models of English-language theatre in Budapest, Zagreb and Beijing.

## SECTION 1.2 APPROACHES TO ANALYSIS

My investigation of English-language theatre in post-Communist Prague can be considered a microhistory, since it fits Giovanni Levi’s definition that it “takes the particular as its starting-point (a particular which is often highly specific and individual, and would be impossible to describe as a typical case) and proceeds to identify its meaning in the light of its own specific context”(106). Levi points out that there are two possible ways of reading social context, the first reads “anomalous” incidents by fitting them into a coherent system, the second reads the anomalous incident by “revealing the hidden incoherencies of an apparently unified social system” (107). Primarily, this work is a history. But, before analyzing the history of the ELTs I first had to construct it, relying primarily on personal and telephone interviews, as well as reviews, articles and other documents. This task, though interesting, was often complicated, as participants mixed up dates, contradicted themselves, and referred to “missing link” documents which were supposedly “in a woodshed in Oregon” or were missing from Prague’s Klementinum

library. The world wide web and the proliferation of personal computers was not in place in Prague until the late nineties, which affected the accessibility both of the plays and documents of the ELT workers and the newspaper articles that reported their doings. In general, ELTs were run by young people working with shoestring budgets; management, publicity and archiving were low priorities.

By situating the works of the English-language theatre groups against the changing face of Czech society in the 1990s, I use both of Levi's approaches at once. To say that there was no coherency in Czech culture would be an exaggeration, but moments of disconnect to a larger social system were the norm in the nineties. This study would read very differently were it to be set ten years later or earlier. There was some English-language theatre in Prague even under Communism, in the schools and through occasional touring shows, and there is some continuing English-language theatre today. However, the meaning of English-language theatre under Communism and since 1999 is radically different than it was during the nineties, a period in which the country experienced a rush of euphoria, disillusionment, normalcy and hope in quick succession.

Of particular interest in the work of the ELTs is in how the groups performed their own culture, or their yearning for the "other," while their productions continued to reflect the changes happening around them in Czech society. Czech theatrical performance in the nineties was also concerned with exploring national identity: "Who Are We?" in the March 1997 edition of Svět a Divadlo analyzed the representation of national character in several puppet plays (Karel Král). "Dramaturgical Bets and Inspiration Through Certainties" by Jan Kerbr in the same issue also questioned the performance of Czech identity.

Theoretical underpinnings to this study include intercultural performance theory, reception and semiotic theory, historiography, cultural studies, and theories of globalization and tourism. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert in their 2002 article "Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis" in TDR (The Drama Review) suggest a taxonomy of intercultural theatre, distinguishing among such categories as intracultural, transcultural, cross-cultural, (small m) multicultural, (large M) Multicultural, ultracultural, precultural, postcultural, metacultural and others. Applying these definitions is subjective, and often located in a critique of the producers' intentions. Lo and Gilbert include postcolonial theories in their definitions, and their perspective

on the political subtext has been helpful to understand the self-consciousness of most of the American artists.

Patrice Pavis' "filtering system," an "hourglass" with eleven steps, models "the way in which the *mise-en-scène* presents and transmits a foreign culture to the public, and what operations come into play in this cultural transfer using theatrical means" (*Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* 184). A Pavisian analysis of a production could have yielded a chapter-length production essay, but to keep the balance between historical and production analysis I limited my use of Pavis to observations in his essays rather than attempting to apply the hourglass.

Marvin Carlson's seven stages or phases between the categories of the culturally familiar and the culturally foreign have been particularly useful to apply to individual productions. Carlson's steps are:

1. The totally familiar tradition of regular performance, in its regular form institutionalized, either by the profession, as in the Noh theatre or by the regulating culture, as in traditional national theatres like the Comédie Française.
2. Foreign elements assimilated into a tradition and absorbed by it. The audience can be interested, entertained or stimulated by these elements, but they are not challenged by them. Often they do not even recognize them as foreign.
3. Entire foreign structures assimilated into the tradition instead of isolated elements. Examples might be the Noh plays of Yeats or the Ninagawa *Medea* or *Macbeth*.
4. The foreign and the familiar create a new blend, which is then assimilated into the tradition, becoming familiar. Molière's absorption of the Italian commedia into his new comic style might be an example of this.
5. The foreign itself becomes assimilated as a whole, and becomes familiar. Examples would be the unchanged commedia dell'arte in France and Northern Europe, Italian opera in England or the American Western film in Japan.
6. Foreign elements remain foreign, used within familiar structures for *Verfremdung*, for shock value, for exotic quotation, or perhaps simply to demonstrate their Otherness. An example would be the Oriental dance sequences in David Hwang's recent Broadway success *M. Butterfly* or the Russian sequences in *The Uncle Vanya Show* by the New York experimental company, Irondale.
7. An entire performance from another culture is imported or re-created, with no attempt to accommodate it to the familiar. A recent example in America would be the dance performances of Butoh ("Brook and Mnouchkine: Passages to India?" 82-83).

The groups themselves shifted in their degree of cultural interaction not only from each other but also within a given season, often dramatically so. Because the companies defined themselves in

relationship to one another by their mission statements and manifestoes, I have also applied my own definitions of ELT production strategies to the theatres I cover, as a way of tracing their tactics towards achieving their goals of border-crossing.

With the exception of North American Theatre, all of the ELTs used more than one production strategy to achieve their goals of border-crossing. Misery Loves Company's most well known production, for example, was the highly collaborative 1995 co-production of [Carlo Gozzi's \*King Stag\*](#) with Jakub Špalek's Kašpar theatre, performed in English with Czech narration, with Czech and English-speaking actors. It could be described as Stage 3 by Marvin Carlson, and using ELT production strategy number 3. In the same season, Misery Loves Company produced [Craig Lucas' \*Blue Window\*](#), with an entirely American cast and a guest director from America. It had no Czech involvement in the selection or production of the play, and in terms of Carlson's seven stages, fits stage 7, and ELT strategy number 1. It may also be helpful to think of the new plays produced by Misery Loves Company through Big Knees correspond to Lo and Gilbert's definition of "ghetto theatre." As with immigrant theatre worldwide, the poetics of the outsider was always present in their work by expatriates for expatriates, although their immigrant status was only temporary, and not driven by severe hardship. Critic Jitka Sloupová acknowledged that distinction in her 1995 essay for [Svět a Divadlo](#) "theatre of the expatriates":

The dictionary meaning of the word *expatriates*, as our English speaking Prague co-inhabitants call themselves, is *emigranti, vystěhovalci, vyhnanci*<sup>3</sup>. I guess that it would be difficult to throw such a status on them, the very words have a much darker undercurrent for us and the sense of never coming back... Let's call them "expatrioti" then, for the lack of a better word. Lately I realize that as an occasional visitor of Prague English speaking performances I must sit up. The feel from such evenings often exceeds the expectations, set up by the modesty of the artists (106-107).

The reception of the ELT productions often pointed back to differences in perception of culture. Primarily I analyze reception through close readings of reviews and videotapes, as well as interviews with practitioners and audience.

### **SECTION 1.3            GLOBALIZATION AND ENGLISH-LANGUAGE THEATRE IN PRAGUE**

At first glance Prague might seem an unpromising site for an investigation into performances of national identity through theatre. The Czech Republic westernized very quickly after the 1989 "Velvet Revolution," and although exposure to Western theatre and popular culture was restricted under Communism, it certainly existed. Differences between Czech and Western theatre are less apparent than differences, for example, between Balinese and Western theatre. The Czech tourist industry has been steadily growing, both with tourists to the Czech Republic, and tourists from the Czech Republic traveling internationally as well as around the country (see Večerník, Krejci and Machonin). However, theatre in Czechoslovakia held a central position of meaning for audiences that is unlike the position of entertainment and mild social protest that it usually holds in the west. Under Communism theatre was often a forum for veiled commentary. As Václav Havel explained at a discussion in Plzeň on a panel including Ronald Harwood, Arthur Miller and Tom Stoppard:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Immigrants, Exiles, Outcasts

<sup>4</sup> This panel took place at the second international theatre festival held in Plzeň, Divadlo '94, coinciding that year with the 61st congress of the International PEN Club held in Prague at the same time. The panel was held as an activity for PEN members; Ronald Harwood was its current president.

Under our conditions, theatre, literature—culture—played a certain elevated role, because for long periods of our history we lived under unfree conditions, and the role of national spokesman, as it were, or someone who articulated the general will, was played by culture ... In the revolution, of which we are now commemorating the fifth anniversary, it was, of course, important that after the students the actors and the theatres mobilized themselves in a surprisingly active way. They went on strike, and meetings started to take place in all the theatres. Well-known faces which the whole country knew from television began to lend themselves to the Revolution, and thus did a lot of work for it (“Not Only About Theatre”).

Those events that caused Czech theatre to lose its symbolic position—the Velvet Revolution and the overturning of the Communist government—also brought it attention from English-speaking idealists who descended on Prague. All through the 1990s, academic articles and newspaper reports questioned the future of Czech theatre as it lost its symbolic position as a site where coded protests against the state could be received and shared without censorship (see Fischerová; Bishop; Greer; M. Morrison). What Czech theatre would become—mere entertainment, a nostalgia-based pastime, or a forum to explore current events (including the growing internationalization of Prague)—was uncertain in the 1990s. Part of the transition to a market economy included an influx of resident visitors and English-teachers, many of whom wanted to participate in the cultural life of Prague. Though the incursion of English-speaking expatriates was widely reported in the press in America and Canada, little scholarly work has been done on their interaction with the Czech community. Their work was not always taken seriously by the English-language press in Prague, or by the Czech critics. There were however, some notable exceptions, particularly the 1995 joint production of Czech Kašpar Theatre and the English-language group Misery Loves Company of [Carlo Gozzi's \*King Stag\*](#). A collaboration between two ELTs, Misery Loves Company and Black Box, on a production of [Tony Kushner's \*Angels in America\*](#), was also widely covered by the Czech Press. Though successful ELTs arose in Berlin and Vienna in the nineties, the ELTs of the nineties in Prague did not succeed in establishing themselves as permanent, professional arts organizations within the Czech community. Their attempts to do so not only mirrored the transitions in the Czech Republic as the country privatized and entered a market economy, they also reflected the growth of and resistance to Americanization and globalization in Prague.

Westernization and perceived Americanization in the former satellite countries of the Soviet Union are ongoing topics of interest not only to arts critics but also to economic and

political theorists. Samuel Huntington, in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, argues that:

In the post-Cold War world, culture is both a divisive and a unifying force. People separated by ideology but united by culture come together, as the two Germanys did and as the two Koreas and the several Chinas are beginning to. Societies united by ideology or historical circumstance but divided by civilization either come apart, as did the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Bosnia, or are subjected to intense strain, as is the case with Ukraine, Nigeria, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, and many others...(28)

Huntington is specifically concerned with resistance/acceptance of American culture in transitional nations. His thesis suggests that as society becomes more and more global, national identity is increasingly based on perception and reception of cultural messages. Huntington also makes a crucial and unsettling distinction between the spread of Western consumer goods and the sharing of culture. In addition, Huntington argues that the wide-spread use of English as an international language does not presuppose a growing universal civilization, but instead it demonstrates:

...*intercultural* communication; it presupposes the existence of separate cultures. A lingua franca is a way of coping with linguistic and cultural differences, not a way of eliminating them (61).

Given Huntington's concerns about the significance of culture as opposed to consumption, as well as the misleading dominance of English, the emergence of English-language theatre in Post-Communist Prague becomes a historical phenomenon with more significance than a history of amateur colonial theatricals.

The emergence of nationalism in the post-Soviet states occurred during a period when multinational corporations and global communications were busy seemingly erasing the significance of nationhood. Thomas L. Friedman, in his examination of globalization *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, concurs with Huntington that "globalization does not, and will not, end geopolitics. ... But it does affect it" (250). Friedman is more optimistic than Huntington however about the spread of American culture through such corporate franchises as McDonald's, laying out "the golden arches theory of conflict prevention" (252). His theory posits that countries with McDonald's franchises in them would rather not go to war with other countries, which have McDonald's, and that governments ignore that preference for globalization at their own peril:



It's McDonald's or Kosovo—you can't have both. And the Serbian people chose McDonald's. ... In the end, they wanted to be part of the world, more than they wanted to be part of Kosovo (252-253).

Interactions in such seemingly unpoliticized spheres as tourism and theatre can also have a lasting effect on political and economic interactions. Amy Chua, in a chapter called “Why They Hate Us” from her book *World On Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, explicitly connects the world-trade center bombings of 9/11 with resentment of American culture:

Anti-Americanism around the world is, among other things, an expression at the global level of popular, demagogue-fueled mass resentment against a market-dominant economy. ... Like the ethnic cleansing of Tutsi in Rwanda, the suicidal mass murder of three thousand innocents on American soil was the ultimate expression of group hatred (231).

Chua does not suggest that such a violent backlash is likely in Europe. Instead the European response to American cultural dominance has triggered “Euronationalism,” defined as “concrete economic and political policies that, while not exactly inimical to U.S. interests, are clearly directed at offsetting America’s global power” (243). Free-market capitalism is so closely associated with America that any downside that comes with it, such as fewer safety nets for unemployment, health care and pensions, are associated with America as well. That theatre practitioners are concerned with Chua’s findings is demonstrated by Chua’s presence as a featured speaker at the Theatre Communications Group biannual convention of 2003.<sup>5</sup> Precisely because the differences in Czech and Western theatre are not readily apparent, they are filled with deep implications that are often overlooked. Theatre in Prague during the transitional period of the nineties revealed cultural attitudes and tensions in Czech society during its rapid growth towards internationalism. As a subset of that transition, English-language theatre in Prague contributed to the changing Czech identity.

#### **SECTION 1.4           CZECH THEATRE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

Czech national identity has historically been displayed, invented and challenged in the theatre. Two competing conceptions of Czech identity are often performed: the shabby but wry "little Czech," and the image of an exalted Czech nation. According to Ladislav Holý, Czechs view themselves as envious, conformist, cunning and lazy, but they believe the Czech nation is cultured, well-educated and democratic (76-77). Whether culture should in turn reflect-back images of “Czechness” is widely debated:

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<sup>5</sup> Theatre Communications Group (TCG) is the national organization for American theatre, with over 425 member theatres, and many artistic, management and advocacy programs and publications, including the monthly magazine [American Theatre](#).

Dvořák's music is considered by some to be inferior to Smetana's because it is too cosmopolitan and not Czech enough; Smetana's music is considered inferior to Dvořák's by others because it is too parochially Czech (Holý 77).

The tradition of the highly cultured nation is linked to *kulturnost*, (a term that loosely means “culturedness,” but has ethical connotations as well): Holý uses as examples excerpts from letters in Czech newspapers that criticize such social problems as pornography and cruelty to animals by raising the question, “Is this a sign of a cultured nation?” (87). Playwright Václav Havel performed both as the nation’s conscience and epitome of *kulturnost* through his written protests against the Communist regime during his imprisonment in the seventies. Although in the later nineties he received a healthy amount of criticism, his position as moral leader remained intact, and he was a very popular president.

Czech national identity has always been explicitly linked to language. The Czech national movement began in the nineteenth century in opposition to an Other: during the national revival, identity was based in conscious opposition to the Germans, who dominated the Czech lands. The Czech language only became a literary language from the nineteenth century on. Like Irish Gaelic in the early twentieth century, the use of the Czech language was a marker of nationalism. The National Theatre was founded in 1881 as a cultural act of resistance to the Austro-Hungarian empire; its first production was Smetana's opera *Libuše*, a fable glorifying the origins of the Czech nation. The construction of the National Theatre was paid for by the Czech people rather than by an idealistic intellectual elite (Day, “Introduction,” vii). At its inception, then, Czech theatre involved community support, language and national identity. The country of Czechoslovakia itself depended on the Other for its existence: the first declaration calling for an independent state uniting Czechs and Slovaks, and seceding from the Austro-Hungarian empire, was signed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on 30 May 1918. U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing had expressed support for the drive to independence the day before. Intellectual Tomáš G. Masaryk spearheaded the movement, working within the U.S. to mobilize the immigrant communities (Fawn 1, 4; Agnew 169). He became the first president of Czechoslovakia when the country established its independence in the “bloodless revolution” on 28 October 1918, and, like Havel after the “Velvet revolution” of 1989, became a moral symbol for the Czech people. His name, along with Havel’s, was shouted by the gathering crowds in Wenceslas Square in November 1989.

Czech theatre as performance of identity always presupposed a foreign Other, even when it borrowed from it. The Devětsil, an avant-garde left-leaning group in the 1920s, considered themselves part of an international movement, and developed a form called “poetism” based on allusion, invention and metaphor. The theatrical tradition of poetism lingered in Czech theatre under communism when the heavy-handed ideological techniques of Socialist Realism were mandatory on Czech stages. Student performers Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, with the composer Jaroslav Ježek, consciously created images of the "little Czech" at satirical cabarets, which included jazz, wordplay and topical sketches, at the Liberated Theatre until the theatre's demise in 1938. The Liberated Theatre had been founded by directors Jiří Frejka and Jindrich Honzl in 1926 as part of the Devětsil (“A Brief Panorama of Czech Theatre”). Voskovec and Werich became so popular they became known as “v + w,” and the Liberated Theatre became associated with them. Their sketches became a "living newspaper" as they dramatized responses to current events, including Hitler's annexation of Austria and greed for the Sudetenland (Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation* 35-36; Day, “Czech Theatre from the National Revival to the Present Day,” 257-258). Virtually every Czech theatre artist since has looked to Voskovec and Werich for inspiration.

Another group whose impact and make-up presupposed the Other was the consciously international Prague School Structuralists, originating in the thirties. Though not theatrical practitioners, the Prague School Structuralists' complex semiotic system included a body of work on theatre semiotics, which, although comprised of work by several different scholars, is a coherent approach to the interpretation of performance. Michael Quinn describes their internationalist ideals:

The culture of the Prague School was conceived, like the Czechoslovak republic between the wars, as a multi-national, multi-ethnic collaboration, as a microcosm in the form of a critical community. Most of the founding scholars in the Prague School, like Vilem Mathesisus (who theorized the ‘functional sentence perspective’), began their careers in a colonial Hapsburg culture, where their work had been considered second rate simply because of the language and location in which it was carried out (4).

Having experienced marginalization because of the language they spoke, and because for many years in the Czech lands German had been the language of authority and civic functions, the Prague School Structuralists worked hard to avoid linguistic hierarchies in their own group.

They understood that language expresses authority. These ideas, and the history of language and its connection to theatre, affected the reception of an English-speaking subculture in Prague in the nineties. As part of the transition to a market economy, Czechs wanted to learn English quickly—leading to an influx of young teachers of English who often felt uneasy about an implied cultural imperialism.

One of the Prague School's defining principles was the conception of theatre as a social institution rather than as an art form separate from the society that produces it. They consciously investigated the frame of performance, expressly foregrounding theatre's central position in society. This seems to hark back to the Czech idea of *kulturnost*, the idea of the Czech nation as intrinsically democratic and educated. Their approach connected theatre to different uses and social forms, including ritual and children's theatre, and took account of audience participation in the construction of meaning. Since 1948 and the Communist rise to power in Prague, the work of the Prague School has been relatively unknown in the West. Michael Quinn suggests that a contributing factor may be language (his analysis underscoring the opinions of the Prague School Structuralists themselves) and the fact that members of the group worked on examples from Czech literature and took Czech linguistics as examples (5).

The Communist regime frowned on formalism and any plays that did not glorify the "positive hero" (Trensky 3-9). A dry period followed, during which many theatre artists retired or emigrated. After the death of Stalin in 1953 and the growing "thaw" in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the government was more tolerant about artistic experimentation. The flowering of culture and idealism following Alexander Dubček's January 1968 declaration that the Czechs would have "Socialism with a human face" dwindled when 200,000 Warsaw Pact troops and 5000 tanks invaded Czechoslovakia in August of that year. Many emerging artists were subsequently prevented from working in the theatre. Most of the socially critical plays of Havel were first produced in translation in Western Europe, and were not heard in their native language until after 1989.

A thaw and refreeze also conditioned the reception of popular music. The subversive power of jazz and rock and roll were linked explicitly with the English language: early groups had names like Hell's Devils, Crazy Boys and Beatmen. In 1970 the Communist regime forbade the use of English in Rock and roll culture: bands could no longer sing in English, take English names, or cover songs from British or American bands (Remet, "Rock Music in Czechoslovakia")

58). Rock and roll had become so important to the Czechs that it was the 1976 trial of an underground Prague band, Plastic People of the Universe, that led to the forming of Charter 77 (Keane 245). Charter 77 was a loose organization of dissidents, including disaffected party members, writers, actors, intellectuals. There was no structure beyond several spokespersons; the charter was published in European papers including Le Monde and The Times and broadcast on the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and the BBC. Before the fall of communism it had attracted over 1800 signatories, despite the government's harsh reprisals against its supporters. Theatre artists who signed could expect a quick job change from the arts to street sweeper. It is not surprising then that when the government created an "anti-charter" and had it declared by the official artists' union and read in front of the National Theatre, more than 7000 artists signed. The movement officially disbanded in 1992 (Horaková, "25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Charter 77 Human Rights Declaration"). The Beatles were and are beloved in Prague, and that love is expressly politicized in the enshrinement of John Lennon at the John Lennon wall. In response to a 1983 push by the Communist regime to suppress rock music with its "philosophy of nihilism and despair" the Jazz Section of the Musicians' Union gathered a group of rock fans on the fifth anniversary of Lennon's death, where a wall of the Priory of the Knights of Malta had been turned into a shrine to Lennon. As if a precursor to the Velvet Revolution four years later, hundreds of people arrived, and, singing "Imagine" and chanting "Abolish the Army" they crossed Charles Bridge (Burton 134-135).

The growing freedoms and feeling of optimism of the sixties, expressed in the beat of rock and roll, led to new theatrical experiments. Jiří Suchy, a former bass player, founded Divadlo Na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade) with Ivan Vyskočil; the two met at Reduta, a pub with a rock and roll pedigree: it was the venue where Czechs first heard Elvis Presley albums (Ambros 28). Otomar Krejča, the head of the drama company at the National Theatre, created a laboratory with Karel Kraus and designer Josef Svoboda for new works in the late fifties, encouraging among others Milan Kundera and Josef Topol. Director Alfréd Radok, considered by many to be the most important post-war Czech director, had had difficulty working after the Communists came to power in 1948, but in 1954, with the thaw, was allowed again to work at the National Theatre. He also worked with Krejča at Laterna Magika (the

Magic Lantern Theatre), creating a memorable production of John Osborne's *The Entertainer* in 1957. Krejča founded his own company, Divadlo Za branou (Theatre Beyond the Gate) in 1965.<sup>6</sup>

## SECTION 1.5 CZECH THEATRE UNDER LATE COMMUNISM

Because “anti-revolutionary” ideas could not be expressed in dialogue on the stage, many theatres developed extra-lingual strategies of resistance, complicated semiotic systems that were readable by their audiences and yet not easily censored by authorities. These symbolic strategies had originally been invented at Reduta by Vyskočil and Suchý to counter the stultifying boredom of Socialist Realism, and flowered at the theatre they founded, Divadlo Na zábradlí, which first produced the plays of Havel. After the Warsaw Pact invasion, the metaphoric and allusive strategies in theatre became even more deeply coded. Dennis Beck describes strategies taken by the Brno theatre Divadlo na Provázku, including textless performances developed from improvisation and performances which were ostensibly critical of fascism but which drew inescapable analogies to the present regime, thus making it impossible for a Communist authority to censor without admitting the unspoken parallel (Beck, “Divadlo na Provázku and the "absence" of Czech community" 24).

Similarly, productions of Shakespeare and other classics could perform social criticism implicitly. Jan Kačer's 1968 production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Činoherní Klub (Drama Club) invoked the Russian invasion for its audience: “They seized Wenceslas Square. That was our cherry orchard and everyone knew it” (Kačer, qtd in Falconer 34). Jarka M. Burian in “Hamlet in Czech Theatre” uses an example from a 1978 production of *Hamlet* at Divadlo Na zábradlí to demonstrate how Shakespearean mise-en-scène often expressed socio-political criticism:

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<sup>6</sup> My overview of Czech theatre history is indebted to Jarka M. Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre*, Burian, *Leading Creators of Twentieth Century Czech Theatre*, Paul Trensky, Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, Olga Chtiguel, Barbara Day, “From the National Revival to the Present Day.”

Fortinbras entered in traditional armor, put on Claudius' crown, and presented the final speech in a cut-and-dried, mechanistic way, thereby suggesting that all the turmoil really hadn't made much difference and that a criminal had been replaced by a dehumanized puppet. ... The *Zábradlí Hamlet* illustrates the special complication that was attendant on most Czech productions for the previous fifty years (that is, since the Munich dismemberment of the country): a need to communicate on more than one level, and in hidden, indirect, often cryptic terms because of severely oppressive conditions (204).

In the seventies, Kačer, along with Havel, was banned from public performances; the 1978 theatre law banned the creation of new theatre companies. Many artists during this period performed in private homes. Tom Stoppard's play *Cahoot's Macbeth* fictionalizes a well known "Living Room Macbeth" in which five banned celebrities, including playwright Pavel Kohout, performed. Malcolm's speech was spoken by all five cast members, suggesting that only society, not one person, could end corruption (Falconer 35). New Czech plays throughout the Soviet period often used historical allegory to drive their points home.

## SECTION 1.6 THEATRE AND THE VELVET REVOLUTION

Theatre and theatre artists were central to the "Velvet revolution" in 1989. On November 17th, a student who had been injured when the police attacked the peaceful demonstrators on International Student Day escaped to the "Junior Klub na Chmelnici"<sup>7</sup> where performers from Divadlo Husa na provázku and HaDivadlo (also from Brno) were performing in a "living newspaper." The production, which had been banned the year before, was called "On Democracy" and included among other things an unaccredited piece by Havel. On this occasion the injured student came on-stage to describe the drama he'd just witnessed. He literally stopped the show (Day, "Introduction" i). It was at the Realistické Divadlo (Realistic Theatre) on 18 November that directors of Prague theatres met with students from the Prague Academy of Performing Arts (AMU) and agreed to cancel performances and instead read aloud what had

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<sup>7</sup> The club, a venue for rock groups and avant-garde performances, was named for Bohdan Khmel'nitsky, a Cossack leader from the Ukraine who successfully led a peasant revolt against the Poles, and founded an independent Ukrainian State.



happened to them. On 19 November the Civic Forum was created by students, actors and others at the Činoherní Klub; the Civic Forum then used Laterna Magika as its headquarters. It was students and actors who went to the factories to spread word of the strike and provide a balance to the state-controlled media (ČTK news reports, qtd in Kukral 116 - 120). It is impossible to overestimate their effect:

Without the actors' intense activities, the Czech revolution could not have been won. After 42 years of brainwashing and propaganda, the words spoken from the theatre stages did move the masses and changed the course of history (Chtiguel 94).

Groundwork for these events had been laid by theatre artists over the past two years who had met in secret, struggled to produce the work of banned playwrights, and/or been jailed themselves in the cause of freedom. The revolution itself, as Havel pointed out to the PEN congress in 1994, had a dramatic structure:

...the Revolution, which was called, not by us but by Western journalists, "gentle" or "velvet," had, as a whole, some sort of theatrical dimension. It had the structure of an ancient drama, at the same time of a fairy-tale, and then again of a musical ("Not Only About Theatre").

Michael Andrew Kukral, an American Fulbright scholar present in Prague during the Velvet Revolution, remembers that when Havel appeared on 22 November in Václavské náměstí (Wenceslas Square), his speech was interrupted by "chants of 'Long Live Havel,' 'Long Live Students,' 'Long Live Workers' and 'Long Live Actors'" (78). Kukral describes Václavské náměstí as a "Theatre of Revolution" (103). From its earliest moments, the new Czech regime was marked by a deep love and respect for theatre workers and students, believing them to be instrumental to their freedom.

The first post-Communist Czechoslovak government included many theatre workers, including Jan Kačer, Petr Oslzlý and, of course, Havel. Since he became a politician, Havel has spoken about the theatricality of politics, placing particular emphasis on semiotic analyses of political events:

The national and historic symbols which politics employs are akin to theatrical symbols. National anthems, flags, decorations, national holidays, and so forth do not mean much in and of themselves as visual phenomena, but the meanings and associations that they evoke are important instruments of a society's understanding of itself, an important means of creating an awareness of social identity and continuity (*The Art of the Impossible* 253).<sup>8</sup>

Havel's comparison of historical symbols to theatrical ones rests on the assumption that theatre evokes similar responses in an audience, that audiences go to the theatre to understand themselves and their place in society. Havel pointed out that because politics depend on the media, the theatrical art is clearly present: "Thus all politicians, including those who sneer at theatre as something superfluous, as an embellishment of life that has no place in politics, unwittingly become actors, dramatists, directors and entertainers" (255).

## SECTION 1.7 POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

Transition from a repressive communist state to a democratic society in the Czech Republic has not been as smooth as it first appeared in the early nineties. The "Velvet Revolution" left society with great euphoria. The first free elections since 1946, in 1990, received a 95% turnout of eligible voters (Fawn 28). They were dominated by the call for a "return to Europe," as Ladislav Holý explains: "The rhetoric in which the necessity of the transition to a market economy was couched constructed the market as a symbol of the civilization to which Czech society now again aspired" (150). Václav Havel's Civic Forum (OF) received the most votes. Finance Minister Václav Klaus of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) was eager to switch to privatization and full marketization as quickly as possible. The Czech rush to achieve privatization, contrasted with Slovakian caution and desire for slower reform, led to the "Velvet Divorce" from Slovakia on 1 January 1993 (Agnew 304). Klaus became head of the new coalition government, with Havel returning as president after having resigned that summer. The new Czech Republic seemed to succeed in the goals of full privatization very quickly. As early as 1994, Klaus had announced

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<sup>8</sup> This speech was delivered to the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in October, 1995.

that privatization was complete (Agnew 308). However, it soon became clear that Klaus had overstated the case. After losing the parliamentary majority in the 1996 elections, the coalition government was gridlocked. Rumors of secret Swiss bank accounts, crooked campaign-financing and corruption in ODS were reported in the press (Agnew 312-216; Fawn 105-107). Havel was virtually the only politician with the public's trust.

Early elections in 1998 installed Prime Minister Miloš Zeman's Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), whose internet-published ambitious manifesto (which included plans to revive the economy, fight corruption, raise the minimum wage and reintroduce child benefit payments for all parents) inspired ODS deputy leader Miroslav Maček to insinuate that the new government wished for a large state with a strong role redistributing wealth: shades of the old Communist regime. The Catholic Church criticized the plan to put an end to the process of returning property once owned by the Church but seized by the Communists. Miloš Zeman offended Germany's chancellor Helmut Kohl, foreign minister Klaus Kinkel, Bundestag speaker Rita Suesmuth, and finance minister Theo Waigel by comparing Sudetan Germans to Czech political extremists. (Radio Prague, 8 Aug. 1998). Deputy premier Egon Lansky refused to apologize. Havel had to issue a conciliatory statement from his hospital bed.

The unemployment rate in the Czech Republic reached just over 6 percent in July 1998, half a percent more than the previous month, and almost two percent more than the previous year. A poll taken in August 1998 showed that almost half of Czech citizens thought they had lived better lives before 1989, although 78% agreed that they had had an increase in individual freedom (Radio Prague, 20 Aug. 1998). The country had also been troubled by incidents of skinhead violence aimed at gypsies and other ethnic minorities (Agnew 320-322; Mucha; Larsen). Youth demonstrations in the summer of 1998 against consumerism sought a debate about consumer lifestyle, criticizing the police for failing to save a young skinhead who died, probably of drug overdose at a "Local Street Party" (Radio Prague, 3 Sept. 1998). Though the Czech Republic seemed to be a model former Soviet bloc satellite in the nineties, its cultural seams were loosening as the country rushed through a societal shift affecting its entire population.

## SECTION 1.8      TRANSITIONS IN SOCIETY

One of the big changes in Czech conception of its national identity after 1989 was the growth of internationalism. The Communist regime had enforced isolation for economic and political reasons (Dangerfield xix). Cultural exchange in the arts prior to 1990 was highly restricted. Western designers, for example, had the opportunity to view the work of Josef Svoboda and other ground-breaking artists at the Prague Quadrennial every four years, and Svoboda was allowed to travel, but tourism was limited. Kukral, describing his experiences as an American on one of the first groups of graduate students selected as Fulbright Scholars in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR) in the autumn of 1989, states that the estimation of the number of U.S. Citizens living in Prague outside of the embassy community just prior to the revolution were less than twelve (33-34). Kukral helped the student effort in the revolution; proof-reading student proclamations for the foreign media after an older student who lived in his dormitory informed him he was the only American student in Prague (70).

The end of relative isolation brought with it its own problems. The media, freed from censorship, could advocate for or antagonize ethnic groups and political platforms in ways that had not been possible under Communism. One of the results was an increase in ethnic tension and violence, especially against Czech gypsies, or Roma (Mucha; Larsen). After 1989, many immigrants from Eastern Europe, hoping to get to the west, stopped in Czechoslovakia. By 1994, the Czech Republic had 100,000 foreigners with residency permits, and as many as 15,000 illegal immigrants. Many of the Roma had come from Slovakia, fleeing persecution there. After the “Velvet Divorce” in 1992, those Roma who stopped in the Czech Republic were denied citizenship if they had a criminal record within the past five years, a stricture not applied to other immigrants. Bigotry against the Roma is an ongoing problem, as Richard Burton observes, “Roma are almost automatically associated by ethnic Czechs with crime (particularly pick-pocketing and mugging), social parasitism, violence and disease” (221).

The Russian mafia also descended on Prague. One of the 9/11 hijackers, Mohammed Atta, may have visited Prague several times in the months leading up to the hijacking, including

a meeting with the Iraqi consul to Prague, Ahmed al-Ani. Czech officials believe he was there, although the FBI and CIA no longer concur (Spurny; Smith). Whether he really was or not, the suspicion that he had been demonstrates a widespread belief that secret conspiratorial activity could flourish in Prague. Another result of the transition to a market economy has been an increase in pornography. Some cultural institutions, including libraries and museums, had to scramble for funds.

## SECTION 1.9 THEATRE AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Just after the Velvet Revolution, Czech theatre predictably rushed to produce formerly-banned dissident plays. These included long-forbidden works by Václav Havel, Pavel Kohout, Milan Uhde. The novelty of these performances wore off and paled in comparison with the real-life drama going on outside. A few Czech playwrights stayed on the bill, particularly Karel Steigerwald, Daniela Fischerová, and Ivan Klíma, but anxiety about new writing continued to grow. Companies with resident playwrights, such as HaDivadlo with Arnošt Goldflam, continued to produce their work just as they had before the revolution. Czech theatres filled out their season with works by Ionesco, Becket, Genet, Stoppard, Albee and Miller. By 1993, Western-style musicals were being produced on Czech stages. The classics were always popular, in part because they lent themselves so well to the innovative work of up-and-coming directors. Molière and Shakespeare were very popular, as well as dramas from the turn of the century by Arthur Schnitzler and Frank Wedekind. Contemporary plays from abroad such as Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* had limited box-office success, perhaps because of the lateness of their appearance in Prague (well after the plays had been published). Ken Ludwig's *Lend Me a Tenor* (whose title was translated into Czech as *Overworked Tenor*) was presented at several theatres but was not critically appreciated (Boková and Machalická). By 1995 the playfulness and ingenuity of young directors such as Hana Burešová, with a celebrated adaptation of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, and Petr Lébl, with a "grotesque and visionary" staging of Chekhov's *The Seagull* (Boková and Machalická; Král, "Sinking into the Depths") were the pride of Czech theatre, rather than new writing.

Criticism of current events could now be read in actual newspapers, not just performed in living newspapers. Theatre audiences took a sharp drop in the early nineties (Billington; Rivero; "Hard Times in Czechoslovakia's Theatre"). Czech theatre companies underwent personnel crises as they dealt with financial struggles and personnel changes. Formerly banned dissident artists returned to their old companies, sometimes from abroad, but the transition was not always smooth, aesthetically and personally, as they worked with the newer members of the company. Marie Boková observed that "the staged productions reflect a pretty unbalanced standard of achievement, and—worst of all—the declining attendance figures recorded by some of the theatres." After Jan Grossman returned to Divadlo Na zábradlí in June 1991, tensions rose to the

point where much of the old ensemble departed to form Divadlo Bez zábradlí (Theatre without the Balustrade). Grossman's new ensemble was a success, but he died unexpectedly in October 1992. Young, controversial director Petr Lébl won the competition for the new post of artistic director of Divadlo Na zábradlí.

The proliferation of American movies and television since 1990 may have encouraged Czechs to develop a taste for more escapist forms of entertainment. Economic anxieties plagued Czech theatres in the nineties, which competed for their audiences not only with popular mass entertainment, but also with tourist-oriented theatres. These economic struggles underscore the artists' apprehensions about the loss of their major theme, that of opposition to a repressive government. Theatre no longer held a position as a central moral witness in the nineties. Veronika Ambros, in her "Eulogy for the Balustrade," explains that:

...the homogeneity of the system has been replaced by a diversification and stratification of the society and therefore of the audience. A playwright turned politician bears testimony to the past. Presently the theatre no longer serves as a *forum publicum*, or as a political arena. It is in search of itself.

Like everything else in Czechoslovakia, theatre was in transition.

When the rumors of government scandal and exposure of corruption grew in 1997, many theatre actors rallied for Václav Klaus and his platform of market reform. That actors support political candidates is not unique to the Czech Republic, of course. *The Lysistrata Project* organized worldwide readings of Aristophanes' antiwar comedy on 3 March 2003 to protest the Bush Administration's war on Iraq ("What is Lysistrata Project?"). Celebrities such Barbra Streisand and Glenn Close made public statements against the war. In the Czech Republic, more so than in America, actors and playwrights, many of whom had been dissidents under Communism, were impressed into the first post-Soviet government. Czech theatrical artists are positioned as moral exemplars. The students and actors who helped spread the word about the revolution were cultural heroes and leaders once the revolution succeeded. The new theatres that arose in the early nineties, including Špolec Kašpar (Kašpar Association), Studio Amfitryon (Amphitryon Studio) at Divadlo pod Palmovkou (Palmovka Theatre) and Buchty a Loutky (Buns and Puppets) were all founded by recent graduates of DAMU, the Dramatic Academy of Performing Arts. All of the leading directors in Prague in the nineties were young: auteur director Petr Lébl was born in 1965 (died by suicide in 1999); Hana Burešová was born in 1959, Jakub Špalek was born in 1968; J. A. Pitínský was born in 1955, and Michal Dočekal in 1965.

Their youth was something they shared with the expatriates who came to Prague to teach English and found theatre companies.

Several Czech theatres folded in the 90s; Otamar Krejča's Divadlo Za branou in 1994, and Karel Kříž's Labyrint (formerly the Realistic) Theatre in 1998, due to declining audience and state subsidies (Burton 218). Labyrint had been the site where two of Prague's most exciting young directors of the nineties had had their first professional productions in Prague: Petr Lébl and Hana Burešová (Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation* 212). It was also a site frequently rented by expatriate directors. Some theatres altered their missions: Ondřej Hrab took over the E.F. Burian Theatre project after winning a contest by Prague City Hall to find someone who could save it from an ongoing decline in audience. Hrab renamed it Archa (Ark). He wanted an institution that would house international productions, and so he disbanded a long-standing repertory. Some of the theatre students who had helped spread the word during the Velvet Revolution found themselves inheriting empty theatre spaces and handed authority to run them: Michal Dočekal and Jakub Špalek were two who after a short partnership found themselves running separately the Komedie (formerly Divadlo Ka) and Divadlo v Celetné. Dočekal is now Artistic Director of the National Theatre in Prague. An investigation of the ways in which Czech theatre, which formerly occupied a central place of symbolic social conscience and courage, has been affected by the transitions into privatization opens a window into larger changes in the Czech cultural psyche.

## **SECTION 1.10      AMERICANIZATION IN PRAGUE**

Two trends in the nineties particularly relevant to the ELTs formed the jumping-off point for my investigation in the transitions in Czech society:

- 1) The growth of a large English-speaking community in Prague
- 2) The growing use of English as a global language, and the pervasiveness of American cultural output throughout the world.

Even under Communism, some Czech theatres had produced American and Western plays in translation, but the exposure of most of the audience to American and Western mass culture was



relatively limited. This changed quickly in the nineties. TV Nova, the Czech Republic's first commercial television station, debuted in February 1994 and quickly became a huge success, gaining 70% of the market share (Dziadul). Owned by Central European Media Enterprises (CME), much of its initial programming was dubbed imports from America. It also reflected Western-style television by airing game shows, although its famous nude weather girl, Počasíčku, who dresses herself every night according to the next day's forecast, is clearly European (this five-minute daily show is one of the most popular in the country). TV Nova's format predictably upset many Czech culture-watchers. Jan Culik, a Czech writer for the journal Transitions, suggests that Nova's omission of programming standards and reliance on popular American fare "helps to further destabilize Czech cultural identity, which was already undermined by the Communist regime" (89). A typical expression of ambivalence is that of Czech director Lida Engelová, a well-known director at the Czech National Theatre. She worked with English-language theatre practitioners in the nineties. In 1997 Engelová dismissed the idea that there was "Americanization" in Prague by changing the subject to complaints about how TV Nova was changing a theatre-going audience by lowering the cultural bar (Personal Interview).

European responses to American culture are many-layered. In *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe* Rob Kroes states: "Anyone who truly cares about the European store of cultural conventions will tend to look upon America as the distorting mirror of our culture" (313). This is particularly true in Eastern Europe where American culture is welcomed for its association with resistance to communism but viewed with suspicion for its tendency to "Disnify" local traditions. Many English-language writers and theatre practitioners invoked Disneyland in their writings about the changing face of Prague in the nineties. Former dissident Josef Krofta, director of Divadlo Drak, a puppet-based theatre that managed to flourish under the totalitarian regime, stated baldly: "Everything that comes over from America is trash" (Bishop, "Puppets of a Totalitarian System: An Exploration of the Drak Theatre" 21).

American products in daily life were embraced quickly by Czechs, however, and in the early nineties Americans often held token positions in the Czech government as well. Havel's first government included musicians as well as theatre artists. He had a meeting with rock star Frank Zappa early in 1990 to discuss, among other things, investment prospects for the country (Remet, "Rock Music in Czechoslovakia" 55). Journalist John Allison (currently the Op-Ed

editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette) went to Prague in 1990 and quickly became the “resident American” in the Lord Mayor’s Office (Allison, Telephone Interview). Allison remembers:

I was there as much as a cultural interpreter... there was still a lot of trepidation between the West and the East. I was Mr. Western man, sitting there. (Telephone Interview)

Allison’s job evolved into informal seat-of-the-pants diplomacy. Celise Kalke, a classical violist and dramaturg who arrived in Prague in 1992, found herself, with little background in the subject, working to help the Czech ministries plan for reconciling laws and regulations in preparation for admittance to the European Union. She worked with a group of Economics professors at the Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education at Charles University (CERGE), an American-style program founded in 1991, as their English-speaking administrative assistant (“Re: You and Prognosis”).

American culture, particularly the protests of the sixties, were invoked during the revolution itself: a performance at DAMU immediately after the theatre strike ended was called Woodstock, a dramatization of American folk-songs; Barbara Day reported that the students wore badges [slogan-bearing buttons] on their “American jerkins” [jackets] (“When Actors Really Act”). The opening of the first Prague McDonald’s in 1992 was greeted by long lines, and crowds so enthusiastic three policemen could barely control the rush when the doors opened. Animal rights activists also showed up, accusing McDonalds of razing forests to provide more pastures for their cattle to graze (Carolina, 27 Mar. 1992). Tom Gross observed in 1995:

The American influence on popular culture and lifestyle is clear. Czechs read Danielle Steele and Stephen King, shop at K-Mart, watch Baywatch and Beverly Hills 90210 on Eastern Europe’s first independent national TV station (35).

Whether one accepts Huntington’s premise that culture and consumerism are distinct, or Friedman’s “Golden Arches” theory, it is clear that in the nineties American products were accessible and visible all over Prague. The Americans who arrived in Prague were often highly-educated, idealistic young people with ambivalent, at best, attitudes towards such mass culture expressions of America. Their distaste for their exported cultural products often distanced them from their host culture.

## SECTION 1.11 "YAPS," ENGLISH, AND THEATRE

Along with importing American mass-culture, Prague soon found itself “importing” American and Western tourists and “YAPs” (Young Americans in Prague) who came to teach, socialize, and soak in the euphoric atmosphere of an idealistic city. These newcomers formed an expatriate community whose coherence and activity was constantly compared to the “lost generation” of the twenties. In fact, in his first editorial for the English-language weekly the Prague Post, Alan Levy proclaimed: “We are living in the left bank of the nineties” (Levy, “Us”). Levy’s 1991 editorial was full of optimism and excitement; he made a virtue of the youth of the staff (Levy was the only one on the paper over 31). In “Letter from Prague” in The Hungry Mind Review a few months before Levy’s editorial, John Allison drew the same simile, with a bit more caution and attention to the difficulties of the transition:

The society is being divided into go-getters hooked up with foreign investors or possessing black market money, and the plain folk who are going to hold on and have faith in what their revolution has promised. Among the foreigners there are tourists on a joyride, business people who live well but must endure pestering from the home office, and the naïfs like me who either teach or work in government, not getting rich, yet believe that we’re living in some kind of Paris-in-the-‘20s (21).

The press was fascinated by the YAP phenomenon. Journalists arrived from “Prime Time Live,” the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Indianapolis News, the Los Angeles Times, the National Review, Playboy, “Entertainment Tonight,” “CNN,” “60 Minutes” and many others; Czech paper Mladý Svět, Lidové noviny and others covered the story too, as did press from England, Germany, Finland, even China (Lyman 219-221). There seemed to be a lot to cover: During the nineties, the YAPs had two newspapers, the Prague Post and Prognosis (which folded in March 1995); a bagel shop, Bohemia Bagels; a Laundromat, Laundry Kings; a bookstore/hangout, the Globe Bookstore—and several English-language theatre companies.

Much of the work of the ELTs would go unrecorded were it not for the simultaneous emergence of English-language newspapers. The early paper Prognosis shared a pioneering spirit with the early theatre troupes, and its writers enthusiastically supported those groups. The surviving paper the Prague Post strove for professionalism and often seemed to make a point of taking a dismissive attitude to the semi-professional nature of the ELTs. The rift between Prognosis and the business-oriented, “professional” paper the Prague Post is typical of a shift

that went on across the board in the expatriate community, where organizations often seemed to exist in pairs: two competing theatre groups, two competing newspapers, two competing nightclubs, and so on. The Prague Post was founded by defectors from Prognosis. Prognosis, founded by six friends from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1990, had a large impact on the fledgling expatriate theatre community. When it folded in 1995 there died with it the last of the early, post-Velvet Revolution expatriate ingenuousness.

Prognosis was legendarily a counter-culture paper in the tradition of the Village Voice, although when it debuted, Prognosis had no conservative daily to oppose. Editor Matt Welch's post-mortem on Prognosis, published a week after its final issue appeared, 7 March 1995, suggests some of the paper's threadbare operating practices with his list of pointers, which included:

1. Never believe the local real estate guy. He is lying.
2. Don't use the accounting books as lids for the rat cage.
3. Don't start a business without having a business plan (Welch).

Ben Sullivan, one of the original editors of Prognosis, remembers:

People were very interested in talking to you because you were American. No one was in this for financial gain, anyone of us could have been doing something else, making more money...it was about this fabulous time in history that we were lucky enough to be around for. When our business staff left [for the Prague Post], it seemed to me more of a comment about different ways we were seeing what we were living through. She [manager Lisa Frankenburg] left in an unpleasant way... she had a meeting with a potential funder for Prognosis, she ended up taking funding and starting another paper (Telephone Interview).

Some of the original funders for Prognosis included Oliver Stone and Jerry Brown; even after the summer 1991 defection by the founders of the Prague Post, the paper was well-placed for the attention given by the American media to the Young Americans in Prague (YAP) phenomenon. Sullivan remembers the overwhelming interest in the American media in the YAPs:

There were tons of stories... it touched a nerve in a bunch of young journalists, and they would just flood us with applications... some of them just came out on their own... we hired Logan Mabe, now a journalist in Florida, that way, and a guy named Jeff Newton who now covers Iraq for CBS News (Telephone Interview).

Prognosis also offered internships to Czech students. Some of the Czechs they hired credit their training with these Americans as having changed their lives. Says Hana Lesenerová of Prague's

Lidové noviny, a daily paper which had begun its life as a monthly *samizdat* (underground) newspaper:

Because of Prognosis I have become a journalist, something I never thought possible or capable of before. Because of Prognosis I quit my biology studies and I have been a journalist to this day. I am now working for the largest daily paper in the country (Email to author).

Prognosis promoted American-style empowerment through such opportunities.

The Prague Post's assessment of the end of Prognosis directly links the paper's demise to the changing times:

Started in March 1991 by a group of former University of California at Santa Barbara students, Prognosis chronicled the heady days when the Czech nation took its first staggering steps toward democracy....But times changed. After a spurt of youthful exuberance, the country sobered up, and those changes were reflected in the Prognosis readership, according to observers familiar with the paper's history. Competition emerged from other newspapers (Lawson, "Prognosis Died of Multiple Wounds").

In the final issue of Prognosis (28 Feb.-6 Mar. 1995) an unsigned article titled "The Inside Story: Why We Closed" laid out the paper's failure to gain a buyer or increase advertising, as well as its editorial weaknesses:

The paper was the only English-language publication to take long, critical looks at political issues here and around the region, from the cutoff of state arts subsidies and anti-Communist "screening laws" to the social status of minorities in Czech society. But in the process it earned a reputation as a paper that picked its fights according to the whims of its writers and whose identity was in constant flux (3).

The Prague Post's attitude to expatriate culture in the nineties, in contrast to Prognosis' friendly inclusiveness, was heavily ambivalent; while it advertised English-language haunts and services, the editorial tenor often demonstrated embarrassment about the presence of American culture in Prague. This ambivalence was often shared by the English-language theatre practitioners themselves, as demonstrated in their program notes. The Prague Post most often demonstrated their ambivalence by over-privileging professionalism over experimentation, often slamming the English-language theatre productions out of all proportion to the groups' experience and ambition. The playful spirit of Prognosis was more in keeping with Czech literature, as well as Czech journalism. Ladislav Holý, in his examination of the Czech character in *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation*, explains:

The image of those in authority as blithering idiots was an all-pervasive and an unceasing source of popular jokes. The Civic Forum skillfully exploited these feelings when it broadcast [during the 1989 Velvet Revolution] to the public in the street the secret a recording of the general secretary's impromptu speech to the district party secretaries. The grammatically incorrect and syntactically incoherent speech of the once most powerful man in the country drove the point home without any need for further comment. (144)

Allison's humorous columns for Prognosis were also occasionally reprinted in the Czech daily, Lidové noviny:

I wrote one thing that was a satire supposed to be a secret memo from Ross Perot in which his plan was to become president of Czech Republic to get some job experience before becoming president of US... the Czechs loved it... the president's spokesman hated it...with those things, my roles merged (Telephone Interview).

Where Allison was integrally placed within Czech society to understand its culture and developed a feeling for the Czech environment, the Prague Post, founded with more foresight, evolved to serve international businessmen, and a new kind of English-speaking Czech, the entrepreneurial businessman.

Theatre critics for both papers also varied in their integration with and acceptance in the ELT communities: Prognosis critics Randall Lyman and Louis Charbonneau both appeared in Black Box productions and were upfront about these seeming conflicts of interest; both went out of their way to support the efforts of all the English-language theatre companies even when they did not give an individual show a favorable review. Critic and later culture editor for the Prague Post Richard Allen Greene directed one of Studio Theatre's first productions (Studio evolved into Black Box), and then founded his own company, Exposure. Exposure's shows were not reviewed by the Prague Post until Greene left the company, but many in the ELT community felt Greene's attitudes to their work were informed by rivalry. Other English-language journals arose that covered the ELTs; most were short-lived. Theatre News, founded in 1995 by Black Box producer Alex Gammie and playwright-director Christopher Lord, served as a useful callboard and source of information for ELT community.

At the same time, many new Czech theatre periodicals began publishing in the nineties: Svět a Divadlo (World and Theatre), by Divadelní Obec (Theatre Community), published ten times a year and included an English summary; the quarterly Divadelní Revue (Theatre Review),

published by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, also included an English summary; theatre czech and slovak [sic] published by the Divadelní ústav (Theatre Institute), published twice a year in English and in French (it altered its name to theatre czech after the 1993 split); Divadelní noviny (Theatre News), also by the Divadelní ústav, published every two weeks. Critic Jitka Sloupová of the Divadelní ústav often covered ELT productions for Svět a Divadlo and others; she followed their work systematically and seriously. Critics from some of the major Czech newspapers, including Večerník Praha and Lidové Noviny, also followed ELT productions.<sup>9</sup> Czech reviewers were also highly educated professional critics, where the critics at the English-language newspapers varied widely in their background in both journalism and theatre.

Czech reviewers and English-language reviewers often saw very different messages in theatre performances (both Czech and English). Under Communism, Czech theatre was so coded in symbols that even the act of applause had a coded meaning (Beck, “Making Ghosts Concrete”). The English-language theatre companies’ code was transparent: every sign onstage pointed to a yearning for integration into their host culture. Yet each company, despite an often confusing intermingling (the English-speaking acting and design pool was small), had different missions and manifestoes. An investigation of the microculture of those groups reveals much about the idealism and transitions of the time.

Another difference between Czech and English-speaking critics was their implied attitudes to the age and identity of the ELT practitioners. American expatriate reviewers like Greene often seemed to internalize a Western bias against taking amateur work by recent graduates very seriously. Czech theatre critics however were particularly interested in the work by young people, for these young people were seen as the future of Czech theatre. This difference perhaps accounts for the attention English-language newspapers often gave to the aptness of an ELT selection, where Czech critics nearly always looked for aesthetic accomplishment and originality. The Prague Post seemed to have an editorial policy that scorned the ELTs, where Czech papers were prepared to discover an English-language equivalent of the new Czech companies springing up around Prague, led by students who had helped spread the word during the revolution (including, as noted above, Michal Dočekal and

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the translations are unsigned and have been provided by the theatre companies from their archives; lack of funding made it impossible for me to redo each translation professionally to verify its accuracy; however my own Czech in most cases sufficed. I have no German however so the German reviews of *Quills* are unverified.

Jakub Špalek). The municipal theatres of Prague were mostly in the hands of young people, untainted by the bad old days of Communism. Middle-aged dissident directors and actors who returned to Prague after the velvet revolution often found it difficult to re-integrate themselves. Those who had stayed, and served as moral beacons, often found themselves drafted into politics with Havel.

In contrast, from 1990-1995, there are no plays by playwrights under thirty included in the *Best Plays of ... American* book series. Most of the “world premiere” slots in U.S. resident theatres in the late eighties and early nineties were taken by playwrights who had come of age ten to twenty years earlier, such as Sam Shepard and David Mamet. Many of the resident theatres in the U.S.A. had been founded during the flowering of alternative theatres in the 1960s and 70s, when there was also ready government money available for the arts.<sup>10</sup> Few professional theatres in U.S. the early 90s were run by artistic directors under the age of forty. When ELT practitioners told the media they had come to Prague because they could not find work at home, they were not merely repeating a self-created myth. On “CBS evening news anchored by Connie Chung,” Ray Brady described the YAPS on 7 July 1992 as “economic expatriates sitting out grim times at home... they call themselves ‘recession refugees.’” Brady reported that the expatriates were able to obtain much higher-level work in Prague than they would be able to in the states (“Young Americans Go to Prague for Jobs”). In her review of the Black Box/Misery Loves Company co-production of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Jitka Sloupová underscored the hardships contributing to the English-speaking actors’ appearances in the Prague production:

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<sup>10</sup> Pittsburgh’s City Theatre, for example, was founded in 1975 as The City Players, funded by a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grant, as part of the City of Pittsburgh’s Department of Parks and Recreation. The Pittsburgh Public Theater was founded in 1974, and received its first space rent-free from the city of Pittsburgh. Berkeley Repertory Theatre was founded in 1968, American Conservatory Theatre in 1965.



All these talented actors are apparently graduates of American and other universities but the huge actor overproduction and competition in their native countries forces them into other professions, and here they are able to fulfill their professions (“Angels for Prague”).

Sloupová suggested that this hardship contributed to the actors’ dedication and “servitude” in portraying character. Czech reviewers took the work of the young expatriates seriously not only because of the novelty of their immigrant status, but also because student companies were seen as the future of Czech theatre.

English itself was increasingly positioned as the language of international business as the nineties progressed. Forced to take Russian in schools during the Communist regime, Czechs now preferred English as their second language. Randall Lyman noticed when he returned to Prague in 1991 (he had previously traveled through in 1989-90) that:

...the bookstores had all relocated their Russian textbooks and dictionaries out of reach on the upper shelves and replaced them on the lower shelves with the Cambridge English Course, the Oxford English Learner’s Dictionary, and other texts for learning English (*Left Bank of the Nineties* 69).

Sinclair Nicholas’ phrase-book *Wang Dang American Slang* became so popular that the authors issued a software edition, as well as a cassette and t-shirts. The history of rock music in the Czech Republic made English the language of youth and cultural resistance, and Czech bands again incorporated English lyrics into their songs. My examination of the English-language theatres in Prague of the nineties investigates Czech cultural responses to the presence of these English-speakers (which include Canadians, Britons, Australians and Americans), as well as the histories of the groups themselves and their interactions with Czech society. These theatrical interactions are not simply examples of cultural imperialism, expropriation or colonization, but a series of cultural engagements in which the larger concerns of economic and political interactions were staged.

## SECTION 1.12 PRAGUE AND THE ELTS

Prague was the home of the YAPs (by definition), as well as a site of great tourist and international activity. Prague dominates Czech cultural life, as do capital cities of many countries. Prague was the primary site of the Soviet invasion in 1968 as well as the site of the Velvet Revolution of 1989, though other towns were involved in both. Michael Andrew Kukral's study *Prague 1989* investigates the way the city's layout facilitated and forwarded the Velvet Revolution, particularly in the semiotic significance of Václavské Náměstí, the Revolution's main gathering place. One striking observation a Czech geographer ("Jiří T") made in interview with Kukral was that Václavské Náměstí, the main site of the 1989 revolution, is slightly sloping—making visibility good throughout its length, as if on a raked stage (136).

Prague street names have changed many times, and are very politically charged. In 1918 when the First Republic was born, Czech officials changed the street names to remove traces of foreign rule. In 1939, the Germans changed street names again. When the Germans left in 1945, Czechs changed them back. In 1948 the Communists again changed the street names, removing names with any whiff of capitalism in them. In 1968, Czechs tore down signs to confuse the Warsaw Pact troops rolling in. After 1989, street signs honoring Communist heroes were torn down, then officially renamed in 1992: Pětiletký ulice/Street of the Five-Year Plan was renamed Československého exilu/Street of the Czech exiles; Rudy vrch/Red Hill became Strmy vrch /steep hill; 7 listopadu/Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> (the date of the Russian revolution) was renamed Listopadová/November (month of the Velvet revolution (Griffin, "Names," "Names II"; Holý 46). Prague occupies symbolic space in the nation's self-image; it is the home of its oldest university, its first National Theatre, and now its largest international community.

It is true that some of the most creative strategies of theatrical resistance to communism occurred at theatre companies in Brno and elsewhere, since some politically questionable theatre artists were specifically prevented from working in Prague. But my investigation is not a survey of post-Communist Czech theatre in general (though such a survey would be useful, and to my knowledge, does not yet exist).

## CHAPTER 2. 1990-1993: “THIS IS THE TIME WHEN ALL AMERICANS ARE GOOD”

What I'm trying to say is this: we must all learn many things from you, from how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, all the way to how to organize our economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not to poverty. But it doesn't have to be merely assistance from the well educated, powerful and wealthy to someone who has nothing and therefore has nothing to offer in return. We too can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it. – Havel, Speech to Congress, quoted in Time Magazine 5 March 1990

Havel's speech to congress asking for Western guidance earned him a standing ovation, and, according to Time, brought some lawmakers to tears. Many young Americans in the nineties tried to answer his summons for help. Those who arrived in Prague in the early nineties were fervent, eager and interested in cultural exchange. They went to teach English and stayed to form theatre companies, newspapers, coffee shops, bookstores and nightclubs. In no endeavor would the notion of cultural exchange be more earnestly proclaimed than among those who founded the theatre groups. Havel as president symbolized a conflation of artistic and civic protest, giving theatre a centrality and potency young English-speakers could only imagine. Czech theatre under Socialism had been heavily censored but remained a setting where coded messages about the regime were shared in public. In her 1979 book *The Silenced Theatre: Czech Playwrights Without a Stage*, Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz explains that political theatre in the West:

... must be explicit in order to be recognized as such. In Eastern European countries reading between the lines has become a game, almost to the point of obsession. In most Western countries, where there is less need for political criticism to wear a mask, the game fails to create tension and generate excitement (122).

The English-speaking expatriates seeking to establish a Western presence in a city where theatre was so culturally charged hoped to find a way to combine this theatrical centrality with their own traditions of naturalism and directness. It was a proposition that promised not only artistic but also a kind of moral value.

The early nineties in Prague were a time of enormous optimism. Czech society was changing rapidly, with sweeping reorganizations of many facets of the economy, including banking and heavy industry. The presence of Americans in the country was a novelty, after so many years of heavily curtailed tourism. The Prague Post reported in June 1992:

In 1991, Germans accounted for almost two-thirds of tourists here, followed by Austrians, Italians and North Americans. But travel experts around town say the number of Americans is growing. ... British Air increased the number of weekly flights from seven to ten on June 2 (Beiser).

Becoming a true market economy was seen as a virtue on a spiritual plane: editorials in all the major papers praised pure Capitalism as the natural condition of mankind. From 1990-1992 Czechoslovakia swiftly implemented changes so successful they seemed to produce an economic miracle:

The challenge of privatization was all the greater in Czechoslovakia because it had the most profound nationalization in Eastern Europe: virtually the entire economy, both production and employment, had been controlled by the state. ... 80 percent of Czech assets had been privatized by 1994, the fastest and most thorough privatization undertaken by any post-communist state (Fawn 89).

Raphie Frank, a lighting designer who worked with many of the ELT groups from 1992-1996 with his partner Erica “Rik” Soehngen, recalls:

... when all is said and done—and this is not theater world specific—but it *did* feel like there was some kind of magic pixie dust spread upon the whole of Prague and the entire Czechoslovak nation(s) back in the early 1990's. You would have had to be blind, deaf and dumb not to notice this sense of boundless hope and possibility relentlessly pushing its way through the hardened, laissez-cynical Czech exterior and coal brown smoke that clung to every edifice. ... It is this euphoric sensibility of the times—this notion of being in a time and place that *mattered*—it is this, even more than our collectively overblown ex-pat egos that tends to color our recollections (Frank, “Re: Thank You!”).

The English-language theatre of the early nineties was categorized by rushed planning, high enthusiasm, missionary zeal, and relatively low production values. Long hours with little sleep

and multiple projects in various stages of development were typical. Small and Dangerous founder Clare Goddard recalls:

We all burnt the candle at every conceivable end. Having worked from 6am to 5pm at the Central European University, I would then go and rehearse with ‘Small and Dangerous’ until 10pm, head to a bar before going to rehearse at ‘Asylum’ for a few hours around midnight. I quickly found myself in hospital with an acute appendicitis—but continued to rehearse from my hospital bed! We all pushed ourselves to the limit but I have never felt so alive (Letter to Author).

Though the job situation for new graduates in America was still bleak, Prague was a boom town, a site where notions of can-do American optimism were fashionable. Dramaturg Celise Kalke remembers that:

I felt the whole time that I was there that we weren’t just teaching English, that we were teaching American self-confidence... it was no accident that a lot of the people coming over were very “bourgey” people. I felt I wasn’t teaching English but entitlement (Personal Interview).

Possibilities seemed endless.

The strategy most ELTs used in the early nineties was that of re-presenting American and Western culture by producing plays that seemed somehow to be typically American or British. To a lesser degree, they attempted to re-present Czech culture. At that time, what the English-speaking theatres primarily had to offer was English itself, and that was the draw most often highlighted in the Czech press. The amateurism of the productions was tolerated because the groups were mainly received as cultural emissaries. Though the ELTs in the early nineties drew upon a common pool of actors and crew, they tried to mark out individual territory, both out of artistic inclination and in order to compete for audience and critical attention. All the groups craved a higher percentage of Czechs in their audience. The branding and marketing the different English-language theatres struggled to secure were displays of American-style entrepreneurship. Though their work was rarely explicitly political, it could never escape political and cultural implications.

To varying degrees, and using different tactics, every English-language theatre in Prague in the nineties tried using their art as a way of border-crossing against a background of Czech transitions. Because the revolution was seen as so important, being first to arrive at the scene of the transition became very important too. The first English-language theatres in post-Communist Prague included North American Theatre, Studio Theatre (which changed its name to Black Box

theatre in its second year of existence), Small and Dangerous, and the student/artist squat Asylum. Expatriate undertakings gained status by date of arrival: the earlier, the better. John Allison arrived in Prague in 1990 and began writing for the English-language paper Prognosis. His 1993 column “The Tyranny of the Twosies” explains the early-arrival status seeking:

In Prague these days, the question (when asked among us swinging ex-pats) has become an occasion for a particularly lame form of snobbism: the tyranny of the Two-Year-and-Up Club of Prague. Most Twosies, when confronted with a rookie, just can't help subtly gloating about their level of acclimation, leaving the impression that they have a hip moral edge: *You came here because you heard it was cool and happening. But I made it that way.*

Allison's day job was to work in the Lord Mayor's office as “American Advisor.” His position was not unique:

Many ministries and government offices had “token Americans”... I'd bump into them here and there...There was even a huge conference called “Assessing the Effectiveness of American Advisors in Post-Communist Czech Republic” in 1992 (Allison, Telephone Interview).

These “token Americans” in Czech government was one of the markers of the early nineties. It was the time, according to North American Theatre founder Peter Krogh, who arrived in the summer of 1990, that “all Americans are good.” (Krogh, Telephone Interview).

Positive Czech attitudes towards expatriate activity were filtered through excitement over the economic transitions: in the winter of 1992, Finance Minister Klaus was spearheading the drive to privatize large, state-owned industries. In Slovakia, with high unemployment, politicians gained popularity by advocating the opposite, the slowing of economic reform (Kaufman). How to proceed with economic reform and privatization were such divisive topics that they led to Havel's resignation in the summer of 1992 and the split of the country on New Year's Day 1993.

## SECTION 2.1      TEACHERS OF ENGLISH, TEACHERS OF CULTURE

Concerns about the future vitality of Czech theatre now that it had lost its great defining subject and purpose were already in the air in 1990, but optimism about international collaboration outweighed anxieties. The February visit of London's National Theatre made national news, along with Ian McKellen's comment that "Prague's National Theatre is the most beautiful they have ever played in." ("Czechoslovakia welcomes for First Time London National Theatre"). Though there had been visits from touring Western companies to Prague under Socialism, such visits were rare. Few Czech theatre directors working in Prague in the nineties remembered them (many of the new wave of theatre directors were students who had helped spread the word about the Velvet Revolution in 1989; they would have been too young to remember the visits from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the University of Kansas in the 1960s).<sup>11</sup>

The positive attitude towards international collaboration included a determination to master English, the new language of business. Ann Gardner, one of the founders of Education for Democracy (EFD), told the New York Times: "The Czechoslovaks are looking to the West, especially the United States, for many answers. To learn Western know-how they feel they have to learn English" (Hamby). Founded in 1990, by May of 1991 EFD had sent over 600 people—mostly untrained—to teach English in schools, government agencies and private companies.

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<sup>11</sup> It would be worthwhile and useful to analyze the frequency and impact of theatre tours from the West, particularly state-sponsored visits from the United States, to Czechoslovakia during the Communist era, but it appears to be impossible. Repeated attempts to get a complete list of such visits either through organizations that sponsored them, including the state department, the Czech embassy, the Theatre Institute in Prague, the administrator of Cultural Programs in the US Department of State have all failed. The US programs that funded cultural tours have all been renamed, merged with others, had their archives sealed, or failed to properly label them in the first place. Martin Manning at the Bureau of International Information Programs at the US Department of State explained that US theatre tours were part of the cultural presentation programs that had started in the thirties and become official after the 1938 Buenos Aires Convention: "After World War II, the tours became part of the US Department of State; in 1978, they were transferred to USIA, then back to State again in October 1991 ("Artists Touring Eastern Europe in 70s/80s"). Sandra Rouse in the Cultural Program Office, formerly Arts American, also had no information. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU), formerly the Division of Cultural Relations, documents the development of US international educational and cultural exchange activities, including the Fulbright Program. The Bureau was organized in 1961 within the Department of State, and merged with the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1978. The collection was presented to the University of Arkansas by USIA in 1983, but the Special Collections archivist there, Věra Ekechukwu, only had records through 1970. Sally Kuisel, the archivist at Civilian Records at the National Archives, advised me that many of the USIA records are still in the custody of the Department of State: "The only way to access them is to fill a Freedom of Information Act request, which can take years... and then there is no assurance that they will be able to find the records that you want. The National Archives also has a number of unlabelled USIA records, many of which have not yet been declassified and processed ("Artists Touring Eastern Europe in 70s/80s").

Funding from the US government probably accounted for the rumor that the agency was a front used by the CIA to create an expatriate presence in Prague to hold off a possible Communist backlash. Studio Theatre's Elizabeth Russell remembers hearing that rumor from John Hašek, the Czech-Canadian who originated the program. In a letter to the Toronto Star in 1990 after the Czech elections in June failed to elect a single socialist member, Hašek wrote:



Czechs and Slovaks are amused by Western students, labor leaders and left-wing academics arriving from the wealthy societies of Western Europe and North America and telling them that capitalism is a failed system of government (Hašek).

Hašek was killed in a car crash in 1993 in Yugoslavia, where he was investigating allegations of corruption between UN peacekeeping officers and Serbians in the area (McNally); some found his death suspicious. The fear of the return of Communism was real. North American Theatre's founder Peter Krogh recalls that:

...in November, 1990, around the anniversary of revolution, things were kind of unsettled...people were afraid that Nationalists or Fascists would come to power... there were demonstrations and counter-demonstrations with tear gas, things were on a low boil (Telephone Interview).

The rumor of young people being used as a cultural “front” might not be completely far-fetched. The United States Information Agency (USIA) did fund academic exchanges in Europe. USIA existed from 1953-1999 for the purpose of “public diplomacy,” otherwise known as “propaganda.” USIA also ran the Voice of America (VOA), the international radio service founded in 1942 that provided news in English around the world.<sup>12</sup> Though conspiracy-theory and gossip were some of the playful pastimes of young expatriates, it is undeniable that due to the efforts of Education for Democracy, a large group of entrepreneurial Westerners descended quickly on Prague. Peter Krogh, as well as Elizabeth Russell and Misery Loves Company founder Ewan McLaren, were all in Prague thanks to EFD.

## **SECTION 2.2            NORTH AMERICAN THEATRE AND “A VERY AMERICAN QUESTION”**

North American Theatre (NAT), in keeping with its name, relied solely on works written by Canadian and American authors. Although one of the plays in their first and only season (1991-

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<sup>12</sup> The Foreign Affairs and Restructuring Act abolished USIA on 1 October 1999, reintegrating its activities into the Department of State.

92), Larry Shue's *Wenceslas Square*, included Czech and American characters, none of the plays they presented were Czech plays in translation, and all highlighted a North American point of view. NAT relied solely on ELT production strategies number one, re-presenting the Performer's culture, and number four, presenting plays about culture clash.

A Czech friend who worked in the Ministry of Culture, Ondřej Typolt, inspired Krogh to start his theatre company with what Krogh called "a very American question." The question was: "What's the one thing you could do if you could do anything you wanted?" "Start an English-language theatre," was Krogh's response. Krogh saw the question as "American" because of it presumed multiple possibilities, in contrast to the attitudes he saw in Czech people:

Once when I was teaching English I told my classes I was going to Prague for the weekend. I ended up not going, and on Saturday one of my students saw me and came running over in absolute shock. I told him I had changed my mind. 'But you said you were going! What do you mean you changed your mind?' He couldn't figure that out (Telephone Interview).

Krogh made an arrangement with the Ministry of Culture to produce a show and create a "cheat sheet" of all the phrases, words and terms used in the play that were not in current textbooks. This "cheat sheet" would be distributed to schools a week or two before the show's performance, giving students a chance to study the phrases in advance.

Typolt found contacts for Krogh in the district Prague 6 at the Delta Club (OKD 6), which had a multi-purpose auditorium able to seat from 200-300 people, and a modified proscenium/thrust stage. The Delta Club had only existed since 1987; it had a film club and a café, and appealed primarily to young people. The e-mail student newspaper of Charles University, Carolina (self-described as "student's email news from Czechoslovakia") described the Delta Club as a place where "students can practise their English without any fear. The English is said to be understandable here" (Carolina, No. 18, 13 March 1992).

As well as being an intercultural youth gathering place, Delta Club was also a venue for stimulating theatre: Brno's famous HaDivadlo theatre premiered its landmark production of Ladislav Klíma's play *Lidská Tragikomedie* at Delta in 1987. Although its location in Prague 6 was not convenient to central Prague, other expatriate outposts were already there: the Prognosis offices were nearby; the tramline to Delta Club passed an intersection with a café called Dante that was a popular expatriate haunt, and the Globe bookstore, the first English-language bookstore in Prague, founded in 1993, would be located in that area as well. It was fitting that

the Club was not far from the airport: it was an outpost for multicultural interactions. Site of performance is always an important factor for any performance group hoping to attract an audience; it is particularly important in intercultural productions, as Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert explain:

Since intercultural theatre stages a meeting of cultures in both physical and imaginative realms—the actual place(s) where a project takes place as well as the fictional spaces represented by the *mise-en-scène*—its spatial semantics also demand analysis. Space is neither neutral nor homogenous; it inevitably colors those relationships within its limits, especially on the stage where configurations of space take on symbolic meaning. We need to ask, then, how the physical space/meeting place inflects intercultural collaboration: Whose ground are we on? (47)

The ground of Prague 6 was, if anyone's, the Czech students' ground, but Czech students lacked the finances to support NAT at the level it hoped to reach.

OKD 6 gave Krogh a 3-page contract signed and stamped in August 1991 with 20 specific conditions (some with sub terms). NAT was obligated to “produce 8 plays during the agreed season, each being performed no fewer than eight times,” to provide a statement of fiscal viability including its bank account number and balance as of July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1991, and to agree to a limit on what actors performing could be paid, and to having their expense account administered through OKD 6's accounting office. In return, OKD 6 promised to provide organizational and material support, with some promotion and advertising, and to provide equipment for rehearsals and performances (Dohodá o spolupráci/Contract with OKD 6).

Krogh's official partnership with the Delta Club lent his organization credibility. Krogh's goal was to raise \$12,000 to supplement the donation of the Ministry of Culture. Krogh described his theatre's mission as an “artistic imperative” by evoking the state of euphoria in Czechoslovakia:

The president is a playwright [sic]. The parliament is composed of artists. The theatres started the revolution. Two of our plays deal specifically with pre-1989 Czechoslovakia and the West, making them illegal in this country until the revolution. Now that the door to culture and art is unlocked, it must be opened. This project does precisely that (Mission Statement).

Under the section “Why It Will Work” Krogh listed four reasons, including “the popularity of English and the theatre's intention to produce and sell Cheat Sheets in advance,” “the low ticket prices” (which were about twice as high as typical student productions in Prague), “the high

quality company members composed of professionals” (Krogh recruited classmates from Cornish College in Seattle), and “the low cost of living in Prague in which the organization would need a mere \$12,000 per year.”

The choice of Larry Shue’s *Wenceslas Square* for NAT’s inaugural production seemed shrewd. The play centers on an American professor in Prague in the early seventies who faces issues of censorship. The story was current in that it was one of the body of plays that could not be performed in Prague under Communism. Similarly, for the first few years of the nineties, Havel’s plays were popular choices at Czech theatres. By the fall of 1991 interest in dissident drama was already ebbing, however. Writing in Contemporary Review in 1992, Rachel Falconer (who had directed Pinter’s *The Dumbwaiter* with O Nesmrtni Chrousta, a company of Czech students at Charles University led by Christopher Cowley), explained that since 1989:

... social conditions have changed at incredible speed; a society insulated for twenty years is facing a tidal wave of western influence. People naturally want Czech drama to reflect these new experiences...

*Wenceslas Square* was nostalgic in that it took place in the “bad old days” following Prague Spring, allowing the audience to enjoy considering the difference in their situations.

The *Wenceslas Square* program thanked the Charter 77 Foundation, apparently just for existing (Charter 77 had no connection with NAT). Such latching on to dissident associations was a very common tactic of the ELTs, particularly in the early nineties. Prague theatre troupes were so heavily involved in the Velvet Revolution that nearly any venue available to rent and every actor still working had some connection to the events of 1989, but ELTs often cited the significance of their rented venues anyway, probably impressing nobody but other expatriates in the audience. Krogh’s director’s notes for the production were printed in both Czech and English. He wrote about the themes of the play:

... we realize the true question is this: How much can we take before we say “Enough!” Czechoslovakia answered this question with mass eloquence in 1989. Though written before this time, the fact that you can see this play is a direct consequence of this movement. (*Wenceslas Square* Program)

Krogh’s earnest and theme-bound approach to play selection marked him as an outsider to the dramaturgy of the Charter 77 playwrights he admired. Writing about his own work, Havel said:

We didn’t try to explain the world; we weren’t interested in theses, and we had no intention of instructing anybody. It was more like a game—except that the ‘game’ somehow mysteriously touched the deepest nerves of human existence (*Disturbing the Peace* 52).

The more ELT practitioners tried to distinguish themselves from a stereotypical perspective of an American abroad, the more they gave the appearance of sharing it.

Though NAT’s mission was to be entertaining as well as educational, it entertained and educated its Western and Czech audiences differently. *Wenceslas Square* was either stimulating or old news depending on who was watching. This failure to consider differing reception fully would trouble all of the English-language theatres. Of course, theatre companies even in their own countries often fail to attract the audiences they desire. As Susan Bennet points out in *Theatre Audiences*:

...both an audience’s reaction to a text (or performance) and the text (performance) itself are bound within cultural limits. Yet, as diachronic analysis makes apparent, those limits are continually tested and invariably broken. Culture cannot be held as a fixed entity, a set of constant rules, but instead it must be seen as in a position of inevitable flux (94).

Krogh seemed to hope for cultural validation from the Czechs based in the content of the plays he chose. The Czech response to *Wenceslas Square*, however, suggests that it was primarily the novelty of language of performance that made the production newsworthy. Radka Prchalová, in the Czech paper Večerník Praha, was primarily interested in the production's value as a language aide:

Even the Director of the play, Peter B. Krogh, admits that this play that is set in Prague in the early seventies has now lost its relevance. .... The best of this performance—what will be of subsequent performances we've yet to see—is clearly on the didactic level... From the stage can be heard understandable English full of slang expressions and idioms. So that the viewer understands better, he gets prior to the performance a small dictionary of these expressions to help with orientation (“The First English Theatre in Prague”).

In contrast, American critic Randall Lyman's review in Prognosis praised the relevance of the subject: “Today, nearly a quarter century after 1968, the piece reinvokes the urgency that inspired its creation: the need to remember” (“Rev. of *Wenceslas Square*”). The two critics' differing responses are typical of ELT reception; with a few exceptions (notably the response to the 1996 coproduction of *Angels in America* by Black Box and Misery Loves Company), the English-speaking papers were more interested in content and significance, and the Czech papers more interested in aesthetic values.

NAT's failure to enthuse Czech critics was probably also a by-product of differing styles. Czech theatre directors employed movement very playfully, and continued to do so throughout the nineties. In her response to *Wenceslas Square* Prchalová complained:

This insufficiency comes from essentially static directing that doesn't require the actors to use much movement across the stage, so they spend most of their time sitting or standing in one place. It is only thanks to the fairly quick changes of scenes that the play isn't boring (“The First English Theatre in Prague”).

Krogh had a BFA in directing from a competitive program. His directing choices that emphasized naturalism likelier reflected cultural norms than mere incompetence. Prchalová concluded:

It isn't sufficient to judge NAT in Prague on just the premiere. Let us wait and see. ... If you are interested in challenging your language knowledge, you can purchase tickets at Melantrich or before the performance at Delta.

Prchalová's review also cheered the potential of a permanent foreign-language theatre company while pointing out some of the problems with the venue:

In the hallways and in print there has been much discussion about how there should be a German theatre opened up in Prague. This hasn't happened yet, but instead Prague has a theatre where only English is performed. They don't meet anywhere in the center, but it's an arm's length—they are under the protective wing of the Obvodni Kulturni Dům (OKD) Delta in Prague 6, in the Dedina Suburb.

In his forthcoming book about the expatriate subculture in Prague in the nineties, *Left Bank of the Nineties: The Birth of Prague's English-Language Subculture, 1989-1996* Randall Lyman suggests that the performance venue contributed to the company's demise:

Located at the end of a bus line and a hundred yard walk, it lay so far from the city center that expats hardly dared venture there for fear of being stranded on the city's outskirts all night if a play happened to run past the last bus departure. No night trams ran there. (130)

The rest of the season was put up quickly, consisting of Michael Frayn's *The Chinaman*, Sam Shepard's *True West*, George F. Walker's *Zastrozzi*, and Maria Irene Fornes' *Mud*. Krogh justified this rather bizarre mix of styles and themes by their content, which either provided a slice of Americana (ELT production strategy number one) or portrayed the experience of being a foreigner (ELT production strategy number four). Krogh had chosen Shepard's play both for its view into American culture and for its easy language. Technician James Patten directed (as well as designing lights, sound, operating the sound, and stage managing). In Patten's notes (again, the notes appear in English and in Czech), he enlarged on his own response to Shepard by explaining America to Czech viewers:

In the U.S. we have political parties, politicians [sic], special interest organizations, all claiming [sic] to be the one representing “family values.”... In this production of TRUE WEST we try to explore the outcome of growing up in a culture where the basic building block of society, the family, is becoming a memory (*True West* Program).

The Prague Post praised the selection:

It’s a good play to do here, for a target public of both expatriated Anglophones and Ameriphilic Czechs, because Shepard’s work is so grounded in the late-20<sup>th</sup>-century US (Widiss, Rev. of *True West*).

North American Theatre received no other reviews in Czech papers, possibly because their runs were so short; Czech repertory usually involves running a show several evenings a month for six months to five years.

The overextension of human resources and the worries about funding quickly took their toll. Apple computer promised thousands of dollars that never materialized. Michael Frayn’s *Chinaman*<sup>13</sup> performed after *True West*, followed immediately by George F. Walker’s *Zastrozzi*: four productions in as many months. *Zastrozzi* was the final show of 1991. Personalities began to fray as problems mounted during the rehearsals for *Mud* by Maria Irene Fornes; it did not help that Krogh had offered the same role to two women in the coming season (E. Russell, Personal Interview). Krogh, who had cast *Mud*, resigned from the company while the show was in rehearsal, leaving Christensen, who was directing, to take over producing responsibilities with the rest of the ensemble.

Despite these frustrations, NAT continued to get publicity, largely from English-language press and media, even appearing on a segment from “ABC news with Peter Jennings,” in which reporter Jim Laurie talked to Christensen as she directed *Mud*. Jennings’ introduction demonstrates how widespread the idea of Prague as the new left bank of the twenties had become:

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<sup>13</sup> Originally announced as a double-bill with Howard Korder’s *Lip Service*, ultimately *Chinaman* was produced alone.



PETER JENNINGS: ... In the past two years, more than 10,000 Americans have come, fallen in love with Prague and haven't left. In the 1920's, Paris was the Mecca for young Americans, especially the artists and writers. In the 1990's, it is Prague. Americans have set up two theater companies here.

KAREN CHRISTENSEN / THEATRE DIRECTOR: Let's set up for scene 13.

The actual numbers of YAPs in Prague were impossible to estimate, but the media consistently exaggerated them. Laurie reaffirmed Czech eagerness for American cultural offerings, while Christensen emphasized the artistic satisfaction she received working in the Czech republic, as opposed to the unemployment she would likely face back home:

JIM LAURIE: [PLAY SCENE] With production costs low and Czech audiences eager to see anything American, there are both popular musicals and the most avant-garde plays.

KAREN CHRISTENSEN: We can do what's in our hearts, what we want. Back in the states, you can't do that ("World News Tonight With Peter Jennings").

Despite this promising report on the low costs and high artistic returns of producing in Prague, North American Theatre was struggling financially. Artistic satisfaction was not paying the bills. Actor John Farrage remembers that while his Czech friends enjoyed the performance of *Mud*, with its relatively simple English, they disliked its portrayal of America:

This was a play about illiteracy and poverty in America... people were unwilling to believe in illiteracy and poverty in America (Farrage, Telephone Interview).

Reflecting organizational strains, the program for *Mud* announced that it had been produced by "North American Theatre II." With its organizational and funding difficulties, NAT reflected the upheavals occurring in Czech theatre companies.

Despite its promise to Delta Club 6, NAT did not manage to produce eight plays. Its last production was *Greater Tuna* by Jason Williams, Joe Sears and Ed Howard in the spring of 1992, which went on under the guidance of Karen Christensen and Kenny Jones. A production of Kevin Kling's *Lloyd's Prayer* was planned but never took place. Krogh hoped to stay involved with theatre in Prague, though not with NAT, and had plans to present an ambitious chamber opera about the Prague legend, the Golem. The opera was composed by Adlai Burman (Burman had composed music for *Zastrozzi* under the playful pseudonym "Jiří Mendez," supposedly a Czech-Puerto Rican) but it failed to secure funding. Instead, Krogh opened a

coffee shop, “U Zlátého Hada Espresso” on Karlová Street (near Charles bridge, thus well-situated for tourists) on Christmas day, 1992. Krogh found it easier to negotiate a capitalist business than to run a theatre in a country undergoing economic transition. North American Theatre never really found an audience wanting to learn English through productions of Sam Shepard, but the coffee bar found its customers, obtaining the first license to sell “Charles University” sweatshirts. This version of Americana appealed to Czechs and tourists alike. Krogh returned to the states in December 1993.

In its one year, NAT set a pattern that every ELT would follow: enthusiasm, overextension, financial worries, waning interest and difficulty in keeping Czech interest beyond an inaugural production. Every ELT had to negotiate issues of exclusivity and inclusiveness in its production pool, and each company had to struggle to find a foothold in subject and style. Every ELT would have to negotiate how to choose a season, how to target an audience, how to motivate a company and keep it together. A professional approach to fundraising and business planning did not spare North American Theatre from the issues of amateurishness and irresponsibility that dogged every ELT of the nineties.

### **SECTION 2.3            THE BIRTH OF STUDIO THEATRE AND THE OPENING    OF THE BLACK BOX**

Studio Theatre preceded North American Theatre in its initial production, Elizabeth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*, in the spring of 1991, but after this one production the company was dormant until the following spring. Originally founded by Russell and Canadians Jodie Newcomb and Holt Sivak, Studio reformed in the spring of 1992 following the troubled North American Theatre production of *Mud*. John Farrage and Russell were in the cast of *Mud* together; when the production ended they revived Studio Theatre under their direction. Midway through its first season, Studio changed its name to Black Box Theatre, which became one of the most significant ELTs of the nineties. Of all the English-language theatre groups, Black Box was modeled the most closely on the structure of American regional theatre. The fortunes of this

company went through three distinctive stages. Like their host community, they entered the nineties with high ideals and energy. In their middle stage, Black Box had more professionalism and resources, but also had more difficulty keeping critical and audience approval. In its final stage, Black Box International Theatre lacked their earlier flexibility and enthusiasm, and found its human resources could not support its businesslike structure. The Czech Republic also went through stages of euphoria and idealism, professionalism and overreaching, and disillusionment during its transition to capitalism and increasing globalization. From 1992 to the end of 1993, Black Box underwent a crucial shift in focus that set the tone for its busiest years in the mid-nineties: they went from a flexible partnership of two to an organized producing group with official not-for-profit status. Along the way, one of the original partners was asked to bow out.

Russell chose the name “Studio” in reference to the artist’s studio her Czech students had loaned her for rehearsals of *Crimes of the Heart*. The name “Black Box” was meant to evoke a magician’s bag of tricks, an open box suggesting worlds of possibility (E. Russell, Personal Interview). In Czech the phrase “black theatre” suggests “black light theatre,” a term that describes a combination of fluorescent lighting, puppetry and black velvet draperies that by 1992 was already an art form aimed primarily at tourists. The Black Theatre, the only company that had been allowed to tour under Communism, had added the word “light” to the English translation of its name after a visit to the US in the early nineties, to avoid racial confusion (Kingston). To an expatriate audience both the names “Studio” and “Black Box” suggest styles of performance venues; to a Czech audience both names would have been, at best, opaque. Studio-later-Black Box earned its title of “oldest established English-language theatre in Prague,” which appeared in all of their programs and marketing materials, because of the one-off production of Elizabeth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* in the spring of 1991.

Like NAT, Studio chose its first play with the idea of re-presenting American culture to Czechs. Using Marvin Carlson’s series of steps between the culturally familiar and the culturally foreign, *Crimes of the Heart* is at the extreme foreign end of the spectrum:

7. An entire performance from another culture is imported or re-created, with no attempt to accommodate it to the familiar. A recent example in America would be the dance performances of Butoh (83).

Russell prepared a glossary of English words for her students that was included in the program, as Krogh did the following autumn. Both Russell and Krogh were teachers of English, and the idea came naturally to them.

Although at this point Studio was an amateur theatre group it behaved professionally when it came to obtaining the rights for the production; that heritage of professionalism became one of Black Box's defining traits. Dramatists Play Service (DPS) had initially asked for payment to be received two weeks before performances were scheduled, but the slow speed of the mail made that impossible; DPS agreed to a check drawn on a Washington, DC bank instead of their usual requirement of a New York account or money order, perhaps in response to the handwritten explanation: "Please bear with me; we are acting in good faith. Life is not so organized here" (McAllister).

Prognosis and Price Waterhouse were both credited as sponsors for the production. The audience was made up primarily of Russell's Czech students. There was not much of an English-speaking acting community in Prague, and the cast were mixed in experience and talent. NAT solved this problem of good local talent by presenting a cohesive company from one theatre school in the states, but that also added expenses as Krogh had promised to house them all. Black Box evolved a policy of bringing in professionals from abroad, but that often worked against internal harmony and collective spirit. Relying primarily on local talent, a strategy used by the mid-nineties group Misery Loves Company, could result in inconsistent productions that worked against the company's reputation. Information on reception of *Crimes of the Heart* is meager, because it was not reviewed in the Czech press, though a small notice about appeared in Lidová Demokracie: "English teachers come to Czechoslovakia from Canada, Australia and the USA..." (Untitled Notice).

In its earliest productions, Studio/Black Box had already settled on employing ELT production strategies one and two, re-presenting the Performer's culture, and re-presenting plays from the Host culture for the benefit of English speakers. Studio wanted to attract three distinct groups: expatriates, Czechs, and tourists. Producer John Farrage was then close friends with Czech director Lida Engelová. Engelová, who had trained with Peter Brook and the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford and London (one of few artists who had been allowed to study outside the country), was very interested in producing plays that could not be done under Communism. By this Engelová did not mean dissident drama, but popular shows from the West.

Farrage remembers that Engelová encouraged him to “show to the Czechs what American culture was like” (Farrage, Telephone Interview). Despite Engelová’s advice, Russell and Farrage were determined to do a Czech play as their first full production together. They wanted to produce Havel one-acts, but he had turned them down. Farrage felt that Studio’s production of a Chekhov one-act earlier that year had provoked the rejection:

He thought it was ridiculous for Americans to try to understand Russians. ... At that time the Russian mafia thing was going on. Schools had stopped teaching Russian—and I had chosen a Russian play (Telephone Interview)

The Chekhov one-act had been produced on a bill with two other short plays: Ionesco’s *The Lesson* and an adaptation, by Joadie Newcomb, of the Czech fairy tale *The Clever Cobbler*. *The Clever Cobbler* was Studio’s first attempt to re-present Czech culture for the consumption of English-speakers. All were directed by future-Prague Post-culture-editor Richard Allen Greene. After Havel turned them down, Farrage and Russell turned to Czech literary agency Aura-Pont for title suggestions. Aura-Pont suggested a play by Daniela Fischerová. Studio promptly commissioned the first English translation of Fischerová’s play *Baj*, titled in English *A Legend*. *Baj*, a medieval-flavored reworking of the folk-tale “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” had originally been written in 1982, but Fischerová had become an officially banned playwright after her first play, *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf* (1979), and had had only “private performances.”

*A Legend* was an ambitious intercultural undertaking, as Fischerová was one of the young playwrights for whom Czech theatre in the nineties had high hopes (Burian 175). Evaluating *A Legend* through Marvin Carlson’s seven stages of cultural familiarity and difference, one might say Studio aimed at stage 4, in which “the foreign and the familiar create a new blend,” but succeeded only in achieving stage 2, in which “foreign elements are assimilated into the tradition and absorbed by it” (82-83). *A Legend* fits the “imperialistic” category of theatre described by Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert:

This form of theatre tends to be product-oriented and usually produced for the dominant culture’s consumption. Performances are often highly spectacular with emphasis placed on the aesthetic and formal qualities of the mise-en-scène (39).

Russell had seen a production of Josef Topol’s *Cat on the Rails* at Divadlo pod Palmovkou, and took note of how the space was used; that production used a split scene effect, which Farrage employed in *A Legend* (E. Russell, “Re: Czech elements in LEGEND?”). Russell’s program

notes for *A Legend*, titled “The History and Future of Studio Theatre,” display her intercultural and collaborative goals for the project:

With this project we feel that we have reached a point of active exchange of ideas between ourselves and the Czech theatre community.

There was not much real exchange of ideas, however: the translator Aura-Pont provided had one meeting with the Studio producers, then never worked with them again, and forbade any alterations in rehearsal (B. Russell, Personal Interview).

Czechs were already developing a certain amount of resentment toward their relatively wealthy visitors. The Prague Post reported:

“At the beginning of the revolution we were flattered to see all these people from the states,” says Klikar, aged 27. ... But every day there are more of them. They don’t seem to know how to fix the economy any more than we do. ... We have already been ruled by powerful people from another country” (Wheatly).

Similar tensions are always present to varying degrees in intercultural performance. Una Chaudhuri writes about interculturalism’s suspicious proximity to cultural poaching, describing “the slippery ground between intentions and effects”:

... it has sometimes seemed to collude in another version of cultural imperialism, in which the West helps itself to the forms and images of others without taking the full measure of the cultural fabric from which these are torn. ... Its critics, however, discern a less-than-equal dimension to its foundational trope: is the barter truly egalitarian, do both sides gain equally, or is there something of the “glass-beads-for-land” model of exchange at work here? Is this kind of interculturalism a sophisticated disguise for another installment of Orientalism, or worse, of cultural rape? (193)

Such misunderstandings can perhaps be seen reflected in the comments of Deborah Michaels, who played the pregnant princess (Fischerová’s retelling includes an evil abortionist). Michaels remembers:

The production took itself too seriously. Very few people came. ... it was more like a community project than a professional endeavor. ... Czech actors were highly trained; this was just a group of young kids; the directors had never directed; the people making costumes were also acting (“Telephone Interview”).

Fischerová attended and was friendly, complimenting the set design and Russell’s performance, (E. Russell, “Re Czech elements in LEGEND?”), but the event as well as the translation are not documented other than in Black Box’s own records. Fischerová translated the title as “Myth,”

not “Legend,” much later, when describing what inspired her in an interview with the Central Europe Review (Horn).<sup>14</sup>

Fischerová discussed the need to translate an entire *mise-en-scène* from culture to culture, when she described a 1993/94<sup>15</sup> production of *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf* at Juilliard. Her comments may illuminate *A Legend*, retrospectively. Fischerová had been skeptical that Americans would be able to grasp the full meaning of her plays written in the Communist era:

Everything was about what Czechoslovakia was living through. Simply put: everything, albeit through new images and metaphors, always revolved around one and the same conflict—the individual against power. That no longer interests me, nor Czechs in general. ...[*The Hour Between Dog and Wolf*] is the tale of Francois Villon (circa 1430-1465), and in Czechoslovakia in 1979 it spoke of freedom of speech and how society rejects nonconforming individuals from its midst. I felt it was a great theatrical misreading. Why, freedom of speech isn't an American problem! I asked myself, what will they be performing? The solution they chose blew me away. The role of Villon was played by an African-American actor, the only black member of the cast. I would have never thought of that interpretation; in Czechoslovakia it would be nonsensical, but in New York, it worked. This is simply the unpredictability of the theater (Horn).

The Studio production of *A Legend* did not reimagine the *mise-en-scène* for an American audience, however, and the novelty of the production did not apparently interest the Czech press. The production lacked the ability to convey all of the cultural nuance it had in Czech, but had nothing beyond its Czechness, and the entertainment of the surface story, to offer English-speakers in the audience.

The name change to Black Box happened while *A Legend* was rehearsing, and reflected the drive toward more professionalism that had come with the addition of new, influential staff, particularly Briton Alex Gammie and Victoria Shobris. Shobris, the American-born child of Czech dissidents, became a full partner during the subsequent production of Sam Shepard's The Unseen Hand. Shobris had been following the doings of the YAPs in the US media, and had found Russell's name in the Prague Post (available in the Czech bookstores of Chicago); she had come to Prague specifically to work with Studio. Her language skills and family history gave her an unusual cultural fluency; her grandparents had left the country in 1948 but their children were not allowed to join them until 1967; Shobris' mother had been arrested for the first time

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<sup>14</sup> This Online journal officially changed its name to TOL, Translations On-Line, in 2002

<sup>15</sup> The play held workshop performances in December 1993, and was produced in Juilliard's repertory in April 1994.

when she was only 14. Shobris was brought up speaking Czech at home (Shobris, Telephone Interview). While many YAPs saw Czech culture as a mirror of their own yearnings, Shobris was able to understand Czech cultural nuances because of her upbringing. She had visited Prague for a month in 1990 (returning to work with Studio Theatre two years later) and observed:

In 1990 I was a real oddity, a person of interest. Everyone wanted to meet me and give me gifts. This woman took the sweater off her back and forced it on me. People assumed my parents were economic refugees. When I would say they were political refugees, people would get very uncomfortable with me. One man who was a former spy couldn't look me in the eye. We were having a completely normal conversation, and he couldn't look at me (Telephone Interview).

In her own experiences, Shobris understood what Havel expressed in his 1990 New Year's address had stated that everyone was complicit in the guilt of the Communist regime, not just economically but also morally (Fawn 40). Shobris also observed the paradoxical mix of optimism and suspicion that defined the early nineties in Prague:

By and large, people in my family were really excited about the increased globalization in culture. My great-aunt, a woman living in a one-room apartment, knew she couldn't afford things in stores. She was 80—she just liked walking by and seeing them. The most magical days in her life were the days of the Velvet Revolution, when she brought water and food to students in Wenceslas Square. ... Czechs are really xenophobic—at least they were. They hadn't been allowed to travel [to the West] for forty years, and the only foreigners they ever saw were people who came over from fledgling Communist countries like Vietnam, central Africa. Suddenly their entire city was inundated by foreigners. But they were interested—rooted in their desire to learn English—to reach out to the west, see what's been going on all these years, have the outside imported to them. They would get to see Americans up close (Telephone Interview).

Of course, there were always some Czechs who traveled to the West as well as there being visiting Westerners in Czechoslovakia, but Shobris' observations about her family's attitude reflects what were commonly held beliefs. The right wing Republican Party (Sdružení pro republiku-Republinská strany Československa), founded 26 December 1989, was openly racist. In the June 1990 elections its success was negligible, but in the June 1992 elections it won six percent of the votes and 14 parliamentary seats. That success encouraged its xenophobic platform, and it particularly exploited a dislike of resident aliens from the Socialist era, mostly Vietnamese and Cuban (Fawn 57). Shobris' memory of her great-aunt's eagerness to see



Americans up close also reflected a common Czech attitude, demonstrated not only by the presence of “token Americans” in government but also by Lida Engelová’s advice to John Farrage.

The production of *U R Who You Eat*, the first under the name Black Box while not programmatically intercultural, offered Czechs that opportunity to observe Americans. When Gavin Stewart, an actor/journalist, described the production in *X-Ink* magazine as “about as far from Czech theatre as you could possibly get,” he also described the production’s appeal. John Farrage directed this musical about the return of Lilith, Adam’s first wife. Ultra Violet had come to the Karlový Vary Film Festival for a retrospective of Andy Warhol’s films; Warhol was a first-generation Czech immigrant. “We decided that would be a huge selling point to Czechs; they all knew who she was,” Russell remembers (Personal Interview). The Karlový Vary Film Festival had been in existence since 1946, and except for the loosening of restrictions during the sixties, had struggled under the yoke of Communist propaganda. Before the Velvet Revolution its audience and reputation had greatly fallen away, but rebounded after 1989. In 1993 the Ministry of Culture set up the Karlový Vary Film Festival Foundation, and the following summer the Festival was held yearly rather than alternating with the Moscow International Film Festival. Black Box’s interest in the Festival, including a choice of play influenced by a celebrity in attendance, demonstrates their strong desire to contextualize themselves in a Czech landscape.

The venue for *U R Who You Eat*, jazz club Reduta, was a big advantage, and helped draw in a wider audience. Right on Národní třída (National Street), Reduta was easily accessible. Reduta also had the appeal of its history as a famous counter-culture pub, the site where Czechs first encountered rock and roll in the fifties, and where intellectuals had developed the innovative theatrical styles to counter the stifling Socialist Realism of the so-called “Stone Theatres” (Ambros 28; Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre* 116-117). When president Bill Clinton visited Václav Havel in 1994, he played the saxophone at Reduta. Black Box were able to get the space through John Farrage, who had met people there and was able to arrange the rental through them (Farrage, Telephone Interview).

Alex Gammie wrote the “history of the theatre” notes in the program. In her comments about the play she noted the Czech love of sixties-era fashion: “...you only have to look at Czech teenage school girls to realize what an enduring fascination the entire 60’s decade has in

Czechoslovakia” (*U R Who You Eat* Program). Many of the Black Light and marionette productions for tourists that appeared on *Národní Třída* in the middle-nineties took imagery from the sixties as a starting point; the National Marionette Museum produced *Yellow Submarine*, and *Divadlo Animato*, a Black Theatre company, produced *Therapy Rock, or Small Story from the Great Time of the Beatles*. The imagination and energy that went into the production apparently overcame the weak script. Alex Gammie introduced successful interactive ideas. “She made these programs that were scratch-and-sniff,” recalls Russell. “There was a lot of food involved... throwing croissants out to the audience... things we added in to spice up the script” (Personal Interview). The audience again was made up primarily of expats, recalls Elizabeth Russell, but there were also:

A lot of people we didn’t know, and tourists... We were right on *Národní*. Czechs did come. One thing that happened with reviews in Czech papers, a lot of times we didn’t know we were being reviewed, reviewers didn’t contact us. Alex [Gammie] got a handle on doing the press and asking people to come (E. Russell, Personal Interview).

The next two productions of the Black Box 1992-93 season continued to follow ELT production strategy number one, that of re-presenting the Performer’s culture in style and content. Sam Shepard’s science fiction fantasy-allegory *The Unseen Hand* continued a vein of pop-culture playfulness, while a new play by Jim Bunch, *Lay Down By Me*, attempted a realistic portrayal of a Southern family encountering death. Black Box’s promotional flyer for *The Unseen Hand* described the play as “the thinking man’s cowboy fantasy.” A reviewer from *Chalk Dust*, an English-teachers’ newspaper for Czechoslovakia published by the London School of Languages in Prague, found relevance in the Black Box production:

The events of the ‘velvet revolution’ just over three years ago are strongly echoed as the alien wrenches himself free from the brutal power of ‘the unseen hand’ (Crawley).

*Lay Down By Me* was produced at Ubiquity, a dance club popular with both Czechs and YAPs. It was unreviewed.

It was during rehearsals for *Lay Down By Me* that creative differences began to shake the leadership of the company. Director John Farrage and playwright Jim Bunch left during rehearsals for a trip to Greece. After they returned, having extended the trip by a week, Farrage found he had been demoted to “co-director.” Shobris and Gammie had little patience with what

they perceived as unreliability, and wanted Farrage out of the group (E. Russell, Personal Interview). Farrage resented what he saw as overly-theme-bound productions that hampered creativity (Farrage, Telephone Interview).

Gammie spearheaded the next production, which consisted of excerpts from Alan Bennett's drama of monologues, *Talking Heads*. This production was a re-presentation of British culture. Bennett's was the first British play produced by Black Box. Briton Alex Gammie directed, and the British Council was one of the main sponsors for the show (*Talking Heads* Program). In contrast to the sprawling pop-culture plays, this play required only two actors. It was enthusiastically received by both English-language papers, while ignored by the Czech papers. A nonverbal production of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghost Sonata*, directed by John Farrage, was announced for 26-28 May 1993, at Asylum, but was cancelled when that venue shut down.

## SECTION 2.4 THE FIRST SUMMER FESTIVAL: BLACK BOX EXPANDS

Encouraged by the season's reception overall, and hoping to gain a wider audience, Black Box decided to produce a Summer Festival:

Czech theatres close down in the summer, and we could be in a venue earlier than a day before our opening. We wanted to take advantage of that—and we really wanted to get Czech audiences. By then a lot of Czech theatres were doing plays by English writers translated into Czech (E. Russell, Personal Interview).

Black Box had originally planned a season of Twentieth-Century Czech plays, to educate English-speaking tourists, or re-present Czech culture. The center of the Festival would have been Karel Čapek's classic, *R.U.R.*, but the literary agency Aura-Pont, who held the rights, was not pleased with the Black Box production of *A Legend*. Black Box went forward instead with a Festival of "international" plays from different English-speaking countries (E. Russell, Personal Interview, Gammie).

The plays for this festival were unrelated by theme or content. Gammie had placed ads in the British paper The Stage and in local literary magazines (several ambitious English-language literary journals had arisen) for new play submissions. The four plays they chose included a children's play, Bruce Shearer's *The Absolutely Awesome Giant*, and three recent plays: Shirley Barrie's *I Am Marguerite*, Michael MacKenzie's *The Baroness and the Maid*, and John Mighton's *Possible Worlds*. The festival also marked the first time Black Box invited a guest director from America. Karma Ibsen, professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at University of Alabama, directed the children's play.

*The Absolutely Awesome Giant* was well received. It used puppets, somewhat inspired by Czech theatre (E. Russell, "Re: Czech elements in LEGEND?"). Unfortunately, the next two productions of the Festival received poor reviews and lost money. Each production was in a different space, which hurt attendance at the Festival overall: "Most shows ran only two weekends, so that no sooner did the audience locate the current venue on its tourist maps than the show would close [and] the festival move somewhere else" (Lyman, *Left Bank of the Nineties* 131). *I Am Marguerite* and *The Baroness and the Maid* both portray isolated women (perhaps in their selection the producers subconsciously reflected their own position in Czech society), and

are constructed around soliloquies without much plot. Gavin Stewart in X-Ink Magazine wrote that *The Baroness and the Maid* and *I Am Marguerite*:

...suffered badly from poor direction, bad writing, and in the latter's case, an extremely poor central performance. It is impossible to understand why these plays were chosen.... In the end, we were left with a good children's play, one success and two howlers ("Boxing Clever").

In keeping with Prognosis' general support for the English-language companies, critic Lou Charbonneau praised the idea of the festival although he criticized its execution:

While Prague's English-language productions are too often less than even good, what the expat theater does have to offer is enthusiasm, a thirst for experimentation, a willingness to take risks and a sense of community ("Black Box Summer Festival of New Plays").

The one agreed-upon success was the play chosen and directed by John Farrage: John Mighton's *Possible Worlds*,<sup>16</sup> an existential murder mystery in which the main character, George Barker, pursues his beloved through all his possible lives. The show was produced at Reduta. Both the Prague Post and Prognosis praised the production. Despite Farrage's unqualified success with *Possible Worlds*, Gammie and Shobris still wanted Farrage permanently out of the company, and he returned to America not long after the show closed.

Despite its shortcomings, the Summer Festival of 1993 succeeded in establishing Black Box as a significant organization with long-term potential. Finances for the Festival show a loss of only 3,748 crowns (approximately \$131).<sup>17</sup> After the Festival, the only activity Black Box held until the spring of 1994 was to hold improvisation workshops in November and December. Signup sheets were at the Globe Bookstore, the English-language bookstore in Prague 7 that had opened just that summer, in July 1993. Founded by five Americans, the bookstore/café became one of the most popular hangouts for YAPS<sup>18</sup> as well as a gathering place for young literary Czechs.

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<sup>16</sup> *Possible Worlds*, in fact, was such a good play it would later (2000) be made into a movie directed by Robert Le Page. Mighton would also win the Governor General's award, and become a math consultant on the 1997 Hollywood movie *Good Will Hunting*.

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, as the company grew busier and busier, they ceased to keep detailed archives of expenses and income. The other troupes covered in this investigation were not able to make accounting sheets available to me.

<sup>18</sup> Several interviews for this volume were conducted there.

## SECTION 2.5 ASYLUM: INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Along with the Globe Bookstore, a gathering place that had a large impact on the ELT community was Asylum, a student gallery/bar/performance space that opened on 31 Dec. 1992, on the eve of the “velvet divorce,” and closed just six months later when the city evicted the students. Among its activities was English-language theatre (Elizabeth Russell worked on a production there, as did Small and Dangerous founders Clare Goddard and Victoria Jones). Asylum’s under-the-wire inception and enthusiastic ideals typify the full-steam-ahead optimism of the early nineties. Asylum never intended to function as a producing organization per se, but as a facilitating venue for disenfranchised groups. In its mission to “provide space to disenfranchised groups” Asylum was perhaps the one English-language theatrical organization in Prague during the nineties that fits the definition of “Community theatre” by Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert:

Community theatre is characterized by social engagement; it is theatre primarily committed to bringing about actual change in specific communities. ... The constitution of the performance group and the subject matter may be organized around common interests (such as gender, ethnicity, or shared social experiences) or defined in terms of geographical location. Multicultural community theatre generally incorporates a range of languages and cultural resources, including performing traditions, drawn from the community (34).

The ELT community at large supported and participated in Asylum.<sup>19</sup>

Located on Betlemská Street not far from Národní Třída, the site was a squat: the electrical power and all of the utilities were stolen. Australian Jason Godwin had originally accessed the space, with help from Karel Umlauf, a Czech student at DAMU (Godwin, “Asylum”). When the police locked the students out, Godwin handed the keys to Erica “Rik” Soehngen and Raphie Frank, lighting designers and visual artists. Umlauf had discovered the Asylum site when another friend at DAMU was doing a survey of unused and empty spaces in

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<sup>19</sup> DuBois was an early participant/volunteer at Asylum, not one of its original founders, though he is represented as one in Caridad Svich’s interviews with DuBois for *American Theatre* and for her book *Trans-Global Readings: Crossing Theatrical Boundaries*. Vicki Sanders in a *Brown Alumni* magazine also repeats the mistake as does *Playbill Online*’s announcement that DuBois had accepted the Artistic Directorship of Alaska’s Perseverance theatre stated that DuBois “formed the controversial Asylum theatre group and then rose to direct in commercial venues throughout Bohemia” (Lefkowitz). That DuBois exaggerated his involvement with the site underscores the legendary value it had for the expat community. It is untrue that the space was “recognized by the state” three years after founding, since it had long been closed down and locked up by then.

Prague. Thirty-five years earlier, the site had belonged to the Salvation Army, but had reverted to the control of the city—which had lost its records of it. Officially, then, the building did not exist (Frank and Soehngen). The split of the country from “Czechoslovakia” to the Czech Republic and Slovakia that occurred as the club/gallery opened did not dampen national spirits: Alena Slezaková in Lidové noviny, quoted in the Prague Post, revealed a typical Czech attitude to the split:

We have survived it, we are living like two nations who can finally decide about themselves. We are moving from a common house into houses of our own; we will decide how we will take care of them (Klimová).

As a collaborative multicultural experiment Asylum was more successful in attracting Czech patrons than the content-oriented programming at Black Box. Czech students played and gave readings in the café; Czech student photographers held exhibitions in the gallery. American students were also involved: Jesse McKinley, now a writer for the New York Times, headed the initiative for the Prague Project, a fund for artists run mainly by NYU graduates, that built the wooden stage in the basement of Asylum (Frank, “More on Asylum”). Though Czechs and YAPs used the space, the usage was not wholly integrated: “The Czechs came in the afternoon and stayed until 9 or so; the Americans came later and stayed later. We were like the occupying force—we wanted to phase ourselves out, and hand the space back to Czech students to run, but it didn’t work out” (Frank, “More on Asylum”).

Czech Students who returned to Asylum after the January lock-out included student journalists Vojtech Ort and Jaroslav (Jarda) Plesl. Plesl was editor of a new Czech student magazine called Babylon, supported in part by the European Journalism Network (EJN). Scott Alexander, who had been Editor-in-Chief of Vassar’s conservative paper, The Spectator, had founded EJN in 1991 to support the creation of independent student newspapers throughout Eastern Europe (Frank, “Re: Scott Alexander”). EJN was active throughout Eastern Europe, not just in Prague, and helped create the first independent student newspaper in St. Petersburg in 1992 (Knol). With Alexander’s support, Asylum used the EJN office as their de facto home, with access to EJN’s computers, printers, telephones (Frank, “Re: Scott Alexander”). Because of EJN, student newspapers did not have to depend on their colleges for money—the money came from Washington, D.C., and the International Monetary Fund. Though not promoted as a pro-American organization, EJN furthered an American agenda. Interviewing Plesl and

Alexander in June 1993, as Asylum was closing, the Prague Post reported that some of the biggest challenges for the student journalists were intangible:

They involve overcoming a mentality born of four decades of communism. ‘The quality of journalism is still not good here,’ says Plesl, ‘because for the last 40 years it was based on ideology. ...’ (Rhoads).

Today, Plesl is deputy editor for the important Czech newspaper, Lidové noviny. Through EJN and other student organizations, Asylum participated in such Czech post-revolutionary transitions.

Asylum continued to negotiate its right to exist throughout its six-month lifespan. It had another run in with the police on 22 April 1993, during a performance of the carnival *Electric Circus*, when an upstairs neighbor appeared in his underwear waving a gun. No one was arrested but Frank and Soehngen had to go to the police station the following day. The police claimed they had not realized Asylum was there, despite these same police having changed the locks in January. The police station on Konviksta street was one block away from Asylum. By this time however Frank and Soehngen had permission from DAMU to be there, and had the police call DAMU to verify. The neighbor was mollified, and even came to Asylum’s last night event (Frank, “Re: Raphie and Rik—tonight”). Although Frank, Soehngen and partner Amy Nestor invested in improvements to the space, on 28 April when they went to sign a lease with AMU (the Academy of Performing Arts, of which DAMU, the theatre faculty, is one of five independent schools) they were informed that the city prevented a third-party lease. Soehngen and Frank sought letters of support for their campaign to keep the space open, receiving them from Czech students and teachers. Ilona Knitlová, aged 25, described herself as a Czech student with an interest in American and British theatre; she was scheduled to direct a production of Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* in mid-May. She praised the venue specifically for its usefulness as an intercultural site, calling it “a special place where students could create art in a town with few available spaces, a space unique in Prague where young people could meet each other and encounter one another’s cultures in a vital way” (“Letter in support of Asylum”).

Asylum’s mission statement invoked the transitional economy in the Czech Republic to justify its existence:



Governmental subsidies for the arts have been cut dramatically in the Czech Republic during the difficult transition from a command to a market economy. Ironically, the opportunities for artistic expression are being diminished at precisely the moment when they are the most needed (Mission Statement: Asylum, 1993).

Laws of restitution allowed pre-Communist owners to reclaim property, some of which was in use for arts organizations. The rising prices of paper and printing affected the affordability of playbills and posters (Day, “The Pit and the Snare” 36). Though in 1993 most of the state subsidies had not been reduced from their 1989-90 amounts, inflation reduced the actual purchasing power of these subsidies by as much as forty percent (“Hard Times in Czechoslovakia’s Theatre”). Some theatres, like *Laterna Magika*, successfully privatized and marketed themselves to tourists. New tourist theatres exploiting Prague celebrities Kafka and Mozart survived on high ticket prices that made them inaccessible to most Czechs (Rivero). Unfortunately, when Soehngen, Frank and Amy Nestor (a newcomer from San Francisco) went to sign a proper sublease with DAMU on 18 May, Tamara Curiková of AMU informed them that due to a rising water table DAMU needed the space immediately for prop storage (Charbonneau, “The Short Life of a Theater/Café/Gallery/Hangout”; Levy, “Asylum Evicted”). *Asylum* would have to leave within a week.

*Asylum*’s final performance, an AIDS-awareness piece by Anthony Lecours, was cosponsored by Jan Mayer’s Linhart’s Foundation<sup>20</sup>. It included a question-and-answer session:

At first only the English-speakers asked questions, and the questions and answers were translated. But little by little the Czechs began asking questions... the attitude had been that AIDS was something only drug users needed to worry about... we saw that change in front of our eyes... it was magical. (Frank and Soehngen, Personal Interview).

This discussion was one of the most heartfelt performances of culture-bridging that ELTs had ever presented.

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<sup>20</sup> The Linhart’s Foundation had been founded in 1987 as an independent collective of artists and architects, and became one of the first to organize alternative cultural events in post-communist Prague. They held music/performance/video events in the “Stalin Space,” the old bunker in Letná park that held the fragments of the huge statue of Josef Stalin overlooking the city from 1956 to 1962 (Lyman, *Left Bank of the Nineties* 137).

## SECTION 2.6 AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LITERARY CULTURE IN PRAGUE: BEEFSTEW FEEDS THE ELT SCENE

Along with re-presenting American (or British) culture through well known or recent plays, one of the enduring strategies used by the ELTs of the nineties was to represent their culture through the presentation of original expatriate work. Alan Levy's clarion call in the Prague Post that compared Prague in the nineties to the Left Bank in the twenties helped spur literary activities. People seemed to feel that a culture capable of producing two English-language newspapers, and launching literary magazines<sup>21</sup>, ought to be producing new plays in English, too. Small and Dangerous, founded in 1992, attempted to do just that. It lasted only one year under that name, but under the umbrella of the mid-nineties troupe Misery Loves Company it continued as Big Knees, and fostered the writing of the two most celebrated playwrights of the YAPs, Laura Zam and Sean Fuller.

Producing new English-language theatre in Prague was part of a project of creating an English-language sub-culture. Playwrights and journalists were often one and the same, occasionally reviewing their own work under a pseudonym. Small and Dangerous announced its formation at Beefstew, the open mike literary evening founded in 1992 by David Freeling. Readings at Beefstew often included excerpts from forthcoming ELT plays. Laura Zam recalls:

I read a segment of a piece I had been performing in New York. It usually used a drum, but I didn't have a drum so I thought I would use a Dobrá Voda<sup>22</sup> bottle instead. I pounded it on my stomach. William Hollister came up to me afterwards and said hey do you know about this company in town... I used Beefstew as kind of trial run (Zam, Telephone Interview).

Though Prague never became the new left bank Levy envisioned, several of the writers working there achieved success, usually after they left Prague. Myla Goldberg, author of the bestseller *Bee Season*, was a regular reader at Beefstew; she credits Beefstew with providing the forum that helped her build the confidence to write. Victoria Jones remembers hearing Goldberg read excerpts from her first, unpublished novel, *Cirkus*, there. One story in particular, about a child who runs away from the circus to join the real world, struck Jones as a metaphor for expatriate

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<sup>21</sup> Examples included Yazzyk, published 1992-1994; X-Ink, 1994; One Eye Open, 1992-1997; Trafika, 1993-present; The Prague Revue, 1995-1997; Gristle Floss, 1993-1996; Riding Black, 1995; Velvet, 1995-1997.

<sup>22</sup> ["Good Water"; the most widely available bottled water in Prague]

life (Jones, Personal Interview).<sup>23</sup> The five-minute time limit at Beefstew also affected the work that was read there, as well as the experience of the listeners. “I began to write for the timeframe,” says Tognazzini, who now specializes in a form that is a cross between prose-poem and flash fiction (Tognazzini, Personal Interview). One story in particular, about a child who runs away from the circus to join the real world, struck Jones as a metaphor for expatriate life (Jones, Personal Interview).<sup>24</sup> Gary Shteyngart’s novel *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*, published in 2002, takes place in the fictional city of Prava, and satirizes much of the YAP scene of the nineties. In one of the more overt insider jokes, an editor in the book momentarily considers naming a magazine Beef Stew; he later decides on the name Cagliostro instead (Shteyngart 266).

The literary scene and the ELTs in Prague shared anxiety about the growing presence of American culture. Few of the expat *littérateurs* wrote directly about their new surroundings; most wrote about their home from a distance. In this respect they did mirror the Parisian expats of the twenties. When the Prague expats wrote about their current surroundings, they often expressed their anxiety about the “McDonaldization” of Prague, sometimes literally. One poet overtly decried the growing commercialization, asking Czechs “Is this what your dissidents went to jail for?” (Lyman, *Left Bank of the Nineties* 76) The very people who were part of the “Americanization” of Prague were often the ones who hated to see Prague begin to look more like a typical Western city, complete with fast food and international chain stores. This anxiety was generally not shared by Czechs. Jonah Goldberg points out the difference in Czech and American attitude in National Review Online:

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<sup>23</sup> *Bee Season* has since been adapted by Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal for a November 2005 film starring Juliette Binoche and Richard Gere In another Prague connection, movie star Maggie Gyllenhaal starred while a student abroad in Sean Fuller’s play *December of All Things* with Misery Loves Company in 1997.

<sup>24</sup> *Bee Season* has since been adapted by Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal for a November 2005 film starring Juliette Binoche and Richard Gere In another Prague connection, movie star Maggie Gyllenhaal starred while a student abroad in Sean Fuller’s play *December of All Things* with Misery Loves Company in 1997.

The expats there were livid that a McDonald's was coming to town. They very much wanted Prague to maintain its sealed-in-amber charm, complete with authentic lousy food. But I remember a Czech friend's outrage at the idea that McDonald's should be kept out. "You try living without hot, cheap, safe food when you want it, for forty years. It's easy for them to say. We don't want to be Prague-Land for young Americans. We want to be a real country.

Beefstew was a cultural ghetto where expatriates performed their ambivalence.

## SECTION 2.7      SMALL AND DANGEROUS PRESENTS ORIGINAL EXPATRIATE WRITING

The work of Small and Dangerous fits Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's definition of "ghetto theatre," "theatre staged for and by a specific ethnic community that is communicated in the language/s of that community" (34). Small and Dangerous did hope to attract Czech audiences also, reasoning that because the plays they produced would also be "small"—i.e., related one-acts—their short length would be more digestible for non-native speakers (Small and Dangerous mission statement).

Founders Jones and Goddard met because of an ambitious musical called *Caravan*, produced by a group of students from the University of California at Santa Barbara under the aegis of yet another new company, New World Theater No. 9. In *Caravan*, characters from different eras meet in a time void. It was a flop.<sup>25</sup> Like Beefstew, *Caravan* was deluged by the media. Director Clare Goddard remembers:

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<sup>25</sup> A perhaps older and wiser Tony Laue later wrote the screenplay of *Rex-Patriates*, a "mockumentary" satirizing expats to Prague who leave and then return. The 2004 film was produced and directed by former Black Box Artistic director Nancy Bishop. *Rex-Patriates*, like Shteyngart's novel *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, occasionally seems to be the very thing it parodies.

... I was caught up in a whirlwind of attention that the piece was attracting. CNN interviewed us whilst in Prague, and Der Spiegel wrote a piece on the musical for the German market (Letter to Author).

Small and Dangerous was born in the wreckage of the overambitious production. Victoria Jones had come to Prague in the fall of 1991 after finishing her undergraduate degree (Jones, Personal Interview). Clare Goddard had arrived in Prague in early 1991 and begun teaching with a Czech organization called “SPUSA,” also lecturing at the Central European University, a new university founded by George Soros. Goddard took her students to see ELT productions by Black Box, O Nesmrtelni Chrousta and the musical company Artists for Prague. Camille Hunt, the third founder of Small and Dangerous, had first arrived in Prague in 1990, left after nine months, then returned in late 1991. Of the three women, only Goddard had a theatre background.

Small and Dangerous’s manifesto was pragmatic, unlike the loftier statements by North American Theatre and Black Box:

There is little money around in the arts in Prague, [sic] working small allows us to put on productions quickly and with few overheads, therefore releasing us from the pressures of catering to huge, anonymous audiences. (Small and Dangerous/Malí a Nebezpeční Mission Statement)

The manifesto also encouraged their audiences to construct a meta-meaning through the juxtaposition of the plays in an evening’s performance. This emphasis on multiplicity corresponds with Prague School theorist Mukařovský’s theories about theatre as interplay of forces, as recapitulated by Marvin Carlson:

...a production must in theory and in practice be conceived in time, must be considered from multiple and simultaneous perspectives, and must recognize all the while that every viewing will put together these perspectives in different combinations (*Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* 98-99).

Goddard recalls that the emphasis on juxtaposition and the playful and nonspecific ways in which the short plays were linked was influenced by the Czech sense of humor “and by the work of Czech writers/directors that we would have seen at Divadlo Labyrint, Divadlo Na zábradlí, Celetna, Pod Palmovka [sic]—together with literature, films & art” (“Re: Ps metameaning”).

Small and Dangerous presented their first evening of one-act plays, titled *Belongings*, at Studio Rubín in October 1992. The plays included were *Belongings* by Tim Stanley, *Who Will*

*Untie Us?* by Bryn Haworth, and *Icebreaker* by Robert Russell. Goddard directed all three.<sup>26</sup> They were linked thematically in that all three were about couples at a difficult stage in their respective relationships (Goddard, “Re: Ps metameaning”). The evening sold out; Small and Dangerous often had to turn people away from the seventy-seat venue. The location of Rubín in Malostrana, next to Jo’s Bar, appealed to Czech students and expatriates alike. KLAMU, the puppet/alternative side of DAMU, performed there; Rubin also had its own ensemble, Divadlo Sklep, in residence.

The Small and Dangerous evenings of one-acts improved with each one, and the company grew increasingly ambitious. *Semtex* in April 1993 consisted of *Sailor* by Victoria Jones; *Boy, girl and probability*, by Vijai Maheshwari, a writer active in Prague literary journals; *hanging* by Clare Goddard, *that play by what’s-his-name (farce without an audience)* by Bryn Haworth. In this evening the plays were not linked thematically; Goddard recalls that “we were looking for a way in which we could all try our hand at writing/devising... we just wanted them to be punchy, explosive different.” In “hanging,” set at an art gallery, Goddard herself played a walk-on one night as a member of the public visiting the gallery with an art-loving blown-up plastic turtle (Goddard, “Re: Ps metameaning”). That style of absurdism does seem to invoke some of the lighter elements of Havel’s plays.

Of their evenings of one-acts, *Curtains*, which ran at Studio Rubín from July 1-5 1993, is particularly noteworthy. Its title referred to what Goddard describes as the “‘mafia-speak’ notion of death” (“Re: Ps metameaning”). It consisted of *Cowboys and Indians* by Robert M. Eversz, *Lila: Conversation with a Mirror* by William Lee, and *Duet for Killers* by Mark A. Rayner. Rayner’s play is an interesting and fairly sophisticated two-hander alternating between audience address and enacted scenes, and recounts the story of two different kinds of murder, a literal one, and the murder of a reputation. Although it is not directly about Prague, it did reflect its audience: the protagonists are recent graduates finding themselves through international travel. Rayner’s novel *The Amadeus Net*, published April 2005 by ENC press, includes a Czech character; he credits Small and Dangerous with giving him his first “validation as a writer” (Rayner, “Re: Small and Dangerous,” “Re: A Czech Question). Lee’s piece, in which a woman

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<sup>26</sup> To my knowledge, none of the plays produced by Small and Dangerous have been published. I was able to review the plays included in the evening called *Curtains*, as well as those plays included in *Stand*. As Goddard explained, these plays were written before the personal computer boom and many do not exist on a disc anywhere, but were handwritten and typed (Goddard, “Re: Metameaning”).

talks to her reflection, played by another actress, about whether she's driven away her lover, who is now a prisoner of war, attempted to personify the internal split between the intellect and emotion. Its concept was simple but its execution was stylistically interesting, and accessible to non-native speakers.

Randall Lyman remembers that the play that really stood out in *Curtains* was “the play about Czech culture clash,” that is, Robert Eversz’ play *Cowboys and Indians* (Telephone Interview).

### 2.7.1 “Cowboys and Indians”: Re-presenting Culture Clash

*Cowboys and Indians*, written specifically for Small and Dangerous, is a fascinating commentary on intercultural confrontations in Prague. While the production strategy for Small and Dangerous in general often corresponded to ELT number four, that is, plays about culture clash, *Cowboys and Indians* did so in a way that enters into Czech stereotypes as well as American understanding of them. Eversz himself is one of the best examples of the successful expatriate writer that Levy hoped would emerge from the Prague scene. A UCLA Film School dropout, Eversz had published two novels before he came to Prague, but it was in Prague where his career first took off, after he sold the novel *Shooting Elvis* (1996), which introduced the character of celebrity paparazzo Nina Zero. His 2004 novel *Burning Garbo*, also about Nina Zero was nominated for the Nero Wolfe award for best American mystery. *Gypsy Hearts* (1997), which he wrote in Prague, is about an American expatriate, a petty thief who “helps” women from whom he has stolen wallets. Eversz named one of the book’s characters “Victoria Goddard,” in honor of the Small and Dangerous founders. *Gypsy Hearts* takes place in 1992 shortly before the opening of the first McDonald’s in Prague, and is replete with descriptions of such real expatriate hangouts as Ubiquity and Jo’s Bar. Eversz did not share the ghetto-anxieties of other expatriates about immersion in Czech culture:

“But why should Americans be any better than, say, Mexicans in Los Angeles?” Eversz said. “It’s the same with most immigrant communities -- they’ll stick to themselves. Americans, in general, are not that interested in Czech culture -- and the Czechs can’t present it forcibly, because they don’t know what it is right now” (Allison, “Letter from Prague”).

Eversz wanted to “see what happens to the American character when it’s removed from home base...” (Allison, “Letter from Prague”).

The play *Cowboys and Indians* tells the story of Martin, a young Czech man who enters a bar and begins shooting tourists. Martin tells the audience how much he likes American culture, before his American girlfriend arrives, and they quarrel. The police arrive and fine Martin for going over the limit on shooting tourists without a permit (even though they are in season). Throughout, Martin talks to the one American in the bar that he shot and killed (the others are French, English and German), calling him “Chuck.” “Chuck” wears a baseball cap and a Cleveland Indians shirt (complete with logo of grotesque Native American). Czech actor Jirka



Šteffl played Martin, the murderous Czech. Wade Daniels' review in Prognosis reduces the play to a "look at the Americans-in-Prague phenomenon with a hint of surrealism" and "a vehicle for a vituperative debate on the cultural value brought and damage done by the thousands of young Yankees who have come to roost in post-velvet Prague."

However, there is more to this play than a surface protest about the growing commercialization of Prague. Eversz' play is not a dramatic performance of American guilt over globalization that parallels Beefstew writers' fears of "McDonaldization." "Cowboys and Indians" is dedicated to Czech photographer Martin Gust, who inspired the play with:

...a boozy conversation we held one night... In those times, American expatriates did not learn about the culture through newspapers but in hospodas, clubs and bars, the places everyone went to drink and talk (Eversz, "On Book Tour").

Rather than representing American self-consciousness, "Cowboys and Indians" provides a dramatic portrayal of an American understanding of the Czech perception of Americans. In the play, Martin not only repeats several times "I like Americans"; he also explains to his American girlfriend that the shooting reflects the positive changes in the country:

MARTIN: Typical American big city is city of strangers. History of war tell you it is not hard thing, to kill stranger. Prague is now city of strangers. (*Cowboys and Indians* 8).

Martin idolizes the American west, identifying with the Indians:

MARTIN: I am much interested in stories about your wild-wild-west. It is big part of American culture, yes? Even today, Americans carry guns and shoot each other, like old days in wild west" (*Cowboys and Indians* 2).

The play ends with a monologue about the history of the American Indian.<sup>27</sup>

By having Martin identify with an Indian, Eversz evokes the phenomenon in the Czech lands of "Cowboys and Indians" clubs, in which adults camp out in "tipis" and pretend to be Native Americans (usually Lakotas). The Czech hobby is partly inspired by the Western novels of the nineteenth-century German writer Karl May, which center on the cowboy, Old Shatterhand, and his Indian helper, Winnetou. May himself never visited America. Eversz recalls:

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<sup>27</sup> Neither Eversz nor Jones had a copy of the last page of the play, unfortunately.

I was aware of the peculiar hold that gentleman had on Central European imaginations. ... I wanted to use the Central European fascination with a warped history of the American West as a way to explore the phenomenon of Westernization then flooding through Prague (“On Book Tour”).

May’s books have been translated into more than 30 languages and have sold more than 100 million copies; his fans included Einstein, Hitler and Helmut Kohl (Gruber; Rohwedder). As Julian Crandall Hollick pointed out in a 1992 article for Montana magazine, the “Cowboys and Indians” clubs were:

...not a pale imitation of Nashville. The Czechs have indigenized it, given it the rhythms of their country dances and polkas, turned it into yet another metaphor about Freedom and the lack of it under Communism in their own country. ... All over the former Communist Europe it was the same story. Grown men and women spent every available moment of their free time dressing up as cowboys and Indians and learning how to live—Friday through Sunday—as a cowhand or a Lakota Sioux. It was good fun. But it also made a political statement.

This type of metaphorical protest that was too oblique to ban, like theatre under Communism, conveyed a message everyone could receive but nobody could censor. Canadian John Paskievich, who explored the phenomenon with his 1995 documentary *If Only I Were an Indian*, found the hobby a means of identity-creation for Czechs and Slovaks could create identity—just as Eversz’ shooter Martin attempted to find himself by picking off tourists in season. Eversz’ short play is a re-presentation of Czech re-presentation of an imaginary American history, and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of an intercultural exchange.

Small and Dangerous had just one more subsequent evening of one-acts, presented in the autumn of 1993. *Stand*, a title meant to imply the need to take a stand, consisted of two plays with some political implications, continuing in ELT strategy number four, plays that re-present culture clash. It consisted of William Lee’s *Refugees* and Sean Fuller’s *Death in Smichov*. *Refugees* explored the situation in Bosnia; Goddard recalls that each night some people walked out in protest. Sean Fuller’s *Death in Smichov* was set at the night tram in Smichov, a neighborhood that was home to many YAPs. The play tried to mix a little bit of absurdism with light comedy. Goddard describes it as “the lighter B-movie to the main feature” (“Re: Ps metameaning”). Louis Charbonneau in Prognosis observed that the poetic style and overblown acting in “Refugees” resulted in a:

...Sarajevo of the Soaps.... It's hardly possible to do justice to the horror in the Balkans by having amateur actors rage and sob for an hour on a Prague stage. ("Rev. of *Stand*")

Turning to *Death in Smichov*, Charbonneau reported that Fuller had "a great sense of humor and a wonderful eye for details of expat life in Prague" but found the play unsubstantial. It was, however, a good example of how immigrant theatre often functions, as described by Nahma Sandrow with regard to the Yiddish Theatre, to validate "the special problems of immigrants by acting them out, making them art and convention, and thus practically a ritual" (77). Fuller had been around the ELT scene from its inception, but this was his first original play.

Small and Dangerous took a long break after a planned production of Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution* fell through. Goddard left in 1994 to do a post-graduate degree in directing, returning in 1995 to direct *Memoir*, John Murrell's two-hander about Sarah Bernhardt. *Memoir* was the last production under the banner "Small and Dangerous". Jones had considered leaving Prague before meeting Richard Toth, the founder of Misery Loves Company (MLC), in the summer of 1994. Small and Dangerous subsequently merged with Misery Loves Company and reconstituted itself as "Big Knees," the new play arm of MLC.<sup>28</sup>

## SECTION 2.8 PERFORMANCE OF CAPITALISM: K-MART AND COMMERCIALISM

While Black Box moved from a free-form, loose organization of individuals using theatre as self-expression to a professional group with higher standards of production, Czechs experienced the end of the honeymoon period of Post-Communism. Both Czech and English-language newspapers published articles and editorials expressing anxiety about globalization and Americanization. The first K-mart in Prague opened in September 1993, towards the end of Black Box's first Summer Festival, during the run of *Possible Worlds*. The store replaced the old Communist department store Maj (May), named to commemorate the Day of the

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<sup>28</sup> Jones and Toth married in 1997, making their merger complete.

International Solidarity of Workers. Victoria Shobris remembers the differing attitudes to the opening among YAPs and Czechs, which mirrored the divide in attitude between Czechs and expatriates about the arrival of McDonalds:

I remember talking with a Czech-American friend in English about how happy we were that Kmart had come. There was a guy listening, a typical expat guy, trying to dress grungy but wearing three-hundred dollar hiking boots. He made some kind of idiotic comment. I grabbed him by the collar and started yelling at him in Czech, “you don’t understand a word I’m saying don’t you so shut up, I live in this country I speak the language I can go to K-mart if I want to. You know this is not your private Disneyland, they don’t think it’s cute that the phones don’t work, that Communism took the economy off the map (Personal Interview).

Shobris’ criticisms of the “typical expat guy” hit home. The more the ELT practitioners tried to bridge culture, the more uneasy their response to the growing presence of English-language culture in Prague—which created a divide between them and their Czech hosts.

Christmas 1993 and the holiday push to shop marked a milestone in the transition to a market economy. An editorial by Alena Zivnustková in the Prague Post suggested, “the growing materialism that has come to symbolize Christmas in the Czech Republic and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia, wasn't invented by Western capitalists.” Communism had already weakened the link between the holiday and spirituality. Zivnustková’s piece concluded that so long as Czech culture kept its own particular emblems—carp instead of ham, a gift-giving Baby Jesus instead of Santa Claus—increasing commercialism was something to celebrate, not fear. In other words, Czechs were less concerned about the growth of American-style commercialism than they were with the threat of cultural imperialism. Huntington’s distinction between acceptance of consumer products and acceptance of culture appeared to be borne out. A post-Christmas article, which interviewed the Czech manager of K-Mart, Anna Jelinková, confirmed that the sales were larger than ever before. Jelinková remarked: “The turnover was huge. It was historic” (Damsell, “Record Christmas Sales”). Both the culture at large and the performance of culture by the ELTs approached a time of harvest as they reflected and mirrored greater abundance of materials: goods, jobs, personnel, and opportunities—but their responses were increasingly divided.

### CHAPTER 3. 1994-1996: “A BIZARRE BY-PRODUCT OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CZECH CULTURE”

My feeling is that the Czech nation—just like other mature European nations—has already outgrown the diapers of its modern national awakening and has come to the awareness that its “Czechness” cannot be the sole or even the chief meaning of its existence, that the state must be something a little different and a little more than the mere pinnacle of the nation’s being. – Vaclav Havel, New Year’s Address to the Nation, Prague, January 1, 1994.

The mid-nineties were a time of increased commercialization and tourist trade in the Czech Republic, mixed with growing anxieties and disappointments. The first flush of euphoria was over, but the country was still essentially optimistic despite the Velvet Divorce of 1992. Public sentiment was still supportive of the increase in fast food restaurants and chain stores; Kentucky Fried Chicken opened its first outlet in the summer of 1994. Tourism to the Czech Republic in 1994 was up by over a million people from the year before (Damsell, “’94 Tourism’s Record Pace Stuns Pessimists”). Record numbers of Czechs were traveling abroad: “In 1989, Czechs made 7.8 million trips outside the country. Last year, they posted 31 million international journeys,” reported the Prague Post in August 1994 (Lawson, “Number of Traveling Czechs Increasing”). On the other hand, the rapid growth of the industry threatened the livelihood of Czech travel agencies facing new competition (Stojaspol), and older Czechs in particular worried about the loss of security with the changes in state social services (Damsell, “Pessimism Taking Hold as Czech Standard of Living Falls”). The founding of the first private broadcasting station, TV Nova, in 1994 signaled the growth of commercialism but concerned cultural critics; its programming relied heavily on dubbed American and European entertainment. The media’s globalization concerned theatre producers. Archa Theatre, a company that relies on international collaborations and also hosts an international film club, raised eyebrows with its debut

production in 1994, a collaboration by Japanese Butoh artist Min Tanaka and former Velvet Underground guitarist John Cale. Archa nevertheless positions its own work as programming meant for a Czech audience—in contrast to the fare on TV Nova (Orel, “The Paradox of Prague’s Divadlo Archa: Internationally Czech”). Archa even conducted a survey of its audience, which demonstrated that although 70% of the Czech population watched the channel, whose programming relied so heavily on dubbed American and European programming, only 2% of their audiences switched on the channel, preferring channel 2, the Czech Republic’s cultural channel. Archa’s director Ondřej Hrab, in an interview conducted in 1999, was proud of the fact that more of his audience did not watch television than watched TV Nova (Hrab).<sup>29</sup> Nova’s local programming seemed politically slanted: it offered a free weekly five-minute broadcast to Klaus but not to his rival Zeman (Fawn 97). By 1994, news was also breaking about corruption and scandals in government and banking. One notorious example is Viktor Kožený’s voucher scheme entitled “Harvard Capital and Consulting.” Founded in the optimistic days of 1991, Kožený’s funds promised a ten-fold return on investments to investors; ten percent of the nine million Czechoslovaks who participated in coupon privatization (the system in which Czechs bought shares of formerly state-owned businesses) traded them for shares in Kožený’s investment funds. Most of his investors never saw any return on their shares and he became known as “the Pirate of Prague.” He left the Czech Republic in 1994 while under criminal investigation. Kožený’s involvement with Czech political corruption went deep; high-ranking politicians in ODS accepted free flights from him, and he was under investigation for bribery when he fled the Czech Republic.<sup>30</sup> The mid-nineties were a time of harvest for both the ELTs and the country, and not all of the harvest was good. On 14 November 1994, Economy Minister Karel Dyba declared that “as of now, there is nothing left to privatize in the Czech Republic” (qtd in Fawn 94), and 80 percent of the economy was privately owned, but the changeover did not necessarily put new people in charge (Fawn 95-96). Banking scandals continued to grow in 1995; as twelve banks collapsed in two years (Fawn 105).

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<sup>29</sup> This interview was originally conducted for my article on Archa published in TheatreForum, referenced above, as was the interview with Don Nixon.

<sup>30</sup> See Fawn 92-93; Pitkin; Kononczuk; “Court Orders Seizure of HPH Property;” Larsen. Kožený was arrested by the F.B.I. on 7 Oct. 2005 with bribing senior government officials in Azerbaijan. At the time of this writing he faces extradition to America from the Bahamas. A decision is expected in December 2005.

As the novelty of performing in English began to wane, English-language theatre organizations had to work harder to attract their audiences. Two companies, Black Box and Exposure, attempted to benefit from the growing tourist industry. They hoped to secure their existence through increasing strategies of professionalism. Black Box's evolution through 1994-1996 included an increasing emphasis on mission and theme; their summer festivals of 1994 and 1995 were aimed at English-speaking tourists and focused on re-presenting Czech culture, while during the rest of the year they continued to try to interest Czechs by re-presenting American and British culture. By 1996, none of the original founders were left, and new artistic director Nancy Bishop assembled a prestigious board of directors to help the group integrate into Czech society. Richard Allen Greene launched his bilingual company Exposure in the spring of 1995. He began forming a board and drafting statements of purpose, hoping to attract more of the international business community to the theatre. Together, Exposure and Black Box demonstrated a rising attempt to achieve professionalism in the English-language theatre community.

## SECTION 3.1 BLACK BOX TURNS A CORNER: 1994

### 3.1.1 Grace

Black Box brought in Nancy Bishop from America to direct *Grace* by British playwright Doug Lucie in the spring of 1994 as part of their desire to increase professionalism. Bishop was pursuing a master's degree in theatre and had directed professionally with Chicago's Straw Dog company. She had heard about Black Box through a friend and she wrote seeking work. Alex Gammie faxed her two weeks before the project was due to begin rehearsals, offering her the job (Bishop, Personal Interview, 4 Mar. 1999). Gammie's choice of the play was based in a desire to address intercultural issues and events in Prague through subject matter; it corresponds to ELT production strategy number four, or plays about culture clash. *Grace* concerns itself overtly with issues of cultural imperialism and fits Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's definition of post-colonial theatre:

...postcolonial theatre is a geopolitical category designating both a historical and a discursive relation to imperialism, whether that phenomenon is treated critically or ambivalently ... (35).

Lucie's play about an English manor overwhelmed by (literal) corporate evangelists from America, is marked by a yearning for authenticity and empowerment. *Grace* tells the story of a group of American evangelists who buy a large country home from an impoverished missionary's daughter, Ruth. The big-business aspects of religion are portrayed as traits localized to America and what makes the proliferation of religion-through-advertising so appealing also makes it threatening.

Elizabeth Russell thought the religious aspect might resonate in Prague:

...since the end of Communism, new churches had sprung up around Prague, and "there seemed to be a lot of missionaries around" (E. Russell, Personal Interview).

The Prague Post reported in June 1994 that although four out of five Czechs still thought of themselves as agnostic:

The country is attracting an ever-growing number of proselytizers for religious groups, most of them alternative faiths appealing to the public's disenchantment with mainstream religions (Calbraith).



New faiths in town included the Mormons, who had 155 missionaries (mostly American) in the Czech republic; Jehovah's Witnesses, who had gained 16,000 followers, and the Hare Krishnas, who, along with chanting in Wenceslas Square, had opened a vegetarian restaurant called U Govindy that was popular with the expatriates (Calbraith).

Before the action of the play begins, Ruth's sister Grace has supposedly died a miraculous death: Jesus himself appeared to take her to heaven. Ruth worries about growing commercialization and rampant capitalism:

RUTH: Very soon, they'll own the world. (*Beat*) Those poor innocent souls in Gdansk, Bucharest, Vladivostok...they won't know what's hit them. The joys of the free market, and in less than one year, the Reverend Hoffman beamed into their homes via satellite, twenty four hours a day (Lucie 21)

The play was favorably received in its 1992 London production, although Benedict Nightingale found that it relied too much on stereotyping (Nightingale, "Glib Gospel of Prejudice"). Gammie played the role of Ruth (Gammie, Personal interview). Bishop credits some of her production's success with her ability to get the best actors working in English in Prague, including Gavin Stewart and Steve Hallam (both of whom later became professional actors in London), as well as Victoria Shobris and Elizabeth Russell. Lindsay Ashford, who played Freddy, the black gameskeeper, was a weaker performer. Throughout the nineties the English-language theatre groups often had difficulty finding good actors of color.

The ads in the program for *Grace* illustrate the growth of the YAP community: advertisers included Radio Metropolis (an English-language radio station)<sup>31</sup>, Laundry Kings (founded by Grady Lloyd, it billed itself as the "first Laundromat in Eastern Europe—a Prague Institution"), Bar Sport Praha, X-Ink magazine, Prognosis, Jo's Bar, and Video to Go (a video rental that promised "Entertainment in English"). Ted Whang, the show's music director, took out an announcement inviting the audience to the Prague Christian Fellowship. While *Grace* protested economic imperialism, its program embodied it.

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<sup>31</sup> Founded in 1992, the station's owner, Zdeněk Vlk, wanted to attract the expatriate community, and hired out of work well known Czech actors and professionals from Czech state radio and the National Theatre, as well as expats as program hosts. John Hašek, founder of Education for Democracy, was one of the co-owners. ELT workers Debora Michaels and Peter DuBois, among others, worked there. The station had its transmitter switched off on 7 March 1995 for non-payment, just as other stories about corruption in new enterprises (and the massive bank failures) was breaking.

The play's positive reception marked a turning point for the theatre. Randall Lyman's review in Prognosis emphasized its relevance:

More than a send-up of televangelism, Doug Lucie's Grace is an indictment of both American cultural imperialism and Europe's servile craving for it...(Rev. of *Grace*).

The Prague Post's review crowed "English Play Hits Bullseye" (Krauthamer<sup>32</sup>). John Allison wrote an unsigned humorous article for Prognosis titled "No Brief Nudity, Please, We're Small-Town Hicks"<sup>33</sup> which commented on a topless appearance by the character played by Allison Murchie:

It was not the shock of seeing a live nude woman on stage per se. It was seeing one of *ours* live and nude on stage.

"Ours" meaning a member of this tiny village called the **Post-Revolution-Native-Speaker-of-English community**.

Allison underscores the ghetto-like closeness of the English-speaking expat community, despite Bishop's directors' notes admitting that she was "constantly grappling with the embarrassment and the difficulty of American cultural hegemony in Eastern Europe."

### 3.1.2 Alenka in Wonderland

Black Box's second spring show prior to the over-ambitious summer festival of 1994 was a bilingual adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, titled *Alenka in Wonderland/Alice v Říši Divů*, that toured eight Czech schools. It was the only production Black Box ever produced that focused so heavily on the bilingual aspect of ELT production strategy number 3, though some later productions did use a multicultural cast. The concept of the show was that Czech Alenka wakes up in "Wonderland"—where everyone speaks English—after falling asleep doing her homework. Alenka needs a translator because she cannot understand anything in Wonderland. A series of games asks the children in the audience to translate specific lines listed

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<sup>32</sup> In the original review, the byline is signed "K.K."; in the Prague Post's online archives he is listed as Kyle Krauthamer.

<sup>33</sup>(slyly referencing the title of the comedic chestnut *No Sex Please, We're British*, written by Anthony Marriott and Alasdair Foot, which ran in London's West End from 1971-1986, though it had only 16 performances in Broadway). It was filmed in 1973.

in the program so that Alenka can move to the next scene (D. Morrison, Home Page). Instead of changing sizes, Alenka changes languages (D. Morrison, Unpublished Essay 1). Essentially, Czech Alenka narrates the story that English Alice enacts. A Czech actress, Adéla Techlovská, played Alenka; Andrea Miltner played Alice, her English-speaking double.<sup>34</sup> Miltner, a Briton of Czech descent, and a professional ballet dancer with Prague's National Theatre, had already appeared in two shows with Artists for Prague, as well as in two of the plays in Black Box's first summer festival the year before.

Unlike *Grace*, *Alenka in Wonderland* did not address culture through its subject matter, but through the structure of the performance itself:

It is important to note that the relationship of the two [Alenka and Alice] was developed so that they would share power, and so that they would have to work together to find their way through Wonderland (D. Morrison, Unpublished Essay 10).

True intercultural production, according to Richard Schechner, depends on this equality of exchange (Schechner, "Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice"), as opposed to what Chaudhuri had described as "land for beads." The production fits Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's definition of "collaborative theatre:"

...this form of theatre-making places great importance on cultural negotiations at all levels... Collaborative interculturalism is often community-generated rather than market and/or state-driven (39).

As an example of border-crossing it was much more thoroughly planned and implemented than *Grace*, but it had a poor reception in the English-language press and Black Box never again attempted another educational project. Deb Morrison, who had directed the piece, was quietly bumped from directing *Karhan's Men* that summer in favor of Maggie Speer, an older professional from America.

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<sup>34</sup> Miltner often appears under the name Miltnerová, adding the Czech feminine ending to the name. In 1994, however, she used the name Miltner in cast lists.

## SECTION 3.2 THE SECOND SUMMER FESTIVAL: BLACK BOX AS A HALFWAY HOUSE

For the summer festival of 1994 Black Box went forward with the idea of producing a festival of Czech plays of the twentieth century that they had abandoned the previous summer. In doing so they followed ELT production strategy number two, re-presenting the Host culture for tourist consumption. All of the performances took place at the same venue, Boris Hybner's Studio Gag located on Národní Třída. Hybner was a famous mime, although Black Box did not have a personal connection with him when they produced their first play there. "It was an attempt to give tourists something of Czech culture," Gammie explains, "A way of being a halfway house" (Personal Interview). The decision to re-present Czech theatre history as a kind of cultural theme park suggests an image of Prague-as-Disneyland that appeared in expat writing of the period. For his director's notes in the Pavel Kohout play *Fire in the Basement*, the third play in the Summer Festival of 1994, Alan Kinnaird wrote of Prague as "this Disneyland summer city" (*Fire in the Basement* program). In June of 1991, Prognosis had printed "Disney Plot Exposed by Insider," a prank letter supposedly from Oliver North at the Disney Corporation to John Allison, approving a proposal for "Prahaland." According to the letter, Disney's Entertainment Development Division was planning some new attractions, including:

"Kafkaesqueville." Based in design on Fantasyland, this attraction will feature a black-light mime performance about a grumpy but lovable giant insect who awakens one morning to find out he is now a handsome prince (Allison, "Disney Plot Exposed by Insider").

As Dennis Kennedy observes:

Disneyland is the most logical model of how to present a culture of pastness in a global economy. Despite their extreme merchandising of culture, theme parks are popularly successful because they provide an accessible and diverting thoroughfare to an imagined history or mythical world (Kennedy, "The Tourist as Spectator, the Spectator as Tourist" 179-180).

Patrice Pavis connects the image of Disneyland with intercultural performance, and a product of a “decentred culture”:

Disneyland culture offers samples of all products, provided that they are sufficiently standardized, easily accessible to, and consumable by, the majority; above all, they must be consensual and assimilable. This multiplicity of cultural samples relativizes all pretension to a lost identity, as much as to any hegemonic, ideological project inherited from the Enlightenment. It marks a radical break with a quest for identity, now considered too naïve, in favour of a self-assertion as cynically functionalist and postmodern (“Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?” 13).

Black Box’s second summer festival, which offered one play from each of four different eras, offered samples of different kinds of Czech theatre. It was not an attempt to regain lost identity since that which was being represented was the Other; rather, through re-presenting Czech theatre history as a kind of cultural fair, Black Box tried to enter the theme park themselves and integrate into Czech culture. It lacked the postmodern quality implicit in a conscious creation of a theme park, but was instead built around nostalgia.

The Black Box Festival of Czech plays was ultimately an attempt to provide entry into a vanished Czech past. The festival included one play each from four significant decades: Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R.* from the twenties, the period of the First Republic under Tomáš Masaryk; Vášek Káňa’s communist drama *Karhan’s Men*, from the forties, in a new translation by Victoria Shobris; Pavel Kohout’s absurdist drama *Fire in the Basement* from the early seventies, and Arnošt Goldflam’s two-hander *Agathamania* from the eighties, in a new translation by Barbara Day (Day, a translator and scholar, joined Black Box’s board in the middle nineties). The ambitious festival received publicity through notices in Prognosis, the Prague Post, The European Élan and the Czech magazine Reflex.

*R.U.R.*, which opened the festival, was a canny choice because it is the most famous Czech play (it introduced the word “robot” into the English language) and also because it evoked images of the First Republic and the glory days when Czechoslovakia seemed a beacon of national independence and cosmopolitan sophistication. During the early to mid-nineties the Czechs were fond of comparing their new society to the days of freedom in the first Republic under Masaryk. Along with chanting the name Havel, demonstrators in 1989 also chanted “Masaryk” and “Dubček.” Both Masaryk and Dubček had championed freedom and independence, Masaryk in the First Republic and Dubček during the Prague Spring (Holý 48).

The enormous international popularity of the play seemed to underscore Masaryk's desire to foreground Czechs in world consciousness:

In his wartime memoirs and interpretation of World War I *The World Revolution* (Světová revoluce, 1925) Masaryk argued that the Czechoslovak Republic was created through his and his collaborators' diplomatic efforts in the United States because they managed to present the Czech cause in the context of contemporary world events and contemporary political thinking (Holý 127).

*R.U.R.* was widely anthologized, taught and produced in universities in the USA for a long time after its debut; its popularity did not really wane until well into the late forties, according to listings in *Ottomiller's Index to Plays in Anthologies* (Connor and Mochedlover). As late as 1946, the play was required reading in a Boston University introductory class on European Modern Drama (L. Orel). Even the title of the play reflects globalization; the initials *R.U.R.* stand for the factory "Rossum's Universal Robots." In Czech the initials would be U.R.R., but Čapek imagined a Czech business with an English name.

Mounting the production was challenging; it requires a large cast, and trained English-speaking actors in Prague were few. Bishop tried to bring out the Expressionistic elements by the use of shadows behind a projected screen; when Director Domin described how robots are manufactured:

...the actors playing the robots stood behind the screen and performed the various tasks of the assembly line, from mixing the batter for flesh, to grinding the bones, to spinning the nerves and intestines (Bishop, "Directing *R.U.R*").

While Bishop considered the play dated, Czech actress Lucie Wenigerová, who played Robot Helena, told the Prague Post that she found the play contemporary and relevant:

There is a strong connection between work and your value to society. It seems that people only work so they can buy new things, like a new car or a summer cottage. To me, Čapek stresses the danger of consumerism and utilitarian values (Plascencia, "Black Box Trots Out the Robot").

Even in the cast of a single production, then, reception and interpretation could vary according to nationality. František Černý, reviewer for the Čapek Brothers' Society Newsletter's enjoyed the spectacle of seeing young Americans working on the Czech classic. He praised Elizabeth Russell's "psychologically sound" acting, implying a welcome distinction from the deliberate irony of Czech acting.

Black Box proceeded in its historical survey of Czech drama by skipping ahead to the seventies and eighties, saving its play from the forties for last. The change in schedule worked out well, as its final play, *Karhan's Men*, turned out to be the strongest all around, as will be shown. The reception of the dissident plays demonstrated, again, different attitudes to relevance and performance from Czech and English-speaking critics. As Marie Boková pointed out in a 1992 précis of the previous two seasons in Czech theatre, the figures of Czech production of dissident dramas speak for themselves with regard to waning Czech interest:

In the 1990/91 season... Václav Havel's plays were performed 5 times, Pavel Kohout—8 times, Milan Uhde—5 times, Josef Topol—4 times, Pavel Landovský—5 times, Karol Sidon—3 times, Ludvík Aškenazy—3 times. In the 1991/92 season these Czech playwrights were represented by no more than 1-2 productions.

English-language producers and critics seemed out of touch with the severe drop-off in interest that the dissident dramas now held among Czechs. Critic Karel Král observed in a summary of Czech theatre from 1994-96 that since 1990 none of the most famous Czech dissident dramatists had written a new play: "Not even Milan Uhde, now a politician, nor Karol Sidon, now the Chief Rabbi of Prague, nor yet Pavel Kohout or Ivan Klíma."

Arnošt Goldflam's *Agathamania* consists of two contrasting monologues; the first by an elegant whore (played by Andrea Miltner) complaining about the goings-on at her neighbors (the

uproar was upsetting her clientele), the second by the Agatha of the title, a simple woman whose talent for listening has caused her to become the center of a cult. Goldflam was associated with the HaDivadlo theatre, a theatre administratively part of the State theatre of Brno. Goldflam's work with HaDivadlo included original plays that were often actor-centered and developed around scenarios with the actors' collaboration, leaving space for the director and audience to project meaning. Jarka Burian describes his writing as "intuitively lyrical and grotesque, with tragi-comic, often surreal, overtones that brought to mind Kafka and Chekhov or the paintings of Marc Chagall" (*Modern Czech Theatre* 170). Morrison's direction primarily emphasized theme, although her addition of a silent court typist was a dramatic and creative illustration of the menace embedded in the text. The Prague Post found the cultural messages of *Agathamania* outdated, reducing it to a message that "Capitalism is a modest, almost saintly woman and communism is a conniving whore" (Byrd). However Agatha hardly represents a hymn to capitalism; it is the greed of the people who come to her—greedy for her compassion, and eager to pay her for it—that has driven her into homelessness. Vladimír Mikulka in Denni Telegraf enjoyed the acting of both women, particularly Miltnerová, who "moderately combined gentle overstatement and ironic distance, while creating a more universal, socially psychological type" ("Black Box Summer Festival").

*Fire in the Basement* was chosen to represent dissident dramas banned under normalization. Kohout, once a Communist party member, had been one of the original signers of the dissident manifesto Charter 77, which condemned the Communist government for failing to uphold human rights, particularly the Helsinki human rights agreements which Czechoslovakia had signed in 1975. Though Kohout's plays were not produced in Czechoslovakia under normalization, they were circulated via *samizdat*, and produced in Munich or Vienna, both short train-rides from Prague (Goetz-Stankiewicz 10).<sup>35</sup> *Fire in the Basement* portrays two firemen who trick a pair of newlyweds into buying fire insurance for fear of being arrested for negligently starting a fire. It is often viewed as an allegory of the invasion of Soviet tanks in Prague in 1968's Prague Spring. Vladimír Mikulka in Denni Telegraf and Anthony Tognazzini in Prognosis both liked the Black Box production, for opposing reasons. Mikulka found that the

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<sup>35</sup> Kohout might also have been known to some English-speaking expatriates through Tom Stoppard's play *Cahoot's Macbeth*, which is dedicated to Kohout and inspired by him. Stoppard met Kohout in Prague in 1977, and the actor Pavel Landovský, who had been banned from working. Kohout wrote to Stoppard not long after that he had begun producing Living-Room Theatre, LRT, and its first production would be *Macbeth*.



play had not aged very well in twenty years, and that “most of the political allusions and allegories sound a little superficial and contrived.” He also noted differing audience responses according to identity:

...a few innuendoes and jokes point out the absurdity of the bureaucratic narrow-mindedness (the foreigners are amazed, but the locals are not surprised) (“Reminiscence of a Certain Fire”).

Anthony Tognazzini described the piece as “a timely Czech political play” (“Rev. of *Fire in the Basement*”). Again, the American reviewer foregrounded relevance and cultural messages, while the Czech reviewer emphasized performance values, even expressing relief that the serious program notes were not reflected in the production.

Czech critics by 1995 were far more interested in the striking directorial work of the young directors Hana Burešová, Petr Lébl, Jan Nebeský and J. A. Pitínský, than in exploring formerly-banned dissident drama. All the work of these directors was playful, eccentric. It was often dark, and, generally, highly personal. Král observed that this playfulness “is one of the inherent Czech national traits and qualities—at least as far as the theatre is concerned. Mystifications, nonsense, poetic double meanings also represent our artistic traditions” (“Sinking into the Depths: The Seasons 1994-95 and 1995-96 in Czech Theatre”). The earnestness often displayed by well-meaning Black Box directors only bored Czech critics. The deadpan insouciance of *Karhan’s Men* however appealed to the culture-bridging goals held by Black Box and the desire for playful commentary beloved by Czechs.

### 3.2.1 Karhan's Men: Enjoying a Laugh at the Former Regime

The choice of a Socialist Realist drama, Vašek Káňa's *Parta Brusiče Karhana*, translated by Victoria Shobris as *Karhan's Men* (the working title had been *Karhan and His Workers*) attracted Czech audiences and press. Black Box's festival program blurb explained that the play:

...dates from only the second year of Communist government in Czechoslovakia, and is therefore utterly sincere in its vision of a bright Socialist future for the Karhans' factory and country. Its references to this and to recent history make it a fascinating mirror of its time (Festival Programme).

Nineteen ninety-four was only the fourth year of a capitalist government in the Czech Republic, and the Czech audience could enjoy ironic nostalgia for Karhan's naïve optimism all the more while basking in their own enthusiasm for capitalism. Watching the play performed by young visitors from capitalist countries heightened the ironic pleasure. Black Box had for once found a play that truly interested Czechs, as Elizabeth Russell recalls:

*Karhan's Men* was just hilarious to the Czechs... it was good timing. No Czech theatre was going to do it (E. Russell, Personal Interview).

Shobris remembers that the audience for *Karhan's Men* had a large proportion of Czechs:

Most Czechs know this play; it was kind of like putting on *The Real Live Brady Bunch*... they enjoyed it for nostalgic reasons. ... It was pure fantasy, assuming there was anything to motivate anyone, the love of the state, giving up the individual for the greater good. I don't think Czechs ever sincerely liked it. They would have played it ironically.... We played it straight, and it wound up even funnier (Shobris, Telephone Interview).

By choosing to translate and produce *Parta Brusiče Karhana* Black Box paid attention to the larger mise-en-scène of Czech theatre in 1994. As Pavis observes:

The dramatic and the performance texts must be considered in relation to the Social Context, i.e. other texts and discourses about reality produced by a society (*Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* 35).

*Karhan's Men* reflected Czech history, but was framed by a contemporary Czech perspective. As part of Black Box's Festival of Czech plays, it also followed ELT production strategy number two, but its appeal was not only to tourists but also to Czechs who viewed the production as a sophisticated deadpan joke.

Káňa's play, whose title Paul Trensky translates as *Grinder Karhan's Work Team*, had debuted in 1949. It was one of a slew of state-sponsored dramas praising the new Communist regime that centered on a "project important for the building of socialism" (*Czech Drama Since World War II* 6). Typically for plays in this genre, the cast is large: the plays demonstrated as well as depicted the glories of full employment by providing jobs for actors and crew. Trensky considered Káňa's play a "small but significant departure from the schematism of these plays" (6) because its conflict grew organically from the characters rather than from outside forces. When it opened, all of the theatres in Czechoslovakia were obligated to produce it. It premiered at Divadlo E.F. Buriana (later the site of the Archa theatre), directed by Burian himself, and received favorable reviews not only for its positivism but also for its naturalistic factory workers and colloquial language (*Karhan's Men* program).

Black Box heightened the nostalgia of the performance by including snippets from contemporary newspapers in the program, including this one from 25 March 1949's Lidové Demokracie:

Káňa's play is the true documentary, educational and effective play about the five year plan. The action was inspired by real factory life, and the workers from the cutting plant of the factory the actors visited thanked the author after the performance and ...revealed that, after the example of the play, they would be holding their own contest in the cutting sector. This is the most beautiful moral benefit of the play—that it inspires the workers in this way. I am sure this will be an example to other factories as well. ... This was a memorable evening for Czech theatre (trans. Ivana Teršová, *Karhan's Men* program).

A reproduction of a drawing from Rudé Právo portrayed a heroic worker in his blue cap looking defiantly at a fat Statue of Liberty holding a bulging bag with a dollar sign, surrounded by cigar-smoking capitalists. To aid expatriate audiences, Black Box included a glossary that explained socialist terms and images such as “Five Year Plan” (the planned attainment of production quotas); “Allotted Times” (the fixed times given to perform a certain task); “Denims,” (worker's clothes used as a symbol of unemployment under capitalism as they were often a parting gift as workers were made redundant); “Country vs. City” (a character, Tulach, is an ideal type of worker, the farmer migrating to the city ); “Protectorate,” “Industrial Expansion,” and “Zápotocký” (an MP who would become second President of Czechoslovakia after Gottwald in 1953).

Czech director Lida Engelová had suggested doing a socialist realist play to Black Box, in a departure from her earlier call to “show to Czechs what Americans are like.” The story concerns the grizzled factory worker Karhan, who has not yet joined the party, his son Jarka, who has invented a machine that will speed up piston-cutting times, and the factory workers who engage in a piston-cutting competition that pits the oldsters against the rookies. After the rookies win, Karhan threatens to kick his son out of the house, but returns to the factory and eventually reaches a cutting time of four minutes (to thunderous applause). Other incidents in the play include the disciplining of a lazy workers' representative, a country boy who describes how bad it was working for the Germans, an engineer who reminds her crew how much better it is now than under capitalism, and a yearning not-quite-love-scene between Jarka and Božka (rather than “a girl, a boy, a tractor,” it is “a girl, a boy, a factory machine”). Shobris tried to use:

*Honeymooners*<sup>36</sup> language... the way you might hear them talk in *On the Waterfront*. The play had that quality, kind of a *Honeymooners* relationship between Karhan and his wife, who bickered constantly...(Shobris, Telephone Interview).

The rehearsal process mirrored the play in that it had a crisis that led to the “unity of the workers.” Director Maggie Speer was frustrated by a cast consisting primarily of amateurs, and not used to working without designers and stage managers (E. Russell). Deb Morrison remembers finding set designer William Hollister, who had been drafted to play the ineffective workers’ rep Klepač, in tears after Speer had crushed his set model (D. Morrison, “Re: 2 More Questions”). The incident illustrated the growing divide between the director and her young cast. Five days before opening, Speer walked out of rehearsals. The cast had to pull together, just as the factory workers in Karhan’s factory worked sixteen-hour shifts to help out the armory. Shobris suspected that Speer:

...really didn’t understand the significance of the play, and then had problems with the huge cast. This was not a Václav Havel play; this was a bad play and we were doing it deliberately (Shobris, Telephone Interview).

A directorial “team” of Morrison, the stage manager Keith Dehany, Alan Kinnaird, and the designers took over.

The cast played their roles without any irony; though they expected some laughs at the play’s earnestness, they did not know where they would be, and were surprised by the laughter they received on opening night (D. Morrison, Personal Interview). The performance videotape does reveal laughter at the cultural inscriptions of the text, including:

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<sup>36</sup> The television show *The Honeymooners* starring Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows, that ran on CBS in 1955-1956. *The Honeymooners* first existed as a sketch on DuMont’s *Cavalcade of Stars*. The original Alice, Pert Kelton, did not move with the sketch when Jackie Gleason got his own show in 1955—she’d been blacklisted. After 1956, Gleason returned to variety format, and presented *The Honeymooners* as part of his own show until 1970. See [www.tv.com](http://www.tv.com); [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).

1. Karhan commenting on his son's drawing "This is an automatic milling cutter!" (Shobris: trans. *Karhan's Men* 3)
2. A young man complaining about his mother's waking him up with "She chased me outta bed this morning, the old bat. 'Get up,' she says, 'The five year plan!'" (10)
3. The engineer Dvořáková telling Karhan in a motherly fashion to "take care of yourself," (19)
4. The same engineer crowing about "good old socialist competition" (28)
5. Dvořáková's line reminding her staff what it was like before the revolution when "A few days before the end of the war, the Americans smashed up the whole factory" (36)
6. The love scene in which Božka remarks that she could write poems "about five year plans, about machines..." This line received such a large laugh that the more romantic end of the line, "...and you" was completely drowned out (32).

Both the Czech press and the English-language press united in praising the play's concept and execution. Richard Allen Greene in the Prague Post enthused that producing the play was "one of the best ideas the Black Box gang have ever had," comparing the style of the play to *Knute Rockne* and *42nd Street* (Rev. of *Karhan's Men*). Tim Gilman's review in Prognosis questioned the production's sensitivity:

Enough time has passed for Western audiences to view the products of the Soviet era as bizarre and unique art forms, but are they acceptable to those who had no alternatives only a few years ago?

Apparently, they were. Eva Stehlíková praised the production in Lidové noviny:

It is difficult to say what this staging signifies to the ensemble and to the American and English people living in Prague, but for us it is exactly as it was for the newspaper Lidové Demokracie at the time of its premiere in Burian's D theatre many years ago: an "unforgettable evening." And this is even besides the fact that we did not get to hear (or we could not catch in the rapidity of the throaty American English) the similarly unforgettable utterance of old Karhan: "It's not like the trenches, a machine gun or dysentery, but it sure ain't no picnic" (Stehlíková).

While Stehlíková observed that the costumes did not really recall the "Blue Shirts and Red Hearts," she appreciated the constructivist staging, in which the actors mimed assembly line movements. Her displayed knowledge of theatre history and style far surpassed the rather superficial English-language reviews. Where Stehlíková references Zamyatin (suggesting that the costumes create an odd dystopia), Greene references the television show *M.A.S.H.* All of the reviewers, including Stehlíková, approved of the lack of irony. With its production of *Karhan's*

*Men Black Box* succeeded in finding a project that interested a Czech audience, as well as appealing to expatriates and tourists. Randall Lyman observed that the show played to packed houses and felt that with a longer run "...it would have attracted a midnight cult following" (*Left Bank of the Nineties* 133).

### 3.2.2 InsideOut's International Arts Festival

By contrast, Dale Wyatt's company InsideOut programmed an international arts festival, not a Czech Disneyland, that same summer at Studio Labyrint. Wyatt was a professional American actress who had been living in Italy; she and British actor Ian Falconer had moved to Prague and debuted the English translation of Enzo Consoli's play *Igloo* in December 1993. *Igloo* was invited to the Setkáni-Stretnutie festival in Zlin, South Moravia (Sloupová, "Theatre of the Expatriates"). On the strength of this one production, the InsideOut team, which included resident Scottish actor Robert Russell, booked the Labyrint theatre for six weeks in the summer, planning to host an international theatre festival. Ultimately thirteen companies were involved, eight of them from Great Britain, with others from Slovakia, Russia, and cities in the Czech Republic. The InsideOut festival included music and film as well as theatre. Some of the other English-language theatre productions in the Festival included a five-person female *Macbeth* from the Soho Group in London, and a production of Pam Gems' *Queen Christina* from Absolute Theatre in England, starring Laura Cox (who returned in 1995 to perform in the Small and Dangerous production of John Murrell's play *Memoir*). Russell recalls that *Queen Christina* was attended by the Israeli ambassador to Prague, which, though prestigious, was a security headache (Personal Interview).

InsideOut succeeded in getting some publicity not only in English-language journals but also in major Czech papers. Kateřina Valentová's article in the daily newspaper *Český Deník* noted InsideOut's two-tiered prices when she mentioned the "price for Czech audiences." This controversial practice of charging Czechs a different, lower price than tourists was tacitly condoned by the Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Ministry of Finance (German), but deplored by most of the world. A holdover from Communist ideology, the practice amounted to a difference of only a few dollars for something like InsideOut's festival, but could be extreme

for such things as medical care and school tuition. It was officially banned in May 1995 but reinstated as a “surtax” for foreigners in July; it was considered a sticking point for the Czech Republic’s entry into the EU as late as 2000 (the Czech Republic entered the EU in May 2004). Few of the other ELTs employed it—Misery Loves Company never did, on principle; Black Box did on occasion and when asked.

The Labyrinth venue in which InsideOut’s Festival took place had a long history involving several name changes. Originally built in 1881 as the Divadlo u Libuše, it changed its name to the Švanda Theatre, and later to the Intimní (Intimate) divadlo. After 1945 it changed its name to the Realistické divadlo, reflecting the primacy of Socialist Realism. In 1991 it changed its name to Labyrint, and opened Studio Labyrint in 1992 (Patková). In 1992 Labyrint also forfeited its right to use its space because of the Act on the Restitution of Property confiscated after February 1948 (Boková). The dispute dragged on and laws prevented the company from being forcibly evicted, but its existence was unstable. It remained one of the most popular venues available for rental by ELTs.

### **3.2.3 Building Bridges Inside the Community**

Following the summer festival of 1994, Black Box focused on building bridges inside the ELT community, and presented small shows that did not drain their resources. Their autumn production was Marsha Norman’s two-hander *Night, Mother*, directed by Karma Ibsen, the University of Alabama professor who had directed *The Incredibly Awesome Giant* the summer before. *Night, Mother* received good reviews in both Prognosis and the Prague Post, but went unnoticed by the Czech press. Branické Divadlo performed the play in Czech six months later. The play did not really fit either side of the Black Box mission: it was not a new play from America (it had debuted in 1982), nor was it connected to the Czech Republic, particularly. In May 1995, Black Box held Shakespeare workshops, led by Kate Buckley, a director from Chicago who had assisted on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the National Theatre in Bratislava, Slovakia in 1992. By holding workshops Black Box hoped to widen the talent pool and foster inter-group collaboration. Black Box revived Alan Bennett’s *Talking Heads* in June 1995. Another strategy intended to increase collaboration was the publication Theatre News,



founded by Gammie and playwright/director Christopher Lord in early 1995, listing auditions and performance dates. That desire to merge and form one or two strong companies out of the fragmentation haunted the English-language theatre scene throughout the nineties. As the feeling of possibility in the English-language theatre scene grew, so did the frustrations: the strain of sustaining a “theatre company” that really consisted of only a few committed individuals was often overwhelming.

### SECTION 3.3 THE THIRD SUMMER FESTIVAL: REPRISING AND REVIVING

By 1995, Black Box had established a solid reputation with Czech critics, but they faced serious competition from Misery Loves Company, a group run by three male English-speakers that worked with Czech actors and theatre companies and had quickly earned the respect of Czech critics. Vladimír Mikulka, in his feature in Denni Telegraf about Black Box’s third summer festival, described Black Box as the “most famous and the most consistent English-speaking theatre in Prague (not including Misery Loves Company, a theatre that consists mostly of Czech actors)” (“Black Box on a Journey Deep into the 1970s”). For this third summer festival Black Box again focused on Czech plays, again using ELT production strategy number two. They also included a comic Czech play, perhaps hoping to reprise the success of *Karhan’s Men*. The three plays they chose included a double bill of “Vaněk” plays (plays featuring the dissident playwright character created by Václav Havel, Ferdinand Vaněk, a character who was “borrowed” by fellow playwrights Pavel Kohout, Pavel Landovský and Jiří Dienstbier); the English-language premiere of Přemysl Rut’s *No Tragedy: A Little Czech Macbeth*, and a theatrical adaptation of Jiří Brdečka’s comic Western (and cult) film, *Lemonade Joe*. Gammie had secured Divadlo Komédie for all of the shows, hoping that this centrally located and well-respected venue would increase attendance. Divadlo Komédie is one of Prague’s Municipal theatres, originally built in 1928. In 1995, the Komédie was run by Michal Dočekal, who with some former members of Kašpar theatre had formed a company called “Maminko, můj hrách květe” (Mommy, my peas are flowering). The Komédie also hosted the Semafor theatre.

Semafor, which had been a musical-cabaret company in the style of Voskovec and Werich, led by playwright Jiří Suchý and composer Jiří Šlitr, had lost its permanent home (Patková).

The Vaněk plays on the double-bill both date from the socialist era (Havel's was written in 1978, Kohout's in 1986). An unsigned article in Večerník Praha noted:

Though the productions are aimed at foreigners in Prague, they are of interest for Czechs also. These days, in fact, this is the only opportunity to see these plays performed on a Czech stage, which is strange, particularly in the case of Václav Havel. It is an educational selection for this Anglo-American theatre company ("Summer Festival of Czech Plays in English").

As noted, Czech theatres had basically wearied of dissident dramas as early as 1991. Mikulka in Denní Telegraph declared that the two one-acts were a "safe bet," but acknowledged the "determination with which Black Box tries to map Czech history through plays that characterize the respective historical eras." He reminded readers about the previous year's unusual production of *Karhan's Men*. Mikulka felt that some of the acting came "dangerously close to the quality of amateur theatre" but praised Black Box for presenting an alternative to "purely commercial tourist productions" and predicted that Rut's play would be more suitable for the company ("Black Box on a Journey Deep into the 1970s"). Shobris remembers very negative reactions from the Czech critics to the dissident plays:

The play [*Protest*] takes you through the mindset and rationalizations of the people who went along, who didn't sign Charter 77, who did betray their own principles, and rationalized it... it [the Communist regime] was "death by a thousand paper cuts." One Czech review in particular was so angry it didn't even mention the quality of the production at all; it was entirely "Americans go home, how dare you judge us" (Telephone Interview).<sup>37</sup>

This response was very different from critical response to *Karhan's Men*, in which all of the audience could share a laugh at the expense of the former regime.

*No Tragedy: A Little Czech Macbeth*, which sets a Macbeth-like story in a Czech panelák (Communist-era apartment complex), had had a Czech production at Brno's HaDivadlo one month before the Velvet Revolution. The Black Box mounting was its first production in English, in an original translation by David Speranza and Hana Anděrová. Director Peter DuBois had studied with Anne Bogart and used his "Viewpoints" training in the production. Viewpoints is a system of exploring text through physicality, often non-realistic and inspired by

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<sup>37</sup> Repeated searches for these reviews has proved fruitless.

postmodern dance, developed by Bogart. At SITI, the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, founded in 1992, actor training consists of Bogart's Viewpoints and Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki's rigorous vocal and physical techniques, which emphasize the lower half of the body and connection to the earth: "Suzuki training demands the actor to face him/herself; Viewpoints training asks actors to face each other" (SITI Company). In practice however, productions employing Viewpoints often show non-naturalistically motivated movement and actors who shadow one another or approach each other on diagonal lines.

Ewan McLaren of Misery Loves Company thought *No Tragedy* was one of the best things any ELT had done to date (Personal Interview, 30 June 1999). Mikulka however thought the production was heavy-handed:

It is the direct connection to specific environment that forms the basic problem of Black Box's staging of *No Tragedy*, especially when it is staged for an audience of foreigners. ... the actors from the first moment "act the theme," and as a result an important aspect of the play is lost: we now are almost directly told what was originally meant to only shimmer through the comically stupid and banal conversations of the central couple...this feeling becomes stronger also with the removing of reality in various scenes, e.g. the actors frequently say their lines without looking at each other ("No Tragedy, but No Great Excitement Either").

The observation that actors said their lines without looking at each other reflects Mikulka's lack of familiarity with Bogart's Viewpoints. What made the production stimulating to expatriate viewers made it unreadable to a Czech critic. Don Nixon, who performed in *No Tragedy*, headed the English-language Initiative at Divadlo Archa in the mid-nineties before taking a job at the Divadelní ústav, felt that before a Bogart/S.I.T.I. workshop at Archa in late 1997, Czech performing artists had been unaware of Bogart (Nixon, Personal Interview).<sup>38</sup> The production of *No Tragedy* caused Mikulka to wonder whether the Black Box effort to "keep staging plays that are so tightly linked with a specific period in history" was worthwhile.

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<sup>38</sup> In late 1997, Bogart and two members of her S.I.T.I. (Saratoga International Theatre Institute) led a workshop on the actor training of Tadashi Suzuki and Bogart's "Viewpoints" method of acting at Divadlo Archa, prior to Bogart's presentation at Archa of *Bob*, a show about Robert Wilson. This workshop included seventeen local actor participants. Several Prague directors, designers and dramaturgs observed.

### 3.3.1 Lemonade Joe: Re-presenting Western Parody

*Lemonade Joe* was the only musical Black Box ever attempted, and was intended to be the cornerstone of the festival. Věra Oráčová translated the dialogue, and she and actor Steve Hallam worked on the lyrics. In 1964, Jiří Brdečka and Oldrich Lipský had adapted Brdečka's 1944 play into a hugely popular film. According to Randall Lyman, Czechs watched it the way Americans watch *The Wizard of Oz* (*Left Bank of the Nineties*: 133). The American elements of production as well as the setting had always been somewhat inscribed into the piece: the first mounting in the early forties included incidental music by Jan Rychlík based on American folksongs and recordings of jazz. In 1953, Brdečka adapted the play again for the ABC theatre, adding more music by Rychlík and new music by Vlastimíl Hála. In 1958, Brdečka added more music and altered the play to operetta form; Black Box worked from that version (*Lemonade Joe* Program). The movie *Lemonade Joe* deconstructs and comments on American "B" Westerns. The plot of *Lemonade Joe* follows its title hero, along with temperance worker Winnifred, as they encourage the sale of lemonade in the local saloon. The owner Doug Badman puts up a fight, as does his brother Horace, aka Hogo Fogo.

Re-presenting the American West as a musical seemed to have sound theatrical possibilities. The American West inhabited the Czech imagination on many fronts: in addition to the infatuation with Karl May and "tipi" weekends, many Czechs loved country and western music. The Czech love of country and western music dates back to the twenties and thirties, when it was called the "Tramp Movement." Film director Yuri Weiss told National Public Radio (NPR) in 1992 that "the intelligentsia's embrace of the American West and particularly the Native American viewpoint in the 1930s was partly a protest against the invading Germans, and the Nazi emphasis on racial purity." Under Communism, according to record producer Miroslav Cerni, "the Stalinists supported country music because of its working-class identification" (Edwards).

John Allison's comic column "The Adventures of Joe Marlboro" in *Prognosis*, which reinvented the comic cowboy as a YAP everyman, had been picked up by the Czech press and translated for the weekly *Televize*. His hapless expat hero was a buffoon laughable to both YAPs and Czechs alike: Marlboro runs to Prague to escape from feminism, where he finds himself rejected by Czech women; unexpectedly teaching English; quoted to his disadvantage in

an English journalist's article about the expatriate scene; and stabbed by a Frenchman in a cheese shop. After receiving publicity for the attack he becomes a DJ on "Radio Kauntry" with a regular show called "Kowboj Džou" and a clothing line in the works (32-33). Expats could relate to the point for point accuracy of Marlboro's adventures; Czechs could enjoy his Schweik-like simplicity. Schweik, the hero of Jaroslav Hašek's 1921-22 (written in installments, Hašek died before he finished it) novel *The Good Soldier Schweik* epitomizes the ideal of the "little Czech man": he is so apparently stupid and well-meaning that his Austro-Hungarian superiors fail to register that his actions can also be read as sly passive resistance. Above all, as Holý points out, Schweik is a survivor (130).

A radio show called "Kowboj Džou" was not far from reality: the program for *Lemonade Joe* included ads from a store called Lucky Horse, which had lent Western shirts, hats and holsters to the cast and advertised "a huge selection of quality Western style goods." However, Black Box's production was more silly than witty, lacking the relevance of Allison's satire. A parody of a parody is tricky, especially if the demands of the music and acting are beyond the cast's abilities.<sup>39</sup> *Lemonade Joe* was poorly received by both the English-language and the Czech press; Tognazzini appreciated some of the "digs at American consumerism" but found the show tiresome in Act 2 (Tognazzini, "Lemonade Joe").

The Czech reviews in Lidové Noviny and Denní Telegraf were impatient with the amateurishness of the company. Vladimír Mikulka in Denní Telegraf approved the departure from the "rather heavy-handed efforts" of the earlier plays in the festival, but felt that much of the play's charm was lost in translation. He referred to the pronunciation of the character's name in "the English standard"—in Czech it is a running gag that the title character's name is pronounced "Zhou." In the English production the name is pronounced normally as "Joe," which is not especially funny. Mikulka concluded that while *Lemonade Joe* was the best of the Summer Festival, the Festival itself raised:

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<sup>39</sup> One example of a successful parody of a parody is the 2005 Broadway production *Spamalot*, which sends up the 1975 movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, itself a parody of bad movies about the Arthurian legend. The Broadway production, unlike Black Box's production of *Lemonade Joe*, was driven by one of the original creators, that is, Eric Idle. It also parodied not only the original story, but the genre of musical theatre itself.

...some unpleasant questions. The idea of introducing the English-speaking community in Prague (and possibly to the more curious of tourists) to Czech drama is undoubtedly interesting; nevertheless it seems that Black Box makes unfortunate selections of texts that are as of now beyond the group's possibilities ("Lemonade Joe, or the Anglo-Prague Dumpling Western").

Jan Kerbr in Lidové noviny was even harsher. He contrasted the English-language theatres that were "a bizarre by-product of the internationalization of Czech culture" with "the better companies (Misery Loves Company, for example)" who were a part of Prague theatre life ("Hogo Fogo Black Box"). He objected to having to review "average amateur theatre" just because it was in one of Prague's most famous spaces. He found the direction "not most demanding for the tempo of the performance (it was demanding on the patience of the audience, however)" and found that "the first twenty minutes were almost unbearable." Kerbr praised actress Kristen Flores, who later performed in the Czech production of *Hair* (1997) with the backhanded compliment that "her interpretation of Hogo Fogo Horatz's song would do even on a professional stage." In conclusion he anthropomorphized the venue, Divadlo Komédie: "The stage, used to the feet of professionals, silently disagreed with their presence" ("Hogo Fogo Black Box"). This remark was a rebuke to Michal Dočekal, director of the Komédie. His former partner, Jakub Špalek, had a lasting and mutually supportive relationship with Misery Loves Company; Dočekal by contrast was not happy with Black Box when they left his theatre (Hollister, "Lemonade Joe").

Overall, Black Box's third summer Festival was not a success. The company was not so well organized as it had been previously. Victoria Shobris had announced her departure. She left in late 1995. Alex Gammie left after the joint production, with Misery Loves Company, of [\*Angels in America\*](#) in 1995-96. Black Box in its Third Summer Festival established a reputation it could never quite shake: that of a well-managed and consistent company who were artistically dull and often amateurish.

### SECTION 3.4      **BLACK BOX'S NEW LEADERSHIP: NANCY BISHOP FORMALIZES THE MISSION**

By 1996, most of the ELTs formed in the early nineties had folded; few had their original founders at the helm. Among the casualties were the student-run squat Asylum, Jesse Webb's musical company Artists for Prague, Peter Krogh's North American Theatre and Dale Wyatt's InsideOut. Director Nancy Bishop returned to Prague from Chicago to take over Black Box in 1996, and kept it going through the summer of 1999. Bishop knew she wanted to raise its professional image. Instead of a summer festival, Black Box held a benefit in June 1996 consisting of short plays: Havel's *Mistake*, Tom Stoppard's *Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*. Ivan Havel, the president's brother, performed in *Mistake*, which attracted some publicity. *Týden* (a weekly Czech magazine) printed a short piece with the title "Havel Plays In Havel," quoting Bishop on her goals to professionalize English-language theatre. Bishop knew Ivan Havel through the Center for Theoretical Studies (CTS), through which Northwestern courses were taught (she had finished her master's degree there in the summer of 1995). Havel also offered Bishop office space for Black Box at CTS (Bishop, Personal Interview, 4 March 1999). Bishop put together Black Box's first board of directors: Jennifer Yeager, Tony Denny, Jan Suchanek, and well-known Czech actor Jiří Datal Novotný, who appeared in *Mistake* and had also performed in *Protest* the summer before. It is notable that Yeager was on the original board of directors, as her later actions in mismanaging and embezzling funds were blamed on Bishop by an expanded board a year later. A "Board Development Statement" laid out goals including developing a core artistic ensemble. The board development statement also formalized the two-fold mission to produce a season of plays in English for the city during the year, and Czech plays in English during the summer. Elizabeth Russell directed David Ives' comic one-act *The Sure Thing* for one performance in July.

The first full-length production of the new, reconstituted Black Box, following the benefit and the one-act, was *The Memorandum* by Václav Havel. Again, Black Box followed ELT production strategy number two, re-presenting the Host culture. Given the skeptical review from Vladimír Mikulka the summer before, it is hard to understand Bishop's determination to produce another dissident drama. Dennis Moran, who stage managed *The Memorandum*, remembers that Bishop once brought him to a dinner with Czech writers, artists and former dissidents, explaining

that the dissidents “had a sort of nostalgia for those days, ironically enough.” It was a nostalgia that Bishop appeared to share, with her preference for plays about Communist oppression. Rather than producing dissident dramas, Czechs were more interested in presenting new dramas that dealt with the complex psychology of life under Normalization, dramas that would have been impossible to write with an eye for production while the Communist government was in power. Jan Sverak’s 1996 film *Kolya* for example is set right before the Velvet Revolution. The movie includes a scene of the Revolution itself, in which the audience observes that the same Communist functionary who had interrogated the cellist Louka has quietly switched sides to join the protestors in Wenceslas Square shouting “Havel na hrad!” (“Havel to the castle”). The movie, which won the Academy Award for best foreign film, demonstrates that Czechs were interested in digesting their history but not in merely regurgitating it. Portraying the way individuals complicit with Communism also ultimately rejected it (whether cynically or truthfully) was timely; a production of an old Havel play was stale. *The Memorandum* had been produced at Divadlo Na zábradlí in 1965 and in 1968 at New York’s Public Theater, winning the 1967-68 Obie for Best Foreign Play.

The play is about language, which did make it somewhat relevant to an expatriate audience. Its plot follows a memorandum received by office manager, Josef Gross, in a strange new language called Ptydepe. Apart from being a critique of idiocy in the name of ideology and using office politics as a metaphor for political systems, *The Memorandum* demonstrates how easily people rationalize their own survival. Gross, the protagonist, resists Ptydepe and calls himself a humanist, but though he is well-meaning, he is also weak. Moran remembers that Ivan Havel did not like the production:

[Nancy] had the actors play it as really broad comedy, almost slapstick. Ivan said the satire of the script should be set off by an understated, natural acting style. And the things described in the play, while satire, were about the sort of things real people went through (not so long ago). ... I’m sure Nancy agreed in principle, but she felt that a tourist/expat audience would ‘get it’ more easily, and certainly be more entertained, with a broader style. The play is very wordy and she thought the audience might be bored unless it was goosed up. We weren’t playing to a Czech audience that would get all the nuances and appreciate the dry irony of Havel’s humor (Moran, “Black Box”).

This justification is not convincing; the play had, after all, been successfully produced in New York without being “goosed up.” Westerners are not unfamiliar with bureaucracy and office



politics, and a slapstick approach to Havel undercuts the machinery of his humor. C. Denby Swanson, who played the secretary Hana, recalls that Ivan Havel objected to her performance:

...because I didn't tease my hair with a comb, as indicated in the stage directions. I have way too much hair for that to be a possibility—I'd have been there all night trying to get a beehive 'do out of this head—instead I had my bangs cut about nose-level, and used them and a comb as a sort of kabuki fan—when there was interesting and valuable information to glean from another character's dialogue, I would peek out from underneath" ("Re: Prague 1995?")

While insisting that a character tease her hair a particular way appears petty, the stage directions inform us that "Combing her hair will be her main occupation throughout the play. She will interrupt it only when absolutely necessary" (4-5). The character is not using her hair to hide; she is merely uninterested. She answers direct questions, but volunteers only comments about food. Swanson also remembers interpretive decisions based in misconceptions:

... the play says that each character has her own fire extinguisher, forks and knives. We decided that this was an expression of individuality by people who were oppressed. But that was completely off. I was later told by a Czech that offices supplied no silverware at the cafeteria, no toilet paper, things like that—it all had to be brought from home. ("Re: Prague 1995?")

The play did succeed in pleasing an expatriate and tourist audience for whom the original context was unfamiliar. The Prague Post wrote that:

In the hands of director Nancy Bishop, *The Memorandum* becomes both a testament to everyday Czech absurdities—waiting in lines for cheese, bread and produce, having to obtain signatures on "official" documents—and a reflection on the alienation that results from such difficulties (Baker, "Black Box Takes a Memo—Exposing Life's Absurdities").

On October 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Black Box restaged *The Memorandum* at Klub Lávka to celebrate Václav Havel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. A panel discussion about the play followed, with Ivan Havel, former Prognosis critic and current Pozor magazine editor-in-chief Louis Charbonneau (Charbonneau had performed the character of Vaněk in both *Protest* and *Permit*, directed by Bishop, in the summer of 1995), and Czech theatre scholar Barbara Day.

Despite this promising start, the group was still having organizational troubles. The ensemble of actors Bishop had tried to form was drifting away. Bishop acknowledged this in her agenda for the Black Box Company Meeting on 15 September 1996. In her assessment of the good and bad production aspects of *The Memorandum* she praised the result but questioned the

poor organization of advertising for the program. Elizabeth Russell, who was planning to leave after the summer, wondered whether the group should not just change its name and start anew (“Unpublished Letter to Black Box”).

Black Box’s final production of 1996 was David Mamet’s *Speed-the-Plow*. This choice corresponded to ELT production strategy number one, re-presenting the Performer’s culture. Mamet’s three-hander about a power play in Hollywood was driven by Shannon McCormick, one of the short-lived “company,” and provided an oblique commentary on the growing film culture at Barrandov studios, where many ELT actors (particularly those in Misery Loves Company’s ensemble) worked in small roles, especially in the B-movies of Lloyd Simandl’s North American Pictures. Barrandov Studios itself typified many of the changes that corporations went through during the transition: the company had been founded in 1931 by Václav Havel’s father and uncle, soon becoming the second largest studio in Europe. During World War II, it was used to make German propaganda films. It was nationalized in 1945 and remained in state hands until 1993, when it was reformed as the shareholder company AB Barrandov (Kellner, “The Legendary Barrandov Studios”). From 1994 to 1996, the studio experienced the same types of upsets that plagued other quickly-privatized institutions. Chairman of the board Václav Marhoul resigned in April 1994, though the board intended to pursue his plans to acquire a TV station and build a movie theme park (Kellner “Arts Diary: AB Barrandov”). In September 1994, the company still had only an acting director, leading to difficulties when individuals with studio contracts were barred from entering the premises by “No trespassing” signs (Crockford). In 1996, the studio reinvented itself again as three new independent legal entities: Barrandov Studios, which handled all the film business; Barrandov Biografia, which oversaw distribution; and the Miloš Havel Foundation and Barrandov Panorama, which supervised land development (Kellner “the Legendary Barrandov Studios”).

The pernicious effect of media on culture was a theme of *Speed-the-Plow*, and, the dominance of American media in Prague was most obvious in film and television. Ursula E. Beitter, in her introduction to *The New Europe at the Crossroads*, notes how Arturas Tereskinas’ article on Lithuanian identity in the media equates such media dominance with colonization:

He points out that America's overwhelming presence in the electronic media, on television and in movies has made people think that America colonizes Europe, that American culture will soon replace other, indigenous cultures, leading not to national cultures but to "globalized cultural identities" (xx-xxi).

That Nova presented dubbed American popular culture was not the only way the station iterated cultural imperialism: sixty-five percent of Nova was held by Central European Media Enterprises, which was owned by former U.S. ambassador Mark Palmer and Estee Lauder heir Robert Lauder. By November of 1994 it had double the ratings for the two state-owned stations combined, with a 63.5% market share (Kellner, "T.V. Nova Attracts Most Viewers").

*Speed-the-Plow* tells the story of two Hollywood executives, the more powerful Bobby Gould, up-and-coming Charlie Fox, and Karen, a secretary trying to get Gould to make a movie out of an Armageddonesque novel. The Prague Post review felt that the production did not dig deeply enough into the dark side of these ambitious characters ("Weak Players Hurt Mamet's Look at Hollywood"). Although the play's content was timely, Czech papers did not review the production. Black Box's publicity efforts were always uneven at best, but there is also a central unsettling contradiction in a play dealing so specifically with the dangers of popular culture and the commercialization of art being presented by visitors from the very country whose cultural output was perceived as a threat. Furthermore, there were difficulties with the management at the venue Black Box had rented, Klub Lávka: "The whole negotiation deteriorated into a fight in which the manager called me a Communist" (Bishop, Personal Interview, 17 July 1999).

The one bright spot on Bishop's horizon was that grant money she had sought for a spring 1997 production of Brian Friel's *Translations* had come through in the summer of 1996. The \$2500 grant from the ArtsLink Foundation in New York amounted to 70,000 Czech crowns, a very good-sized budget. Designed to support collaborations between Americans and Eastern Europeans, the grant had required an invitation from a Czech company, which Bishop had received from Jakub Špalek of Kašpar, the company that hosted *Misery Loves Company*. Coincidentally, Kašpar was preparing its own (Czech) production of Friel's play. When the grant came through, Bishop wrote to Kašpar member and *Misery Loves Company* director David Nykl, offering to share the grant money if the Black Box production could be, as [\*Angels in America\*](#)<sup>40</sup> had been the year before, a *Misery Loves Company/Black Box* production, and

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<sup>40</sup> This production is discussed in detail in [chapter four](#).

offered him the role of Owen. This offer was turned down, and McCormick, who had driven the *Speed-the-Plow* project, defected to Misery Loves Company. With a prestigious, if inactive, board, and grant money in place, Black Box had some reason to be optimistic about establishing itself as a solid institution, but was unable to convince Misery Loves Company, with its solid base in Czech theatre, to collaborate on an ongoing basis.

### SECTION 3.5 EXPOSURE: PLAYING IN TWO LANGUAGES

As Black Box was continuing its struggle for credibility, a long-time observer and sometime participant in the ELT scene decided to become a major player. Prague Post critic Richard Allen Greene had high professional as well as intercultural ideals for his bilingual company Exposure from its inception in 1995. Greene had always played both sides of the fence in the ELT community: he directed Studio's double bill of one-acts by Chekhov and Ionesco in 1992. His review of Misery Loves Company's inaugural production in 1994 of *Nightingale for Dinner* reads like a manifesto for the company he founded in 1995:

English-speaking expatriates have tried many formulas in their quest to produce good English-language theater in Prague. With *Nightingale for Dinner*, Canadian director Ewan McLaren might finally have found the right combination...By cleverly using, rather than fighting, the fact that most of the actors are speaking a foreign language, the production may even come out better in translation than it does in the original.(Rev. *Nightingale for Dinner*).

Three motivating principles drove Greene to found Exposure: he was frustrated by what he saw as the "timidity" of Czech dramaturgy; he wanted to do "something outside of the ghetto of being an American in Prague," and he wanted to "bring in some new scripts" (Personal Interview). His defining principle, then, was to follow ELT production strategy number 3, bicultural and/or bilingual productions. He formed an advisory committee immediately (preceding Black Box's decision to form a board), using his Prague Post contacts within the business community. Czech laws prevented employees from sitting on a board of directors; Greene did not give his advisory committee the power of an actual board. He applied to a bank for a grant, which he received; he developed a logo, carefully thought-out budgets, and a laser-

printed mission statement (Greene, Personal Interview). In addition to Coleen Nelson, the advertising director for The Prague Post, and actors Jiří Bábek and Deborah Michaels, Greene's committee included an attorney, a legal assistant and a secretarial coordinator from the firm of Squire, Sanders and Dempsey. The San Francisco-based law firm was a significant supporter of English-language theatre companies in Prague: they routinely allowed the use of their copy machines for programs and issues of Theatre News; they employed individuals as office assistants (including such theatre regulars as Louis Charbonneau, Randall Lyman and Peter DuBois), and took out ads in programs (Lyman, Telephone Interview). Greene tried to avoid accusations of favoritism by making sure the Post did not review Exposure productions, but many saw a bias in his reviews of other companies.

Greene's ideas were drawn from the context of Czech theatre. In his 1995 editorial "Czech Theater: Going Through a Bad Stage" he echoed the sentiments of many English and Czech critics worrying about the dearth of new Czech theatrical voices. The future of Czech theatre was the main topic at Divadlo '94, a four-day international theatre festival held in Plzeň, whose topics included questions about funding cuts (Kalke, "Future of Czech Theater Examined at Divadlo '94"). Typical dark notices appearing in the press at this time included: a CTK National News Wire report that almost fifty per cent of young people did not go to the theatre (6 Sept 1994), a report from James Drake in the Prague Post about staffing crises at the National Theatre (5 Jan. 1994), and a long article by Herb Greer, in the September 1993 issue of World & I, about the changing relationship of Czech theatre to society. Melissa Morrison reported in the Prague Post in July 1994 that several theatres had had to change their names or spaces and cancel their shows as they struggled with the loss of state subsidies. Ondřej Hrab's decision to disband the repertory company of the E.F. Burian theatre when he founded Divadlo Archa caused an uproar (Morrison, "Theater's Day of Reckoning."). Alex Gammie told Morrison that Czech theatres had to "cut the deadwood" and deal with the lack of a safety net, but admitted that one reason Black Box was doing well was that nobody was paid. Morrison's inclusion of an amateur English-language theatre in an article about the funding crises in the Czech theatre only highlighted the ELTs lack of integration into Czech society; the ELTs were not operating on a fully professional basis so of course did not suffer the same economic concerns.

Where Greene departed from the many Czech critics worried about the looming crisis in Czech theatre was his strong resistance towards popular forms. In March 1995, just as *Exposure* was getting off the ground, he wrote:

Naturally, theater, at its best, does entertain, but, as art, it must examine society, asking important questions. ... Now, I happen to love *Guys and Dolls*, but it isn't theater. ("Czech Theater: Going Through a Bad Stage.")

Greene's dislike of popular forms led him to believe that Czechs interested in them were being led astray by globalization. In a "season preview" of 1993, he complained about the presence of musical theatre in Prague:

Surprisingly, musical theater has found its way to Prague, perhaps as a result of economic pressure to appeal to tourists.... Czechs as a people are too literate, too intellectual, too tied to the stage to let it go so easily ("Noses, Noises and the Bard: What the Theatrical Year Has in Store")

Yet, despite Greene's assumptions, the "first Czech musical," *Dracula* opened in October 1995. It was a huge media phenomenon, and even had performances in English. Greene's conception of Czechs and their theatre was itself a projected performance of identity.

The inspiration for a bilingual company, according to Greene's comments during a Radio Metropolis panel discussion in the spring of 1995, was an Israeli multicultural workshop he had attended in 1985 in which director Avi Hadari gave actors sides in their own languages. The audience for the performance only understood half of the text but enjoyed it anyway ("Sleeping Together"). The trouble with Greene's inspiring memory is that an audience at a workshop is in a different frame of mind from paying customers at a professional production. Failure to properly consider audience response was *Exposure's* biggest problem. The concept of bilingual production itself is not inherently flawed; there are many companies working bilingually today in varying degrees. Tadashi Suzuki often has his Japanese and English-speaking actors speak their own languages on stage; the New York ensemble Universes performs in "Spanglish"—a mix of Spanish and English—with their show *Slanguage*; the Flemish group Needcompany performs Shakespeare in many languages at once depending on the nationality of its performers; Robert LePage often mixes French and English; Teatro Vision in San Jose often mixes Spanish and English. However all of these companies have at least one of the following elements: an audience likely to be competent in both languages; a show whose story was familiar enough to

an audience that foreign sections would not detract from the dramaturgy, or a visually-based style that does not rely on language for its overall effects. *Alenka in Wonderland* had succeeded in the schools, if not as a professional performance, partly because it too relied on a familiar story.

Maria Shevtsova's description of the audience-centered missions of two Italo-Australian bilingual theatres, Sydney's FILEF Theatre Group, and Adelaide's Doppio Teatro, lays out several successful principles of bilingual productions. These groups intended to:

...tackle material of relevance to immigrant communities but which mainstream theatre still ignores; ... reach their children, namely the second and third generation of Italo-Australians who may have been more or less assimilated into the dominant Anglo/Celtic culture but who, on the other hand, are losing or have lost touch with their language and culture of origin; ... The purpose, then, of working in two languages was to foreground all these difficulties and help alleviate them (17-18)

Shevtsova also describes a process of bilingual framing, in which one language is used to narrate and another used in the enacted scenes. The most successful bilingual production in Prague of the nineties, the Misery Loves Company/Kašpar Theatre coproduction of *King Stag*, used this framing strategy and was already in preparation when Exposure produced its first show. The plays produced by Exposure under Greene's leadership (he left the company in 1996) did not foreground anything about the presence of English-speakers in Prague, nor the Czech interest in learning English.

Exposure first presented two public play readings followed by discussion. Readings, of course, depend primarily on language, since most of the other elements of performance are missing. The readings were designed to attract funders, but they did not demonstrate the viability of the bilingual concept. The first play-reading was John Reaves' *Mississippi Nude*, in December 1994, prior to Exposure's official opening. Set in 1880s Philadelphia, *Mississippi Nude* alternates the story of a "primitivist" female artist with that of an ambitious male painter; language shifts marked the two worlds. Susan Sontag's *The Way We Live Now*, held at the Slovak cultural center, followed, and included a post-reading discussion about AIDS. Generally speaking, trapping potential funders into an unexpected issue-oriented discussion does not encourage donations. Deborah Michaels, who participated, remembers a stimulating event, but

William Hollister, who attended, remembers that people were furious that they were forced to participate (Michaels, Telephone Interview; Hollister, “Re: Exposure”).

### 3.5.1 Staging the Past in Two Languages: Exposure’s first full productions

Following its initial readings, Exposure went forward with two full productions, one in June and the next in July 1995. Both productions dealt with historical figures. Lavonne Mueller’s *Colette in Love* depicts the French author Colette at the fin-de-siècle; Charles Henrich’s *Enola* fictionalizes the life of the pilot who dropped the atom bomb on Japan. Neither of the plays clearly connected to a contemporary situation in the Czech Republic, though a case could certainly be made for seeing traces of fin-de-siècle style all over Prague, as well as reverberations from World War II. In *Colette in Love*, French author Colette encounters her dominating husband, her young male lover, and her female lover. Though there are four characters in the play, the author suggests that all the characters interacting with Colette can be played by one person (Mueller, *Colette in Love*), and that is how director Heather Ondersma cast it. Czech actress Katka Březinová played Colette, and Gregory Linington played Willy, Max and Missy. Březinová was an established Czech actress, and Linington was a tall leading man with a degree from the two year actor-training program at California’s PCPA (Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts at Hancock College).<sup>41</sup>

Ondersma used the two languages to signify power shifts onstage, making Czech the “feminized” language. When Colette spoke with her husband Willy, she spoke English to signify his continued hold over her. Colette spoke Czech to her young lover Max. Linington, who also appeared in Misery Loves Company’s bilingual *King Stag*, remembers that *Colette in Love* was “always alienating one side or the other” (Personal Interview). Christopher Lord’s review in Theatre News observed:

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<sup>41</sup> At the time of writing, Linington is preparing for his seventh season as a company member at Oregon Shakespeare Festival at Ashland.



There is something a little mystifying about the whole enterprise. “Why?” says a voice inside. “Why?” ...It is intriguing to wonder where this bilingual idea will lead next. A Swahili/Basque production, perhaps?”

The production had internal cultural challenges: Březinová wanted a prompter, and Greene had very little experience as a producer. Free absinthe for the audience on arrival did warm up the house.

Exposure’s second full staging was set to open just one short month after *Colette in Love*; few of the English-language theatre producers in Prague ever seemed to learn from the exhaustion they witnessed in their colleagues. Playwright Henrich was a screenwriter who taught at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, and had received a Nicholl Fellowship (*Enola* Program, author bio). *Enola* fictionalizes the life of the pilot who dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima. Although the name of the plane is the historical one, the pilot in the play is not based on Paul Tibbets. Michael Halstead, an opera reviewer for the Prague Post (who therefore worked for Richard Allen Greene), directed. The venue was Divadlo Komedie, the setting of the third Black Box Summer Festival a month earlier.

The Exposure production of *Enola* was a world premiere. Set designer William Hollister recalls that the production received publicity because of the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing, but that “all that engendered was flack for the total lack of historical detail” (“Re Producing *Enola*”). Halstead had each character speak one language consistently (unlike Ondersma’s use of language to mark power shifts). He cast the American pilot with a Czech actor, Karel Umlauf, who spoke very good English (Umlauf, with Australian Jason Godwin, had been one of the original founders of the squat Asylum), to serve as a “bridge” (*Enola* Program). Both Halstead and Hollister remember that the money Greene promised did not appear, and that Greene went to Italy for a week while the show was in rehearsal. There was no one on point to handle production needs, and publicity was nearly nonexistent.<sup>42</sup> Since the play went unreviewed by the Prague Post and Prognosis had already folded, reception can only be inferred. Czech papers did not attend. The show lost money.

English teacher Mark Corner felt that Exposure’s bilingual concept could succeed, but thought the strategy of taking a play written in one language and chopping it into two languages

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<sup>42</sup> Halstead, “Replies to Some of Your Questions;” Hollister, “Re: exposure,” 7 Jan 2004; Michaels, “Re: Producing *Enola*”

was problematic. Corner wrote *Just Another Blasted Love Song*, about a male English teacher, his female Czech student and his Czech landlady, expressly for Exposure (Personal Interview). Greene liked the play, and asked Halstead to direct. After the first read-through, however, Greene told Halstead that the company was folding. In their overextension and burnout, the ELTs mirrored the stories of bankruptcy and mistrust surfacing in the Czech news: the first flush of optimism was ending. According to the Prague Post, “one out of every five purchase agreements made with the National Property Fund, which oversees the privatization process, have not been met” (Jette).

Halstead and Corner offered to take on the responsibility of running the company themselves (Halstead, “Re: Enola Question). Greene agreed to stay on as founder of the nadace (foundation) because Czech regulations required it; he directed a bilingual production of *Zoo Story* in early 1996 but was otherwise uninvolved with Exposure after *Enola*. Greene had believed that language was irrelevant to the production of theatrical pleasure. After he stepped down as artistic director in April 1996, Exposure highlighted the relevance of language to the production of meaning and pleasure.

### **3.5.2 Just Another Blasted Love Song: Bilingual Success**

*Just Another Blasted Love Song (JABL)* explores the idea that language affects personality, and that when we speak another language, we also conceal/reveal parts of ourselves. Corner wanted audience members to be able to follow the scenes of his play in the languages they do not speak, although looking at his text (in which Czech language is indicated by bold type) it is clear that essential information is sometimes available in only one language. Many of the longer sections are in Czech; this was probably a wise strategy for Prague audiences. Czechs were interested in learning English, but were not necessarily interested in learning it at the theatre. YAPs were interested in integrating themselves into Czech culture, including performances in Czech.

Language and its relationship to trust is explicitly foregrounded in the play early on, when Stephen tells his student Marcela what he understands about the life of his landlady, Paní Fischerová:

**MARCELA: Stephen, you were guessing what she said.**

STEPHEN: Well, she's never told me otherwise since then. When you don't have a language you improvise. As the deaf do. Maybe that's an idea. The proper Esperanto could be sign language.

**MARCELA: It's not getting to know someone. You can't do that without a shared language. Maybe she's just humouring you.**

**STEPHEN: You exaggerate the power of language.**  
(*JABL* 4)

The relationship that develops between Marcela and Stephen is sexual but not always romantic. In long Czech conversations with Paní Fischerová, Marcela denies that Stephen is her boyfriend, though she spends the night. Marcela and Stephen often argue about cultural issues; she resents his use of English to lecture Czechs as if they were children:

**MARCELA: How many times have I heard that sermon! (in an English accent) What do you ever learn about Shakespeare? When he might have been born, when he might have died, whether his romances might be called tragedies, which folio might be the correct one. Facts, facts, facts. The old communist system of black and white. But what he's saying, what the poetry means, that's a greasy realm of opinion. So leave that out, please. We know it, Stephen. We're not stupid. The revolution's six years old and we don't need these lectures any more.**

STEPHEN: (going over to her) You look beautiful. (*JABL* 18).

In sequences like this, *JABL* performs language as an act of appropriation as well as communication. The theme of *JABL* is inscribed into its text. As Una Chaudhuri observes, "As a discourse that is overtly and by definition heterological, interculturalism dramatizes and enacts—ambiguously but unmistakably—the world(s) of difference" (195). Diana Taylor's definition of "transcultural" is also useful here; she emphasizes that in the blend of elements from two cultures, there is loss as well as creation:

The transcultural model simultaneously notes the *co-existence* of elements but, just as importantly, underlines the element of *loss* of the two systems in the creation of a third (62).

Using Marvin Carlson's seven steps of cultural familiarity, *JABL* corresponds to step number four, in which "the foreign and the familiar create a new blend, which is then assimilated into the tradition, becoming familiar" ("Brook and Mnouchkine: Passages to India?" 83).

Throughout the play language is symbolic of difference; difference between cultures, between genders, between lovers. In the final scene of the play, Stephen discovers that all of his impressions of Paní Fischerová's life are mistaken: her husband was a married man, yes, but he was an Englishman who eventually left his wife and lived in Czechoslovakia. For Paní Fischerová, English is her husband's language, and when she speaks it she is reminded of her life with her husband under Communism, and of her loss:

**FISCHEROVÁ: No. I don't want to. Strange as it may seem, English was the language of love to me. I can't resurrect it.**

**MARCELA: It might help you to get over it.**

**FISCHEROVÁ: It isn't something you get over. What do you know of giving your whole life to a man, denying yourself children and then the stubborn fool goes and dies. Your wounds can heal. Your broken hearts are a week's misery, secretly enjoying the attention of friends, followed by a new love affair.**

STEPHEN: All relationships are temporary. Successful marriages like yours are just the ones where death beats divorce to the finishing line.

FISCHEROVÁ: (brusquely) Stephen, I hate the way you assume cynicism in order to protect yourself from pain. Now that's the last thing I shall say using the blasted language.

STEPHEN: (ecstatic) Blasted! Blasted! Blasted! My landlady says 'Blasted!' Bosh, Bunkum, balderdash and bollocks. Speak some English to me.

**FISCHEROVÁ: No. (JABL, 28-29)**

Despite her refusal to speak English to Stephen, in the last moment of the play, Fischerová completes a stanza from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* that Stephen, outside the apartment, recites to himself when Marcela leaves. Stephen does not hear her speak English, but the audience does.

Three of the four in the cast were Czech. Hana Frejková, who played the landlady, is a well-known and respected Czech actress. Her father had been executed by Communists during the purge trials of 1951, and she was known for her work performing Yiddish songs and sketches by inmates at Theresienstadt (Frejková). She was one of Michael Halstead's English students; she had appeared in *Enola*. Her presence as the older, grieving landlady in Corner's play added

metatheatrical meaning to the performance; the actress, like the character, had suffered losses related to cultural shifts. The program for *JABL* included not just a synopsis in Czech; it was completely bilingual, with everything, including synopsis, cast and crew biographies, the excerpt from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and the list of sponsors and advisory committee, printed in Czech and English. Christopher Cowley, the founder of the early Czech student company O Nesmrtelni Chrousta, played Stephen.

The Prague Post did not review the play, but Denni Telegraf did. Though František Knopp misread the word “zatracená,” Czech for “blasted,” as “ztracená,” Czech for “lost,” his review is both sensitive and positive. In the first paragraph of his review he expressly situates the play in the context of the English-language theatre scene:

There are a bunch of English-speaking theatre companies in Prague, but it seems—almost—that we don’t know they exist. It surely is strange—to lament our rich multicultural past on the one hand, and to be left unconcerned by various spontaneous and very authentic cultural activities of the English speaking fellow citizens on the other. Is the call for the diversity of Czech culture sincere? (Knopp, “Just Another Lost Love Song”).

Knopp noticed that the style of the play was not highly theatrical, but he enjoyed the “commonplace quality” of the performance, prizing the authenticity in depicting familiar situations:

It’s been a while since there has been an original play, drawing on our native surroundings, that is meant for a definite audience acquainted with the issues the play brings. The play works with detail, observed through everyday experience of a stranger facing the intrigues of Czech life (scandals in a café, at a newsagent’s...), with linguistic, bureaucratic, nationalistic intrigues...

While Knopp enjoyed the play’s story, as well as the performances, particularly that of Frejková, what really struck him about the production was the serious and successful effort at receptive specificity. Prague School Theatre Theorist Jan Mukařovský argued in his 1978 essay “On the Current State of the Theory of Theater” that theatre audiences do not reflect society at large, but that each theatre developed its own audience, whose competence grew as they became familiar with the techniques of a particular theatre (Quinn 60-61). Knopp saw in *Just Another Blasted Love Song* a production that reached a multicultural audience who received the performance “warmly, without bias.” *JABL* was one of the few ELT productions that succeeded in attracting a large Czech audience; translator and dramaturg Ondřej Pilný, who worked on Kašpar Theatre’s

production of *Translations*, remembers that there seemed to be an even split of Czechs and English-speakers in the audience (Pilný, Personal Interview). Pilný worked on the Czech translation for Corner's next play, *Czechmate*.

*Just Another Blasted Love Song* received support from the British Council, which financed a tour to schools in the Czech towns of Plzeň, Ústí nad Labem and Pardubice in the winter of 1997 (Halstead, Personal Interview). The show received positive press in Plzeň, with two combination feature/reviews approving of the intentions and execution of the undertaking. Plzeňský Deník quoted Jaroslava Bogučaniková from the Akademie Spirit:

English is a foreign language that everybody calls for these days, both the schools and the public. This play means a great opportunity for students to test their knowledge and learn some new English (Lacinová).

Mladá fronta Dnes also enjoyed the Plzeň performance:

In the midst of the tangle of Prague's Black Theatres and constantly repetitious performances, the projects of the bilingual Exposure Theatre Company might bring a breath of fresh air to the English speaking persons living in Prague, and not only to them ("Exposure theatre Company Presents Bilingual Performances").

The Mladá fronta Dnes piece also shows Exposure, like most of the English-language groups, indulging in a little bit of creative historicizing, when it reported that the company had been "established in 1993 by three young people who had decided to bridge the gap between the Czech and the American audience." Richard Allen Greene founded the company in 1995. The three Britons who ran the company in January 1997, Michael Halstead, Mark Corner and Robert Russell, were not acquainted in 1993.

Although Corner was preparing his follow-up to *JABL*, which had been a critical and economic success, with a play called *Czechmate*, the company wanted to produce more than one play a year. The new directors of the company decided to produce contemporary British plays, as an alternative to the mostly American authors produced by Misery Loves Company and Black Box (Halstead, Personal Interview). Like Black Box, Exposure would have a "two-fold mission."

### 3.5.3 The Infante: Spain in Prague

The first British play Exposure produced was an original work by Michael Halstead. *The Infante* is set in sixteenth-century Spain. The tradition of commenting on current political situations through a historical setting was strong in Eastern Europe, as described by Jarka M. Burian in his analysis of Shakespeare under communism:

A production, especially a revival of a classic, was expected to offer some comment or special perspective on the play in relation to the socio-political conditions prevailing at the time” (“*Hamlet* in postwar Czech theatre” 204).

*The Infante* was not about Prague, but it had a tenuous connection since it was about the Hapsburg dynasty, who had ruled the Czech lands until 1918. The production of *The Infante* followed ELT production strategy number four, that of producing plays about culture clash. The play was intended to reflect the mood of a country in transition, as Halstead wrote in his author’s note:

The old order is falling apart, the new is in its dangerous infantile stage. ... They represent the causes of the vacuum into which our own society has fallen, which has resulted in the blandness and banality which contemporary civilization employs to conceal its bankruptcy (*The Infante* Program).

Director Robert Russell felt that the play was “about people operating under constraints in a difficult political situation” (Personal Interview). Though the text was not bilingual, Halstead and Russell again used the linguistic skills of the actors thematically, casting the French Isabel with a Czech actress (Lord, “Do You Speak English?”). *The Infante*, then, tried to deepen Exposure’s success in playing to a specific audience. The story concerns the conflict between Philip of Spain and his black sheep son, Don Carlos, a drinker and sexual molester who recognizes only his own authority. Eventually Philip, a devout Catholic, had his son imprisoned, possibly murdered. Like JABL, the production sold out many performances.

With Richard Allen Greene formally out of the company, the Prague Post could review Exposure productions. Critic Anna Baker (believed by many to be a pseudonym for Greene) criticized Halstead for failing to integrate “the issue of colonization or a more complete explanation of the Catholic Church’s mighty power into his story” but was otherwise positive (“The Dark Side of the Reign in Spain”). However, despite using Czechs in production and in casting, the production was not deeply intercultural. It primarily coincides with stage 7 in

Marvin Carlson's stages of cultural familiarity, in which "an entire performance from another culture is imported or re-created" (83). Despite its success with *JABL*, *Exposure* suffered from the bad reputation of Greene's first bilingual productions and was never really accepted by the other ELT groups as an equal.



#### CHAPTER 4. 1994-1996: “THE ROLE OF THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN PRAGUE CULTURAL LIFE CANNOT BE DISREGARDED”

You're a taste for sore ears! (*laughs*) You've only been with us a while, and already you've got us saying extraordinary things. Just think if you were with us longer!?! – Josef Topol, *A Nightingale for Dinner*, trans. Eva Turnová

Every English-language theatre group in Prague in the nineties dreamed of achieving critical recognition from Czech theatre artists and press; Misery Loves Company(MLC) did succeed in integrating itself into Czech theatre and the culture of Prague. It produced its first work in 1994—three full years after Studio and North American Theatre debuted—and declined rapidly after its founder Richard Toth returned to America in 1997. Despite its relatively brief tenure, two of MLC's productions, the 1995-96 co-production with Black Box of *Angels in America* and the 1995-97 co-production with its Czech host company, Jakub Špalek's *Kašpar, King Stag*, are considered by virtually everyone who followed English-language theatre to have been the most outstanding productions of the nineties.<sup>43</sup>

Part of its success was inscribed in its structure: it was the only English-language theatre group in Prague that really functioned as an ensemble, with a strong artistic leader and recognizable theatrical style. Toth had a background in clowning, and from its first productions Misery emphasized physicality. Though on paper its border-crossing goals looked similar to those of Black Box, the latter modeled itself primarily on American professional regional theatre, whereas Misery Loves Company more closely emulated collectives like the Wooster Group and Mabou Mines. MLC worked in a true Czech repertory fashion, with some of its productions running in the repertory for up to two years. In its structure, Misery Loves Company

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<sup>43</sup> Interviews of this opinion include Jitka Sloupová, Robert Russell, Greg Linington, Michael Halstead, Mark Corner, Alex Gammie, Elizabeth Russell, William Hollister, Deborah Michaels, Steve Hallam, Leah Gaffen, Ondřej Pilný.

organizationally followed ELT production strategy number three, collaborating with a Host culture theatre company. Not every individual production followed this strategy, but the collaboration was inscribed into its existence, and remained present even when it followed production strategy number one, re-presenting the Performer's culture. Unquestionably it was the ELT that achieved the most respect from Czech critics. Misery Loves Company produced nine plays in its main repertory, twelve plays under the banner of its new play forum "Big Knees" (shows in the Big Knees series usually ran for three months), and four through its educational division) "Class Acts."

MLC was able to work this way because it had a permanent residency at the centrally located Divadlo v Celetné (theatre on Celetná street), thanks to its host and sponsor, the Czech theatre company Kašpar, run by Jakub Špalek. Špalek's young company symbolized the hopes of a post-revolutionary beginning; Jan Pömerl in *theatre czech* described Kašpar in 1995 as "an atypical group of enthusiastic and talented young actors and directors" (66). Špalek had been one of the theatre students who helped spread the word about the Velvet Revolution in Ostrava in November 1989 when state-sponsored media would not report its progress. Partly on the basis of that political involvement Špalek, along with Michal Dočekal, became one of the directors of one of Prague's most important theatre spaces, the Celetná theatre. Dočekal later split off and led his own company at Divadlo Komédie. These companies were part of the Municipal Theatres of Prague, the Městská Divadla Prazská (MDP, composed of the ABC, the Rokoko, and the Komédie).<sup>44</sup>

The Celetná theatre itself was part of the architectural renovations that happened in the nineties all over Prague. It was housed in the Mannhardt house, named for the eighteenth-century aristocrat Johan Friedrich Mannhardt, who had used the hall for cultural performances in Baroque Prague. Since 1985, the building had housed the Theatre Institute (Divadelní ústav); in 1991 the Institute's board began allowing theatrical productions in the renovated space. In 1994 it became a home for two companies which had lost their spaces in 1993: the DAMU student company and Kašpar. After a year's trial, the Theatre Institute allowed Špalek to lease the hall in an ongoing way (Pömerl 66).

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<sup>44</sup> The MDP had been created by director Ora Ornest in 1950 and artists from the Vinohrady Theatre, to further a different and more intimate style of acting than was seen on the larger stages. In its first twenty years it often produced Western plays. Kašpar's association was through its performances at the Rokoko theatre ("A Brief Panorama of Czech Theatre").

In forming a company based on personality and shared theatrical tastes, the founders of Misery Loves Company behaved like small Czech theatres during the “thaw,” the period after Stalin’s death in 1956 until Prague Spring in 1968. The Minister of Education and Culture, František Kahuda, had defined a policy that encouraged artistic individuality (though individuality that “spoke as a socialist man”) (Trensky 12-13). In 1995, most of the Alfréd Radok awards, based on surveys of theatre critics conducted by the theatre journal Svět a Divadlo, were given to young artists at the small theatres. The existence of the Radok awards also signified the post-revolutionary reclaiming of Czech history. Created in 1992 when the Alfréd Radok Foundation was founded, they honored the man considered by most Czech critics to be the most significant postwar director. Radok worked with the MDP as well as on famous productions at the National Theatre and *Laterna Magika*, and his influence on Czech artists is immense. Jarka Burian describes his work as combining “a highly imaginative, inventive joy in the interplay of theatre elements with a sensitive, probing conscience that sought to deal artistically with the ambivalent realities of life” (*Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre* 60-61). He went in and out of favor with the government however and fled to permanent exile following the Soviet invasion in 1968, although he had been designated National Artist earlier that year.

Czech post-revolutionary theatre was plagued by anxieties about a dearth of original work; which, according to Jana Patočková, writing in 1995, “have practically disappeared from the repertoire of most theatres.” The youth of the 1995 Radok award-winners was considered an asset: “It’s encouraging that the plays were written by an assortment of young authors who are very much involved in the theatre and whose texts, on the whole, have the character of open scripts written for specific theatre companies” (Patočková 60). The youth of Misery Loves Company’s founders, and their style of specific company-created productions, along with their connections to a Czech theatre company already marked as a significant rising star, all combined to make Misery Loves Company an English-language theatre that truly had a foot in both the cultural world of Czech theatre and the YAP world of the ELTs.

## SECTION 4.1

## THE FOUNDERS OF MISERY LOVES COMPANY

Misery Loves Company was founded by Richard Toth, David Nykl and Ewan McLaren. Nykl and McLaren were both already involved in professional Czech theatre. Nykl was a professional Canadian actor of Czech parentage. His parents had emigrated to British Columbia immediately after Prague Spring, in 1968; he was fluent in Czech. He was already working with Jakub Špalek when he met Toth and Ewan McLaren. Inspired by viewing the Velvet Revolution on television, he had written to Špalek about bringing a production of *Waiting for Godot* to Prague in 1992. Nykl's company, Ironworks, had to arrange their own airfare to Prague and bring the set (the tree), but Špalek handled everything else. A year later, while Nykl was interning as a director's assistant in New York, Špalek offered him a role in a Czech production of Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*. That year the group at Rokoko split, with one half run by Dočekal winning the Komédie space in competition, and the other half winning the Divadlo v Celetné space. Nykl stayed with Kašpar (Nykl, Personal Interview). By the time he first performed in *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* with Misery Loves Company, Nykl was also performing in the Czech sketch-comedy television show *Česká Soda*.

Canadian Ewan McLaren had come to Prague under the auspices of Education for Democracy in 1990 after completing a BFA in acting at York University (McLaren, Personal Interview) In December 1991 McLaren had directed Pinter's play *The Lover* on a double bill with Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* for Christopher Cowley's Czech student company O Nesmrtelni Chrousta, where he made some valuable connections, including translator Eva Turnová. Turnová had translated Josef Topol's play *A Nightingale for Dinner (Slávik k večeře)* into English for Richard Metcalf's pre-revolutionary student company Jestom Jednou; that production won a Fringe First at the Edinburgh Fringe in 1990. After seeing a production of Franz Kafka's *Amerika* at Studio Ypsilon, McLaren went backstage to inquire about the possibility of teaching English to the company. Ypsilon was noted for its cabaret style and mixture of social commentary and high-spirited comedy. Jarka Burian describes their work as "casual postmodernism with social overtones that dates back some thirty years" (*Modern Czech Theatre* 161; 207). Ypsilon was known not only for its colorful and musical clowning, but also for the way it integrated these techniques "with subject matter and themes that involved penetrating comments on the Czech national character and contemporary realities, often in the guise of

personalities and events from Czech history or literature” (*Modern Czech Theatre* 163). Studio Ypsilon not only took McLaren up on his offer to teach, they also asked him to direct an English-language version of one of their plays, the documentary-style company-created *Mozart v Praze* (Mozart in Prague). The production was aimed at tourists, but attendance was poor until the theatre thought to put a photo in the Prague Post, which had just started publishing in October 1991.

Studio Ypsilon then asked McLaren to play the “Czech Foreigner” in their musical production of *Some Like It Hot* (they changed the title in Czech to the awkward-sounding *Hot Some Like It* to indicate their playful adaptation of the film). This was McLaren’s first experience working in Czech repertory. Before he accepted, Artistic Director Jan Schmid warned him that the play could stay in their repertory for three or more years. McLaren played in the production until he left in 1998. McLaren was immediately struck by what Czech dramaturgs call “rational irony”:

...you don’t try to be the character you are playing. You sort of hold him at arm’s length and play with him and say to the audience, “Look, here’s me and here’s the character. And now I’m the character and now I’m not.” It really has a reason and the reason is that the smaller Czech theatres at least spent most of the time under Communism looking for a way of saying things without being direct. You had a script that was saying one thing, but really you were saying something else. And the Stanislavsky method became associated with socialists and Social Realism; it was being used to state and restate what most people considered nonsense. And the whole dramaturgy of this production was about that...So they added in an extra role for me, the role of the Czech-American who walks in and out of the scenes saying ridiculous things like “did you know that at this time in Chicago there were many thousands of Poles and Czechs” and “this whole sequence actually happened in a Czech garage.” I was in a Czech folk costume which Czechs I’m sure found very funny (Personal Interview, 30 June 1999).

That McLaren found his first role there at Schmid’s theatre underscores Czech interest in incorporating their North American visitors into their theatrical *mise-en-scène*. When McLaren left the role in 1998 Ypsilon hired a Czech to speak in a deliberately bad accent. The production had a profound effect on McLaren:

I spent 250 or however many performances on stage singing a Czech folk song in a Czech folk costume and at the same time saying to myself, “what am I doing here?” It seems to me that the very best Czech actors are able to inhabit their role fully even though they’re playing with it. I got into the rehearsal and I said okay, I gotta figure out what I want, what the objective is... I would walk across the stage scratching my nose by accident just cause it was itching and the director said “Yes! That’s it! That nose scratching, that’s it, that’s what I want right here.” (“Personal Interview,” 30 June 1999).

McLaren knew that what he had to offer Czech actors when he directed was an immersion in naturalism. He assembled a group of Czech actors and talked the management of Divadlo v Řeznické into letting him direct a Czech production of Stephen Poliakoff’s drama *Hitting Town*, a story about a British brother and sister in 1974 against the background of the IRA bombings. Divadlo v Řeznické had been known as a strong, untraditional theatre space, which launched the careers of important directors, since the 1980s (Patková). With *Hitting Town*, Divadlo v Řeznické launched McLaren’s directing career. *Hitting Town* was nominated for Best Production of the Year in 1994 in the critics’ poll conducted by the theatre journal Svět a Divadlo. It joined the theatre’s repertory, playing altogether for five years. Critic Jitka Sloupová reminded readers of McLaren’s success with *Hitting Town* in her review of one of the first Misery Loves Company productions, also directed by McLaren, *A Nightingale for Dinner*. Sloupová wrote that *Hitting Town* had been “one of the most interesting productions of the past theatre season in Prague. Critics were taken above all by the raw intensity to which the director led the Czech actors and which contrasts so much with the dominant style of Czech acting (“(Anglo)Americans in Prague”).

While McLaren was directing and acting in *Some Like It Hot*, he met David Nykl at a performance at Divadlo na Zábřadlí. McLaren introduced Nykl to Richard Toth (Personal Interview, 30 June 1999). Richard Toth had arrived in Prague in early 1993, having previously worked as a clown with Circo Americano in Italy. He had family in Slovakia, and his friend Leah Gaffen had arrived in Prague the year before. Gaffen first introduced Toth to McLaren (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999). The three men decided to work together, using the name of a company Toth had started in America in 1987.

## SECTION 4.2           “THE TRUE HOPE OF PRAGUE ENGLISH-SPEAKING THEATRE”: A STRONG BEGINNING

Czech critic Jitka Sloupová dubbed Misery Loves Company “the true hope of Prague English-speaking Theatre” on the strength of only three productions, in a detailed examination of English-speaking theatre in Prague for theatre journal *Svět a Divadlo* in March 1995 (“Theatre of the Expatriates”). MLC’s first two projects, *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* and *A Nightingale for Dinner* opened in the summer of 1994. The third production Sloupová described was Sean Fuller’s original play, *Shoot Him In The Head*, which opened in early 1995.

### 4.2.1   The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine

*The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* by Leah Cherniak, Martha Ross and Doug Morgan, was Nykl’s choice. He had seen the play in Canada and thought it would be a good vehicle for himself to perform in English (with Kašpar he performed in Czech). The contradictory love story of *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* is a comic examination of anger and irritation in newlywed bliss. The play was collaboratively developed by Cherniak, Ross and Morgan through improvisation in a clowning style. The characters of Ernest and Ernestine address the audience directly, but it is up to the individual performers to discover “the playfulness of this interaction” onstage (Cherniak, Ross and Morgan 9). Toth directed.

The clowning and commedia inscribed into the text made the play accessible to non-English speakers; in producing it Misery Loves Company followed ELT production strategy number 3. The play’s themes of miscommunication were particularly apt. The mission statement of Misery Loves Company stressed performance style instead of an explicit mission of border-crossing:

Misery Loves Company is a collective of performers drawn to the theatre from various backgrounds such as clowning, music, dance, the visual arts, performance art as well as traditional forms of theatre (*The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* Program).

The company's performance style convinced Boris Hybner to lend them his theatre space (Nykl, Personal Interview). Hybner was a famous physical comedian who had been a beloved figure in Prague since the sixties. He had resisted the Soviet invasion with his 1968 performance *Harakyry*, protesting the Soviet invasion; Russian authorities banned the performance, closed the theatre, and forbade the cast to work together (McLune, "Trapped In An Invisible Box."). In 1979 Hybner founded Gag, "The Original Society of Slapstick Comedy." In 1989 a TV series called "Gagman" was based on a trilogy of his slapstick comedies. He acquired Studio Gag, a small space right on Národní třída, right after the Velvet Revolution ("Boris Hybner and the Gag Studio"). Hybner is listed in the *Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* program as "inspirace" (inspiration).

The broad, playful style of the show harmonized well with Czech theatre. *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* corresponds with step two of Marvin Carlson's steps of cultural familiarity in which:

Foreign elements are assimilated into the tradition and absorbed by it. The audience can be interested, entertained or stimulated by these elements, but they are not challenged by them. Often they do not even recognize them as foreign"(82).

The production received favorable reviews in both the English-language and Czech press. Petr Dudek in *Lidové noviny* enthused:

Allison Sanders lives through her Ernestine with a verve rarely seen among Czech actresses; her physical talent and natural refinement make for a rather too attractive "girl from next door." Nykl's clumsy Woody-Allenesque Ernest wakes from a pointless stiffness and downtroddenness in the first third of the production to a pleasant wildness and spontaneity (dance with imaginary guitar and microphone)....

The piano accompaniment (original melody by Tomáš Slouka together with classic standards) supports the piece in a style long ago established by one shy man in a bowler, who used to play in a similar small Prague theatre, and to similarly young audiences just a few blocks away... ("Misery in Good Company").



Dudek's allusion to a "shy man in a bowler" most likely referred to Jiří Šlitř. Šlitř performed with Jiří Suchý at their musical/cabaret theatre, Semafor Theatre, in the 1960s, until his early death in 1969. He often wore a bowler, Suchý a straw hat (Šormová, 425-426; Burian, "Re: Shy Young Man in Bowler Hat?"). By alluding to Šlitř, Dudek contextualized the performance not as an expatriate curiosity but as a contribution to the theatrical life of Prague. Dudek concluded:

For those, who number among the Prague Anglophone community (both local and foreign), Misery Loves Company has prepared an evening, which would be a real treat even for those who know only Czech ("Misery in Good Company").

Lou Charbonneau in Prognosis agreed: "All in all, Misery Loves Company has hit Prague's cultural scene (notice I don't say 'expat cultural scene') like a B-52" (Rev. of *Anger* and *Nightingale*).

#### 4.2.2 A Nightingale for Dinner

Ewan McLaren had wanted to stage Josef Topol's *Nightingale for Dinner* since he first read Eva Turnová's translation. Topol was one of the first banned playwrights to be revived in the eighties; in January 1989, eleven months before the velvet revolution, a theatre in Cheb produced *The End of the Carnival*, and in June, the Vinohrady Theatre produced his newest play, *The Voices of Birds* (Day, "When Actors Really Act"). Topol wrote the play in 1965 after a trip to America as a guest of the Ford Foundation. Exhausted by the families who hosted him so eagerly he had a recurring dream: a young man has dinner with the family of his sweetheart; they kill him and bury him in the garden (Topol, qtd in *Nightingale for Dinner* program, Misery Loves Company<sup>45</sup>). Paul Trensky relates *Nightingale for Dinner* to Strindberg and expressionistic theatre as well as to Ionesco (59). Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz suggests that the play's lyrical production of tension between freedom and reality evokes Calderon, Cervantes and Kleist (157). The play was well-known to Czech audiences; it had been produced before Prague spring, and analyzed by Czech and English critics. This choice showed Misery Loves Company following ELT production strategy number 2, re-presenting the Host culture. However, unlike

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<sup>45</sup> Topol also included a letter to his wife describing this dinner and the origin of the play in a published edition of his plays in Czech, according to Jitka Sloupová's review "Anglo-americans in Prague"). This edition is not published in English.

Black Box, which used this strategy to educate audiences primarily made up of tourists, MLC added their own sensibilities in exploring texts that attracted them. They also followed this strategy in their adaptations of Czech fairy-tales. Unlike the dissident dramas that Black Box produced, Topol's plays still interested Czech theatre practitioners. While Misery Loves Company was preparing *Nightingale for Dinner*, the Czech theatre company at Studio A-Rubín was producing the same play.

McLaren cast Czech actors as the host family, with Richard Toth as the only native English-speaker, playing Nightingale. The family speaking a language of otherness for the benefit of their guest added tension to the *mise-en-scène*. The cast included Tat'jana Medvecká and Jan Vlasák from the National Theatre, Barbara Lukešová from the Theatre Studio Rokoko, and Petr Vacek from Studio Ypsilon. The choice of cast was artistically and commercially shrewd. Like *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine*, *A Nightingale for Dinner* gained intercultural capital through its performance space and Czech theatre connections. The venue was Divadlo Kolowrat, the small upstairs space of the National Theatre. Ivan Rajmont, director of the National Theatre's Drama Repertoire, told Richard Allen Greene that his decision to let McLaren use the space was artistic as well as pragmatic:

I was very impressed (with *Hitting Town*), and I know that [McLaren] won't damage the reputation of the National Theater ("Doing Dinner With Mixed Company").

Lou Charbonneau noted the high proportion of Czechs in the audience:

Czechs outnumbered the foreigners and appeared genuinely delighted to be watching a play by one of their country's best playwrights, performed in English by actors they know at their own National Theater (Rev. of *Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* and *Nightingale for Dinner*).

Critic Jitka Sloupová wrote that the company aimed at "cooperation between Czech and Anglo-American theatre communities in Prague... a glance at the program shows how close this cooperation is" ("(Anglo)Americans in Prague"). She found the thirty-year old play particularly timely in McLaren's staging:

Almost thirty years later the situation is reversed; the young Americans find themselves in the position of "foreigners." Even though Prague shows them an affable face, mutual unfamiliarity makes contacts difficult and provides room for conjecture, secrecy, even nightmares... ("(Anglo) Americans in Prague").

Designer William Hollister remembers that Topol preferred the English-language production to the one at Studio A-Rubín because McLaren:

...produced it straight. It was a normal setting and the surreal moments didn't slide too far. The Czech version had Addams family moments, trying to stress the bizarreness of the product ("Dual Performances," Email to Author).

Sloupová found that McLaren's divergence from the Brechtian style of acting and directing commonly employed by Czech directors was one of the charms of this production (Sloupová, Personal Interview, 13 Sept. 1999). MLC brought the successful production to the Edinburgh Fringe in the summer of 1995.

MLC had planned to produce Peter Handke's *Kaspar* next. Handke's 1968 drama about Kaspar Hauser, a boy who appeared out of nowhere in Nuremburg in 1828 and had to be taught to speak, would have been a bridge between the clowning of *Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* and the poetic surrealism of *A Nightingale for Dinner*; Handke imagines Kaspar as an innocent clown. MLC contextualized Handke's play in the program for *Anger in Ernest and Ernestine*: "Our production takes full advantage of the linguistic disarray many people feel living in Prague by presenting this play about the breakdown of language." The production was cancelled by the move to Divadlo v Celetné.

### SECTION 4.3 MOVING INTO CELETNÁ

Jakub Špalek's company Kašpar could not afford the total rent for Celetná, nor did it have a large enough repertoire to play there every night (McLaren, Personal Interview, 30 June 1999). Špalek invited a few companies to share the space, including a group from DAMU and a mime company called Divadlo Dvacet-Dva (Theatre 22). He invited MLC to join after seeing their first two productions (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999). The Prague Post, reporting that the agreement had been solidified by the last week of October, marked the move as a milestone: "After four years of fits and starts, glimmerings of hope dashed by subsequent disappointments, Prague's English-language theatre scene finally seems to be coming into its own" (Ashley, "English-language Theatre Finds New Home in Prague"). The move to Celetná brought Misery Loves Company new and positive attention from the Czech press as well, particularly when Petra Špalková, Jakub Špalek's sister who was widely considered to be one of the best actresses in Prague, replaced Allison Sanders, who had returned to Canada in *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine*. Although Špalková did not speak much English she learned the lines orally after only twelve rehearsals. Daniela Fischerová wrote her first post-1989 play, *Fantomima*, in 1995 expressly for the nineteen-year old actress (Mackney); in that Czech production she played opposite Nykl again. *A Nightingale for Dinner* also received a second round of positive reviews in its new venue. Lacey Eckl in Prognosis felt that Špalková's presence added a "cross-cultural subtext to the play."

Misery Loves Company also seemed to be fulfilling the hope for English-language theatre in Prague when it received an invitation to perform at the Second Annual Mezinárodní Festival Divadlo (International Theatre Festival) in Plzeň in November 1994, shortly after *Nightingale for Dinner* began performing at Celetná. Other invited theatre companies were primarily from Eastern Europe: Divadlo v Řeznické brought its production of *Hello, Dolly!*, Divadlo Na zábradlí brought new artistic director Petr Lébl's production of *The Seagull*, Divadlo

pod Palmovkou brought *The Homecoming*. Britain's Cheek by Jowl, the only other English-language company, brought *As You Like It*.

## SECTION 4.4 MISERY LOVES COMPANY BRANCHES OUT

Until June 1995, Misery Loves Company's only other shows besides their first two plays running in repertory were the new plays in its Big Knees series and the student productions of Class Acts. A detailed examination of each Big Knees and Class Acts production would be a book in itself, however a look at their origins provides a flavor of these two producing wings that affected MLC both in reputation and in resources.

### 4.4.1 Big Knees

The existence of Big Knees was somewhat divisive. Ewan McLaren was opposed to doing new work:

I just remained frustrated that the work had nothing at all to do with the city we were in and the culture we were in and there were a fair amount of arguments about this. I remember, in particular, an argument Chris Clarke had, saying 'how can we do theatre about something we don't understand? We can comment on where we're from at least' (McLaren, Personal Interview, 30 June 1999).

Dramaturg Celise Kalke and Leah Gaffen of Class Acts felt that Big Knees was harmful to the company's reputation (Kalke, Personal Interview; Gaffen, Personal Interview).

Big Knees existed briefly before it joined MLC: Sean Fuller had produced two one-act plays, *Love Falls Asleep* by Chris Beneke, and *Tea and Symphony* by Chris Clarke and Steve Hallam, at Radost and then at Studio Rubín in October. Fuller and Beneke chose the name "Big Knees" through word association; Toth contributed the idea of putting a different name to each production (e.g. Big Knees on Jesus; Big Knees on Rebecca). Both of the one-acts in the first Big Knees (on Jesus) at Celetná, directed by Toth, are meditations on being a misfit: *Self-Help* begins with a young man trapped in an apartment in Žižkov telling stories about a woman he

met; Clarke and Hallam's *Tea and Symphony* is a series of sketches with characters A and B, loosely about a tea-drinker in a world of coffee, as a light metaphor for homosexuality. Despite the initial emphasis on non-verbal new work, Big Knees soon gained the reputation (and the reality) of showcasing plays by expatriates about expatriates, what Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert have defined as "ghetto theatre." Though Big Knees threatened to pull Misery Loves Company away from its initial strong reputation with Czechs, it also played an instrumental role in cementing the artistic collaborations that were at the heart of Misery Loves Company and that led to its greatest successes. Playwright Laura Zam describes the Big Knees school of playwriting as a:

...synergistic sense of humor that had to do with Richard and Sean's comic sensibility, combined with the Czech appreciation for the absurd... it was part of the non-seriousness of the time, a playfulness that had to do with our experience in Prague itself. We were playfully entrepreneurial (Group Interview, Laura Zam).

From its inception in 1994 through 1996 Big Knees produced roughly 12 shows (some were one-acts on the same bill; Misery's official paperwork is not complete). Dates refer to months of opening, before they entered the repertory:

1. *Tea and Symphony* by Chris Clarke and Steve Hallam (August 1994)
2. *Self Help* by Sean Fuller (September 1994)
3. *Love Falls Asleep* by Chris Beneke (September 1994) (this production technically took place before Big Knees had been created, but appears in Misery Loves Company's paper in the list of Big Knees productions through 1996)
4. *Thursday Morning* by Laura Zam (January 1995)
5. *Savage/Love* by Sam Shepard/Joe Chaiken, deconstructed by Peter DuBois (this production is not in MLC's official chronology, but appeared on the same bill with Zam's *Thursday Morning*)
6. *Shoot Him In the Head* by Sean Fuller (February 1995)
7. *3 Chunks of Zam* by Laura Zam (May 1995)
8. *Wind-Up* by Sean Fuller (September 1995)
9. *Two Can Live as Cheaply* by Dave Freeling (November 1995)
10. *Going Where the Sun Shines Brightly* by Gavin Stewart (January 1996)
11. *Repelling Objects* by Dave Ulrich (March 1996)
12. *In Progress* by David Speranza (March 1996)
13. *Dumb* by Richard Toth and William Hollister (July 1996)
14. *Wild* by Anne Goforth (July 1996)

Big Knees plays were not reviewed by the Prague Post; Richard Allen Greene justified this policy on the grounds that they didn't run long enough (Group Interview, Richard Toth),

however, the Prague Post did run reviews of internationally touring shows after they had closed, suggesting the policy was selectively employed.

#### 4.4.2 Big Knees playwrights: Laura Zam and Sean Fuller

Though many English-language practitioners viewed Misery Loves Company as the “boys club” to Black Box’s female “spinnies” (their own name for themselves as spinsters), playwright Laura Zam’s work was a cornerstone of Big Knees. Her path to Prague typifies that of many YAPs: Zam had arrived Prague in 1994, planning to stay for a few weeks before going on to a kibbutz in Israel. She was already thirty and had been working in New York as a medical transcriptionist while developing her own performance work. “I was very burned out on the arts scene in New York, especially living this double life. When I got to Prague, I was not going to do any kind of theatre” (Zam, Personal Interview). She found work teaching English and after visiting Israel decided not to go to a kibbutz after all. She became involved with Misery Loves Company after William Hollister heard her perform *Thursday Morning* at Beefstew, the Sunday night open mike events at Radost. Hollister invited her to perform for Peter DuBois, Clarke and Steve Hallam (who was also appearing in *Savage/Love*) in DuBois’ living room, and they offered her a slot on a double bill with the upcoming production of DuBois’ *Savage/Love* (Zam, Telephone Interview 2 Nov. 2003). Zam performed two pieces, *Robert* and *Cold Pain Windows*.

In *Cold Pain Windows*, Zam plays a woman recounting a dream in which she could see everyone through her apartment windows but nobody could see her. The character’s anxiety rises as she dons outlandish clothing in order to be noticed, concluding “I became convinced I was having delusions of existence.” Lyle Zimskind’s review in the Prague Post contextualized the performances as part of a project of English-language community building, noting how DuBois greeted at least half of the audience by name. About Zam’s piece he wrote: “In this Prague debut, Zam herself has taken full advantage of the opportunity to be seen and welcomed by her new peers and should not feel unduly lonely.” DuBois’ deconstruction of Sam Shepard and Joe Chaiken’s *Savage/Love* combined the text with the sexual conduct code from Antioch college. DuBois deconstructed the piece by folding in the sexual conduct code at Antioch college, and interpreting the play as the story of two men who had died of AIDS using

Shepard/Chaiken to tell their story (DuBois, Personal Interview). Jennifer Torpie at Prognosis admired DuBois' staging, which drew "from a variety of stage and screen influences, including a comedic, vaudevillian dance number and a film noir spoof," but felt that adding AIDS to the dramatic mix was an undeveloped idea.

*Savage/Love* moved to Celetná in January 1995 with Zam's performance piece *Thursday Morning* on a bill called *Big Knees (on Gomorrah)* at Celetná in January 1995. Zam used her body and her dance training to construct work centering on themes of paranoia and sexuality. In 1994 and 1997 she taught a seminar on "writing with the body," through the Prague Institute for Further Education. Through her physical performances, particularly *Circles, Holes and Arches*, which was not produced as part of *Big Knees* but as part of the MLC mainstage, Zam introduced a form of expatriate movement-based playwriting using Performer-cultural references without glossary.

Sean Fuller was the other driving force behind *Big Knees*. Fuller often wrote about disaffected young people, coding his plays with settings which, though not Prague-specific, clearly reflected the YAP experience, mirroring in a way the use of coded meanings in Czech theatre under Communism. Fuller's literary banter, in which lines devolve into the absurd and comical, was similarly compatible with a Czech aesthetic. Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (v + w) of the Liberated Theatre of the thirties were devotees of Chaplin and Keaton (Burian, *Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre*, 25, n6; 207); so too was Fuller, who wanted to create a "new vaudeville" in his repartee with Toth (Fuller, Personal Interview). Michael Quinn's study *Prague School Theatre Theory* excerpts this text of v + w:



DUST: And this is the best thing, a guy should right away, or like this...

ASHES: Yes, absolutely...

DUST: ...and by all means...

ASHES: ...yes...

DUST: ...and then, you know? And then...

ASHES: ... Yes, and why not...

DUST: ...You said it!...

ASHES: ... I'm glad you're from Prague. At least we have something to talk about. (Quinn 65)<sup>46</sup>

In *Shoot Him In the Head*, Fuller's first full-length play for Big Knees, FBI agents Kowalski and O'Brien use similarly comic and opaque high-context dialogue:

KOWALSKI: How did I know what?

O'BRIEN: What today was?

KOWALSKI: Because I was there.

O'BRIEN: What?

KOWALSKI: Because I was there. I saw it happen.

O'BRIEN: You what?

KOWALSKI: You deaf?

O'BRIEN: Excuse me?  
(Fuller, *Shoot Him In the Head* 1)

Both exchanges are full and comically empty of meaning. Fuller was often compared to Tarantino; he preferred the term "screwball noir" (Fuller, Personal Interview).

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<sup>46</sup> The skit from which this is taken is entitled "Our Speech," but Quinn is actually here excerpting Roman Jakobson's essay about it—to my knowledge there is no English-language collection of texts by v + w. Full citation in Quinn's notes is: Roman Jakobson, "An Open Letter to Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich on the Epistemology and Semantics of Fun," in Quinn, "Jakobson and the Liberated Theater," *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 1 (1987), 161.

*Shoot Him In the Head* (whose anagram is *S.H.I.T.*) is the story of two orphans, Mavis and Lloyd, who, on turning eighteen, burn down their orphanage and go on the run. The action is quick and quirky: Lloyd encounters Bela, a wealthy landowner's daughter, who shoots her adopted father and goes on the lam with the two boys. In Act II Lloyd has been "turned," and helps bring his former friends to the feds. Throughout, the play is a yearning for home. *Shoot Him In the Head*, subtitled *Big Knees (on Superman)* was the Misery Loves Company production that first assembled the core ensemble: Richard Toth and Sean Fuller played the FBI agents; Chris Clarke and David Nykl played the orphans Lloyd and Mavis; New Zealand film student Armaghan Ballantyne played Bela; Laura Zam played the psychiatrist, and Chip Persons played Larry, a drug addict with hypnotic powers. Victoria Jones directed; William Hollister designed the set.

Again, reception was enthusiastic. Emma McLune's review in the Prague Post cheered this "homegrown play, directed with verve and cinematic vision and played with assurance" ("Shoot Him in the Head Hits the Bull's-Eye"). Jitka Sloupová praised Toth for supporting Big Knees, unaware that Big Knees was an arm of Misery Loves Company:

Richard Toth (the excellent Mr. Nightingale from Topol's *Nightingale for Dinner*), a circus clown, mime, actor and director has shown a great sensitivity and imagination in so far everything he has done in Prague. It was he, who faithful to the very name of his Misery Loves Company offered the space to a group called Big Knees, which specializes in original Prague English drama. The first authorial evening of "Knees" called *On Jesus* composed of two one-act plays and a series of sketches, which I unfortunately missed, so the next evening called "On Superman" met me unprepared. The full-length *Shoot Him In the Head*, the first play by the actor Sean Fuller (also the author of an one-act play performed in *On Jesus*) has simply enchanted me. ("Theatre of the Expatriates")

Sloupová drew connections between Fuller's Irish identity (he has dual Irish and American citizenship) and Irish dramaturgy:

... Lloyd Mathers, the hero of the ironic theatrical symbiosis of a "road movie" and a "gun moll", [sic] is a character just as tragicomic, thrown both to life and adventures against his will, as the "playboy" of his compatriot J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. And just like Synge, Fuller sets the proverbial mirror at the perplexed society ("Theatre of the Expatriates").

Sloupová's observation corresponds with Fuller's claims that he was inspired by Brendan Behan's sprawling, messy style:

I always loved the figure of the 'quare fellow' or hostage. And I was interested in creating a melodramatic structure in which you would have high and low qualities mixed with song and drama (Group Interview, Sean Fuller).

Sloupová also drew connections between Fuller's characters and Czech culture: "Fuller occasionally also makes fun of the sentimental attitudes of hippies, American 'sixty-eighters.'" "Sixty-Eighters" is the Czech term for the generation that grew up quickly when the Soviet armies invaded Prague in 1968; it was also used to refer to those Czechs who had returned to their country after years abroad. She concluded that while the play:

...stems from American reality (including the gallant remark about the Pittsburgh Penguins' star Jaromír Jágr) draws inspiration from American genres... still, the play's playful cynicism, describing an all-pervading irresponsibility, seems so close to our feeling, I don't know if Sean Fuller would write it like this back in New York... but it may be the Celtic origins we share ("Theatre of the Expatriates").

By "Celtic origins" Sloupová most likely referred to the belief that the Celtic peoples originated from the area now known as Hungary, and the belief that the name "Bohemia" stems from Bojí, the name of the local Celtic tribe. However, as Czech-Irish scholar Michelle Woods points out in a 1999 article about the Czech love affair with Irish culture, which continued to grow throughout the nineties, the Czech affiliation with the Celtic is probably wishful thinking, "an attempt to dis-identify from their Slavic heritage which was heavily promoted by the Communist regime" (Woods, "Czech It Out Now—It's a Mini-Celtic Tiger"). Regardless of whether the myth is based in history, Prague demonstrated its love for Irish-ness: in 1996, there were five Irish bars in Prague: James Joyce, Molly Malone's (which also opened a branch in Brno), Scarlett O'Hara's, The Derby and O'Brien's (Moran, "Go Irish, Young Czech"). Anheuser-

Busch had failed in an attempt to buy the original Budvar brewery—workers had appealed to Václav Havel—but Guinness, a stout, was not viewed as competition to Czech beer, and was welcomed in Prague (Butcher).

#### 4.4.3 Class Acts

In addition to Big Knees, Misery Loves Company had an educational arm, entitled “Class Acts,” driven by Leah Gaffen. Gaffen had been teaching English at the Gymnázium nad Alejí, and had instituted an after-school drama program. She received money from George Soros’ Open Society Fund just as Misery Loves Company debuted. Toth came to see her student production of *Little Shop of Horrors* and invited her to reprise it at Celetná. The show was successful both financially and artistically. In fact, Class Acts, with its support from parents and friends, made money more consistently than MLC did as a whole (Gaffen, Personal Interview). Toth made up the name “Class Acts.” Although Class Acts’ productions were intended for their host country, they were completely filtered through an American sensibility and style. Students not only learned English vocabulary and performance techniques; they learned American (sometimes British) culture through performance.

After the success of *Little Shop of Horrors*, Gaffen prepared a Class Acts Festival for May of 1995, including scenes from that Gymnasium nad Alejí production, and highlights from four other English-language Gymnázium productions around the Czech Republic: Gymnázium Českolipská in Prague, Akademické Gymnasium in Brno, Gymnasium Sladkovského in Prague and Gymnasium Slovanské in Olomouc. The festival was held at Komedie, not at the Celetná theatre, and was sponsored not only by the Open Society Fund but also by The British Council and the Ministry of Education. Ondřej Lukáš was the sole Czech director; he directed Ayckbourn’s *Mother Figure* and Michael Frayn’s *Black and Silver* at Gymnázium Slovanské in Olomouc. The Festival was a success, with notices appearing in Lidové Noviny and Práce. Ilona Adamová in Práce was particularly enthusiastic:

The coordinator Leah Gaffen and students of five Czech High Schools have shown that the interpretation of dramatic texts in English improves communicative skills, fluency of students, extends vocabulary, improves pronunciation and intonation skills. ... Among others, Svatopluk Skopal, the actor from Vinohradské Theatre, came to support the students. ....

Students noted differences in Czech and American teaching styles. Ondřej Skovajsa, one of Gaffen's students at nad Alejí, played the role of Huck Finn in *Tom Sawyer* in 1994, and the male chorus leader in *Lysistrata*, directed by Amery Rock in 1995. He remembers:

...there was a real clash between the strict and often humiliatingly stupid Czech teachers who forced you to take your shoes off and wear slippers when entering the building and the enthusiastic and more liberal American teachers ("Leah").

The second Class Acts Festival, again held at the Komedie, included schools from Karlový Vary, Plzeň, Hradec Králové and Uherské Hradiště and Prague (a total of seven). The students from Olomouc, Plzeň and Hradec Králové were all directed by Czechs; Gaffen's training program was succeeding.

#### **SECTION 4.5 KING STAG: THE HIGH POINT OF INTERCULTURAL THEATRICAL COLLABORATION**

Misery's next full repertory production of 1995 was a co-production with Jakub Špalek's own Kašpar theatre. The bilingual imagining of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi's *King Stag* was an artistic and critical success, playing to packed houses. Many remember it as the pinnacle of English-language in Prague. Ewan McLaren's comments are typical:

...of all the Czechs I know who have been dealing with English language theatre in Prague, some of them remember *Ernest and Ernestine* and a few of them may talk about *Angels in America*, some of them may remember *Nightingale for Dinner* but anyone who saw *King Stag* said it was the best English language theatre they have ever seen" (Personal Interview, 30 June 1999).

C. Denby Swanson saw the show while visiting Prague in the summer of 1995 and credits it with her decision to return the following year as an actor (C. Denby Swanson, "Re: Prague 1995?").

Again, Misery Loves Company used ELT production strategy number 3, a bilingual production that was also in collaboration with a company from the Host culture.

*King Stag's* fairy-tale structure lends it a kind of porousness to acting and scenic invention, the same porousness that had attracted Julie Taymor in her noted production with director Andrei Serban at American Repertory Theatre in 1984. It provided a platform to highlight the skills of both the Czech and English-speaking companies. Patrice Pavis' vertical hourglass model of intercultural theatre concentrates on filters from one culture to another, but *King Stag* simultaneously presented a horizontal filter of two cultures in dialogue. Neither culture was dominant. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert suggest the word "intercultural" for performances that explore the interstice between cultures, because a production: "...draws our attention to the hyphenated third space separating and connecting different peoples" (44). With the production of *King Stag*, Misery Loves Company and Kašpar Theatre created a performance that was neither American, nor Czech, but both/and.

Špalek first had the idea of the co-production to initiate the collaboration between the two companies. Toth suggested they use *King Stag*, and began work on an original adaptation in January 1995 for a June opening. Gozzi's fantastic fable is deeply linked to the tradition of Commedia Dell'arte, with many of the "lazzi" (comic, slapstick bits) improvised from the skills of the performers. *King Stag* tells the story of King Deramo in the city of Serendippo, who is looking for a bride to love him for himself alone. When the play opens, he has already rejected thousands of applicants. His evil prime minister Tartaglia tries to bully his daughter Clarissa into marrying the king; however, she truly loves Leander. The kitchen wench Smeraldina also tries to gain the king's affection, despite her love of Trufaldino. But Deramo has a magic statue that smiles when a woman lies. Angela, the daughter of the good minister Pantalone, does love Deramo but just as it looks all will be well, Tartaglia takes Deramo hunting and tricks him into sharing one of the great secrets told to him by the wizard Durandarte, who has been living as a parrot for the past five years. Through this secret, Tartaglia tricks Deramo into inhabiting the spirit of a stag (hence the play's title) and takes the king's body himself. Angela is not fooled by Tartaglia/Deramo; Deramo manages to leave the body of the stag and enter into the dead body of an old beggar; eventually all is revealed and everyone lives happily ever after.

Toth's adaptation employed a narrator, played by Czech actor Jan Potměšil, who described the enacted scenes that followed. He embodied the style of Czech rational irony,

winking at the audience about the silliness onstage. Wheelchair-bound Potměšil had been a student actor who, like Jakub Špalek, had participated in the 1989 revolution. Potměšil had joined director Jan Kačer on a trip to Ostrava to talk to miners there. On the return to Prague, the car crashed on an icy road. Potměšil was permanently paralyzed (Šebrlová). A popular young leading man, he became a beloved hero of the new regime. *King Stag* set designer William Hollister considered the audience's reception to Potměšil's first entrance as a metatheatrical response to his persona:

... In *Stag*, when Potměšil rolled out always slightly late, with parrot and hat and colors, and parked cheerfully downstage right, screaming "Okay, I'm here now! Let's go!" and people in both cast and audience cheered, it was also clear that many in the audience knew what it was all about (Hollister, "Stag and Fantomima").

At times Špalek himself had to play Potměšil's role, Cigolotti, because Potměšil was sometimes afflicted with a cyst on his leg. The cast included some of the most popular Czech actors in Prague; Sean Fuller remembers that "of the ten leading Czech actors under 35, four of them were in *King Stag*" (Personal Interview).

Dramaturg Celise Kalke helped Toth prepare the text, working with a native speaker of Italian on Gozzi's text. The Czech actors brought Czech translations of the play. Playwrights Laura Zam and Sean Fuller played Smeraldina and her brother Brighella and wrote and improvised their scenes in the style of Commedia Dell'arte:

BRIGHELLA: Sausages! What a vulgarian! Listen Smelly, your job is to appeal to his majesty's fancy. Look at it my way. You become queen, and I go from pots and pans to the Duke of Earl.

SMERALDINA: Don't you worry about a thing. Just leave it to me. I've been studying all the great love scenes.

BRIGHELLA: Yeah?

SMERALDINA: Yeah. "Oh Deramio, Deramio, therefore art wow Deramio." "This is certainly the driest martini a king has ever stirred for me, and speaking of dry, I'm reminded of my trip to the Sahara in '34." "Is that a scepter in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?" (Toth, Trans./adaptation of *King Stag* by Carlo Gozzi, 4-5).

Though the word-play would only have been accessible to English-speakers, the antagonism between brother and sister reproduced the Punch-and-Judy-ish clowning of *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* that had been so successful with Czech audiences.

The program made deliberate playful use of "Czenglish"; including this notice: "Misery Loves Company Je Proud To Pracovat With All Baječný Líde V Kašpaře And Kašpar Poděkovat The Lavly Lidy From Misery Loves Company Pro Možnost Kolaborate A Začínat Přatelství." The sentence is fairly comprehensible to speakers of English or Czech, but is not written wholly in either (although the structure of the sentence is closer to the English sentence-structure). Its full English translation is "Misery Loves Company is proud to work with all the fabulous people from Kašpar and Kašpar thanks the lovely people from Misery Loves Company for the opportunity of this collaboration and the beginning of friendship." The design of the show was also similarly split: Marie Jirásková designed the puppets and costumes; as already noted, American William Hollister designed the set. Celise Kalke and Karen Sell played viola and saxophone, respectively, during scene changes.

Because the show was a Kašpar production, there was a significant budget for set and costumes. The cast and crew were paid. Jirásková's costumes were bright and whimsical: Clarissa, played by Barbora Kodetová, wore a stylized backpack suggesting her student-like youth. The stags walked upright with long, hoof-like canes. Hollister's set was a series of shifting pale yellow curtains in five rows; the back row was just two large curtains. He was inspired by alchemy and revelation, imagining the set as veils that were gradually revealed (Hollister, "Main story behind SOL: Aleph, Mem, Shem"). The four front rows of curtains were



hung on curtain rings, allowing for a solid line of curtains or several individual spaces; the configurations of curtains and light changes were enough to make large scene-changes. The back row of curtains were hung with clothespins, and were taken down at the end, supporting Toth's directorial concept of a troupe of traveling players in the Czech countryside. Jirásková's abstract puppets were worn on the cast's shoulders and exchanged when they transformed. Other scenic expressions of transformation included shadowplay—the audience watches Tartaglia bully his daughter as shadows on a sheet; when he scolds his shadow grows larger and larger as Clarissa's shrinks. The Czech company wrote an epilogue in which the magician Durandarte emerges on stilts, complaining that magic no longer exists and all the mystery in the world has been replaced by science and technology. The narrator Cigolotti responds by inviting Durandarte to a pub:

CIGOLOTTI: I think that there are very few things in this world that can beat sitting down somewhere to some good food and drink, maybe a little music—and when you can do that with an old friend, that's magic. (Toth, trans. adaptation of *King Stag* by Carlo Gozzi, 82).

This epilogue, spoken in Czech, suggested that magic could be found in the small elements of Czech life.

The combined efforts of a popular theatre with an English-language company pleased Czech critics. Jakub Špalek, in an interview with [Večerník Praha](#), raised the question of playing to tourists so that he could answer it:

The first question my friends ask me is, why are you doing this? For tourists? Are you going to take it somewhere? At present we aren't going anywhere with *King Stag* nor are we doing it only for tourists. And we are hiding no commercial intentions behind it. We'll perform for our normal ticket price. I want to spice up Kašpar's regular activity with things such as working with Misery Loves Company (Horký).

Špalek's affirmation of the usual ticket price is important; he later rejected a proposed merger between Misery Loves Company, Black Box and Exposure in part because he objected to the high ticket prices of Black Box's [Metamorphosis](#) in 1997 at Celetná. Asked whether English would be a barrier, Špalek replied that "A collective European Culture has been forming lately (especially in film) and it is very attractive to me personally to try to overcome the language barrier and to show that it is possible." Vladimír Hulec's review in [Mladá fronta Dnes](#) also raised the question of commercial theatre in order to dismiss it:

*King Stag* is a very pleasant step into the summer theatre season. This production was able to break down barriers between Czechs and foreigners living in Prague and able to shoot down the border between so-called commercial and noncommercial, amateur and professional theatre. It leads us down one of the potential, logical and so-far untrodden routes for Prague theatre to follow.

Jan Kerbr's review in [Lidové Noviny](#) was the most explicitly enthusiastic about the interculturalism of the production in his positive review, titled "Our Americans in Celetná."<sup>47</sup>

The role of the American Community in Prague cultural life cannot be disregarded and this stage fusion is conclusive evidence of that. The magic of the production is achieved largely through its ingenious casting. Czech actors whose English is more or less textbook create characters who are naïve, or at least not completely self-confident, and young Americans who were a self-assured, crazy comedic group ("Our Americans in Celetná").

Kerbr concludes: "The joyous atmosphere of camaraderie contributes to the pleasant experience," using as evidence the Czinglish sentence in the *King Stag* program, reprinted in his review.

Christopher Lord's review for [Theatre News](#) agreed with the Czech critics, finding *King Stag* "the best English-language show in Prague so far":

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<sup>47</sup> Dramaturg Celise Kalke remembers a similar American-as-pet epithet, when during her internship with Martin Velišek at Divadlo pod Palmovkou the gatekeeper would buzz her in with "Martine, vaše Američanka je tady (Martin, your American is here)" (Kalke, Personal Interview).

What really distinguishes this production, though, is its very original visual style, with excellent make-up and costumes giving the production a wild, comic-book feel to it. Live music by Celise Kalke and Karen Sell was well-thought out and executed, and there are many nice touches of magic and special effects all around. A brilliant success all around.

In this column, which also included reviews of Exposure's [Colette in Love](#) and [RE:Kvést's Conference of the Birds](#), Lord scolded the [Prague Post](#) for its negative and irresponsible attitude to the English-language theatre. The [Prague Post](#) review of *King Stag* was disappointing (There was no review in [Prognosis](#) because it had folded in March, 1995, two months before the opening). Richard Allen Greene had assigned a Czech writer, Tomáš Partl, to cover *King Stag*. Partl had covered other Kašpar productions, but his review is mostly a synopsis of the plot, demonstrating little theatrical knowledge or analysis. Partl concluded that "English is essential for understanding *King Stag*; Czech is optional" ("All Your Favorites Join Forces for Fairy Tale"). MLC took the assignment of a junior writer to this production as a deliberate slight by Richard Allen Greene, whom they then nicknamed "Rodney Allen Rippey" (Group Interview).

Despite its artistic success, *King Stag/Král Jelenem* ran in repertory for only one year; it was an expensive show to keep running, with sixteen cast members (including the two musicians). However, with Špalek's professionalism and connections, Toth's physical humor and slapstick, and the combined talents of Czech and American actors, *King Stag/Král Jelenem* represented a ripening of the intercultural theatrical collaborations to date.

#### **SECTION 4.6            ANGELS IN AMERICA: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE THEATRES BRING AMERICA TO PRAGUE**

MLC's next major production was another co-production: this time with another English-language theatre. In December 1995, MLC joined with Black Box to present the first Czech production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. In practice, this meant that Alex Gammie and Elizabeth Russell handled publicity and other producing duties, while the MLC ensemble handled all of the creative side of the production. There had been some tension between the two

groups after Misery Loves Company found a permanent venue, sponsorship from a Czech theatre, and critical success. The gender differences in the leadership of the two groups were noted and joked about by everyone. Gammie recalls:

...all those boys, charming as they are, were really useless at organizing anything. It was a typical situation where the artistic director is male and the administrator is female, so it was up to us to organize the lives of these egomaniac, heterosexual men (Personal Interview).

Russell felt that MLC did not appreciate Gammie's contributions, nor reciprocate (E. Russell, Personal Interview).

Both Toth and Gammie were keen to do the play in Prague. Gammie remembers, "it was causing so many ripples in the states, and it was so valid to do it in the Czech Republic. It would never have been seen if we'd not done it" (Gammie, Personal Interview). Similarly Toth remembers that after talking with Špalek he thought it would be good to "focus on the official idea that we could now offer the Czech community things in English but also things that they could not see in the Czech theatre" (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999). This choice corresponds to ELT production strategy number one, re-presenting the Performer's culture. What distinguishes *Angels in America* and perhaps accounts for its success is that it not only displayed the Performer's culture, it did so with a choice that already appealed to Czech theatregoers.

Both Czech critic Kristina Žantovská and Czech-American critic Paul Trensky had written about the New York production for the theatre journal *Svět a Divadlo* in April 1994. Translations of both *Angels in America* and *Perestroika* had appeared in the same journal in 1993 and 1994. Žantovská's article includes summaries of American cultural history, including the association of homosexuality with politics through the AIDS epidemic, the beginning of the feminist movement of the 70s, and the Mormon religion. In a paragraph called "Longing for the Ideal" Žantovská critiques the American character:

The revolution for equality is still present in today's America. ... Women refuse to accept the fact that they can't be the same as men, homosexuals refuse to accept their exceptionality concerning reproduction at least, African-Americans use their "difference" more and more as a weapon in the unforgiving battle against whites. America lacks a sense of healthy skepticism, humor and self-irony. Ideal always means seriousness—stiff, unyielding, and vulnerable.

Her portrayal of America strongly contrasts the self-deprecating humor of the "little Czech." As described by Ladislav Holý in *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation*, the "little Czech" is "not motivated by great ideals" (Holý 62).

Paul Trensky's article addresses cultural differences by examining the literary qualities of Kushner's play:

We would have to go back all the way to the 40s and 50s, when Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill wrote their most important plays to find a similar response from both critics and the audience.

The three English-language playwrights listed are the three most familiar to Czechs: Miller, Williams and O’Neill were all produced before and after Prague Spring. Havel admitted that in his youth he had loved the plays of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill “but they didn’t provoke me to write plays because I knew that I could never write such good ones” (“Not Only About Theatre”). Trenskey also challenges the reluctance of Czech theatre to address homosexuality:

Some of the story plots and situations (especially in the second part) could perhaps seem unusual, or even scandalous for the Czech audience. In the United States, however (and it seems in Western Europe as well) Kushner’s play is far from being perceived as especially shocking. Homosexual inclinations are not as taboo—as they still are in Bohemia—and many famous personages claim being gay.

By referencing Western Europe, Trenskey associates the play with the longed-for goal of the country’s “return to Europe.” This “return to Europe” was one of the primary goals of the Velvet Revolution, dominating the elections of 1990. The transition to a market economy was only one part of that return (put forward particularly by Václav Klaus) that lay at the heart of Czech self-image:

Czechs have always detested being classified as Eastern Europeans and are quick to point out that Prague is west of Vienna and west of the line between Vienna and Berlin. ...Czechs use the concept of *kulturnost* to construct a boundary between themselves and the uncultured East into which they were lumped after the communist coup d’état in 1948, and they see their proper place as alongside the civilized, cultured and educated nations of Western Europe (Holý 151).

Trenskey makes his cultural points between the lines and in code. He points out that Kushner’s suffering hero is not a superman:

The author doesn’t take advantage of the fact that the disease afflicted a lot of people in artistic circles. Prior is a “little” man with a big heart and not a genius struck by the disease at the acme of his career.

In direct contrast to Žantovská’s criticism of Kushner’s ideology, Trenskey explicitly associates Kushner’s main character with the positive qualities of the “little Czech.”

Jitka Sloupová had translated the play into Czech for publication in Svět a Divadlo, she also reviewed the English-language Misery Loves Company and Black Box co-production. She described Czech directors' reluctance to stage the play in her production review:

You could name any well-known contemporary Czech director and I could in most cases confirm that they've read *Angels*. I either offered it to them or to their dramaturges and they told me of the strong impressions they had gained from reading it in Svět a Divadlo. Many of these directors, including myself, are skeptical about the prospect of realizing such a project or even imagining whom they would cast. The comedy sketch from a television show illustrates the point: two young Prague actors depicted an argument between a homosexual couple. The presenter of the program brings both actors out in front of the camera again—unmasked, “freed” to talk with them a bit, so that even the most naïve viewer could understand that in real life the actors have quite different voices and speech patterns—in short, that they acted homosexuality with bravura but otherwise they are normal—heterosexual men—as Kushner's Roy Cohn would say (“Angels for Prague.”)

Two Czech reviewers of the Broadway production, Marek Naar in Soho Revue and Žantovská Svět a Divadlo, did make a point of associating the homosexual characters with homosexual actors, thereby reinforcing Czech/American cultural difference. By producing the lionized Kushner play, the English-language theatres were following Lida Engelová's advice to John Farrage: to show to Czechs what Americans are like.

Using ELT production strategy number one was extremely common for all of the ELTs of Prague, but *Angels in America* played to a Czech context because of the existing interest in the play. The only Czech members of the cast were the angel, whose otherness is inscribed into the play, and the Czech guitarist David Babka, but the production was tailored for a Czech audience. Nykl in particular associated Kushner's theatricality—with flaming books and flying angels underscoring the emotional impact of “I'm dying with AIDS”—with the pointed playfulness of contemporary Czech theatre (Personal Interview). The program included a glossary of terms titled “Explanatory Notes”; where Karhan's Men had defined terms from Czech life for its American audience, the *Angels in America* program defined American terms for Czech viewers. Some of the subjects included were “Mormons,” “Hebrew,” “Roy Cohn,” “Ethel and Julius Rosenberg” and “ACT UP and Queer Nation.”

The play primarily centers on two couples: homosexuals Lou Ironson and his lover Prior Walter, and Mormons Joe Pitt and his wife Harper. Joe is a Republican lawyer who works for Roy Cohn, the famous bulldog of the McCarthy hearings; he is also a closeted homosexual. Lou

abandons Prior when Prior becomes ill with AIDS. Harper is mentally unstable, in part because of her marriage to a closeted homosexual. Through the lives of these troubled characters (including Cohn, who is in deep denial about his homosexuality, and dies of AIDS, serenaded by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg), who interact through connections both logical and surreal, Kushner examines America's strengths and weaknesses; its greed, corruption, optimism, and possibility. The epilogue is hopeful: though G-d is absent, Prior is alive after five years—choosing to live on earth rather than remain with the angels as their prophet.

The production had logistical challenges. It has a cast of at least eight playing thirty characters, one of whom is a campy African-American; finding good actors of color in Prague was always difficult. As on Broadway, Toth and Gammie wanted to present *Angels in America* and *Perestroika* in one day. Even with significant cuts (helped by Serbian dramaturg Sodja Zupanc) it was a long event. The performance began at six, and was over around 11 PM (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999). Toth cast himself as Roy Cohn; Ewan McLaren directed him, with Toth directing the rest of the show. Set Designer William Hollister wanted a set based on levels of scaffolding, to reflect the scaffolding seen all over Prague as the city underwent renovations. The scaffolding was also inspired by a church in the middle of Karlin square, near Dům dětí, where many ELT productions rehearsed (Hollister, "Re: Main Story behind SOL: an unfinished cathedral"). Storing the set and putting it up again always had to work around the other shows in repertory at Celetná; Leah Gaffen's students from nad Alejí Gymnasium became the unofficial set crew (Hollister, Email to Author, "Re: Main Story behind SOL: Aleph, Mem, Shem."). Toth supplemented the light plot at Celetná by having the actors use handheld and construction lights. There was no opportunity for a full technical run-through before opening night (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999).

Russell and Gammie worked hard on publicity and sponsorship, sending sponsorship letters out that included a description of the importance of the play, critical blurbs about productions from both companies, and a budget. Black Box was officially registered as a non-profit foundation in the Czech Republic, though Misery Loves Company was not ("Proposal for Support of the Misery Loves Company/Black Box Production of 'Angels in America'"). They did not succeed in gaining a large financial sponsor, but they did succeed in several in-kind donations, including scaffolding from SGB Kovona, and medical equipment from the Canadian



Medical Centre. The producers sent out a press release in Czech and English; it is the only production in the files of either company with an organized table of newspaper listings:

**Table 1: *Angels in America* Press Coverage<sup>48</sup>**

Newspaper/Magazine	Listing or review?	Date	Have?	Translated?
1. Reflex	Listing-mention	12/1/95	Yes	No
2. Time Out London	Listing	December	No	N/a
3. Expres	Listing	11/22/95	Yes	No
4. Denní Telegraf	Listing	12/7/95	Yes	No
5. Haló Noviny	Listing	12/12/95	Yes	No
6. Večerník Praha	Review	12/13/95	Yes	No
7. Regional ‘SD’	Listing	12/16/95	Yes	No
8. Denní Telegraf	Review	12/20/95	Yes	No
9. Lidové Noviny			No	No
10. SOHO review	Listing and article	Jan. /96	Yes	No
11. Prague Post	Review	1/10/96	Yes	N/a
12. Czech Business Journal	Review	1/17/96	Yes	N/a
13. Prague Post	Letter to editor	1/17/96	Yes	N/a
14. Prague Post	Listing (Top pick)	1/17/96	Yes	N/a
15. Týden		Jan. 96		
16. Svět a Divadlo	Review	Feb. 96	Yes	no

The companies also sent a press release asking for help to bring Tony Kushner to Prague, but did not raise the necessary \$1700.

The press was overwhelmingly positive of the effort if not of the production. The review by Anna Baker praised the production, calling it “top-notch” and a “milestone” for the companies, but questioned the play’s relevance:

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<sup>48</sup> I have changed the way the dates are written to reflect American practice.

In its homeland, *Angels in America* speaks to a national conscience struggling with sexuality and prejudice. But in a country facing different issues—emerging racism, financial insecurity and shifting values brought on by new economics—*Angels in America* says far less.

A letter to the editor from Jaromír Kratchovil objected to the review's condescension:

One is left with the impression that AIDS is a secondary concern in this backwater republic. ... No doubt the reviewer hasn't followed customers from a club known as "the boat" into the deep folds of Letná Park. Or hasn't watched 13-year olds wearing baseball caps pierce their arms with a shared syringe of heroin. ... About this problem [HIV], the so-called expatriate press is considerably more attentive than our homegrown variety of news.

English-language theatre had broached the issue of AIDS before, from Asylum's final lecture performance, to Peter DuBois' deconstruction of *Savage/Love* in December 1994 (continuing in January 1995), Exposure's reading of Susan Sontag's *The Way We Live Now* in the spring of 1995, and the collection box for "AIDS projekt" in the lobby of the Komedie theatre in the summer 1995 Black Box production of *Lemonade Joe*. Czech theatres, however, were not producing work directly addressing homosexuality or AIDS. The English-language magazine the Czech Business Journal noted that the play had been promoted on Czech television on AIDS awareness day in December, and that while the play had many elements, including romance, "it is in gay issues that the play sets new precedents on the Prague stage" (Tizard).

Some Czech critics also questioned the relevance of the play's issues, though every Czech review began by describing the play's significance and awards. Jana Soprová, in her review in Večerník Praha, associated AIDS with America:

Such themes as AIDS, homosexual relations, drugs, religious strife and Puritanism, opposed with so-called "normal" sexuality, are no longer taboo for us either, but we tend to view them a bit differently—let us say, without the American, almost scientific, preoccupation.

While Soprová found the play "fascinating," she decided that:

...this uniquely American experience is untranslatable, in the way it would be if we were to interpret for the Americans the Hussite movement, or Czech-Slovak relations. However, for the Czech viewer, this production can be an interesting look into the "other" world across the ocean.

Martin J. Švejda in Lidové Noviny also found that "the difference between ours and American social climates is so big that this text could most probably be hardly fully rendered in our home

settings.” Vladimír Mikulka in Denní Telegraph acknowledged that some of the political passages were difficult for Czechs, particularly “the symbolic use of Gorbachev’s Perestroika as the new hope for the world,” but he praised the “restrained yet surprisingly masterful performances, fully professional, which isn’t so common here”:

The production of *Angels in America* merits praise as a dramaturgical accomplishment, bringing a play that is at the center of worldwide theatrical attention to Prague. Additionally, it represents a milestone for Prague’s English-language theatre and the first indication that it may, in time, achieve the status which German-language theatre held before the war. Although it would be difficult to call it a onetime success, it is an interesting production from various theatrical standpoints such as its straightforward, frank performance style, which is practically unknown here.

Jitka Sloupová also felt Kushner’s epilogue conflating Prior’s drama with Gorbachev’s Perestroika and Glasnost was sentimental and unbelievable:

In Prague, where—if anyone does at all—Gorbachev is remembered only cynically (after all, “nobody hung themselves” when he left), the comparison of these two issues makes the final point look downright stupid. (And audiences will have no idea how far Kushner’s “pining” for [Gorbachev-style Communist] ideology has brought him in his subsequent play *Slavs!*—see Svět a Divadlo 3/1999.

Despite this reservation, Sloupová found the play unsentimental and effective, praising the musical accompaniment by guitarist David Babka and its restraint, the functionalist stage design, and many of the cast, including newcomer Greg Linington as Louis.

Like Mikulka, Sloupová saw the straightforward acting style of the cast of *Angels in America* as something particularly American. In her conclusion, she compared their work with that seen in the Wilma Theater’s production of Jim Cartwright’s *Road* at the second International Theatre Festival in Plzeň in the summer of 1995, who:

...introduced us to theatre springing from other principles than ours: theatre in which an actor builds character in order to transform himself from role to role (and to tear down barriers) but not to create his own individual image (which could damage, for example, how convincing he is at creating a homosexual character) (“Angels for Prague”).

Czech émigrés Jiri and Blanka Zizka are the directors of Philadelphia’s Wilma Theatre; they represented the U.S. at the Theatre Festival. As the reception of *Angels in America* would be, the reception of that production had been particularly conditioned by the Czech desire to see

capitalism portrayed optimistically, and the Czech notion that ugliness should not be portrayed on stage.<sup>49</sup> Despite these reservations about theme, Jan Kolár and Vladimír Procházka in a joint article for *Divadelní Noviny* stressed the interest of the acting style, which they, like Sloupová, construed as American: “What is undeniable, though, is the real, deeply motivated and psychologically accurate American dramatic art of all the actors, without any exception.”

Despite the intense critical interest in the production of *Angels in America*, the show did not succeed economically. Czech critics and dedicated theatre-goers wanted to see a production of *Angels in America*, but a production in English lasting five hours was a hard sell to a less motivated playgoer. Czech critics ignored the next two MLC productions. Mike Trickey in the *Ottawa Citizen* reported in November 1995 on conditions that would slow the influx of potential audience members for the ELTs: “Prague still welcomes young westerners, but it prefers Gold Cards to backpacks.” He reported the two-tiered pricing system for Czechs and foreigners, and went on to describe new regulations requiring tourists to demonstrate income to cover their trip, and the relative difficulty of obtaining English-teaching jobs without qualifications. Another factor negatively affecting attendance was that by 1996, merely speaking English was not enough to interest a Czech audience. Finally, the difficulties in producing English-language theatre in Prague, including maintaining and finding adequate personnel, raising funds and securing spaces, made it difficult to maintain a consistent level of professionalism.

Following the huge push to put up *Angels in America*, the founders of Misery Loves Company were understandably tired. Ewan McLaren was receiving offers in the Czech theatre, and directed Christopher Hampton’s *Total Eclipse* for the Czech company at Labyrint, as well as the English version of the “first Czech musical,” *Dracula*. Nykl hired Webster Forrest, the stage manager from *Angels in America*, to direct him and Toth in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* for the February slot at Celetná. Forrest’s concept included the idea that the players who come to divert Hamlet and the Danish court are all inside the mind of a mad Player King:

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<sup>49</sup> Considering the production in 2004, Zizka felt the reception in the Czech Republic would be different after fourteen years of capitalism: ... at that moment they wanted to hear good things about capitalism. It didn’t quite gel at the time. Now, fourteen years in, the play would have resonance. Now there is unemployment, problems with gypsies, emigration... (Blanka Zizka, Telephone Interview).

He had these guys from the beginning of the play to the end of the play doing these weird abstract gestures because they're yin and yang, id and ego; it was just ridiculous and it didn't work (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999)

Although the Czech press adores Czech-born Stoppard, they ignored this production. The Prague Post review by Anna Baker was scathing (“Hamlet Duo Isn't Just Dead, It's Dull, Too, in Latest from Misery Loves Company”). Gammie was able to keep *Angels* running for six months and left shortly after it closed. Nancy Bishop took over Black Box in 1996, but she lacked Gammie's history and rapport with MLC, and Jakub Špalek of Kašpar never welcomed her.

#### **SECTION 4.7 THE RESISTIBLE RISE OF ARTURO UI: A PRAGUE PRODUCTION?**

The Czech Republic in 1996 was no longer the “wild east” with unlimited optimistic potential: financial scandals had rocked Klaus' Civic Democratic Party (ODS), and the country was losing faith in his idealistic views about pure market-driven capitalism. The elections on 31 May and 1 June had ODS the strongest party, with 29.6 percent of the vote. Miloš Zeman's Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) received 26.4 percent of the vote, tripling their votes since 1992 (Agnew 313). Havel had to broker a coalition government between the opposing parties, as both refused to cooperate with the openly racist Republican (SPR-RSČA) party or the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM).

Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, with its allegory of capitalism and fascism, seemed an apt reflection of the unrest and anxiety in the air. In addition, Czech-German cultural relations were experiencing a resurgence of cordiality. In April 1996, Prague hosted a Czech-German cultural program called “marionettes in action.” Sponsored by the Goethe Institute of Prague, it included an exhibit of marionettes by German and Czech designers and lectures about trends in German theatre (Dvořáková and Sevciková). *Ui* opened in May and ran until December, overlapping that Festival and also the Prague Festival of German Theatre, which opened in September. Czech playwright Pavel Kohout founded the Festival, which took place at the Vinohrady Theatre. Kohout had been resident in Vienna from 1978, when Czech authorities

refused to allow him re-entry after accepting the Austrian State Prize for Literature; since 1989 he and his wife had divided their time between Prague and Vienna. The Festival included a production by Divadlo Na Vinohradech of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*, as well as productions by four prominent German theatres (Levy, "The Kohouts Go Multinational—and Win"). The aim of the festival was to restore the collaborations between Czech and German practitioners that had existed before World War II (Reslová).

David Nykl remembers *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* production as Misery's most "Prague" production:

...it was Euro-centric and borrowed heavily from local theatre. Brecht was a good direction for us to go—it most closely resembled our mandate: presentational, theatrical, comic, funny (Nykl, "Re: Shy Young Man in a Bowler Hat?").

Victoria Jones directed, inspired by the film *Underground* that she had just finished working on at Barrandov studios with Serbian director Emir Kusturica. *Underground* tells the story of a man who convinces his best friend and a group of partisans to stay underground because World War II is still raging, caused an intellectual furor after it won the Palme d'Or prize at Cannes in 1995, with some critics interpreting it as a legitimization of Serbian aggression in its suggestion that nationalism was the fault of the Communist regime (Vukov; Turan). Brecht's parable of the rise of Adolph Hitler seemed to Jones:

... very appropriate at that time in Europe. There was a resurgence of ethnic antagonisms in Yugoslavia and Germany, all kinds of nasty mutterings going on about the rise of neo-Nazis (Jones, Personal Interview).

Czech newspapers were reporting incidents of skinhead violence against minorities and sexual discrimination. The Prague Post reported that the number of racially motivated crimes had increased from 70 in 1993 to 280 in 1995 (McLune, "Skinhead Brutality Is on the Rise"). A rally celebrating the birth of Nazi collaborator and cleric Jozef Tiso in Bratislava was disquieting (McLune, "Slovak Crowds Eulogize Nazi Collaborator Tiso"). Producing Brecht for Czech audiences was tricky, in part because of Czech ambivalence about German writers, which lingered even in 1996. The 1945 Beneš Decrees that deprived resident Germans and Hungarians in the Czech lands of property were still a sore point, and in the winter of 1996, German Finance Minister Theo Waigel, at the Sudetan German organization's annual meeting, demanded the

revocation of the Decrees. Waigel insinuated that Czech entry into the European Union could be delayed if the Czech Republic refused (Agnew 329).

Brecht's 1941 epic, subtitled "a parable play," tells the story of Arturo Ui, a small-time gangster who takes over the greengrocers of 1930's Chicago through bribery, murder, arson and intimidation. Ui plans to continue beyond Chicago however:

...For Chicago and Cicero  
Are not alone in clamouring for protection.  
There are other cities: Washington and Milwaukee!  
Detroit! Toledo! Pittsburgh! Cincinnati!  
And other towns where vegetables are traded! (Brecht 98).

Every character in the play and each scene has an exact German parallel: Ui is Hitler, Old Dogsborough represents Hindenburg the President of Germany, Ignatius Dullfeet represents Englebert Dollfuss, Chancellor of Austria, Ernesto Roma represents Ernst Rohm, Giuseppe Givola represents Josef Goebbels. The Warehouse Fire in the play represents the Reichstag Fire, the Dock aid scandal represents the East Aid scandal, Chicago represents Germany, Cicero Austria. Brecht further distanced the audience from the events by having them speak in Elizabethan-style verse with a gangster's vulgar vocabulary (Brecht, introduction by Manheim and Willett, xvii). The play was not staged until 1958, two years after Brecht's death in 1956.

Stylistically, Brecht's texts are what Umberto Eco calls "open work," where the text must be completed by the interpreter (62). Brecht's technique is the opposite of Shaw's dialectics; by silencing an opposing point of view, the spectator is left frustrated and fills in himself the position Brecht prefers: "The consequence (or at least Brecht's hope) of such a method is the creation of a vacuum that would be filled by the audience's shock of recognition" (Eco 109-110). The play depends for its effectiveness upon the reader's willingness to engage in controlling the metaphor. Brecht shares the Czech sensibility of obliqueness, but Czech critics understood his work as didactic. Brecht was connected in the minds of Czech theatre-goers and critics with the kind of thematic moralizing of Socialist Realism. While Czech acting was ironic and Brechtian in style, Czech theatre approached political commentary more obliquely. Jones' production was playful and stylized, but it was also deeply earnest..

*Ui* was the most explicitly political play Misery Loves Company ever produced. Jones, who had studied Czech film, knew that the Czech sensibility was one of avoidance:



If you look at all of the films of the Czech new wave, not one of them was actually talking about the subjection to Communism, which is why they were so heavily censored, because the censors couldn't figure out what they *were* talking about.... By avoiding talking about their political situation they were making a much larger political statement (Group Interview, Jones).

Rather than using signs or announcements explaining what was going on in Germany at the time in which the play is set, Jones wanted to expand the context to what was currently going on in Europe. Serbian dramaturg Sodja Zupanc worked with Jones and playwright Laura Zam to write interludes that were comic and anachronistic. Zam played the role of a news broadcaster, first in period as a radio announcer but increasingly connected to the present day:

After coming to power legally, Hitler surprises his high patrons by extremely violent measures. However, he does keep all his promises. This brought to you by Promise margarine. On January 15, 1982, Saded Gothbe Zade, formerly the Ayatollah Khomeini's personal advisor, is murdered on charges of conspiracy. It is estimated that between 1979 and 1982, over 4600 executions took place in Iran. This marks the peak of Khomeini's wave of terror—the previous news brought to you by Clairrol's new permanent home wave (Zam, *Ui* text, "radio jingle").

Interlude eleven, marked "on site," is a preview for "live at Five," reporting the murder of Hitler's friend Rohm: "In addition we'll show you footage taken inside of Bosnian concentration camps." Zam's performance reflected Czech cabaret style.

Some of Jones' choices were clearly inspired by Czech theatre productions. A production of the musical *Cabaret* was running in Prague at Divadlo Na zábradlí, directed by Petr Lébl, in January 1996; in a final image Barbora Hrzanová, the actress playing Sally Bowles, gradually contorted her body into a swastika. A group tap dance march at the end of *Arturo Ui*, which evolved into brutal stomping, echoed Lébl's choice as the actors arranged their arms into swastikas (Hollister, "Ui Set and 'elephants': Useful Anecdotes"). Like *Angels in America*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* was a challenging production. There were seventeen actors in the cast, and two blues guitarists.

The Czech press ignored the show, except for covering a freak accident in which a balcony fell and dropped three actors fifteen feet to the stage (David Nykl, lighter than others, remained on the shards of the balcony). According to Richard Toth, the audience thought it was planned, and applauded. The accident made the front page of Mladá fronta Dnes. The German-language newspaper Prager Zeitung wrote a full-page feature on the production, recounting the

history and story of Brecht's epic, and quoting Jones about her concept of the play. Von Tarik Amar viewed the depiction of gangsterism as "an unavoidable connection of business and fascism." Anna Baker's review in the Prague Post praised the production, finding its blend of humor and cynical restraint succeeded, unlike the "laborious *Angels in America*" ("Misery's Resistible Rise Is Irresistibly Good"). Baker praised the original music by Jeremy Saxon, the set design of colored panels by William Hollister and John Comer, and the work of many in the cast: "Nykl tap-dances demoniacally across the stage, laughing with the dementia of hate; add the decadent seducer Linington and rough-boy Fuller, and they make a captivating trio" ("Misery's Resistible Rise Is Irresistibly Good"). However, she critiqued Toth's Ui for being "unable to define his character until well into the second half. He's not weak enough for contempt, but not evil enough, either." Baker missed the point of Brecht's drama, which portrays the rise of a flexible opportunist. Berliner Ensemble member Manfred Wekwerth, in notes on an early production of the play, expressed criticism of the portrayal of Ui as a "passive plaything" who does not change: "Precisely Hitler's languidness, his indecision, emptiness, feebleness, and freedom from ideas were the source of his usefulness and strength" (Brecht, "Later Texts" notes by Manfred Wekwerth, 113). Robert Eversz remembers Richard Toth's performance in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*:

Richard Toth gave a brilliantly sweaty, smarmy performance as Arturo Ui; his performance made clear he had the talent to play the stage of any English-language stage in the world, and we were just lucky enough to have seen him on a more intimate stage in Prague ("Re: Arturo Ui? And Some Updates").

Eversz' laudatory comments raise questions, however, about MLC's intended audience. With her political commentary, Jones hoped to appeal to Czechs who were complacent about the troubles on their own borders, continuing her work on *Underground* and as the producer of William Lee's play *Refugees* with the defunct company Small and Dangerous. Unlike shows in the Big Knees series, mainstage shows always sought a high percentage of Czechs in the audience. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* combined the strengths of Misery Loves Company's highly energetic, comedic acting with themes of power and corruption that seemed timely—but Czech critics did not come. Czech theatre-goers still seemed to prefer a more oblique approach to social commentary. Petr Lébl's *Cabaret* did not point directly to a current situation, as *Ui* did with its contemporary interludes. *Cabaret* reinforced Czech ambivalence about Germans, and Brecht was a German playwright. The production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* may have

been successful on any English-language stage in the world, but the stage at Celetná was also a Czech one, and MLC had not secured a mixed audience. Though Mikulka in his Denní Telegraf review of *Angels in America* had compared English-language theatre to the German theatre before the war, the English-language theatre never had the German theatre's large resident audience base.

In some ways the English-language theatre scene was at its height in 1996: Misery Loves Company had running in alternating repertory *King Stag*, *Angels in America* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, as well as several Big Knees productions and touring Class Acts productions; Black Box produced two Havel plays (though not a fourth summer festival), and Exposure had survived its leadership change and successfully produced Mark Corner's bilingual play, *Just Another Blasted Love Song*. *King Stag* ran for a year, and at one point in late 1996 Greg Linington (for example) appeared in that, *Angels in America*, and Sean Fuller's *The Age of Reason* (in addition to Peter DuBois' individually produced *Fat Men in Skirts*), as well as playing two roles in films shot by North American Pictures. But a height also suggests a peak. English-language theatre, and its expatriate audiences, were gradually beginning to dwindle.

#### **SECTION 4.8            BLUE WINDOW AND THE AGE OF REASON: EXPANDING THE MISSION AGAIN**

MLC followed *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, which had a very earnest mission, with a play which seemed to bear little relation to MLC's usual emphasis on interculturalism and comedy. Aesthetically, *Blue Window* had little in common with the Misery Loves Company aesthetic of high-energy clowning nor David Nykl's motto for the group, "If it don't hurt, it ain't funny." The justification for the production of Craig Lucas' play about a troubled dinner-party was in the company-driven structure of MLC. One of Misery's principles, in keeping with the feeling of ensemble, was that anyone could propose a project.

Four Misery Loves Company actors, Chip Persons, Howie Lotker, Katie Petrosky and Taline Sherrif had all been students of Barbara Bosch in the BFA actor training at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB), and wanted her to direct them in Prague. One reason for

choosing the play was that it was relatively contemporary (it was twelve years old) and American, set in New York. Another reason for choosing the play was that it offers four very solid roles for women. Misery Loves Company was still perceived as a boys' club, and the plays they produced rarely had more than one or two good roles for women. They also rarely had female directors; Kate Petrosky had directed Laura Zam in *Circles, Holes and Arches*, Anne Goforth had directed her adaptation of a Czech fairy-tale, *Wild*, and Victoria Jones had directed Sean Fuller's *Shoot Him In the Head* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, but most of the high-profile Misery Loves Company shows were chosen and directed by men.

The play begins with characters in separate apartments dressing for the party, and dialogue must overlap yet remain distinct. It needs only a minimal set. However, dividing a playing space through lights is difficult at the Theatre at Celetná: lighting designers were still relatively rare. Most often, the director set general lighting cues with the board operator. Persons remembers that at that point most Czech theatres still used colored glass, rather than using gels (Personal Interview). In addition to having some trouble managing the technical process of working in a Czech Theatre, Persons wonders whether Bosch's directing theatre from a woman's perspective might have contributed to a feeling of tension in the Misery Loves Company ensemble who were not involved in the production (Persons, Personal Interview).

Just as Black Box had justified producing *Night, Mother* because depression and dysfunction were universal, *Blue Window* could be justified because dinner parties and mis-connecting groups of friends were a common feature of Prague life. *Blue Window* is about how people connect or fail to; it is character and situation driven with very little narrative plot. But it was clear to Persons admits the four UCSB graduates were primarily taking advantage of an opportunity to showcase themselves (Personal Interview). Though Misery Loves Company never held as strongly to a stated mission as Black Box did (particularly from 1996-1999), the production typified a growing "mission creep" that some, like McLaren, Gaffen and Kalke, had foreseen with the beginning of Big Knees.

The play opened in September 1996 and ran in repertory with *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and *The Age of Reason*. Just as Black Box had had difficulty with director Maggie Speer's expectations in the 1994 production of Karhan's *Men*, Misery Loves Company had issues with Bosch:

We kind of understood our own way of working in the Czech way at Celetná; we'd been there for three years. And she was coming from an academic background, which I think is the worst situation to learn how to do theatre. Because everything is given to you, everybody had their own little compartmentalized job, you always have a stage manager, assistant stage manager... the actors didn't really understand what went in to doing these things. It was my mistake, because I thought they did (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999).

Toth's mistake is easy to understand. The "company-driven" ideal suggests that all members of the company can take responsibility for production elements such as stage management, but in practice, the actors in *Blue Window* had no experience with the nuts and bolts of putting up a show. *Blue Window* received a good review from the Prague Post, but it had no overt connection to Prague. There were no Czechs involved in the production, and the production was not a recent work from America. Although only one year earlier, with *King Stag*, MLC had appeared as the hope of English-language theatre in Prague, again Czech critics ignored MLC.

Sean Fuller's *The Age of Reason* was the first time an original work was produced on the mainstage of MLC. Though it did re-present culture clash, and fit MLC's mission in the same way as *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, the practice of producing a new work on MLC's mainstage was also a departure. Pragmatically, it could allow *The Age of Reason* access to more resources than a work in Big Knees received, but with regard to mission, producing Fuller on the mainstage only threatened the already-jeopardized reputation of the Big Knees Series. *The Age of Reason* dramatized expatriate unease, particularly in response to political and economic troubles in the Czech Republic that affected the YAPs' daily lives. Tim Jasek reported in the Prague Post some realty firm workers' frustrations that after six years, multinational firms were still unlikely to be managed by Czechs, quoting a Czech worker: "...I feel as though I'm working in a British colony sometimes. We're paid a lot less, and many of the foreigners treat us like slaves..." In "Czech Retailers Regroup to Face New Competitors," Julia Gray reported that "headaches and hangovers could result as too many overly enthusiastic retailers attempt to invest in the Czech Republic," describing the limited success of expensive boutiques from the West whose prices were too high for most Czechs (Prague Post).

Fuller remembers "rampant commercialism" affecting the attitude towards Americans:

Young Czech entrepreneurs were trying to grab as much as they could. When I arrived in 1990, I was literally called an exotic... in Strakonice where I was teaching, I was the first American there since Patton. It went from “gee, whiz” to “oh, god” to “yeah, yeah.” It was in the back of our minds that the expatriate community was a parasite...(Personal Interview).

Toth decided to produce *The Age of Reason* to support Fuller’s development as a writer. The play, produced October 1996, was closely modeled on Sartre’s novel of the same name. Though it was ostensibly about Americans in Berlin, Toth, the cast and the audience were all aware that it was really about Americans in Prague. The play takes place in 1995, on the evening of the fifty year anniversary of V.E. Day. Fuller invented a chorus of “dandies,” three toughs who comment on the action and incite riots between skinheads and communist gangs. Anna Baker’s review in the Prague Post enthused:

...Fuller and the cast are reaching for the brass ring with this one, and they have caught it. It is a fresh, innovative and well-acted drama about lives lived and lives spent waiting. (“Twelve Characters in Search of a Reason, à la Sartre”)

Yet even such praise could not make up for the absence of Czech feedback. In December of 1996, as Toth recalls:

... there were a lot of goodbye parties. We were planning to close all the shows by Christmas. Certainly by this point for us in ’96 we all knew that ’96 or ’97 would be the end of Misery Loves Company as we knew it” (Personal Interview, 9 April 1999).

As if Sartre’s world-weariness had infected the Misery Loves Company ensemble, Toth remembers the production as “the beginning of the end.” The exhilaration of working in the Czech Republic was gradually being replaced by disillusionment:

All during this time we always hoped that we’d be more welcomed by the Czech community. And more reviewed by the Czech community. ... and there really was a sense, I think on the Czech side, that the novelty was wearing off. They were also not too interested in having a bunch of Americans come and do theatre here. They had German theatre when the Germans were in Prague and I think there was some talk that this was going to be a new German theatre. So I think on a nasty side some people saw it as we had German, we had Russian, now we have American (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999).

By 1996, most of the Misery ensemble faced the choice to stay and deepen their connection with Czech culture, or return home and work in their native language. Though they loved their host culture, they increasingly realized it would never be their own.

## CHAPTER 5. 1997-1999: “NOW THAT DUNKIN’ DONUTS WAS THERE, OUR JOB WAS DONE”

It is my firm belief and hope that the young generation - those who grew up after the fall of communism - will not be affected by this terrible post-communist syndrome, and I am looking forward to the time when these people take over the administration of public affairs. That time has not yet come; we are still living in a situation which makes us wonder how long it will take society to adapt to the new, more natural conditions of life, and how deeply the totalitarian era affected our souls.—Václav Havel, Address Before the Members of Parliament, 9 Dec. 1997.

The Czech Republic experienced disillusionment and disappointments in the last years of the nineties. In an address to the Czech Republic in April 1997, Havel described the “*blbá nálada*” (bad mood, feeling of pessimism) that seemed to dominate the country (Agnew 319). In June of 1998, Klaus’ Civic Democratic Party (ODS) was defeated by Miloš Zeman’s Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). Inflation rose above ten percent. ČSSD established a Revitalization Agency to rescue key industries including Zetor, the Brno tractor exporter and Tatra-Kopřivnice, maker of black limousines (once in demand by Communist party officials) and trucks, but did not reach its goals (Agnew 316-317). Zeman also set about to privatize the banking sector and separate commercial and investment banking (Agnew 318).

Czech society’s bad mood included a public backlash against Havel when he married actress Dagmar Veskrnová after his wife Olga died. Havel sued the commercial television station TV Nova in 1997 for invasion of privacy when the station filmed him in a hospital bed with zoom lenses (Steele). Czech newspapers reported incidents of skinhead violence against minorities and sexual discrimination. The town of Ústí nad Labem’s plan to build a wall separating a Roma neighborhood from their Czech neighbors caused international outrage. Eventually the town council abandoned the idea, but the Czech Republic’s reputation suffered (Agnew 321). The English newspaper The Guardian reported that Havel was growing



disillusioned “with what he calls ‘the new walls’ that have arisen in Czech society, the racial intolerance towards the Roma, the xenophobia, and the chauvinism” and that he was unhappy with the failure of the Czech Republic to hold any trials prosecuting former Communist officials (Steele).

The last three years of the nineties were similarly marked by financial disaster and internal unrest for all of the English-language theatres. Merger talks between Misery Loves Company, Black Box and Exposure only demonstrated the wide gaps between them. Sean Fuller’s play *December of All Things* was the last project Misery Loves Company produced with its original ensemble. Exposure’s final project was the 1998 production of *Europe*. Black Box’s 1998 production of *Quills* was an artistic success, but its subsequent tour to Germany sowed the seeds of financial disaster. While the groups’ output had grown in quality and professionalism, the availability of willing hands diminished. As the century drew to its close, the English-language theatre community in Prague practically vanished.

Feminism and sexual harassment were increasingly frequent topics of discussion in the Czech press during the nineties. The term “sexual harassment” was first translated as “sexualní harašení” in 1992 by the Czech-Canadian expatriate author Josef Škvorecký; it means “sexual buzz” rather than “harassment,” and Škvorecký deliberately mocked the whole concept as a creation of sexually frustrated American feminists (True 91). Nevertheless, Marie Vojtková brought the Czech Republic’s first sexual-harassment case when she filed a complaint against bank manager František Batria in July 1995. Vojtková was ridiculed in the press and forced to resign, but the following August, another woman brought a charge against the same manager and he was dismissed.<sup>50</sup> Many Czech women did not like to think of themselves as feminists, viewing the word as a kind of slander. The rejection of Socialist ideology also caused some women and politicians to reject equal rights for women in favor of a return to traditional gender roles (Šiklová 79; Heitlinger 96).

As if in answer to the increasing attention to gender roles, Richard Toth chose *Oleanna*, a play that foregrounds miscommunication between the sexes, as his last production in Prague. David Nykl directed; Toth played John, the professor hoping for tenure whose life is interrupted by his confused student Carol. The production opened in the spring of 1997, when several of the company had already left, and all of Misery’s other repertory shows had closed. The story portrays the way two people can “read” each other incorrectly, with tragic results. In Act One John has a tense conference with Carol, who is failing his class. He offers to help her if she continues to meet with him privately. Their conversation is constantly interrupted by the phone ringing. When Act Two opens, Carol has filed sexual harassment charges against John. He pleads, lectures and bullies her to get her to withdraw the charges. When Act Three opens, Carol agrees to have her group speak to the tenure committee if John withdraws his book from the reading list. The miscommunication escalates until Carol’s exaggerated charges of rape and battery seem about to come true, as she cowers on the floor after he physically attacks her. In performance, audiences almost always sympathize with John. While *Oleanna* was rehearsing, Czech Television moved Michaela Jilková from a high-profile on-camera job on the show

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<sup>50</sup> McLune, “Media Leads Dialogue About Whether Sexual Harassment Does Exist Here,” “Banker is Country’s First Fired for Sexual Harassment,” True 92.

“Arena,” a popular political discussion show, to a desk job when they learned that she was pregnant; many were outraged by Jilková’s report that producer Jan Stern had said that her pregnant stomach would “stress politicians [out], and viewers would look at my stomach and wonder when it would be flat again” (Legge).

Mamet first wrote the play in 1992, in the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas hearings and the charges of harassment brought by Anita Hill. It is clear that Carol misreads John’s pompous gestures of kindness, but it is also clear that he is unaware of the effect of his careless condescension:

CAROL: NO, NO—I DON’T UNDERSTAND. DO YOU SEE??? I DON’T UNDERSTAND...

JOHN: What?

CAROL: *Any* of it. *Any* of it. I’m *smiling* in class, I’m *smiling*, the whole time. What are you *talking* about? What is everyone *talking* about? I don’t *understand*. I don’t know what it *means*. (Mamet 36)

A play so overtly about misunderstanding and language was a good choice for an English-language company, and the gender issues made it particularly timely. Mamet was viewed as a quintessential American playwright.

Misery Loves Company’s production re-presented American culture, using ELT production strategy number one, with an eye for its relevance to Czech society. Toth remembers:

It wasn’t a style that people knew too much about—the Mamet style. And the issues were important. A lot of women schoolteachers would come in. We were hired to do conversations with them after the show... (Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999).

The Kolowrat Theatre, the smaller house of the National Theatre (where Misery Loves Company had produced *A Nightingale for Dinner* in 1994) produced *Oleanna* in the spring of 1999. Toth believes it was inspired by the earlier MLC production:

A lot of Czech actors came to see [our production], because they had heard a lot about the play and were interested, even Czech actors who didn't speak English very well. More Czech actors came to it than had come to *Ui*, because they knew the play and they knew Mamet and I think they wanted to understand more about it.

Despite Czech interest in *Oleanna*, Toth had announced his departure. He felt his goals for MLC had not been realized:

It would surprise you that the more you got to know Czech culture, the more you felt like an outsider. ... If we had been able to get the press and publicity and the notice in the Czech papers we wanted, we would have stayed. We realized we performed mostly for expats and people we know...(Toth, Personal Interview, 9 April 1999)

Yet in Jitka Sloupová's review of *Oleanna* in *Lidové noviny*, she praised the company for its resistance to becoming a tourist theatre, mentioning Laura Zam's *Circles, Holes and Arches* as an example of their innovative work. She wrote that *Oleanna* might be "the highlight of the company's work":

Like Kushner's *Angels in America* (staged by Misery Loves Company two years ago), *Oleanna* has been staged successfully in major theatres all over the world—with the exception of the Czech theatres—and keeps the audiences fascinated with its acutely tragic and at the same time current conflict. ... ("Dramatic Conflict Is Not Dead")

Of Toth she wrote:

This actor and also director—so far the guiding spirit of Misery Loves Company—says goodbye to Prague with tonight's show before his move to New York.

Her review, and the subsequent Czech production of *Oleanna*, suggest that Czech theatre critics and producers were still prepared to be interested in a solid production of a new and relevant play.

Misery Loves Company never recovered as an ensemble after Toth departed. Many of the company left Prague for good that summer when the Big Knees show *Dumb* played in the New York fringe festival in the summer of 1997. In the summer of 1996 Big Knees had

produced a double-bill of adaptations from Czech folklore called *Big Knees (on Bořivoj)*. Bořivoj is the ancient Bohemian prince and founder of the Přemyslid dynasty. The first play, *Wild*, was adapted by Anne Goforth from an old Czech legend about a women's revolt after the death of Queen Libuše. *Dumb*, by Richard Toth and William Hollister, was adapted from Božena Němcová's story *The Wise Goldsmith*. Němcová, a folklorist of the nineteenth century, was a major figure in the Czech national revival.<sup>51</sup> It is a simple story of a young peasant lad, Radek, who wins the heart of a mute princess (after other suitors have their heads chopped off) by asking her portrait a question and curing her. The use of puppetry and a wooden marionette added Czech imagery. Other elements of the play were surreal invention: when the princess Liběna first becomes dumb, the puppeteer breaks an egg on the doll's head; the yoke is red, and a bird lands on the doll's shoulder. *Dumb* also made use of Toth's quick comic banter and clowning. Anthony Tognazzini, who was writing for the Prague Post at the time, remembers the show as "the best original play/performance I saw in Prague.... It had the feel of a silent company, and not something based in the English-language" (Tognazzini, Personal Interview). Tognazzini could not review it for the Prague Post due to the paper's policy of not reviewing *Big Knees*. *Dumb* did well at the New York Fringe Festival, and extended for three weeks, but audiences dwindled after the Festival ended. It was not reviewed.

## SECTION 5.2 TRANSLATING TRANSLATIONS: THE IRISH CONNECTION AND INCREASING PROFESSIONALISM

The Black Box production of Brian Friel's play *Translations* opened just as Kašpar opened their production of the same play in Czech. Irish culture had been steadily growing in Prague throughout the nineties, and the twin productions of *Translations* demonstrated the fad. Jitka Sloupová had alluded to Czech "Celtic origins" in her review of Sean Fuller's [Shoot Him In the Head](#) in 1995. Czech love of Irish culture had continued to proliferate in Prague, demonstrated

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<sup>51</sup> Němcová's idyllic novel *The Grandmother* is compulsory reading in schools. Divadlo Husa na provázku stages a version where the beloved grandmother figure is played by a man (*Grandmother* program); the show was first performed in 1997. Divadlo Archa has brought the Brno theatre's production to Prague more than once.

in part by the popularity of the Irish bars, and the availability of Guinness on tap in Czech pubs. Dennis Moran, the dramaturg for the Black Box *Translations* (who had stage managed *The Memorandum* in 1996), wrote an article about the phenomenon for the Prague Post called “Go Irish, Young Czech” in which he reported that Kašpar theatre’s production manager Marcela Mašinová told him that the Czech interest in Ireland had been whetted by Guinness. Czech brewery Staropramen released its own stout, called Velvet, in October 1997. In her 1999 article for the Irish Times “Czech It Out Now—It’s a Mini-Celtic Tiger,” Michelle Woods reviewed some of the Czech-Irish connections of the twentieth century: Irish nationalists viewed Czechoslovakia, established 1918, as a model for an independent Ireland; Waterford Crystal was revived by two Czechs in 1946; Central Prague has a street called Hibernian Street, named for a Franciscan monastery established by Irish monks in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Friel’s play is about language as much as relationships, and uses the British policy of “standardizing” Irish place names in the nineteenth century as a point of departure. Seamus Deane describes the play as “the tragedy of English imperialism as well as of Irish nationalism:”

The failure of language to accommodate experience, the failure of a name to fully indicate a place, the failure of lovers to find the opportunity to express their feeling whether in words or deed, are all products of this political confrontation (22).

The play takes place in a hedge-school in the fictional town of Baile Beg/Ballybeg, an Irish-speaking community in County Donegal, in 1833. The British Army Engineer Corps have come to complete an ordnance survey of Ireland, including the renaming of the Irish place names. One of the soldiers, Yolland, falls in love with an Irish girl, Maire, though neither can understand each other’s language. When Yolland is missing after a dance the town is threatened with having all of its animals killed and their homes razed.

Bishop and Kašpar’s director Jakub Špalek chose the play for different reasons. Bishop was attracted to the play in part because of her own experience speaking English in Prague:

... I moved to Prague and I felt like I was living it. Lines like Jimmy's quotation of Ovid, "I am a barbarian in this place because I am not understood by anyone" resonate with anyone who has lived as a foreigner in another land. ...When the Abbey Theatre was established in Dublin proponents emerged arguing for an Irish language theatre, although English won out. Similarly when the Czech National Theater was established in 1881, language again arose as a central theme in the Czech National Revival, at a time when German language productions dominated the Czech stage. ...In the post-Communist period, what place does English hold in the cultural life of our host city? (Bishop, *Translation Program Notes*)

Three years after Allan Kinnaird's directors' notes in the program of *Fire in the Basement* during Black Box's second summer festival, Black Box directors still performed their own ambivalence about being in Prague. For Bishop, choosing the play was clearly following ELT production strategy number four, or finding a play about culture clash. Špalek told Jana Soprová at Večerník Praha that he chose the play for its style and its fit with his acting company more than its themes:

Although the play deals with serious problems of national identity, the perishing of a culture and language, the very style of telling this is very human and gentle. And the classic unity of place, time and action is observed. I perceive this as a kind of return to the roots of drama. ...  
(Soprová, "Kašparian Translations: Irish Premiere in Celetná").

Kašpar's translator and dramaturg for *Translations* was Ondřej Pilný. Pilný had studied for a year at Trinity College, Dublin, before returning to Prague and obtaining his PhD in modern Irish Theatre, becoming a lecturer in Irish literature at Charles University in the English and American Studies program. Pilný remembers that Špalek had wanted to do an Irish play; Irish was fashionable at the time (Pilný, Personal Interview). As he told the Prague Post, he disagreed with Bishop's historical analogy:

“The historical situation is totally different,” he says. The Czech lands were developed and industrialized under Austrian rule, while “the west of Ireland was in the Middle Ages at the time.” As for today, “we are not being threatened by the English language or by an ‘American invasion,’” Pilný says. “American culture has infiltrated, as in the rest of Europe, but it’s up to you whether you’re into that or not.” (Moran, “Go Irish, Young Czech”)

Pilný and Špalek decided not to let a literal analogy influence their translation:

In fact, we also abandoned any ideas of translating the “new,” anglicized place-names into, for instance, German, which would have resulted in making a historical parallel that seemed questionable and rather superficial (Pilný, “Translating Ireland—a Czech Experience”).

There were significant differences in the two productions, besides language. Black Box’s cast was multinational, including two Czech actors; Kašpar’s cast was entirely Czech-speaking. Bishop had received sponsorship from British Midlands to fly over three actors from Ireland and England to Prague; the English actor missed his plane and was replaced by local actor Robert Russell. Black Box tried as much as possible to reflect Friel’s Irish setting; the Irish cast members served as dialect coaches. The Kašpar production was realistic in style, but not particularly Irish:

...it was done mainly as a play set in the poor countryside. Some music was used—composed by Petr Malašek on the basis of several traditional Irish tunes, but again there deliberately was no attempt to make the thing sound ‘authentic’ in any sense (Pilný, “Re: Oops”).

Black Box’s production performed at Labyrint for two weeks in March 1997, played at the Hradec Králové Festival in the spring, and was revived, at the Celetná Theatre, for the Black Box Summer Festival of 1997. The comparatively short run of the Black Box production seemed unprofessional in a Czech context; normally a Czech play runs in repertory for at least six months. Kašpar’s Production stayed in the repertory for several years, then transferred to a theatre in Brno, finally closing in January 2002.

Bishop’s efforts with grantwriting and sponsorship for the production of *Translations* were significant advances in professionalism for Black Box. In addition to the sponsorship by British Midlands, and the support of the ArtsLink Foundation, Bishop received a grant from the Cultural Relations Committee of the Irish Government in Dublin, and sponsorship from Grafton Recruitment and Molly Mallone’s. Other contributors included Tullamore Dew Irish Whisky, Murphy’s Irish Stout, Price Waterhouse and the Czech-Irish Business Association (*Translations*



Program). Marie Cross, the Irish ambassador to the Czech Republic (the embassy had opened in 1995), told the Prague Post that funding the production was “promoting Ireland through its literature” (Moran, “Go Irish, Young Czech). Both the Black Box and Kašpar production received funding from the cultural relations committee of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, a committee that also helped to fund the Irish studies program at Charles University. Bishop told Threshold Praha:

When the redcoats came out onstage [Brennan, from the British embassy] leaned over to the Irish ambassadors and said “I know what’s coming, and I just want to say that, on behalf of my country, I apologize.” During the intermission, one of the people from the Irish embassy said to him, “Okay I accept your apology now” (Gray).

With ambassadors in attendance on opening night, increases in funding and sponsorship, and favorable publicity, Black Box was in a good position to plan another summer festival.

Businesswise, 1997 was very much a transitional year in the Czech Republic. USAID, which had been in the Czech Republic since 1991, closed its bilateral mission there in 1997, although of course the embassy remained. One of the organizations USAID had supported in the Czech Republic was CERGE, the Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education of Charles University, which trained economists in the Czech Republic (Sedlak, “CERGE to Receive \$4 Million USAID Grant”). Randall Filer, who became a Black Box board member, was a visiting professor of economics from the United States who taught at CERGE. USAID also supported the Citizens’ Democracy Corps; in 1994 this organization had fifty-four consultants in the Czech Republic to advise businesses on marketing, finance, development and management (Sedlak, “U.S. Advisors Aid Troubled Firms”). As well as those individuals who came over directly supported by USAID, many entrepreneurs and investors from the United States began work in the Czech Republic with the hope of support from USAID. Some consultants stayed on. Meanwhile many of the creative idealists were leaving. One of the last USAID representatives to the Czech Republic, Mark Posner, described the changing atmosphere for young English teachers:

There were many Americans capitalizing on “American” and “English speaking,” but gradually, the Czechs became more discerning and only Americans with specific teaching credentials were employed (Posner, “Prague—English Teachers”).

USAID’s departure clearly signified the end of the middle transition in the Czech Republic, and the changing era was reflected in the English-language Theatre that remained. As backpacking expatriates were no longer sure of finding work, the acting pool continued to shrink.

When Bishop took over Black Box, none of the founders had considered the implications for the official paperwork. Black Box had filed paperwork in Prague to be considered a *nadace*, or not-for-profit foundation. Bishop discovered when she went to apply for money from the city in the spring of 1997 that she and co-producer Maura Gedid lacked power of attorney on the *nadace*. As the license was expiring, and the laws were changing to make the status of *nadace* less respected than it had been, the easiest solution was to formally dissolve the original Black Box Foundation and reincorporate as the Black Box Association, a “*zdrúžení*” in Czech terminology, transferring the old foundation’s assets to the new association. Bishop and Gedid would then have power of attorney. Russell and Shobris agreed. Russell also wrote a letter formally removing John Farrage from the original foundation board, due to his failure to fulfill his duties. Barbara Day, one of the heretofore inactive board, had helped Jakub Špalek with the same procedure and was helpful to Bishop in sorting out a complex process. Bishop remembers:

We had to get three Czech people to found it... it was stupid and bizarre... and then sign it over to the Board of Directors, so three people founded it who had obviously nothing to do with it. I don’t even know who they are. And then the Board really kind of took over and became legally responsible. People who worked for the organization couldn’t be on the board. So by founding the board I very effectively disenfranchised myself from the company (Personal Interview, 17 July 1999).

By changing the status of the company, she had handed over primary responsibility for the company to others.

Bishop hoped the board would provide financial underpinnings to secure Black Box’s stability. Although they could receive one-time grants from the city, English-language theatres in the Czech Republic were ineligible for many indirect subsidies the state made to the actual theatre venues, which included electricity and utilities, guards and firemen, even costumes. Misery Loves Company received some of these through their affiliation with Kašpar Theatre and

their home at Kašpar's Divadlo v Celetné. A theatre that had no such relationship with a Czech organization had to fund these indirectly-supported items themselves. Black Box reflected some of these costs in ticket prices. This practice alienated some Czechs, including Kašpar's leader Jakub Špalek (McLaren, Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999). By holding benefits, fund-raisers and organizing a board with business connections as well as friends of the theatre, Black Box sought security, but also created an image of theatre as a business endeavor that did not appeal to Czech theatre artists.

### 5.2.1 The Summer of 1997: Black Box's Prominence

Black Box's fourth (and last) summer festival in 1997 was its most professional yet. Black Box had obtained grant money, had an active board of directors, received good reviews for its summer productions and seemed to be solidly placed for a secure future as an ELT in Prague. However, the professionalism only masked a growing gap between the company's aims and its resources, both financial and human. While its professional reputation grew, Black Box's artistic reputation with Czech theatre artists continued to decline. Black Box chose its summer program to respond to the Czech fad for Irish culture, to explore Czech feelings about Prague Spring, and to produce a Czech play for tourists that would make use of Bishop's preferred style of Living Theatre-type avant-garde.<sup>52</sup>

Black Box had received a 100,000-crown sponsorship from Price Waterhouse, and two 50,000 crown sponsorships—one from a local law firm and one from board member Marc Ellenbogen, a German baron brought up in America. All together this was a very good budget for the summer, the equivalent of over seven thousand dollars. Black Box also received the city money that had prompted the reorganization from a nadace to a združení: 66,000 crowns for the summer and another 150,000 crowns for the following season. Black Box's offices were now in the centrally located Lucerna Palac, a historic "pasaž" (complex of shops and offices that

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<sup>52</sup> The Living Theatre was founded in 1947 by Julian Beck and Judith Malina as a counterpoint to commercial theatre. The Theatre promoted unconventional and poetic drama, including the work of Gertrude Stein and Pirandello. In the 1960s the group functioned as a touring collective which emphasized agit-prop; in the 1970s the group explored site-specific work. In the 1980s they began work that included audience-participants ("The Living Theatre: Historical Notes").

featured a walkway from one street to another) owned by the Havel family; Bishop obtained the space through her connection with Ivan Havel. The Lucerna Palace also housed a movie theatre, a bar a music club, a restaurant and several stores. It was a liminal space that evoked the pre-Communist past as well as the growing embrace of American and Western culture. However, while the location was impressive, the office space itself was not very professional. The office consisted of two rooms, a front room with a tiny kitchen, computer and run-down furniture, and a back room with a bed and some broken-down furniture, where Bishop lived (Orel, Unpublished Letter to Parents).<sup>53</sup> Black Box looked professional on paper but much less so in person.

Bishop limited the festival to just three plays. One of the plays was a revival of *Translations*. The others, in an attempt to re-present Czech culture for tourists, were the Steven Berkoff adaptation of Kafka's short story, *Metamorphosis*, and a two-hander by Czech Senator Jaroslava Moserová, *A Letter to Wollongong*. The Festival was scheduled to perform at Divadlo v Celetné. Prior to the Festival Black Box participated in a joint benefit with the human rights organization the Czech Helsinki Committee, under the patronage of the British Embassy. Black Box would perform *A Letter to Wollongong* for the benefit, held at the British Council; tickets were 1500 crowns. Black Box received good publicity through Czech TV and TV Nova, because of the high profiles of Senator Moserová and Ivan Havel. The director for *A Letter to Wollongong*, Frances Colquhoun, flew in from London. Chris Channer, the leading actress who was supposed to fly from London hurt her foot and could not come in time for the benefit; she performed in the Festival in August. Bishop replaced her with well-known Czech actress Daša Blahová for the benefit, but Blahová did not donate her services. Jiří Datel Novotný played the role of the brother opposite her.

Moserová's play had been produced in London, but not in Prague. It fictionalizes Moserová's own experiences as the nurse on duty when Jan Palach, the student who set himself on fire to protest the Soviet invasions of 1968, had been brought to the hospital. The play is conceived as a letter written by the nurse to her émigré brother in Australia. The program for *Letter to Wollongong* featured a picture of a Soviet tank by the statue of St. Wenceslas in Wenceslas Square. It is an interesting expression of cross-cultural theatricality that a group

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<sup>53</sup> I went to Prague in the summer of 1997 to work on the Black Box production *Metamorphosis* as stage manager, lighting designer and dramaturg; some of the information in this chapter is based on my own journals, letters and memories.

working in English presented a play written in English by a Czech senator, about Czech history, for a primarily expatriate audience. The Prague Post, reporting on a Black Box press conference, reported that the play:

...indicates that there were no clean hands under communism. “We are all incriminated a little bit,” [Moserová] said during an interview at the British Council, which sponsored a benefit performance of the play in June. ... She said that Palach remains a beloved symbol for this country, though his death serves to remind its people of their own shortcomings, their own complicity in an immoral regime (Blackburn, “Continuous Letter Searches for Truth”).

Through their affiliation with Moserová, Black Box gained a connection to Palach. The production made use of ELT strategy number two, but did not limit its intended audience to members of the Performer’s culture. Moserová’s identity and the veracity of her experiences made the play of interest not only to tourists and expats but also to Czechs.

Moserová had written the play on the 25th anniversary of the Soviet invasion while serving as Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Australia and New Zealand, as a performance for the children of the Australian Czech community, many of whom did not speak Czech (Moserová, Author’s Note). The author’s notes in the program (where, although not in the Prague Post, she is listed as Jara David-Moserová) are historical glosses on the context of the play:

The Soviet invasion on 21 August 1968 changed everything. ...It took almost a year before people holding important positions or aspiring to positions of authority started making concessions to the hardliners. The loss of hope, the fatalism, the defeatism were slowly yet steadily spreading...A young student of philosophy felt that something had to be done, something that would shake the conscience of the nation, that would remind Czechs of their motto *The Truth Will Prevail*, in memory of Jan Hus who died at the stake rather than disclaim the truth (Author’s Note, *Letter to Wollongong Program*).

Palach’s death, as Ladislav Holý explains:

...was also bound to evoke what Hus’s death symbolized: his betrayal by foreigners and the inspiration of a movement in which the Czechs played their most significant role in Europe ever. It was these two particular connotations of Hus’s death that gave a particular meaning to Palach’s death and made him a symbol of resistance to the post-1968 regime (45).

Palach continued to be honored after the Velvet Revolution, and his name was part of the post-revolutionary street-renaming project of Prague: the square in front of the Faculty of Arts, where

he had studied, was renamed for him even before the city council approved the change (Holý 45-46). Black Box Theatre Company's association with Palach through Moserová was an attempt to dramatize Palach's symbolic value for expatriate consumption.

The productions in the summer festival were subject to tensions among the international cast and crew. Although Black Box now had state funding, its methods of production were still disorganized. Colquhoun did not travel with a stage manager's prompt book. Moserová's play is simple, but it requires slides and special lighting that were not easy to assemble in Prague. Similarly, Bishop and the lighting designer for *Metamorphosis* planned over 100 light cues, based on Berkoff's descriptions, but with only one day to hang, focus, set levels and run light cues at Celetná, what would be an ordinary amount of lighting cues in a Western setting was an unrealistic goal, achieved at the cost of morale. Bishop had worked in Celetná before, so the oversight is peculiar. The Czech board operators were not used to taking cues from the stage manager but quickly realized that with so many cues timed to individual gestures they would not have time to learn the cues by watching the performance, which was their usual method. They had to learn the American method of calling a show, with warnings for multiple cues, very quickly.

Cast tensions added to the technical difficulties. Again, Black Box's professional veneer outstripped its real resources, especially in the human dimension. Bishop had flown in two more actors for *Metamorphosis*, Orla Tuthill from Dublin and Robert Orr from London. The demanding role of Gregor was double-cast with Black Box ensemble member Scott Bellefeuille and Irish actor Tom O'Leary. By the summer of 1997 there really was no active Black Box ensemble, but Bishop had not given up hope. Berkoff's adaptation, which had debuted in London in 1969, mixes Brechtian and Expressionist styles, as well as the physical theatre style developed in the 1960s by Joseph Chaiken at the Open Theatre, Julian Beck at the Living Theatre, and the famous mime Lecoq. Bishop was very faithful to Berkoff's conception, having Berkoff's steel cage for Gregor copied, and directing the actors to imitate several of the poses illustrated in photographs in Berkoff's *Meditations on Metamorphosis*. Czech costume designer Pavlina McEhnhroe played more loosely with Berkoff's conception, creating fanciful nineteenth-century costumes for the cast, whom she also put in stark whiteface. Her use of white makeup added a Czech cultural context to the mise-en-scène, as Voskovec and Werich had performed in white makeup. Because of the physical demands of the show, the cast rehearsed

with movement coordinator Corinne Ott every day before working on the text. Bishop tried to keep morale high with two retreats, one to a restituted Zámek (palace) owned by Baron Reisky, a friend of the theatre.<sup>54</sup> Bishop also brought the cast to Kohanky for a week, to a villa owned by Jakub Špalek of Kašpar. In between the two retreats Bellefeuille quit, and had to be coaxed back. Cast morale was hard to maintain: the weather was oppressively hot; the cast was physically exhausted.

Bishop had selected *Metamorphosis* for several reasons. She was unable to find a suitable post-revolutionary Czech play, she had wearied of the dissident dramas and she thought Kafka qualified as a Czech writer, and would attract tourists, although he did not write plays (Bishop, Personal Interview, 4 March 1999). Certainly Kafka was well-known in Prague; by 1997 there was already a strong “Kafka industry” with Kafka’s face appearing on t-shirts, mugs and posters. Much of Kafka’s work had been banned following Prague Spring, although there had been some very famous dramatizations of Kafka in the sixties, particularly Grossman’s direction of Klima’s 1964 adaptation of *The Castle* at Divadlo na zábradlí, and Grossman’s adaptation of *The Trial* for the same theatre in 1966 (Burian *Modern Czech Theatre* 122-123; Goetz-Stankiewicz 118-199). Writing for [Index on Censorship](#) in 1985, Barbara Day reported that “Kafka is no longer staged in Prague, but behind the scenes he can be found everywhere” (36). However, Czech theatres had produced Kafka immediately after the Velvet Revolution. A production of Kafka in English, even by an international cast, would not necessarily be a huge draw for Czech theatergoers.

*Metamorphosis* was well received by both the Czech and English press, however, who for once seemed to see the same play. While Black Box’s strategy was primarily that of representing Czech culture for tourists, they also employed successfully ELT production strategy number 3, relying on bi-cultural and/or bi-lingual productions, including nonverbal work. The [Prague Post](#)’s reviewer praised Scott Bellefeuille for “portraying with remarkable depth both the horrible and the human” (Blackburn). Jana Soprová in [Večerník Praha](#) wrote that Bellefeuille dominated the production both “in the incarnation of the idealized son and breadwinner of the family, and the monstrous insect, who climbs the construction of his prison with the skill of an acrobat” (“Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*”). The non-verbal elements of *Metamorphosis* particularly appealed to Czech critics. Soprová suggested that the show was accessible to Czechs:

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<sup>54</sup> The stage manager saw the cast go to “the castle” without her, as she was recuperating from Chicken Pox.

... the staging, to its credit, is not based only on the spoken words but mainly on the audio interpretation, from individual extempore to canon singing and speech scanning. All this is accompanied by suggestive sounds (e.g. the chorus repetition of the amplified clock ticking), the inventive play of lights and shades and a bit of humor in the individual etudes lightening the black Kafkaian vision (“Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*”).

*Metamorphosis* also marked the first time an English-language theatre production was reviewed in an American academic journal. Catherine Diamond wrote a review of the performance for Theatre Journal: “[Black Box’s] production of *Metamorphosis* characterizes its internationalizing of Czech theatre within the precincts of Prague” (115). Bishop’s choice of Berkoff’s *Metamorphosis* met the challenge of assimilating into Czech theatrical aesthetics, highlighting presentational effects and rational irony, while offering a palatable translation of a Czech writer for tourists. Diamond alone of the reviewers knew that the lighting, sound and movements were all based upon Berkoff’s directions.<sup>55</sup> Bishop had successfully submitted *Metamorphosis* to the Dublin fringe, where it played from 6-11 October 1997 to packed houses (Tuthill).

Misery Loves Company was also having difficulties keeping an ensemble together. MLC had planned to produce Steve Martin’s *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* in the summer of 1997 but the project was abandoned at the first read-through when two of the actors got into a fistfight. Instead, William Hollister produced his show *Sol*, co-created with David Nykl. Like *Dumb*, *Sol* was based in fairy tale and myth. Unlike *Dumb*, the cast included significant Czech involvement: two women were National Theatre actresses. Although the show was not reviewed, the Czech actresses’ involvement suggests that friendly collaborations with MLC continued.

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<sup>55</sup> Diamond also wrote about cultural tourism in Prague theatres for New Theatre Quarterly, focusing on *Laterna Magika*, the Black Theatre, and the marionette operas, the only Czech theatre available in the summer (“Prague Summer: Encounters with a Third Kind of Theatre”). Diamond included in that article a lengthy footnote about “Prague’s two resident English-language theatre companies,” Black Box Theatre Company and Misery Loves Company, describing the Black Box summer festival as one that is “geared towards cultural tourists with plays related to Czech culture and politics” (236). By the time this article was published in 2001, neither Black Box nor MLC were active in Prague.



### SECTION 5.3            MERGERS AND MISSIONS

By the end of the summer of 1997, the three resident English-language theatres in Prague sought a way to ensure their survival by joining forces. Space was an issue: Labyrinth theatre was closing, meaning one less venue available to the three troupes. Filling a house for an English-language theatre production had always been difficult. The acting pool, never large to begin with, continued to diminish. The obvious solution seemed to be to join forces. Each company had projects they wanted to produce. Exposure was eager to produce Mark Corner's next bilingual play, *Czechmate*. Black Box had already started the arrangements to bring over American director Chuck Harper for a production of Doug Wright's *Quills*. Sean Fuller of Misery Loves Company wished to produce his new play *December of All Things*. At the first meeting, representatives from the three theatres discussed the large issues that would affect a merger: artistic control, fundraising, mission and goals. It quickly became apparent that the three companies had different visions, and did not trust one another. Was a proposal for a "merger" just a way for Misery Loves Company to gain access to Black Box's grant money—and did Black Box want anything other than the Celetná space (McLaren, Personal Interview, 30 June 1999)?

Once it was clear that the groups did not share an aesthetic, they began investigating the idea of forming some kind of umbrella organization that would allow each group to work independently yet share resources. David Nykl did not consult Jakub Špalek about the plan until after the first meeting; Špalek was opposed to a merger. McLaren remembers Špalek saying:

You guys have a problem with production? Organization? We're going to help you. Our theatre is going to be part of your theatre, rather than you joining forces with Nancy Bishop (McLaren, Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999).

Špalek disapproved of Black Box's high ticket prices (McLaren, Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999). At 200 crowns, Black Box charged more than most Czech theatres. In addition, Bishop's style could be off-putting; Nykl found it difficult to work with her (Nykl, Personal Interview).<sup>56</sup>

Despite the failure of the three organizations to form a single unit, they did pool some of their resources. A Prague Post article in October quoted Ewan McLaren on the decision to collaborate: "This is not a merger, but an agreement to cooperate on as many productions as possible" (Bauerová). Misery Loves Company did produce *December of All Things*. Exposure's *Europe* opened at Celetná in the spring of 1998, and Black Box and Misery Loves Company co-produced Doug Wright's play *Quills*. Fuller and Nykl opposed the concept of bilingual theatre, so Mark Corner's play *Czechmate* never found a home. The failure to merge resources officially led to diminished opportunities for all. McLaren's notes from the merger meetings include a doodle of a fiddle and the Coliseum burning; 1998 was the last year all three groups were still active.

#### SECTION 5.4      DECEMBER AT CELETNÁ: DECEMBER OF ALL THINGS AND QUILLS

Fuller's *December of All Things* was his most direct exploration of expatriate issues, reflecting the feeling of decay that permeated the YAP community. The story concerns a love triangle, involving Anna Beam, a Jim Beam whisky heiress, her irresponsible lover Francis, and William, an aspiring writer. At the play's opening, Beam has returned to America, leaving Francis in Prague. Both William and Francis go after her. Fuller borrowed critic Louis Charbonneau's last

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Corner's unproduced sketch "Business Meeting" reveals the conflicting personalities and missions that doomed the merger meetings. Corner depicted Nancy Bishop as "Nina," a leather clad dominatrix. "Business Meeting" also underlines the intracultural misunderstandings within the groups: The Canadians "Slick" and "Cy" refer to the "Exposure Boys" as "Limeys," and have trouble understanding their accents. The producers of Exposure were all British, Misery Loves Company's producers were Canadian and Bishop was American.

name for the character of a tortilla factory owner in New Mexico; the character of William has an interview with a Pittsburgh newspaper, evoking the persona of former Prognosis writer John Allison, who was (and is) a writer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. The production had an outstanding cast, including a young Maggie Gyllenhaal who was then a student abroad; the actress has since starred in the movies *Secretary* (2002) and *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) among others. Laura Zam played the character “Hattie Joe Charbonneau.” David Nykl played the part of William. Fuller directed the play himself. The play uses intercut dialogue, live music, and surreal sequences. For example, at William’s job interview, the interviewers suggest he take off his clothes and relax; he responds with a strip-tease.

In *December of All Things* the characters seek a home that is both literal and metaphorical. Like Bishop’s “rex-pats” in her 2003 film *Rex-patriates*, they end up returning to Prague. William has a revelation:

WILLIAM: Okay. That my time in Prague hadn’t been just an experience to bridge me further on, to pad a ceevee for a later date, but that perhaps my life was there. And not as an ex-patriot [sic] (Fuller, *December of All Things* 56).

In her final monologue, Anna explains that Prague is a site of possibility, not alienation:

ANNA: ...I took a shortcut down an alley in Old Town, not far from the school where I teach, and suddenly had to stop and catch myself. Because with the light in that alley, soft, diffused coal sunset, the curve of the building, the sound of my boots on the stones beneath, my spirit was suddenly full of the place, it was a serene ambush (Fuller, *December of All Things* 57).

The Prague Post enthused:

Successfully, [Fuller] leads us through all the confusion with comedic and vaudevillian elements gleaned from his “peer mentor” Richard Toth, the founder of this repertory company (Chibbaro).

Despite this positive reception, and the valentine to Prague life, Fuller left Prague after this production closed.

Black Box’s production of Doug Wright’s play *Quills* overlapped with *December of All Things* at Celetná. Belgian lighting designer Wim de Vos, who had arrived in Prague in August 1997, worked on both. David Nykl and Chris Clarke were in both casts. *Quills* attempted to continue in the heightened theatrical style of *Metamorphosis* that had pleased Czech critics that summer. Director Chuck Harper received an ArtsLink grant to come to Prague; he knew Bishop

through Straw Dog Theatre in Chicago (Bishop, Personal Interview, 4 March 1999). Wright's play, about the Marquis de Sade's conflicts with the directors of Charenton Asylum, had won an Obie award for playwriting in 1996. The play poses questions about art, responsibility and censorship. In the play, after one of de Sade's stories causes a riot in the asylum, the normally compassionate Abbé de Coulmier goes to extreme measures to keep the Marquis from writing—involving gradual dismemberment and death. Wright's Marquis has little to do with the historical de Sade, who died of pulmonary congestion in his sleep. Bishop felt the play's subject of an artist facing censorship would be relevant in Prague (Personal Interview, 4 March 1999).

Harper directed the production using a technique developed at Chicago's New Crime Productions, a company founded by John Cusack, Tim Robbins and others "interested in combining the raw energy of a rock concert with the aesthetic experience of theater" (Zam). An onstage drummer punctuated the actors' movements. Black Box held workshops in the acting style, attended by Czech actors, but the production was cast solely with native speakers of English due to the difficulty of the text. McEnchroe's slightly surreal set included a double backdrop and a hanging rhinoceros puppet. *Quills* was professionally executed, but did not attract a large audience. Christopher Lord blamed poor publicity for the early closing of *Quills* in an article for Think magazine in April 1998. He noted the shift in English-language theatre from "amateur dramatics to professional show biz" and encouraged his readers to attend Exposure's production of Europe, then running at Celetná theatre:

So make the effort. Support Prague English language theatre. Because otherwise it will curl up and die ("Oh yeah... theatre").

Black Box had a gap in its programming when an ambitious project called [\*Oceans\*](#) was not ready to go into rehearsal by the end of 1997. Bishop decided to reprise *Quills* in Prague, then tour the show to the English-language theatre in Berlin, Friends of the Italian Opera. The Board of Directors did not favor the idea of the tour. Bishop remembers surprise at the Board's reaction:

We changed the name to call ourselves an international theatre company. Barbara Day said “this is a Prague-based company,” and I agreed. But I thought that just because we were touring didn’t mean we were not a Prague-based company (Bishop, Personal Interview, 17 July 1999).

The Board reluctantly approved a budget, with the condition that Bishop and new producer Jennifer Yeager raise the money for the tour. The revival of *Quills* opened in Prague on 9 July 1998.

*Quills* received much better publicity in its second incarnation in Prague. It had already received a good review from Julie Chibbaro at the Prague Post in December, and been included in the “year’s highlights” in the Post’s “Year in Review.” For the reprise, Večerník Praha printed a short piece with a photograph, encouraging readers to attend. Jana Soprová compared the themes in the play to the movie *The People vs. Larry Flint*, writing that the production “confronts the question of intellectual freedom, which is relevant in this country.” She acknowledged that some of the vocabulary was difficult, but let her readers know that they would “learn some new slang words for the male anatomy” (Soprová, “The Marquis’ Quill”). Vladimíra Hořtová in the Czech Harper’s Bazaar also wrote a complimentary piece, largely drawing on the Black Box press release. These positive Czech responses suggest that Bishop was gradually rehabilitating the reputation of Black Box from its low point in the summer of 1995. They also support Pilný’s view that to gain Czech attention, an English-language theatre production needed to run for several months, as Czech productions do in repertory.

*Quills* was very well received in Germany. Boro, in Berliner Allegemeine, reported that “The play was excitedly accepted during the premiere.” Christine Wahl in Der Tagesspiegel was not impressed with the play’s philosophy, but enjoyed the mixture of Commedia Dell’arte and Grand Guignol. Wahl praised the performers:

By the way: the Black Box Theatre has really good actors!... The doctor (Robert Orr) celebrates his continuous red-eyed stare with consequential perfection; and David Nykl's censor turns the failure of morality almost into a tragedy of mankind.

The warm reception of *Quills* in Germany both encouraged and depressed Bishop:

For me that was the beginning of the end—here I've been working so hard all these years on English-language theatre in Prague; the Czechs don't care; the Czech press doesn't care; we go to Germany and they love it, and the Germans go (Personal Interview, 17 July 1999).

The Board held a meeting after the show closed, while Bishop was in America. They were concerned that the tour to Germany had involved some unforeseen expenses: a promised loan of a drum set fell through, and Black Box had purchased one; the keyboards had had to be fixed, and there was no contingency money in the budget. Yeager resigned, promising to untangle the messy financial books before she left. When Filer later examined the books, he discovered that 60,000 crowns were missing. In a striking reflection of the business scandals that had plagued Prague from the beginning of 1995, the Board soon discovered that Yeager had embezzled the money. As noted in chapter two, Yeager herself had been a board member; she had resigned in order to take on the producer's role (Czech law forbids board members of a *zdržení* from employment in the not-for-profit corporation they oversee). The Black Box Board tried various strategies to force Yeager to repay the money, including alerting the foreigner's police and writing to Yeager's family in the States. For a time, Yeager met with board member Peggy Krikava once a week to make payments; payment was never received in full.

As part of the company's growing drive towards professionalism, Black Box had hired its first Czech producer, Václav (Vášek) Šneberger, in October 1997. Šneberger was studying developmental drama at DAMU, and pursuing a Ph.D. at Charles University. When the crises over Yeager's embezzlement arose, the Board sought his advice about the structure of the company. Šneberger advised the Board that they needed to produce plays year-round, with a larger staff. He presented a proposal of a minimal theatre company to the Board, at their request, but by spring of 1999 financial straits of the company were too dire to proceed.

## SECTION 5.5 SEASICK OVER “OCEANS”

While Black Box was preparing *Quills* and Misery Loves Company was readying *December of All Things*, Ewan McLaren was also working to produce an ambitious project called *Oceans*. The press release for Black Box International Theatre that described the 1998-99 season described *Oceans* as:

...a landmark event that will include a community and educational outreach program that asks Europeans to confront their own identity and their relationships with their neighbours as the Czech Republic prepares to enter the European Union (“Season Announcement”).

Had the production succeeded in meeting its own goals, it would have been a fascinating topic with many layers of interpretation. It would have followed ELT production strategy number four, being a play about culture clash, but would also have followed ELT production strategy number 3, using a multicultural cast and international collaboration. However the process of its development, conceived by a Canadian director, and forced into a premature public reading by the Black Box board of directors, did not reflect its lofty goals. Instead, it typified a fiasco of semi-professionals struggling to sell an artist’s work before it is finished. In fact, *Oceans* can be seen as Black Box failing to confront its own identity as it worked uneasily with Czech theatre artists.

*Oceans* was originally conceived by McLaren after he saw a touring production of *Anna Karenina* by the British group Shared Experience in April 1993. Shared Experience used English text very precisely and minimally, and McLaren saw that anyone in the audience, including the Czechs, could follow it (McLaren, Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999). McLaren was also interested in “the strange underground of comic books,” in particular the Toronto artist Chester Brown. McLaren wanted to work with a text that created meaning through the juxtaposition of scenes that developed a theme “that would make audience members think about their place in a world where so often there is something large that comes along and extinguishes something small” (McLaren, Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999). McLaren wanted a Czech playwright to write the text. Arnošt Goldflam, with his elliptical use of surreal imagery and metaphor, seemed an ideal choice. Goldflam had some experience of xenophobia as he was one of the few Czech Jewish playwrights who identified as such and wrote about Jewish experience explicitly (Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre* 172). McLaren had translated Arnošt Goldflam’s play

*Sladký Theresienstadt* into English for American director Damien Gray, who directed the premiere at Divadlo Archa in November 1996 (it was a joint production with New York's En Garde Arts). *Sladký Theresienstadt* is based on the diary of Willy Mahler (Goldflam renames him "Mahner"), who was one of the Jews picked by the Nazis to help select the inmates for transport to the death camps (Beck).

McLaren loved *Sladký Theresienstadt*, but felt that Grey did not know how to work with Czech actors: "...what I saw up there was not naturalism and not style, not performative—somewhere in between" (Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999). With his experience working in Czech theatre, McLaren thought he could succeed where Grey had not. Goldflam and McLaren had never worked together, although Goldflam had interviewed McLaren for Czech television; they had not worked together on McLaren's translation. McLaren brought the idea of the *Oceans* project to Bishop at Black Box, since Misery Loves Company seemed to be collapsing. It was Bishop who first used the word "xenophobia" to describe the theme of the project, which also became associated with an adaptation of Schiller's play *Wallenstein*. Bishop felt the word would be important for fundraising purposes. Czechs, and Czech theatre, admitted to some measure of xenophobia: Archa's Ondřej Hrab was frustrated with Czech intellectuals who dismiss Robert LePage and Robert Wilson, saying they "like to hear bad things about this art form, and they are not interested in hearing about new things or discovering them" (Hrab, Personal Interview).

Bishop spoke about the project to "Elizabeth Sofranco" in an article titled "Communicating About Xenophobia Via Theatre" for the 1998-99 Czech Republic Business Guide (formerly the Expatriate Guide); Bishop in fact wrote both sides of the interview. The Guide was published by Michele L. Greene, who was on the Black Box board. Bishop's article stresses the theme of the play, the intent to include humor drawn from the comic book "Yummy Fur," Czech fairy tales and ghost stories. Bishop describes a plan to tour Czech schools, not referencing Class Acts or the Bear Project that were already producing English-language theatre in the schools. The article, apart from being another example of Potemkin-village journalism and self-promotion, demonstrates how isolated from one another the English-language theatre groups in Prague had become. The article also suggests a slight shift in mission for Black Box: a desire to "unite Czech and foreign theatre artists in collaborative projects." The projects Bishop



produced in 1998-99 were far more multicultural than early Black Box projects, and usually involved Czech actors and designers.

Black Box had hoped to produce *Oceans* in the spring of 1998, but it soon became clear that the script would not be ready in time. Black Box had also suffered a change in office space. Bishop had lost her space at CTS (the Center for Theoretical Study) in the fall of 1997, and was asked to leave the space in Lucerna Palac shortly before the first production of *Quills*. Board member Randall Filer arranged Black Box's next office space in the building Politických vězňů 7, where he taught economics. McLaren looked for guidance with the *Oceans* project to the Black Box board of directors. Filer's wife Barbara Forbes, who was also on the Black Box Board of directors, and had worked as a professional costume designer in the U.S., advised McLaren that the project needed a development phase, with a public reading. McLaren was not happy with Goldflam's first draft, and wanted to drop the project, but the Black Box International Theatre board had raised 100,000 crowns, and Forbes insisted it go forward. Bishop remembers that:

Ewan and I became so nervous about pleasing the board that we went to great pains to list all of the board members on the *Oceans* program, but forgot to list the actors (Bishop, Board Letter).

Sponsors and funders were invited to the very first reading of *Oceans*, although the play was not finished. McLaren and the cast had only rehearsed for two weeks. Forbes had confused a backers' audition with a developmental reading.

The public reading of *Oceans* took place at Divadlo Na zábradlí on 3 November 1998; a second reading was held at the British Council the next day.<sup>57</sup> McLaren read the stage directions in English. The reading, which was well attended, made use of expensive supertitling, and the actors switched between speaking English and Czech. The story centers on a character named "Misfortunate," who is visited by the three fates at birth. The action of the play moves from the Czech Republic to New York; at one point Misfortunate begins a song to a Yiddish recording. After the reading Bishop spoke, with Šneberger translating into Czech. Martin Palouš from the Czech Helsinki committee also spoke, in English. Goldflam told the audience that "theatre was communication about communication," discussing the evolution of the play and the idea of

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<sup>57</sup> The description of this reading is based on my own unpublished journals, and memories of the event.

stories within stories, that were inspired by the Arabian nights. A Czech woman in the audience questioned the bilingual aspects, wondering about the intended audience.

McLaren had assembled a “dream group” of actors that included Pavel Kříž and Jan Unger, but he felt that the finished project:

...had nothing to do with the comic book idea of narrative structure. ... And it totally failed to be a piece that either worked in English that was so simple and carefully prepared that even Czechs could understand it, and it totally failed to combine English and Czech (Personal Interview, 8 Oct. 1999).

McLaren went to Canada for a theatrical apprenticeship and decided not to pursue the project when he returned in the spring of 1998.

## SECTION 5.6 EUROPE AND THE END OF EXPOSURE

Though Mark Corner's *Czechmate* had been uninvited to Celetná, Exposure went forward with the other branch of its mission: to produce recent British plays in the Czech Republic. Halstead's directors' notes suggest that he was driven by some of the same issues that inspired Bishop with the stalled *Oceans* project; he felt the play presented:

...the disorientation brought about by a rapid shift from communism to the not so brave new world of market forces; the sense of rootlessness, frustration and betrayal experienced and felt by ordinary people who find it difficult to adjust to a different set of values within a "global economy" which takes no account of their own individual predicament, resulting in senseless and ultimately pointless acts of violence (*Europe Program*).

Scottish playwright David Grieg's play about an unnamed town in Central Europe falling on economic hard times, threatened by an influx of refugees, had premiered in Edinburgh and Chemnitz, East Germany, in 1994. Though it was the second Exposure production performed solely in English, it had an international cast, with three Czechs, one Belgian, one Scot, one Dutchman, one Englishman. It followed ELT production strategy number 4, presenting a play about culture clash. Exposure no longer used the advisory board set up by Richard Allen Greene, beyond asking Jan Kačer to come to the press conference for *Europe* (Halstead, "PS").

The review in the Prague Post echoed Halstead's views of the themes and their relevance. Mortkowitz found the play somewhat less urgent in 1998 than it had been in 1994, but concluded:

*Europe* is a game attempt to come to grips with complex issues. The play's themes could not be more relevant: refugees, economic hardship, xenophobia, violence ("A Journey Through the Dark Heart of Europe").

At least one Czech review, in Mladý Svět, warmly praised the play, and said it "rehabilitated English-language theatre in the eyes of the Czechs in Prague."<sup>58</sup> The production succeeded in communicating the theme of loss of identity that Black Box had hoped to portray with *Oceans*. *Europe* only had six performances: it was an expensive project, and barely broke even. Halstead had planned to tour the show, but Robert Russell, who had the large part of Fret, the stationmaster (and was praised by Mortkowitz for having given "the performance of the night")

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Halstead forwarded the citation, and translation, from Mladý Svět 32, XL, p. 63, but I have not been able to obtain the entire review.

became involved with directing the first Czech production of Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, at Divadlo Komedie.<sup>59</sup> Halstead did not wish to continue alone, and left Prague not long after (Halstead, Personal Interview). *Europe* was Exposure's last production. After a hiatus, Halstead picked up the multicultural aims of Exposure as expressed in *Europe* by founding the Eclectic Theatre in Dresden in January 2005 "with the aim of promoting English language culture and intercultural communication through the performing arts" (Eclectic Theatre Press Release).

## SECTION 5.7 THE FINAL BLACK BOX SEASON

Despite the unrest in the autumn of 1998 over Yeager's embezzlement, Black Box went forward with a full production season. Their first production was a presentation of the Essential Theatre of Dublin's production of *Xixang* by Neville Carlyle Style, in a series of three evenings called *Europe for Tibet*, one of which was a benefit for the Czech Helsinki Committee. The next production was Caryl Churchill's 1979 drama *Cloud 9*, in November 1998. The play addresses issues of post-colonialism, as well as issues of identity and gender, reflecting the same issues in Czech society that Misery Loves Company's production of *Oleanna* had addressed six months earlier. Newcomer Dan Fleischer-Brown directed. Siegfried Morkowitz in the Prague Post enjoyed the show, but found Churchill's "sledgehammer feminist message" dated (Morkowitz, "The Empire of the Sexes"). The boxed information in the review announced that the play would return in January. However, despite Šneberger's report to the Board that the play had been a "big success," the show was not reprised as planned: the theatre was too strapped for funds. Bishop was forced to turn down an invitation from Friends of Italian Opera to bring the show to Berlin in April.

Bishop's proposed season had included a production of Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* in April and a Czech play, either another adaptation of Kafka, or a play by Karel Čapek, in the summer. *Betrayal* would coincide with the playwright's visit to the Czech Republic for the Ninth Prague Writers' Festival of 1999 in Prague, which featured Pinter's work, and a Czech play, Given the

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<sup>59</sup> The production won the Alfred Radok prize for 1998.

state of finances, Bishop proposed skipping the Pinter and just concentrating on the summer production, but the Board decided to go ahead with both productions. The decision was made in part because of Pinter's communication with Barbara Day that he would attend the premiere.

Pinter's 1978 drama about a love triangle involving a married couple and the husband's best friend is revealed primarily in reverse chronological order, shifting back and forth between the present and the past. The play did not clearly conform to Black Box's mission of presenting contemporary English-language plays that were relevant in Prague. It was, however, a simple and inexpensive show, and the prospect of Pinter's visit was appealing. Fleischer-Brown again directed, as Bishop was in the U.S. visiting a sick parent. None of the actors were Black Box regulars. Black Box held a benefit performance for the company on 8 April 1999, with subsequent performances from 9-20 April 1999. The venue for the production was Divadlo Skelet, a large theatre just off Václavské náměstí. Its location was convenient, but the site was not conducive to Pinter's intimate drama. Pinter did not attend the performance, and the show was unreviewed.<sup>60</sup>

Bishop hired an adaptor for an intended production of Kafka's novel *The Trial*,<sup>61</sup> though the budget had not yet been approved. Bishop had also secured sponsorship from Grafton recruitment for a tour of the unwritten adaptation to Dublin in the autumn of 1999. Bishop returned to Prague to see *Betrayal* in April. Shortly after her return, the Board held a secret meeting at which they decided to fire Bishop and no longer have an artistic director.<sup>62</sup> Instead, they would have an Executive Director, which would be Barbara Day, and "individual artistic directors" for each show. They still intended to hire Bishop to direct *The Trial*. Šneberger told the board that he did not support their position, and would only continue to work for them so long as Bishop was there (Bishop, "Re: Back in Prague").

Black Box International Theatre now had no artistic leadership. The English-language theatre actors and directors in Prague told the Board they would work for Black Box only if they

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<sup>60</sup> I did not see the production as I, too, was in the U.S. visiting family in April.

<sup>61</sup> I was the adaptor for the project. My descriptions of the process of *The Trial* are based on my own records, which include volumes of emails from myself to Bishop, the Board, the lawyer for Dramatists' Guild, professional colleagues, cast members and so on. While I feel my version of events is accurate (and supportable by the volumes of emails), any reader should be aware that my account is also a very personal one

<sup>62</sup> Bishop's discovery of this meeting and its timing were almost farcical; board member Martin Cullen approached her during a reading Pinter gave at the writers' festival, during the run of *Betrayal*, informing her that the rest of the board were meeting without her. Cullen brought her to the meeting, where she was informed of their decision. Cullen then resigned on her behalf.

were paid the professional going rate for Czechs, more than double what Black Box had been paying (Bishop, Personal Interview, 17 July 1999). When writing to the Board to request the minutes of the secret meeting, Bishop pointed out that many small theatres exist without boards of directors, but very few exist without artistic directors (Bishop, Letter to the Board). A mission statement could not compensate for the loss of the real sense of mission as the place of the artist in the organization became increasingly marginalized.

### 5.7.1 The Final Black Box Production

*The Trial* was the last production of Black Box International Theatre.<sup>63</sup> Šneberger did resign immediately after it closed. *The Trial* was another example of Black Box's forays into multicultural performance styles under Bishop's leadership, although the collaboration was again tense. Bishop wanted to present *The Trial* for several reasons: she wanted to bring another production to Dublin, and she had had a success with the 1997 transfer of *Metamorphosis*; she was still committed to the concept of bringing in tourists in summer productions (following ELT production strategy number two), and Kafka was a recognizable name. By 1998-99 the "Kafka as cottage industry" in Prague was even larger than it had been in 1997 for [Metamorphosis](#). Bishop's notes in the program for *The Trial* describe her pastiche concept:

Maybe it's just because Kafka's face, which has become an icon of Prague, is constantly before us like an Andy Warhol print. Being a Prague-based company, we can't help to comment on the McDonaldsization of Kafka's face in Prague, while at the same time we recognize that we are, ourselves, exploiting Kafka (Bishop, Director's Notes).

Five actors, three of whom were Czech, would play all 33 roles, with masks designed by Joel Sugarman; the production would also use Brechtian devices of signs and choral speech, as well as a live musician. Czech designer Pavlina McEnchroe again created sets and costumes, with Czech designer, Eva Petriková. Like *Metamorphosis*, *The Trial* would not merely re-present

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<sup>63</sup>In March of 2000, Fleischer-Brown directed Paula Vogel's play *Goodnight, Desdemona*; it was listed as coproduction between Black Box and Misery Loves Company, but in reality this was a way for the Black Box board to spend the grant money they had received.

Czech history for English-speakers, but would also blend Czech and American theatrical styles. In effect it attempted to blend ELT production strategies two and three.

The rehearsal period for *The Trial* was rushed. The dates for the show were set for June, meaning that the entire production had to be written and rehearsed in a little under two months. The short amount of time between having an approved budget to opening affected the casting. Bishop tried to explain this difficulty to the Board:

...they would say they wanted to get Czech actors and I would say you have to talk to Czechs months in advance, and you can't talk to them months beforehand if you don't have an approved budget because it's embarrassing. I could work with the Czech repertory system if I could tell Petra [Lustigová] now that I need her for a role in November (Bishop, Personal Interview, 17 July 1999).

Bishop was able to assemble a very strong group of Czech actors anyway, primarily because she knew them personally and began offering them roles before the budget had been approved. The Czechs in the cast included Jan Unger, who had performed in Arnošt Goldflam's *Sladký Theresienstadt* at Divadlo Archa, and in the reading of *Oceans*; Petra Lustigová, a resident actor at the Komedie (who had worked with North American theatre), and David Máj, a puppeteer with the Most Puppet Theatre who was finishing his graduate studies at DAMU in Alternative Theatre and Puppetry. Bishop cast Scott Bellefeuille as K., despite her previous clashes with him; the other English-speaking actor was Rich Gold (inexplicably, known as Jason), who had performed in David Nykl and William Hollister's production of *Sol* in the summer of 1997. Bishop hired Czech composer Ondřej Adámek to perform live keyboards and percussion. The adaptor added a framing device of the historical Kafka writing the novella *The Trial* to Bishop's conception of a Kafka pastiche. The actor playing Kafka, Scott Bellefeuille, also played K., and the character of Kafka participates in the actions of *The Trial*. Kafka's tubercular cough underscores the unhealthy atmosphere of the waiting rooms of the court; the violence of an anti-Semitic demonstration occurring outside of Kafka's insurance office, where he was one of two Jews employed, leads into *The Trial's* "whipper scene."

The rushed schedule also created production difficulties. Black Box International Theatre had not acquired any underlying rights to the Kafka or an English translation of the novel, but this was not fully realized until the adaptation was well underway, which meant that it had to be carefully combed for any direct quotations from existing English translations (the German novel is out of copyright). The cast had already begun learning their lines, and resented

having to learn the modifications; it was difficult for the Czech speakers to incorporate them. Publicity was not well handled: no Czech or English-language newspapers came to the press conference for the production; only one Czech cable television attended, and the producers did not coordinate with the concierges of the tourist hotels, whose job it was to make recommendations to guests. By contrast, in the early nineties, Jesse Webb of Artists for Prague had arranged with American Express to arrange tickets to his shows as part of travel packages. Black Box's board hoped to become an institution that appealed to tourists, visitors and the business community, but lacked Webb's ingenuity, salesmanship and energy.

Although the process was difficult, the project did achieve more cultural blending through the cast, designers and composers than any Black Box production to that point: more than half of the cast and most of the designers were Czech. Using Marvin Carlson's stages of the culturally familiar to the culturally foreign, *The Trial* primarily fits his stage four, in which "the foreign and the familiar create a new blend" (83). The style of the production alternated between American realism in an absurd context and Czech ironic re-presentation, depending on the actors and the context of the scene. Scott Bellefeuille playing Kafka and K. was the only actor who did not wear a mask. The language of the play was entirely in American idiomatic English. The character of Titorelli, the court painter who offers to help K. with his case, uses a pushy "car salesman" tone to explain to K. the differing options of actual, apparent and final acquittal.

Similarly, the lawyer Huld, whose explanations fail to help K., was played by Czech Jan Unger, speaking a mish-mash of English catch-phrases and song lyrics, whose accent made the phrases new and strange:

HULD: You misjudge her. I see it all the time. (*HE leaps out of bed.*) Time for a change. You see how it is. But opportunity knocks on heaven's door. (*HE begins to walk in circles around K.*) I'll leave no stone unturned, no avenue unexplored, no anthill unupset, no sleeping dog lying, no lie we can't get out of, no out we can't get in on... (Orel, *The Trial* 28)

Some of the metatheatrical devices in the play sought to implicate the audience in K.'s ordeal: when K. asks Fraulein Burstner for her name, Lustigová pointed out her own in the *Trial* program. McEnchroe designed a "bed/door"—when standing, it was a working door that opened in to the many hallways and offices in the play; when propped up on a slant it served as a bed in K's boarding house. McEnchroe, inspired by a few lines in the text about one of the characters turning into a crow and flying away (inspired by Kafka's name, which means "crow" in Czech),



designed a large nest with crow's eggs that hung ominously over the stage. Máj's puppets commented on the play in Czech-accented English, when the puppets weren't actual characters in the show. All of the masks hung in a line at the end of the stage.

*The Trial* had its first performance before an invited audience on Tuesday, 15 June 1999. It was scheduled for ten performances in Prague, spanning five weeks. Siegfried Mortkowitz of The Prague Post attended a dress rehearsal. After the second performance, and before the review in the Prague Post came out, Bishop began insisting on changes, having heard that Mortkowitz did not like the theme of "Kafka as cottage industry." All of the changes called for were the removal of Bishop's original concept of the "McDonaldsization of Prague." In responding so sharply to a Prague Post review, before the review had even been published, Bishop performed her own ambivalence about her work. Ironically it was at least partly her own lack of a clear artistic vision that put off Czech theatre artists like Jakub Špalek.

Mortkowitz's review was titled "Nudge, nudge, wink, wink: Deconstructing Kafka." He objected to the framing device: "it was a constant irritation, like a dilettantish discussion among college sophomores about why Kafka named his hero K." The hostility of his review demonstrates this English-language critic's ambivalence about blending Czech culture with American idiom, reflecting the positivism established by Culture Editor Richard Allen Greene with regard to the work of the English-language theatres. These critics' desire for a kind of theatrical/literary purism stood in conflict with the playful and irreverent work of Czech directors, in particular Petr Lébl at Divadlo Na zábradlí, whose Chekhovian productions insouciantly, even merrily, revealed new meaning in such plays as *Ivanov*. Prague's Divadlo Archa regularly presented avant-garde and deconstructed work. Using Kafka as a character to frame the show is not a deconstruction in any case, nor particularly academic, but a fairly unoriginal framing device. Philip Glass and Rudolph Wurlitzer's operatic version of *In the Penal Colony*, directed by JoAnne Akalaitis in 2000, also included the onstage character of Kafka reading from his diaries. Liz Engelman, then dramaturg for A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) in Seattle, which coproduced the opera with the Court Theatre, described with Celise Kalke, then dramaturg at the Court Theatre in Chicago.<sup>64</sup> the effect of the addition of the Kafka character to the production for TheatreForum:

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<sup>64</sup> Kalke, who had been the dramaturg and violist for *King Stag*, and interned at Divadlo pod Palmovkou, subsequently became the literary manager of the Public Theatre in New York City, where she worked with

Akalaitis invented activity landmarks for Kafka to interact with the story onstage such as eating the drawings of the machine and undressing the officer for his execution... With the addition of the Kafka character and an investigation into the mind of Kafka the writer through his diaries, the opera began to illuminate the artist's compulsion and grew into an exploration of an artist being tortured by his own work. Kafka stood as a buffer between the audience and his own horrifying story ("In the Penal Colony: Commission, Collaboration, Coproduction" 54).

Christopher Lord saw the Black Box production of *The Trial* twice, and wrote to the Prague Post to protest the review:

What exactly is it that the Post has always had against the legitimate theatre crowd? ...Pessimists are saying that English-language theatre is going to die soon. I hope they are wrong; but if it does, the Prague Post, which could have done so much good, will instead bear much of the responsibility for killing it ("Letter to Alan Levy of The Prague Post).

Unfortunately, there were no other reviews of the Prague production, and nothing to balance Mortkowitz's assessment.

The reception for the Dublin presentation of *The Trial* at the Crypt theatre in September 1999 strongly contrasted that of the Prague Post, praising most strongly those comic elements that had most irritated Mortkowitz. The original framing device was replaced with a voiceover narrative and the script was shortened, but otherwise not essentially changed. The production's reception was no doubt framed in part by Black Box International Theatre's reception in Dublin as a primarily Czech company. The Dublin critics did not share Mortkowitz's ambivalence about an American blend with Czech culture. The major Dublin press attended the production, and there was a feature about the company's visit in the Irish Times. Again, Bishop had had to raise the money for a subsequent production in Dublin herself. The show sold out each night of its run.<sup>65</sup> Bishop's new producer, Síle Ni Bhroin, an Irish woman in Prague, was far more successful at attracting advance press than the Black Box board had been. An article titled "Check out the Czechs" described a pre-opening reception:

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Associate Artistic Director Peter DuBois. While Artistic Director of Alaska's Perseverance Theatre, DuBois had hired Richard Toth to recreate *King Stag* in 2003. Through collaborations like these an aesthetic shaped by Czech theatre makes its way to American stages. Kalke accepted a job as literary manager of the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia in October 2005.

<sup>65</sup> The adaptor experienced the lines and waitlists firsthand on arrival.

“Kafka thought the play was funny,” offers Czech actress Petra Lustigová. Czech ambassador Petr Kolar is there, as guest of honour, to greet the visitors.

Gerry Colgan in The Irish Times wrote a small preview about the production a week before it opened, accompanied by a photograph, suggesting that “It could be an experience to savour” (“The Irish Times Critics’ Guide”).

Though the show had only six Dublin performances, it was reviewed by four papers as well as an online entertainment guide. The tenor of all of the reviews was to highlight what was original and impertinent, again strongly contrasting Mortkowitz’s protective approach to Kafka. Colgan’s review in the Irish Times described the play as a “faithful and telling staging of this overpowering parable (“Doing Kafka Justice”). Joanne Hayden in the Sunday Business Post noted the puppets:

Unveiling the absurdism and comedy in Kafka’s celebrated work, there were lots of genuinely funny moments here, moments which were often created by puppets... One scene, in which a judge puppet turns to another and asks what the play is all about and then goes on to confess how he likes a play with a beginning, middle and end, got the most laughs.

Maurice Newman in the Evening Herald appreciated the comedy:

Black Box International redefine Kafka for his devotees as a comedy writer who has too long been regarded as a miserable old git.

Deirdre Mulronev in the online guide Wow! What’s On Where also particularly liked the way the play “gives a good kick to the Kafkan Threshold.” The warm reception had the same ironically demoralizing effect on Bishop that the positive review of *Quills* in Germany had had; she became convinced that her efforts in Prague were hopeless. Bishop had intended to relocate to Dublin, but returned to Prague after receiving an offer to cast the television movie *Dune* (Bishop, Telephone Interview, 25 Feb. 2005). She has been a casting director in film in Prague ever since. Black Box International Theatre ceased to exist as a producing entity after the Dublin *Trial*.

## SECTION 5.8 THE ASHES OF BLACK BOX AND MISERY LOVES COMPANY

There were a few productions under the name Misery Loves Company after Sean Fuller's December 1997 production, *December of All Things*. Lighting designer Wim de Vos developed a dance and music project with some of the actors from Misery Loves Company called *The One Who Is* in May 1998; it was billed as a coproduction with Theatre Company One. Playwright Laura Zam served as the dramaturg. Zam remembers the project as a "fiasco... it wasn't integrated, and the director didn't make it congeal" (Zam, Telephone Interview, 2 Nov. 2003). In the spring of 1998, Misery Loves Company co-produced its only theatrical production in New York, Dennis Davis' *The Song of Seven Cities*, an adaptation Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's opera-ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins*. It was directed by Peter DuBois, who knew Toth from Prague but had not worked with MLC before. While the show was in rehearsal, DuBois accepted the position of Artistic Director at Alaska's Perseverance Theatre; he left after it opened. Victoria Jones Toth is a film editor in New York; she and Toth continue to use the "Big Knees" label for short films. At the end of the films, the final credits read: "This was Misery Loves Company" (Jones, Personal Interview).

Dan Fleischer-Brown had become involved with Misery Loves Company after directing *Cloud 9* for Black Box in the autumn of 1998, although he also stayed involved with Black Box. He directed two productions at Celetná: a mask/movement piece called *Grave Matters*, featuring maskmaker Joel Sugarman and David Nykl, which opened in February 1999, and Mary Luckhurst's play *Kretschmer's Diary* at Celetná in March. Nykl handed over the reins of the company to Fleischer-Brown when he left the country in March. Before his departure, Nykl had increasingly become busy acting in the Czech theatre. He performed for both of the premiere Czech directors, appearing in Petr Lébl's *Plukovník/Ptak* at Divadlo Na zábradlí and Jan Pitinský's *Magic Mountain* at Divadlo ve Dlouhé; today he is once again in Canada, and acting professionally. He plays a Czech character, Dr. Zelenka, on the Sci-Fi channel program *Stargate: Atlantis*.

Misery Loves Company continued to exist for awhile in Prague under Fleischer-Brown's leadership. He moved the company out of Divadlo v Celetné to a theatre space at the far less centrally located Divadlo U Andělu in March 2000. Although Fleischer-Brown told the Prague

Post that the move was prompted because the Celetná space was too small (Jayne), it is likelier that without Toth and Nykl, Špalek no longer felt any connection to the company. Fleischer-Brown produced Shakespeare's *As You Like It* at the new Globe Theatre in Prague in September 1999. In the spring of 2000 Michael Reisman, a Fulbright scholar who had performed in *As You Like It*, received a grant from the Soros foundation for Misery Loves Company to produce a festival of one-acts including Czech and English-language plays on the same bill. Misery Loves Company accepted the money, but rather than using it for the one-acts, used the grant money for the summer 2000 production of *Hamlet* at the Globe. Reisman did present one evening of one-acts in June 2000 at the Roxy Klub, but was not reimbursed (Reisman, Telephone Interview). Scott Bellefeuille, who performed the role of Laertes, wrote a series of five participant-observer articles about the production of *Hamlet* for the Prague Post, suggesting that the newspaper took a more supportive interest in English-language theatre than it had during the nineties.<sup>66</sup> By that time, Richard Allen Greene had left Prague and the new culture editor was Theo Schwinke, a regular at Beefstew. Fleischer-Brown staged the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet* in Czech, employing some of ELT production strategy number 3, bilingual productions.

Shortly after the production of *Hamlet*, Fleischer-Brown changed the name of the company to Miloco. In the tradition of creative historicizing, the Miloco website claims that the company had been developing since 1998. Miloco produced the Fulcrum Festival of International Theatre at the Alfréd ve Dvoře Theatre in September 2000. This festival presented theatre companies who focused on physical work, with groups from Bulgaria, Romania, Holland and Yugoslavia (Divadlo Miloco Home Page). In January 2003 Miloco produced an adaptation of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Moravian philosopher Jan Amos Komensky's *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* in English and Slovak (Novak). Not long after the Komensky adaptation, the group apparently suffered from infighting (Hollister, "Re: Miloco") and imploded. There have been no Miloco productions since. Ewan McLaren attended that production and felt that while it was ambitious, it was under-rehearsed and difficult to follow. His impression of the process was that it had not interfaced with the Czech professional community (McLaren, "Re:

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<sup>66</sup> The Prague Post hired Steffen Silvis, a professional theatre critic from Portland, Oregon, where he wrote for the Willamette Weekly, to take up the post of theatre/film critic in September 2005 (Silvis). The appointment of Silvis, an O'Neill Institute Fellow and an NEA Fellow, also suggests that the newspaper takes the function more seriously than it has in the past.

Miloco”). McLaren now runs the Alfred ve Dvoře theatre, which focuses on movement-based work.

In the spring of 2000, it appeared that Black Box might resurface with a new artistic director. Cathy Meils, a *Variety* reviewer resident in Prague, approached the Board with a proposal to direct Larry Shue’s *Wenceslas Square* (the first production of North American Theatre, nine years earlier). The *Prague Post* reported that Meils was taking over the company (Pitkin). However, after meeting with Bishop, Meils decided it would be unwise to take over Black Box (Meils). Instead, she founded her own company, Prague Ensemble Theatre (PET), with actor Howie Lotker, who had performed with Misery Loves Company, and actor Ponny Conomos. PET had a similar objective to Black Box International Theatre: “to produce plays that had connected our cultures” (Meils, “From Cathy”). Meils founded the company with a legal structure that was slightly different from that of BBIT, and more empowering to her. She produced Shue’s *Wenceslas Square*, Polish playwright Janusz Glowacki’s *Hunting Cockroaches* and Arthur Schnitzler’s *La Ronde*, as well as a new American play called *In Search of the Greatest American Hot Dog* by Paul Lauden and Jonathan White. Essentially, PET followed ELT production strategies one and two. After Conomos left for America, Meils asked actor John Owen McKillop to step in. He ended up splitting off into his own company, English Workshop Productions (EWP) in 2003 (Levy, “McKillop: Priest’s Son As Ambusher”). Meils ceased producing public performances after the August 2002 flood in Prague, which made funding scarce. Instead she began a series of readings of Slovak plays, sponsored by the Bratislava Theatre Institute and the US embassy (Meils, “From Cathy”); Bishop directed one of these. In November 2003, Meils began producing dinner theatre, a genre new to Prague, at the Tulip Café. Meils is no longer in Prague, but the musical cabarets continue.

## SECTION 5.9 CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A PROTOCOL FOR ENGLISH-LANGUAGE THEATRE

Much of the *blbá nálada* or bad mood Havel had described in his address in April 1997 in the Czech Republic seemed to have evaporated by late 1999. The “gypsy clause” that had prevented

many Roma from gaining citizenship if they had a criminal record within the past five years from their country of origin was modified in 1999; former Czechoslovak citizens who had been living in the Czech Republic since 1993 could now gain citizenship by declaration (Agnew 321). In July 1999, Czech survivors of the Holocaust began receiving restitution payments (Pinterová). The Czech Republic joined NATO in March 1999, and entered the European Union in June 2004. In December 2003, a statue of Franz Kafka was erected in the Jewish Quarter of Prague (Asiedu). In April 2005, Radio Prague reported that Prague was the sixth most visited city in Europe.

English-language theatre groups continue to form in Prague, usually lasting for just a few productions before folding. Often they choose the same plays that had interested the ELTs of the nineties: Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*, productions of Sam Shepard. However, though the plays produced are often the same as those of the early nineties, the cultural milieu is vastly different. Czechs are no longer attracted to the novelty of English-language production for its own sake, and the idealistic fervor of the English teachers who descended on Prague in the early nineties is gone. The growing indifference of the Czechs to the Americans among them demonstrates how far the internationalizing of Prague had come: as Richard Toth joked, "Now that Dunkin' Donuts was there, our job was done" (Personal Interview, 9 April 1999). Contemporary English-language theatre in Prague, whether community-based or professional, is no longer perceived as a subset of the transition to Capitalism. The young generation Havel predicted would grow up without having been afflicted in their souls by Communism are coming of age.

The English-language theatres in Prague primarily failed to thrive in the long-term because they failed to establish themselves within the Czech arts economy. Overall situation of a company with regard to intercultural practice has not been widely theorized, but of the theorists consulted, Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's taxonomies were particularly useful in analyzing the overall positioning of individual ELTs as they negotiated their place in the Host culture over time. Marvin Carlson's steps of the culturally familiar to unfamiliar are useful in analyzing individual productions, but do not apply to companies as a whole. Similarly, Patrice Pavis' theories are useful for directors and critics but not helpful in the long run for would-be producers. As the ELTs attempted to build cultural bridges they often failed to find their target audience, succeeding in performing a model of earnestness that was artistically uninteresting.

The history of the ELTs in Prague, while specific to time and place (particularly with respect to the cultural meaning of theatre in the Czech lands), provides useful lessons applicable to any country with a growing English-speaking subculture. A variety of production strategies can be effective but they depend in part on timing. The use of production strategy number one, representing the Performer's Culture, was effective in the early nineties, when the novelty of English-language theatres held its largest appeal. In a country that is eager to learn English, with little history of English-speaking within its borders, using theatre to teach culture as well as English can be an effective strategy. Director Lida Engelová's advice to Studio Theatre's John Farrage to "show to Czechs what Americans are like" was based in Czech curiosity about their new visitors. North American Theatre's overall mission to produce plays written in North America that either represented their home culture or presented plays about culture clash, using strategy number four, was sensible given the time of the company's debut. However, there are clear disadvantages to a company's positioning itself as worthy primarily because of language. One is the obvious truth that when the novelty wears off the company will have no audience. Another is that theatre critics in the Host culture will view the company's work primarily as a social phenomenon rather than as an artistic troupe worthy of serious consideration.

The nuts and bolts of producing—venue, timing, casting—should also be thoroughly investigated before the venture begins. Unless theatre companies in the Host culture routinely move from space to space, an ELT that rents spaces for performance based on availability and price is automatically placing itself in the public's mind as an oddity. NAT avoided this by producing consistently at the Delta Club, but the space was out of the way for many expatriates and English-speakers. NAT also fell into two errors that almost every ELT in Prague made in the nineties: overextension and exaggeration. While it is necessary to produce regularly enough to remind the public of a troupe's existence, and in general a good idea to produce in a way that mirrors the schedules of companies in a Host culture, NAT, by rehearsing one play while the other was performing (mirroring to some extent Czech repertory), pushed its human resources to the point of exhaustion and suffered as a result. NAT's artistic director Peter Krogh tried to overcome the difficulty of finding sufficient English-speaking actors in its host country by soliciting colleagues from Cornish College in Seattle, but presenting these colleagues as "professionals" (even though some of them were) tended to exaggeration. Krogh also



exaggerated the security of funding and availability of roles. After two women discovered he had cast them both in the same role, he quit.

Another lesson that benefited some of the ELTs is that it is all right to present oneself without justification. Although its founders were not American, Small and Dangerous essentially followed Engelová's advice to "show to Czechs what Americans are like" when they presented their evenings of original expatriate writing. Small and Dangerous benefited from the "poor theatre" aspect of their manifesto that made a virtue of the limited resources. They also positioned themselves as a student company by presenting in a venue that was home to student companies. The house was small, so the productions usually sold out. They spent nothing on advertising. The pieces were short, usually with only one main action, so that even though they were in English, they were potentially accessible to Czechs learning English. Small and Dangerous did not find the percentage of Czechs in the audience their primary measure of success (although the percentage was usually relatively high), nor did they seek validation from reviews. With their mission to encourage expatriate writing, their work embodied its own meaning. Since longevity was not their goal, the relatively short life of the company does not represent a failure. Many of the writers who first were produced by Small and Dangerous are still writing, suggesting that the company fulfilled its goals.

The groups, and productions, that succeeded the most with Czech audiences were those that were most organically themselves. Czechs routinely were interested by young companies doing interesting work, more than "American" companies doing "American" work. Proof of this is the successful internationalizing of Archa theatre. When Peter DuBois used the system of "viewpointing" devised by Anne Bogart in a 1995 production of *A Little Czech Macbeth* as part of the Black Box summer festival, the staging fell flat for Czech critics because they had no frame of reference for it. But when Bogart herself presented workshops at Archa two summers later, Czech theatre practitioners were engaged and interested. Bogart was not presenting a version of Americanness, but bringing her particular artistry to a Czech audience. Black Box was most successful with productions that offered an innovative performance style, like *Quills*, or presented something otherwise unavailable on Czech stages, like *Karhan's Men*. *Small and Dangerous* succeeded with its short one-acts because they embodied the same rough, student theatre production that young Czech companies embraced.

While mission is important to keep a company on track, it is important to consider audience response to that mission. In general one lesson learned from the ELTs of Prague is to be wary of missions that are too lofty in their goals. Black Box suffered from its two-fold mission to present Czech plays in English in the summer for tourists and contemporary plays in the winter for residents. Attempting to please everyone put Black Box in a strained position from the outset; the loftiness of their goals was commendable but unrealistic for a variety of reasons. With a two-fold mission one side will always achieve primacy, and Black Box became known as more of a slick and commercial enterprise, by virtue of its summer festivals. This unfortunately was not the side of the mission dearest to the hearts of the founders and directors. In addition, as a “slick” enterprise their work was lacking, as their actors were not professional, their financial resources were low and they did not have the resources and experience to market effectively. It is not so much that performing Host culture plays in English (or the use of strategy number two) is a trap, as that a company that aims primarily for tourist interest will lose critical esteem very quickly, should any aspect of their production fall short. The harsh reviews of the actors in *Lemonade Joe* in the summer festival of 1995 demonstrate how far Black Box had tried the patience of some of the Czech critics.

In addition, there is a distinction to be made about which Host culture plays are performed, when employing strategy number two. Presenting plays by former dissidents, or plays with deep social meaning, is a risky endeavor fraught with potential resentment on the part of the Host culture. Although not every country has a similar situation with regard to dissident writing, it is useful to consider the minefields of producing, with all good intentions, plays that hold particular meaning and hark back to a particular unhappy time for members of the Host culture. In short, ELT presentations of Host culture political drama are likely to fail, as far as Host culture reception is concerned. Black Box received good reviews in the *Prague Post* for its dissident dramas in the summer of 1995, but the Czech papers panned them. In contrast, presenting historical chestnuts like *R.U.R.* or oddities and unperformed works like *Karhan's Men* appears to be a welcome strategy. Indeed, presenting well-known but unperformed works appears to be a solid way of gaining interest from the Host culture, both audience and critical alike.

Organizations that interact dynamically with the Host culture are likelier to succeed, regardless of what production strategy they use on individual presentations. In its initial

presentation of [\*The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine\*](#), Misery Loves Company used production strategy number 3—although the play is written in English, it relies so heavily on clowning that it achieves the transparency of a nonverbal production. In its second production, [\*A Nightingale for Dinner\*](#), Misery Loves Company appeared to be drawing on production strategy number two, that of presenting Host culture plays in English, but the play also deals if not with culture clash than with differing horizons of expectation: the family hosting Nightingale are so “other” that Nightingale’s foreignness is a given in the play. By casting the family as Czechs speaking English and Nightingale alone as a native-English speaker, the production of *A Nightingale for Dinner* also embraced strategy number 3, which includes multicultural casting as well as bi-cultural and/or bi-lingual productions. Even with these first two productions, MLC had positioned itself as a company working primarily with strategy number three; when they were invited to work under the umbrella of Jakub Špalek’s Kašpar theatre, that strategy became inscribed into the structure of the company. MLC became positioned very differently from other ELTs in the minds of Czech critics, as demonstrated by their reviews. MLC was seen as contributing to the cultural life of Prague, rather than as an ELT using theatre to promote the English language. Although MLC’s mission had more to do with style of performance than border-crossing, they achieved more intercultural interactions than did other ELTs, due to their ongoing collaborations with respected Czech theatre artists.

Establishing a strong style and aesthetic is also a marker of professionalism that helps an ELT gain acceptance. A resident ELT needs to consider professionalism with regard to craft itself. A successful company demands dedication to theatricality, not just to production values. Where Studio Theatre/Black Box was founded by a mix of people, not all of whom had theatrical experience, MLC was organized around a few dynamic individuals who were already working professionally in Czech theatre. Unlike other troupes, MLC attracted a fairly stable and very loyal ensemble, and developed a performance style based primarily in the clowning of Richard Toth and the comic versatility of David Nykl. Ewan McLaren’s growing reputation as a director attracted positive interest from the Czech community. Where other ELTs had difficulty finding actors for the roles in the plays they chose (even when chosen with the dearth of actors in mind), MLC actors, designers and playwrights were always inscribed in a season. MLC was able to run its productions for months or years in a long Czech repertory style not only because of its residency at Celetná through Kašpar, but also because of the stability of its core company.

Misery Loves Company also succeeded because it had a clear and recognizable aesthetic based in clowning and nonverbal performance.

“Ghetto” plays—plays by and for expatriates—can be effective if done boldly and with confidence. However, a company that presents them needs to be mindful of how they fit into the overall mission of the company. Misery Loves Company’s first production with Sean Fuller, *Shoot Him In the Head*, attracted serious commentary from Czech critic Jitka Sloupová. However many subsequent Big Knees productions went unreviewed. The calendar for their performances varied from MLC’s mainstage shows, and the individual productions varied widely in quality and style, from one-act plays about expatriates to avant-garde deconstructed Czech fairy-tales. The development of two resident playwrights however did seem to succeed with both Czech and English papers. The existence of Big Knees was somewhat divisive for MLC. Again, a company with a two-fold mission needs to be wary of resources and proportions allotted.

Presenting bi-lingual productions can succeed if the use of both languages is made porous. That is, if the languages are divided by one as a narration and one for enacted scenes, the structure and expectations will be clear. Black Box succeeded with a production of [\*Alenka in Wonderland\*](#) that used languages this way, as did MLC and Kašpar with [\*King Stag\*](#). However, the Exposure productions that took plays written in English and translated parts of them into Czech for thematic reasons, like [\*Colette in Love\*](#) or [\*Enola\*](#), mostly succeeded in alienating both sides of the audience. Bi-lingual productions conceived in two languages, however, and that demand both languages for their storytelling, have potential for great success, as Exposure found with [\*Just Another Blasted Love Song\*](#). Such plays inherently use production strategy number four, that is, they are plays about culture clash. *Just Another Blasted Love Song* represented a situation familiar to everyone in the audience—the English teacher with a Czech student—and the use of both languages was intrinsic not only to the theme but to the situation of the play, as well as the situation of the audience.

Where there are multiple ELTs in a small community, drawing on the same pool for audience as well as technicians and cast, ELTs would be well-served to formalize a way of pooling resources, even if the aesthetics and missions vary widely. Like NAT, Exposure suffered from overextension of resources and lost its first producer after less than one full season. After Richard Toth left for America, MLC lost its forward motion. Black Box wobbled

perilously when all of its original founders left. Informal agreements to share the Celetná space did not help MLC, Exposure or Black Box in any significant way. Another lesson learned from the ELTs is that it is almost impossible to rehabilitate a company's reputation once it has been tarnished in the eyes of Host culture artists and critics. Nancy Bishop successfully changed Black Box's performance style in the late nineties to one that was far more multicultural than earlier production. In productions of [Metamorphosis](#), [Quills](#) and [The Trial](#), Bishop used Czech designers and experimental performance styles that were engaging to international audiences in Germany, Prague and Dublin. However while her productions received good reviews from Czech critics, such Czech producers as Jakub Špalek continued to associate Bishop with a kind of tourist theatre (in part, because these productions were still marketed to tourists in the summer, and ticket prices were high). Similarly Exposure under the leadership of Michael Halstead was very different than it had been under the leadership of founder Richard Allen Greene, but those early bi-lingual productions had so alienated some in the ELT community that it contributed to the failure of "merger talks" between Exposure, Black Box and MLC. The capital gained in keeping the name of an established company is zeroed out by the capital lost in trying to rehabilitate a company's reputation. If the artistic approach and style of a company has significantly changed, a name change may be in order, although the paperwork involved in many countries can make this daunting.

Plays about culture clash are likely to be successful in inverse proportion to how immediately relevant they seem (unless they are literally set in the Host country in the present)—suggesting a local distaste for the appearance of preaching. [Europe](#) by David Grieg, produced by Exposure, received very good reviews from Czech and English-language critics, but the more transparent presentation of Brecht's [The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui](#), although a dynamic and interesting performance, was not appealing enough to Czech critics to encourage them to attend. Real multicultural productions involve people of different backgrounds and languages coming together to do something new. They are worthwhile but difficult. ELTs routinely did not allow quite enough time for exploration and rehearsal. All of the ELTs routinely underestimated this aspect of production, as well as marketing. After ELTs have been resident in a country for more than five years, the plays that seemed appropriate at first will now hold little direct appeal beyond their intrinsic artistic appeal. That is, a production of *True West* held intercultural interest in the early nineties for Czechs both in its representation of Americans and in its

providing an opportunity to see a play by a great American writer. At the end of the nineties, Czech theatres routinely presented new American plays in translation; commercial television stations showed dubbed American programming, and travel to America was accessible to anyone who could afford it. A production of *True West* would need more than its content and language to appeal—it would need the same markers that it would have in its Source culture, that is, particularly strong or noteworthy actors and director. New companies that began in the late nineties often mirrored the choices of the companies of the early nineties, but with the cultural milieu so different, they were widely ignored.

All of the English-language theatre groups of the nineties “failed” in their missions in one way or another. Richard Toth, whose ensemble Misery Loves Company most successfully crossed critical and artistic borders, had hoped to establish a permanent international ensemble in Prague. Black Box International Theatre moved from an amateur group to a professional group, but failed to meet the Board of Directors’ goal to establish a business-oriented theatre, akin to the English-language theatre of Vienna. Yet while the groups did not achieve their intended missions, individual productions succeeded at crossing borders. In addition, there are many Czech journalists, actors and musicians who worked with the “failed” English-language theatres, including Hana Frejková, Jan Unger, Petra Lustigová, Arnošt Goldflam, Jakub Špalek. The ELTs of the nineties left behind a legacy, even a tradition, of English-language performance and culture in the Czech Republic. Švandovo Divadlo, which shows English subtitles with their live performances, is run by Daniel Hyrbek, who formerly led a student company resident at Divadlo v Celetné, the home of Misery Loves Company. A student group at Charles University produces plays in English, led by English lecturer John Martlew (Horaková). The efforts of the ELTs in the optimistic and turbulent nineties established a pattern of intercultural interaction, which made their very presence redundant.

## SECTION 5.10 POST-SCRIPT: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE THEATRE AS A PERFORMANCE OF GLOBALIZATION

Four twenty-first century ELTs suggest an organic model for intercultural English-language production: Budapest's Madhouse Theatre, the Merlin International Theatre, also in Budapest, Beijing's Noble Bridge Theatre, and the English-language Theatre of Zagreb. All of these theatres are either founded by locals with an interest in English-language theatre or work in partnership with a theatre in their host culture. Their activities are not a performance of expatriatism, but a performance of globalization. The rapid development of the Internet and electronic mail from the mid-nineties on has also made international communication easier and faster than ever before. This instant intercultural dialogue and exchange of ideas suggests a fascinating cross-cultural dialogue.

Jon Fenner, Matt Devere and Mike Kelly, all graduates of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA), founded Budapest's Madhouse Theatre Company. Prior to attending LAMDA, Kelly had studied Central-Eastern European studies at London University and had put on a Pinter play in Budapest while an exchange student in 1991. While at LAMDA (1994-1997) he frequently returned to Budapest to perform in short runs of English-language plays through his contacts with Budapest's Merlin Theatre, whose producer László Magács had already produced several English-language productions (Keszthelyi). In 2000 Magács invited him to perform *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* by Jess Borgeson, Adam Long and Daniel Singer (The Reduced Shakespeare Company), and he invited Fenner and Devere to join him. The play was a success and in September 2001 the three officially founded Madhouse Theatre. Subsequent productions include a version of Oedipus, *Two Blind Mice*, with the Hungarian company Atlantis ("About Madhouse"). Most of their productions follow ELT production strategy number 3, emphasizing clowning, and collaboration with Host culture theatre companies, as well as dramatizations of stories well known in the Host culture. When Merlin's producer Tamás Jordan was appointed to the post of National Theater Director in 2003 (the Hungarian National Theatre opened in 2002), he invited Madhouse to be in residence there (Keszthelyi). Fenner returned to England in 2005. Their new show for Autumn 2005, *One Set to Love*, is a devised theatre piece, and will perform at the National Theatre (Hodgson). Their emphasis on physical work suggests an aesthetic not unlike Toth's and Nykl's, and their close

collaboration with Hungarian theatre companies gives them an organic entry into Hungarian arts culture.

The Merlin International Theatre continues to produce English-language theatre, and in 2004 launched the “English Language Theater Company.” The Budapest Sun dubbed the company the “first dedicated, professional English language theater company,” apparently not conceiving of Madhouse, which had been resident at the Merlin since 2000, as a company. Lázsló Magács conceived of the company, which he founded with actress Susannah York (Marshall). While the company appears to be primarily still in the process of organization, the Merlin International Theatre’s program for Autumn 2005 includes *My Chair Yourself*, described as “a new piece of British devised theatre,” *Scabaret*, by English Improvisative Cabaret, *Looking for Hamlet*, a monodrama written by Alexis Latham and Novak Janos, The Spullenmen, a Dutch group who produce visual theatre and theatrical installations (Merlin International Theatre). Magács appears to be following a model shared by Prague’s Archa theatre, inviting foreign companies in for residencies and presentations.

The English Language Theatre of Zagreb was founded in 2005 by Mercy Bona Pavelić, in cooperation with Mala Scena Theatre. Bona Pavelić’s theatre seems to share an aesthetic that blends the goals of Black Box in its desire to present recent hit plays from England and America, primarily using ELT production strategy number one. Mala Scena Theatre is Croatia’s only private theatre; it was founded in 1986 by Vitomira Loncar and her husband Ivica Šimić, and opened with a translated production of Tom Stoppard’s *The Real Thing*. Mala Scena moved into its own space, which seats 150, in 1989. (Mala Scena, Home Page). They have performed in English during tours to the UK and the US, as well as in German, and have a staff of seven. The ELT of Zagreb will be the first time they will perform in English at home (Loncar, “Mala Scena”). Their first production, in October 2005 will be Charlotte Jones’ play *Humble Boy* (English-Language Theatre of Zagreb, Home Page). Bona Pavelić is of Croatian descent; her parents emigrated to America during World War II. She and her husband, who was Croatian (born in Dubrovnik), moved to Croatia for two years in 2000 and decided to stay on (Bona Pavelić, “Other ELTs”). As president of a small foundation administered by CECArtsLink in New York, called FACE Croatia (Fund for Arts and Cultural Exchange Croatia), Bona Pavelić initially spent most of her time in Croatia developing grant proposals for arts organizations there. FACE describes itself as providing grants to “support the broadening of public awareness of and



appreciation for Croatian art and culture, and to encourage the growth of Croatian arts philanthropy in both Croatia and the United States” (FACE Grant Program). Bona Pavelić had followed Loncar’s work and given her a grant to help develop the adult program of Mala Scena. Following *Humble Boy*, Bona Pavelić plans to translate Zljkó Vkmirica’s monodrama *The History of My Stupidity*, into English, play it in Zagreb, tour it around the country, and export it to London or New York (Bona Pavelić, “Other ELTs”). She expects more than half of her audience to be Croatian, particularly young corporate managers and students (Bona Pavelić, “Re: ELT of Zagreb”). The ELT of Zagreb differs from Black Box and Exposure in the absence of any language about “culture-bridging” and educational mission. It differs also in that it partners with an existing local theatre, and is founded by someone with heritage in the Host culture, as well as experience in funding arts organizations.

Chinese national Tong Li corresponded with American playwrights and directors on the internet chat group [dramatists@yahoogroups.com](mailto:dramatists@yahoogroups.com) about play development and marketing before developing his idea for a theatre, making his theatre conceptually international from its inception. In his press release Li describes the increasing presence of American industry and the English language in Beijing:

Now McDonalds are at almost every corner of Beijing... Starbucks are appearing surprisingly here and there in the capital of this once the largest Communist country. ... Beijing receives more than 2.5 million overseas tourists a year, more than half of them speaking English (Noble Theater Bridge Company Press Release).

Li describes a Beijing population mixed not only with resident foreigners but also that 10% of the population called “little capitalists.” The press release also explains how theatre had been considered an “ideological field” by the government and tightly controlled: “But when China succeeded with joining WTO, China is required to open up this sector of the market to the outside world” (Noble Theater Bridge Company Press Release).

Noble Bridge’s first production, *The Power*, adapted from a Chinese legend by Li himself, opened in September 2005. In presenting this Chinese tale in English Li follows ELT production strategy number two, re-presenting translations from the Host culture for the consumption of English-speaking audiences. *The Power* is set in the Zhenguan period, AD 627-649, during the reign of Emperor Taizong. Li hired American director Elena Araoz, and Chinese-Australian Nina Liu for the role of the heroine Mei Niang, a concubine-turned-empress.

Li found that Chinese actresses who had played the role in other dramatizations of her story emphasized the cruelty of a woman who killed her baby to get power and chose Liu for her versatility (Woodhead). All of the cast were Chinese except for Liu and Araoz. Liu told The Sydney Morning Herald that the process of working in two languages slowed the rehearsal process. She also found that she was divided from the cast by differences in acting language: “They attack a character in very different ways. Because of the history of acting here, where it has come from Chinese culture like Peking Opera, they use certain gestures for certain characters so the audience will know straight away who they are” (Woodhead). Li concurs: “It is very hard to make Chinese actors speak English and act at the same time. But the result is good”(“Re: Hi.”). The China Daily found the “diverse stage scenery, with distinctive backgrounds, dazzling costumes, and dancing and music in an ancient Chinese style which will delight audiences” and quoted English-speaking audience members who described the production as the first drama they had seen in a theatre in Beijing (“Chinese Gets a Foreign Accent”). Li has already encountered some of the perennial problems hampering the ELTs of Prague: scarcity of English-speaking actors and the need for a dedicated public relations effort (“Re: Lessons Learned”). Noble Bridge intends to tour *The Power*, and has plans to run a season of 4-6 plays and musicals in a 300-500-seat venue. Like the ELT of Zagreb, Madhouse and Merlin, Noble Bridge has not been founded with a lofty goal of building cultural bridges. Noble Bridge has been conceived as a business venture by a member of the Host culture, based on the perceived needs of that culture. Unlike many of the Prague ELTs, Noble Bridge has a foundation in both the Host and the Performer’s culture.

It remains to be seen how far all of these organizations will be able to build on their initial momentum. Their undertakings, however, whether they succeed or go under, demonstrate an intercultural process that is both globalized and local. They differ in their use of production strategies, suggesting that these do not account for an organization’s success so much as the organization’s structural integration within its host culture, although it appears that ELT production strategy number three, when used judiciously and not arbitrarily (as Exposure’s first bilingual productions appeared) is likely to have the widest appeal. Because each group’s origins are already inherently in some way multicultural, either through the identity of the founder, as in the case of Tong Li, or the identity of the partnering organization, as in the case of Madhouse theatre, the goals of border-crossing through theatre are likelier to be realized more

quickly and perhaps more fully than they were in the English-language theatres of Prague in the nineties, who often had great difficulty in publicizing their events and finding their target market. Their projects exist as a by-product of globalization, yet they are community-driven. They blur boundaries between source and target culture blur and present a hybridity of content and intent.

## APPENDIX

### PRODUCTION CHRONOLOGY OF THEATRES COVERED IN CHAPTERS ONE THROUGH FOUR

In all appendices, proper names are bolded the first time they appear. Entire cast lists are not included but members of the cast and crew who were or would become significant in the ELT community are also noted. Any omissions are unintentional.

#### NORTH AMERICAN THEATRE

Founded by **Peter B. Krogh** in **August 1991**

Company members: **Kerry Skalsky, Chris Porterfield, Karen Christensen, James A. Patten, Kenny Jones**

**First Production:**

*Wenceslas Square* by Larry Shue

Directed Peter B. Krogh

Cast included **Petra Lustigová** and **Lucie Vopalenská**

Delta Klub OKD

Vlastina 887, Prague 6

17 September – 3 October 1991

Subsequent Productions (all at Delta Klub):

*True West* by Sam Shepard  
Directed by James A. Patten  
8-24 October 1991

*Chinaman* by Michael Frayn  
Directed by Peter B. Krogh  
5-21 November 1991

Originally announced as a double-bill with Howard Korder's *Lip Service*

*Zastrozzi* by George C. Walker  
Directed by **John Farrage**  
Designer **Sean Fuller**  
Cast includes **Joadie Newcomb**  
12 – 19 Dec. 1991

Following this production, Kerry Skalsky left the company

*Mud* by Maria Irene Fornes  
Produced by “North American Theatre II”  
Directed by Peter B. Krogh, replaced by Karen Christensen  
Cast includes John Farrage, **Elizabeth Russell**  
25 Jan – 8 Feb. 1992

*Greater Tuna* by Jason Williams, Joe Sears and Ed Howard  
Directed by **Gene De Wild**  
21 April – 28 May 1992

## ASYLUM

Betlémská 7, Prague 5.

Founded by **Jason Godwin** and **Karel Umlauf** December 1992.  
Turned over to management of **Raphie Frank** and **Rik Soehngen** January 1993.  
**Amy Nestor** assisted.

Stage built by the **Prague Project**, a fund for artists run by NYU graduates of the school of dramatic arts, led by **Michael Parsons**. Members included including **Jesse McKinley**.

**Maya Květiny** took charge of Gallery programming.

Czech students involved included **Vojtech Ort**, **Honza Novak** and **Jarda Plesl**.

Vera Chase organized Czech poetry readings.

**First Event:**

Fundraising Party

31 Dec. 1992

**All Dates in 1993.**

Police change locks in mid-January. Frank and Soehngen change them again,

“Australia Day Celebration”

Private party at Asylum

26 January

Showing of French and Indian Cultural Films

February

Developmental Mask Work Rehearsals

February

Rock Video Shoot of Czech band Už Jsme Doma

March

Marathon Reading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

March

Irish Storytelling Workshop

March

James Mitchell Discussion about his one-man show, *Hemingway Reminisces*

24 March

“Playwriting Group Discussion”

13 April

First in a Series of Weekly Meetings.

“Honka- Honka’

Live Performance of American Folk Duo in honor of their first release, “Self-Help Songbook’

15 April

“Tape Show—group exhibition challenging traditional framing format for presentation of artworks.”

16 – 23 April

*Electric Circus: The Carnival*

An Evolution from the March Poetry Carnival, with increased emphasis on visual spectacle.

22 April

“College Art—American artist Matthew O’Sullivan’s interpretation of the Tarot using contemporary imagery.”

24 April – 1 May

“Czech language poetry reading”

28 April

*28 April. Soehngen and Nestor arrive at AMU to sign lease but are told the city refuses third party leases. Renegotiations begin.*

*Bez Masky*

A space specific, collaborative work between Danish actor **Morton Nielsen** and American actor **Peter DuBois**

29 April – 3 May 1993

“Black and white photography: A group exhibition by local Czech University students.”

7 – 9 May

*Danse Macabre*

Original morality play by Englishman **Christopher Lord**. Czech and English-speaking cast, performed in English.

10 - 12 May

“Solo dance performance by British choreographer Lizzy LeQuesne.”

14 – 15 May

*Electric Circus #2*

17 May

*Soehngen and Nestor arrive at AMU 18 May to sign a new sublease agreement but instead are told that DAMU’s storage space was flooded and as a result they needed this space for prop storage. Asylum is given one week to vacate the premises.*

**FINAL EVENT:**

*Aids Awareness Night*

Anthony Lecours

Sponsored by the Linhart’s Foundation

20 May

**The Following shows were scheduled but not performed due to the venue's closure:**

*Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill

Directed by Charles University student **Ilna Knitlová**

This show did rehearse at Asylum, but with the uncertainty about whether the space would remain opened, they were asked to find another space for performance.

16 May

*Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound*

Directed by Christopher Lord. A production inspired by the theatre space and its echo of a great amphitheater. Performed in English. (This would have been postponed in any case because it was still in preparation. It was ultimately performed at Lávka in the autumn of 1994)

19 – 20 May

Nonverbal adaptation of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*.

Performance to evolve through collaboration between Czech and non-Czech actors and musicians, with the intent of crossing the barriers of language.

Directed by **John Farrage**, production of Black Box Theatre.

26 – 28 May

“Exhibition of Children's Art”

30 May – 8 June



**STUDIO THEATRE/BLACK BOX THEATRE/BLACK BOX  
INTERNATIONAL THEATRE**

Founded by **Elizabeth Russell, Joadie Newcomb** and **Holt Sivak** in **May 1991**

**First Production:**

*Crimes of the Heart* by Elizabeth Henley  
Directed by Holt Sivak  
Assisted by Elizabeth Russell, who also performed  
Cast includes Joadie Newcomb  
Club Prosek, Jablonecka Street. Prague 8  
2 – 5 May

Studio Theatre reformed in the spring of 1992, under the co-artistic directorship of Elizabeth Russell and **John Farrage**.

**Subsequent Productions:**

*The Brute* by Anton Chekhov and *The Lesson* by Eugene Ionesco, with *The Clever Cobbler*, an adaptation of a Bohemian fairytale by Joadie Newcomb (Newcomb is now described as “artist in residence”)  
Directed by **Richard Allen Greene**  
Cast includes **John Hašek**  
Classic Prague Club  
Pařížská 4, Prague 1  
14 – 24 March 1992

*A Legend* by Daniela Fischerová, translated by **Stephen Finn**  
World Premiere in English  
Directed by John Farrage  
Cast includes **Alex Gammie, Deborah Michaels**  
Divadlo pod Palmovkou  
Třída Rudé Armady 34, Prague 8  
28 May – 6 June 1992

During the run of A Legend Studio Theatre changed its name to Black Box Theatre.

as **BLACK BOX THEATRE**:

“Associate Partners” listed as John Farrage, Elizabeth Russell and Alexandra Gammie.

**First Production**

*U R Who You Eat* by Ultraviolet

Directed by John Farrage  
Cast includes **Victoria Shobris**  
Reduta Theatre  
Národní Třída 20, Prague 1  
22 – 31 Oct. 1992

**Subsequent Productions:  
1992-1993**

*The Unseen Hand* by Sam Shepard  
Associate Partners now listed as John Farrage, Elizabeth Russell, Alex Gammie and Victoria Shobris  
Directed by Elizabeth Russell  
Lighting Designer **Raphie Frank**  
Cast includes **Steve Spehar**  
PKC Club  
ZZŽenské Domovy, Stropeznického 1, Prague 5  
2 – 3 Dec. 1992  
A-Studio Rubín  
Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1  
7 – 10 Dec. 1992

*Lay Down by Me* by **Jim Bunch**  
World Premiere  
Directed initially by John Farrage, then by **Jane Hradec** and John Farrage  
Lighting Designer John Farrage  
Lighting Advisors Raphie Frank and **Rik Soehngen**  
Ubiquity  
Fetish Club at Pařížská 9, Prague 1  
18 - 28 March 1993

*Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett  
Directed by Alex Gammie  
Assistant Director **Corey Washburn**  
Cast includes **Alison Murchie, Robert Russell**  
Radost F/X Club  
Bělehradská 120, Prague 2  
25 - 29 May 1993

Nonverbal production of *Ghost Sonata* by August Strindberg  
Directed by John Farrage  
Scheduled for performance 26 -28 May 1993 at Asylum, Betlémská 7, Prague 1  
Cancelled when the venue closed down

The 1993 Summer Festival of New Plays, including:

*The Absolutely Awesome Giant* by Bruce Shearer  
Directed by **Karma Ibsen**  
World Premiere  
Divadelní Ostrov, Strelecký Island, Prague 1.  
30 July – 5 August 1993

*The Baroness and the Maid* by Michael Mackenzie  
Directed by Elizabeth Russell  
Stage hand **Jennifer Yeager**  
Cast includes **Andrea Miltner**  
Dejvické Divadlo, Zelená 15, Prague 6  
3 – 8 September 1993

*I Am Marguerite* by Shirley Barrie  
World Premiere  
Directed by **Alan Kinnaird**  
**Divadlo v Celetné** (Franz Kafka Divadlo), Celetná 19, Prague 1  
9 – 13 Sept. 1993

*Possible Worlds* by John Mighton  
Directed by John Farrage  
Cast includes **Randall Lyman**, Sean Fuller  
Reduta Theatre  
Národní třída 20, Prague 1  
13 – 22 September 1993

“Player’s Workshops” held Tuesdays and Thursdays, November 1993, at Dům dětí,  
Karlinské Náměstí 9, Prague 8  
lead to an evening of “Theatresports”  
Repré Rock Club, Divadelní Olympika,  
2 Dec. 1993

**1994**

*Grace* by Doug Lucie  
Directed by Nancy Bishop  
Associate Partners now listed as Elizabeth Russell, John Farrage (on sabbatical), Alexandra  
Gammie, Victoria Shobris  
Cast includes Alex Gammie, Sean Fuller, Alison Murchie, Victoria Shobris, Elizabeth Russell,  
Gavin Stewart, Steve Hallam  
Žižkovské Divadlo TGM, Stíného 5, Prague 3  
18 – 26 March 1994

*Alenka in Wonderland/Alice v Říši Divů* adapted from Lewis Carroll  
by Elizabeth Russell, Deborah Morrison and cast  
Directed by Deborah Morrison  
Cast includes Matthew Salt  
Toured 8 Prague schools May 1994  
(names of schools and exact dates of performances unavailable)  
Appeared at Labyrint Studio, Štefániková 57, Prague 5  
26 – 30 May 1994  
and Roxy Klub, Dlouhá 33, Prague 1  
3 – 4 June 1994

The 1994 Summer Festival of Czech 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Plays, including:

*R.U.R.* by Karel Čapek  
Directed by Nancy Bishop  
Cast includes **William Hollister, Don Nixon, Michael Halstead, Lucie Wenigerová,**  
“Robot Maintenance” **Richard Toth**  
14 – 23 July 1994

*Agathamania* by Arnošt Goldflam, translated by **Barbara Day**  
English-language Premiere  
Directed by Deborah Morrison  
Cast includes **Anne Goforth** in silent role of “court typist” created by Morrison  
28 July – 6 Aug. 1994

*Fire in the Basement* by Pavel Kohout  
Directed by Alan Kinnaird  
Cast includes **Raphie Frank, Ian Falconer, Heather Ondersma**  
11 – 20 Aug. 1994

*Karhan's Men* by Vašek Káňa, translated by Victoria Shobris  
English-language Premiere  
Directed by **Maggie Speer**, replaced by Deborah Morrison  
Based on a suggestion from **Lida Engelová**  
Dramaturgical assistance from Eva Šormová of the Theatre Institute  
Cast includes **Chip Persons, Taline Sheriff**  
25 Aug. – 3 Sept. 1994

All Performances at Gag Theatre, Národní 25, Prague 1

*Night, Mother* by Marsha Norman  
Directed by Karma Ibsen  
Karlín Theatre, Hudební Divadlo Karlín  
Křižíkova 10, Prague 8  
3 – 12 Nov. 1994

## 1995

“Shakespeare Workshops” led by **Kate Buckley**, associate artistic director of Chicago Shakespeare Repertory Company  
Dům Děti a Mladež (Karlinské Spektrum Centre), Karlinské Náměstí 7, Prague 8  
7 – 21 May 1995

Revival of *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett  
Restaged by Alex Gammie, Cast as before  
A-Studio Rubín  
Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1  
23 June – 2 July 1995

### The 1995 Summer Festival of Czech 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Plays, including:

*Protest* by Václav Havel and *Permit* by Pavel Kohout  
Directed by Nancy Bishop  
Cast includes **Louis Charbonneau, Jiří Datel Novotný**  
13 – 29 July 1995

*No Tragedy: A small Czech Macbeth* by Přemysl Rut, translated by Hana Anděrová and David Speranza  
English-language premiere  
Directed by **Peter DuBois**  
Cast includes **Gregory Dayton Linington, Don Nixon**  
3 – 12 Aug. 1995

*Lemonade Joe* by Jiří Brdečka, translated by Věra Oráčová, music by Vlastimíl Hála and Jan Rychlík, English lyrics by Věra Oráčová and Steve Hallam  
English-language theatrical and musical premiere  
Directed by Heather Ondersma  
Cast included **Kristen Flores, Eoin Dubsy, Shannon McCormick**  
17 Aug. – 2 Sept. 1995

All performances at Divadlo Komedie, Jungmannová 1, Prague 1

Victoria Shobris leaves the Czech Republic in late 1995.

As co-production with Misery Loves Company (Black Box producers include Elizabeth Russell and Alex Gammie):

*Angels in America* by Tony Kushner

Directed by **Richard Toth**, assistant director **Ewan McLaren**

Cast includes Chris Clarke, Angela Madden, Markéta Trešnáková, Taline Sherrif, **David Nykl**, Tyren Scott Thomas, Gregory Linington, Chip Persons, Anne Goforth, Richard Toth

Designed by William Hollister, Music by **David Babka**

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

Opened 7 Dec. 1995, ran in repertory until April 1996

Alex Gammie leaves the Czech Republic in December 1996

## 1996

Nancy Bishop returns to Prague in the spring of 1996 as artistic director of Black Box

Forms an ensemble consisting of, Shannon McCormick, **Stevie Desaille**, Elizabeth Russell

**Scott Bellefeuille**.

Bishop begins assembling the first **Black Box Board of Directors**, including Jennifer Yeager, Tony Denny, Jan Suchanek, Jiří Datel Novotný

*Black Box Benefit: Fifteen-Minute Hamlet* by Tom Stoppard and *Mistake* by Václav Havel

Directed by Nancy Bishop

Cast includes **Ivan Havel**

Klub X

Na Příkopě 15, Prague 1

5 June 1996

*The Sure Thing* by David Ives

Directed by Elizabeth Russell

Klub X

Na Příkopě 15, Prague 1

3 July 1996

*The Memorandum* by Václav Havel

Directed by Nancy Bishop

Stage Manager **Dennis Moran**

Cast includes **C. Denby Swanson**

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

2 – 11 Aug. 1996

Elizabeth Russell leaves Prague in the summer of 1996.

Revival of *The Memorandum* to honor Václav Havel's birthday with reception and panel following.

Panel includes Dr. Barbara Day and Pozor editor-in-chief Louis Charbonneau.

Klub Lávka, Novotného Lávka 1, Prague 1.

5-6 Oct. 1996

*Speed-the-Plow* by David Mamet

Directed by Shannon McCormick

Cast includes **Kate Petrosky, Dave Ulrich**

Klub Lávka, Novotného Lávka 1, Prague 1.

26 Nov. 1996 – 17 Jan. 1997

## 1997

**Maura Gedid** joins Black Box as producer

Black Box changes under Czech law from a Foundation to an Association

John Farrage is formally removed from all Black Box paperwork.

Bishop and Gedid obtain power of attorney from the original founders (process complete by July 1997).

*Translations* by Brian Friel

Directed by Nancy Bishop

Cast includes **Gail Fitzpatrick, Noel le Bon, Michael McGuffie, Tom O'Leary, Jan Vlasák**

Sponsored in part by grants from the ArtsLink Foundation, the CECC International Partners of New York, and the Cultural Relations Committee of the Irish Government, Dublin

Labyrinth Studio

Štefániková 57, Prague 5

14 March – 29 April 1997

Appeared at Hradec Králové Festival Spring 1997 (exact dates unavailable)

Benefit for Black Box Theatre and the Czech Helsinki Committee:

*Letter to Wollongong* by Jara Moserová-Davidová

Directed by **Frances Colquhoun**

Cast includes **Daša Blahová**, Jiří Datel Novotný

At the British Council, Národní Třída 10, Prague 1

24 June 1997

The 1997 Summer Theatre Festival, including:

*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, adapt. Stephen Berkoff

Directed by Nancy Bishop

Designer **Pavlina McEhnhroe**

Movement Coach **Corinne Ott**

Production Stage Manager **Gwen Orel**

Cast includes **Robert Orr**

21 Jul. – 19 Aug. 1997

*Letter to Wollongong* by Jaroslava Moserová  
Directed by Frances Colquhoun  
Cast includes **Chris Channer**  
21 – 25 Aug. 1997

Revival of *Translations* by Brian Friel  
26 – 30 Jul. 1997  
All at Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

Board listed in Summer Festival program includes Dr. Barbara Day, **Marc Ellenbogen**, Alex Gammie, **Michele L. Green**, **Dr. Ivan M. Havel**, **Peggy Krikava**, Jiří Datel Novotný, Elizabeth Russell, Victoria Shobris, Jennifer Yeager

*The Metamorphosis* appeared at the Dublin Fringe Festival  
City Arts Centre  
Oct. 1997

As co-production with Misery Loves Company:  
*Quills* by Doug Wright  
Producer **Jennifer Yeager**  
Directed by **Chuck Harper**  
Percussionist **Jef Bek**  
Designer **Wim de Vos**  
Cast includes **Chris Clarke**, **David Nykl**, **Peter Alton**  
Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1  
Supported in part by a grant from the ArtsLink Foundation  
15 Nov. – Dec. 1997 (exact date unavailable)

Company changes name to **BLACK BOX INTERNATIONAL THEATRE:**

## **1998**

*Quills* revival (not as co-production) at Činoherní klub, Ve Smečkách 26, Prague 1  
7 – 11 Jul. 1998

*Quills* tours to Germany:  
Friends of the Italian Opera  
Fidicinstrasse 40, 10965 Berlin (Kreuzberg)  
14 – 19 Jul. 1998

*Europe for Tibet*  
A Festival for Tibet, produced with the Linhart Foundation



Included showing of films, and three presentations of the Essential Theatre Company of Dublin in *Xixang* by Neville Carlyle Style  
Roxy, Dlouhé 33, Prague 1  
7 – 9 Sept. 1998

Black Box International Theatre hires **Václav (Vášek) Šneberger** as producer

*Oceans* by Arnošt Goldflam  
Directed by **Ewan McLaren**  
Staged Reading  
Cast includes David Nykl, Pavel Kříz, Jan Unger, Petra Lustigová, **Jan Horvat**  
British Council Auditorium, Národní Třída 10, Prague 1  
2 Nov. 1998  
Divadlo Na zábradlí  
3 Nov. 1998

*Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill  
Directed by Dan Fleischer-Brown  
Cast includes **Joel Sugarman**  
Divadlo v Řeznické  
14 – 27 Nov. 1998

*Cloud 9* invited to play at Friends of the Italian Opera, 11- 25 April 1999, but Black Box is unable to accept the offer

## 1999

“Viewpoints” Workshop  
Led by Joel Sugarman  
Americká 1, Prague 2  
Every Sunday, Feb. 1999

*Betrayal* by Harold Pinter  
Directed by Dan Fleischer-Brown  
Cast includes **Clotilde le Grand, Dave O’Kelly, Kuba Shwartz**  
Benefit Performance:  
Divadlo Skelet, Opatelova 5, Prague 1  
8 April 1999  
Subsequent performances 9 – 20 April 1999

The Black Box Board fires Nancy Bishop at Board Meeting 12 April 1999  
At this time the Chairman of the Board is Dr. Barbara Day. The board consists of Pavel Bratinka, Martin Cullen, Antonin Dockalek, Věra Egermayerova, Marc Ellenbogen, Jiří Datel Novotný, Randall Filer, Michele Green, Peggy Krikava, Bohumil Nekolny, Weston Stacey

*The Trial* by Franz Kafka, Adapt. Gwen Orel  
Directed by Nancy Bishop

Composer (and musical performer) **Ondřej Adámek**

Designer Pavlina McEhnhroie

Masks by Joel Sugarman

Cast includes **David Maj**, Petra Lustigová, **Rich Gold**, Jan Unger, Scott Bellefeuille

Divadlo Skelet

Opletelová 5, Prague 1

15 June – 7 July 1999

Václav (Vášek) Šneberger quits as producer of Black Box

*The Trial* tours to Dublin

Producers are **Sile Ni Bhraoin** and **Susan Faulkner**

Adámek replaced by sound effects from **Vincent Doherty**

Crypt Arts Centre

Dublin Castle, Dublin 2

20 – 25 Sept. 1999

## SMALL AND DANGEROUS

Founded by **Victoria Jones, Clare Goddard** and **Camille Hunt** in September 1992

### **First Production:**

*Belongings*, consisting of three one-act plays:

*Belongings* by Tim Stanley

Cast includes **Petra Kohoutová, Gordon Weiss**

*Who Will Untie Us?* by Bryn Haworth

Cast includes Paul Chilvers, Maria Straw

*Icebreaker* by **Robert Russell**

Cast includes **Gavin Stewart, Bryony Martin**

All directed by Clare Goddard

A-Studio Rubín

Malostranské náměstí 9, Prague 1

22 Oct. 1992

### **Subsequent Productions:**

*Semtex: Several Minor Disturbances*, consisting of four one-act plays:

*Sailor* by Victoria Jones

*Boy, Girl and Probability* by Vijai Maheshwari

*Hanging* by Clare Goddard

*That Play by What's-his-name* by Bryn Haworth

Cast includes **Sean Fuller, Morton Nielsen, Bryony Martin, Richard Tennant, Steve Spehar, Ann Marsh**

Directed and Produced by Clare Goddard and Victoria Jones

Assisted by **Peter DuBois** and Camille Hunt

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

3 – 7 April 1993

*Curtains*, consisting of three one-act plays:

*Cowboys and Indians* by **Robert M. Eversz**

*Lila: Conversation with a Mirror* by William Lee

*Duet for Killers* by **Mark A. Rayner**

Directed and produced by Camille Hunt, Clare Goddard, Victoria Jones

Cast includes **Jirka Štefl, Armagan Ballantyne, Lori Wyant**

A-Studio Rubín

Malostranské náměstí 9, Prague 1

1 – 5 July 1993

*Stand*, consisting of two one-act plays:

*Death in Smichov* by Sean Fuller

Cast includes **Matthew Salt**

Directed by **Gavin Stewart**

*Refugees* by William Lee

Directed by Victoria Jones  
Cast includes **Alison Murchie, Stephanie Howard**  
23-31 Oct. 1994

*Memoir* by John Murrell  
Directed by Clare Goddard  
Cast includes Laura Cox, Robert Russell  
A-Studio Rubín  
Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1  
5 – 8 April 1995

## MISERY LOVES COMPANY

Founded by **Richard Toth, David Nykl and Ewan McLaren** in March 1994

### **First Production:**

*The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine* by Leah Cherniak, Martha Ross and Robert Morgan

Directed by Richard Toth

Cast includes David Nykl, **Petra Špalková**

Music: "Honza" Jan Kořínek

"Inspiration": Boris Hybner

Studio Gag, Národní 25, Prague 1

21 May - 26 June 1994

Cast includes David Nykl, Allison Sanders

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

**Petra Špalková** replaces Allison Sanders

1 Dec. 1994 – Oct. 1995

### **Subsequent Productions:**

(all run in repertory; end-dates not always available)

*Nightingale for Dinner* by Josef Topol, trans. Eva Turnová

Directed by Ewan McLaren

Cast includes **Jan Vlasák, Tat'jana Medvecká, Petr Vaček, Barbara Lukešová**

Divadlo Kolowrat (National Theatre), Ovocný Trh 6, Prague 1

14 June – 5 July 1994

Plzeň International Theatre Festival

11 Nov. 1994

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

Dec. 1994 – Oct. 1995

Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, The Demarco European Art Foundation,  
Edinburgh, Scotland

13 – 19 Aug. 1995

Plans to produce Peter Handke's *Kaspar* were aborted

October, 1994, MLC prepares to take up residency in Divadlo Celetné (Celetná 19, Prague 1) and run in repertory there. All shows perform at Celetná unless otherwise noted.

*King Stag* by Carlo Gozzi, adapted by Richard Toth and the company

Co-production with **Divadelní Špalek Kašpar**

Directed by Richard Toth

Cast includes Chris Clarke, David Nykl, Sean Fuller, Laura Zam, Chip Persons, Gregory Linington, Taline Sherrif Petra Špalková, Robert Russell, Barbora Kodetová, Gustav Řezníček, Jakub Špalek, Jan Potměšil, Petr Vobecký

Music: **Karen Sell, Celise Kalke**

Design: William Hollister

19 June 1995 – 16 June 1996

*Angels in America (Millennium Approaches and Perestroika)* by Tony Kushner

Co-production with **Black Box Theatre**

Directed by Richard Toth

Cast includes Anne Goforth, Angela Madden, Markéta Třešnáková, Tyren Scott Thomas

Music: **David Babka**

Dec. 1995 (exact end date unavailable; one year run)

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard

Directed by **Webster Forrest**

Cast includes **Dave Ulrich, Eon Dubsky, Katie Petrosky, Howie Lotker, Jan Nemejovsky, Scott Bellefeuille**

20 Feb. 1996 (end date unavailable)

*Circles, Holes and Arches* by **Laura Zam**

Directed by Kate Petrosky

Design Webster Forrest

25 June 1996 – 22 Aug. 1997

*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Bertolt Brecht

Directed by **Victoria Jones**

Music: **Jeremy Saxon, David Babka**

Design: William Hollister, **John Comer**

May – 13 Dec. 1996

*Blue Window* by Craig Lucas

Directed by **Barbara Bosch**

21 Sept. – 12 Oct. 1996

*The Age of Reason* by Sean Fuller, after Jean-Paul Sartre

Directed by Richard Toth

Cast includes **Jeff Spector, Patricia Combeaud, Donna Alexander, Ewan McLaren**  
25 Oct. – 14 Nov. 1996

*Oleanna* by David Mamet  
Directed by David Nykl  
Cast includes Richard Toth, Kate Petrosky  
27 Jan – 15 April 1997

*December of All Things* by Sean Fuller  
Directed by Sean Fuller  
Cast includes **Maggie Gyllenhaal**, David Nykl, Chris Clarke, Laura Zam, Cary Hegdahl  
Vera Oračová on piano, Noel Le Bon on bass

These plays, though not called Big Knees, were all new productions with limited runs:

*Sol* by William Hollister  
Directed by David Nykl  
4 July 1997  
(one night only)

*Bad Gorilla, Bad!*  
Written and Performed by Rebecca Floyd  
Directed by John Heckel  
July 1997  
(One night only)

*The One Who Is*  
Co-production with Theatre Company One  
Directed by Wim de Vos  
16 May – 23 June 1998

*A Song for Seven Cities And Other Tunes from the Nation of Seams* by Dennis Davis and Alva Rogers, adapted from the opera by Kurt Weill  
Directed by Peter DuBois  
Movement by Richard Toth  
Clemente Soto Velez Milagro Theatre, 107 Suffolk St, NYC June 1998

*Grave Matters*  
Nonverbal Performance created by **Joel Sugarman** and Chris Clarke  
“Third Eye“ provided by **Dan Fleischer-Brown**  
Assistant **Susan Faulkner**  
4 Feb. 1999  
revived Nov. 1999

*Kretschmer's Diary* by Mary Luckhurst  
Directed by Dan Fleischer-Brown  
March 1999 (exact dates unavailable)

*As You Like It* by William Shakespeare  
Directed by Dan Fleischer-Brown  
Divadlo Globe '99, U Výstaviště 1/15, Prague 7  
Sept. 1999 (exact dates unavailable)

## **BIG KNEES**

(most Big Knees shows ran from one- three months in rep)

*Tea and Symphony* by Chris Clark and Steve Hallam  
Directed by Richard Toth



Labyrinth Studio, Štefániková 57, Prague 5

Aug. 1994

Then Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

Dec. 1994

*Self-Help* by Sean Fuller

Directed by Richard Toth

A-Studio Rubín, Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1

Sept. 1994

Then Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1, on bill with “Tea and Symphony”

*Love Falls Asleep* by **Chris Beneke**

Directed by Sean Fuller

A-Studio Rubín, Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1

Sept. 1994

*Big Knees (On Gomorrah)*, Two one-acts including:

Savage/Love by Sam Shepard and Joe Chaiken

Directed by **Peter DuBois**

Thursday Morning by Laura Zam

21 Jan. 1995

Moves to A-Studio Rubín, Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1

1 – 7 Feb. 1995

*Big Knees (on Superman)* includes:

*Shoot Him In The Head* by Sean Fuller

Directed by Victoria Jones

14 Feb. – 10 March. 1995

*Big Knees (On Rebecca)*,

*3 Chunks of Zam* by Laura Zam

(plays include *Dominica*, *Seven Maxims*, and *The Mystery of Trees*)

Directed by David Nykl

24 April – 22 May 1995

*The Best of Big Knees Festival*

*Shoot Him In The Head* by Sean Fuller

5 – 6 July 1995

*3 Chunks of Zam* by Laura Zam

7 July 1995; 9 July 1995

*Tea and Symphony* by Steve Hallam and Chris Clarke; *Self-Help* by Sean Fuller

8 July 1995

*Wind Up* by Sean Fuller

Directed by Chris Clarke  
Sept. – Nov. 1995 (exact dates unavailable)

*Big Knees (On Hank Marvin)*, including  
*Going Where the Sun Shines Brightly* by **Gavin Stewart**  
Directed by **Richard Tennant**  
Jan. 1996 (exact dates unavailable)

*Big Knees (On Goliath)*, including  
*Repelling Objects* by Dave Ulrich  
Directed by **Joshua Gray**  
*In Progress* by **David Speranza**  
Directed by Gregory Linington  
9 March – 23 April 1996

*Big Knees on Bořivoj*, including two one-acts  
*Dumb* by Richard Toth and William Hollister  
Directed by Richard Toth  
*Wild* by Anne Goforth  
Directed by Anne Goforth  
Costume and Props: **Maura Gedid**  
1 July 1996 (no end date avail)  
*Dumb* appeared as late night “nočník,” 21 Nov. 1996 in Prague.  
It toured to New York Fringe Festival, Aug. 1997 Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Project,  
107 Suffolk Street, NYC.

Two Can Live As Cheaply by **David Freeling**  
2 Nov. 1996

## CLASS ACTS

*Little Shop of Horrors*; Book and Lyrics by Howard Ashman, Music by Alan Menken (based on the screenplay by Charles Griffith)  
Directed by **Leah Gaffen**  
Performed by the students of nad Alejí High School in schools, Divadlo Rokoko and Divadlo v Celetné

*Some Like It Hot*, Book by Peter Stone, based on the movie by Billy Wilder, songs by Jule Styne and Bob Merrill, and starred Robert Morse, Tony Roberts, Elaine Joyce, and Cyril Richard  
Directed by Leah Gaffen and **Amery Rock**  
Performed by the students of nad Alejí High School in schools, Divadlo Rokoko and Divadlo v Celetné

*1995 Class Acts Theatre Festival*

Students from Gymnasium nad Alejí, Gymnázium Českolipská. Akademické Gymnasium (Brno), Gymnasium Sladkovského, Gymnasium Slovanské (Olomouc)

*1 Chekhov 2 Acts*, an evening of one-acts by Anton Chekhov including:

*The Bear* and *The Proposal*

Directed by **David Fisher**

Cast includes David Nykl, Anne Goforth, David Fisher, Robert Russell, Chip Persons

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

And schools in the Czech Republic

Autumn 1995- 1996

*Black Comedy* by Peter Schaeffer

Directed by Leah Gaffen and Amery Rock

Performed by students of various Czech High Schools at Divadlo v Řeznické

1996

## EXPOSURE

Founded by **Richard Allen Greene** and **Deborah Michaels** in autumn 1994.

Advisory Committee: Janice Edwards, Richard Allen Greene, Evan Z. Lazar, Virginia Marston, Deborah Michaels, Coleen Nelson, Lyle Zimskind

Reading of *Mississippi Nude* by John Reaves.

Cast includes **Deborah Michaels**.

Dec. 1994 (exact date unavailable)

Reading of *The Way We Live Now* by Susan Sontag

Adapt. Edward Parone, Trans. Pavel Vereš

Directed by Richard Allen Greene

Cast includes **Deborah Michaels, Lucie Wenigerová, Michael Halstead, Jiří Babek, Steve Hallam**

14 – 24 Feb.

Both held at the Slovak Cultural Center (Slovenský Inštitút v Praze)

Purkyňa 4/53, Prague 1

### **First Full Production:**

*Colette in Love* by Lavonne Mueller, trans. By Jana Švecová

Directed by **Heather Ondersma**.

Cast includes **Katka Březinová** and **Gregory Linington**

Sound design **Scott Bellefeuille**

Piano **Steve Hallam**

A-Studio Rubín, Malostranské Náměstí 9, Prague 1

2 – 17 June 1995

*Enola* by Charles Henrich, trans. Jana Švecová

Directed by Michael Halstead

Assistant Director **Rik Soehngen**

Set Design **William Hollister**

Cast includes **Karel Umlauf, Hana Frejková, Eoin Dubsy, Anne Goforth**

Divadlo Komédie, Jungmannová 1, Prague 1

6 – 8 July 1995

In the program for this show, Richard Allen Greene is listed as Artistic Director.

Advisory Committee has now added to its original members Isabella Adamec, Jiří Babek, Justin Hochberg, Jan Jira, Irena Prokopová, Paul Riddleberger, Jan Svěrak, Jiří Votruba

After this production, Richard Allen Greene turned over the management of the company to Michael Halstead and Mark Corner.

*Zoo Story* by Edward Albee  
Directed by Richard Allen Greene  
Divadlo TGM (Masaryk Theatre), Štíného 5, Prague 3  
10 Feb. 1996

*Just Another Blasted Love Song* by Mark Corner, trans. Barbora Štefanová  
Directed by Michael Halstead (now listed as Artistic Director)  
Set Design **John Comer**  
Cast includes Hana Frejková, Kateřina Klimšová, **Christopher Cowley**  
Labyrinth Studio, Štefaniková 57, Prague 5  
21 – 28 June 1996

Tours to Plzeň, Pardubice and Ústí nad Labem in March – April 1997.

**Markéta Atanasová** replaces Kateřina Klimšová on tour

British Council, 28 March 1997

Revived at Labyrinth Studio November 1997 (exact dates unavailable)

Additions to the Advisory Committee include Nina Divišová, Stephen B. Heintz, **Jan Kačer**, Jaromír Zbroj

The following productions were not produced bilingually:

*The Infante* by Michael Halstead  
Directed by **Robert Russell**  
Cast includes Philip O'Neill, Jeff Smith, Kateřina Daňková, Stephen Fisher, Ryan Turner, Mark Corner  
Labyrinth Studio, Štefaniková 57, Prague 5  
2 Dec. 1996 – 17 Feb. 1997

Artistic Directors now listed as Michael Halstead, Mark Corner, Markéta Atanasová

Additions to the Advisory Committee are Richard Allen Greene, Prof. Martin Hilský

Planned but not produced:

*Taking Sides* by Ronald Harwood

Co-production with **Misery Loves Company**

Directed by Michael Halstead

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1

1 – 6 July 1997, then entering the MLC repertory

*Europe* by David Grieg  
Directed by Michael Halstead  
Lighting Design **Wim de Vos**  
Cast includes **Noel le Bon**, **Eva Horká**, Zdeňek Maryška, Wim De Vos, Elin Špidlová. Richard Prošperí, John Comer

Divadlo v Celetné, Celetná 19, Prague 1  
10 March – 18 April 1998

*Planned but not produced:*

*Czech-Mate* by Mark Corner, trans. **Ondřej Pilný**

(This would have been a bilingual production)

## **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS**

This section includes descriptions of other English-language theatre workers in Prague of the nineties, whose activities affected the groups investigated in the main body of this essay, as well as a summary of Artists for Prague. Unless otherwise noted, sources are included in the Works Cited list.

## Christopher Lord's Threshold: Poetic Transformations

Christopher Lord produced only a handful of shows, but nearly everyone involved in English-language theatre saw at least one of them. Lord attempted to create a kind of mytho-poetic drama, usually working with Czech imagery and legend. Lord, a political theorist who has published and edited several serious treatises about central Europe, including *Central Europe: Core or Periphery?* (Copenhagen Business School Press, 2000), and *Parallel Cultures* (Ashgate, 2001), edited a journal of international relations for the Czech ministry of affairs in the nineties, and authored numerous letters to the editor of the Prague Post about issues relating to the EU, NATO and the transition. Lord was one of English-language theatre's most fervent supporters. He, with Black Box's Alex Gammie, published the newsletter "Theatre News."

Christopher Lord's *Danse Macabre* was billed as a production by Threshold Theatre. The title of the "company" (really just Lord himself, and whoever helped on individual productions) was based on the probably mythical etymology of Praha deriving from the Czech word for threshold, "Prah" (Lord, "Personal Interview"). Like so many theatrical undertakings in Prague, Lord organized the production through social encounters. In 1992-93, English speakers and those interested in theatre routinely gathered at a café called Hogo Fogo, even, for a time, holding regular meetings there to discuss projects.<sup>67</sup> *Danse Macabre* was an allegorical drama first produced 24 March 1993 at Divadlo v Celetné, then reprised at the Asylum space in May.

Like Robert Wilson, Lord sought imaginative distancing in his productions, which abstracted the Czech imagery in the design. Andrzej Wirth explains:

...interculturalism is for Wilson a vehicle *not* for cultural understanding, but for distancing, and luring the spectator into a meditative trance, as the only one comfortable position of appreciation in view of the displayed diversity (285).

Lord's allegory of medieval figures including "Power," "Beauty," "A Pointless Clown," evoked the architecture of Prague, specifically the Astronomical Clock (known in Prague as "Orloj" or just "clock") in Old Town Hall (which is very near Divadlo v Celetné): whenever that

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<sup>67</sup> The café is named for a character in the popular Czech spoof of American Westerns, the film *Limonádový Joe* (*Lemonade Joe*).



clock strikes the hour there is a procession of the 12 Apostles, preceded by the figure of death. The other moving figures include a Turk shaking his head, Vanity looking at herself in a mirror, and Greed, figured after the medieval caricature of a Jew (Soukup 74)<sup>68</sup>. Lord's play did not dramatize the procession of the figures in the Astronomical Clock but his reference to them attempted to engage his source culture and his host culture through not only allegory but also metaphor. The production also included music—there were three Czech musicians, playing piano, organ and clarinet, and some of the characters ended their monologues with dancing. The character of Knowledge, played by John Farrage, is the only one who speaks in prose, giving a detailed anthropological history of humanity.

Lord often borrowed imagery and techniques from Czech and Asian theatre forms. His adaptation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in November '94 at Lávka was inspired in part by a Japanese theatre company that had visited Prague (although the puppets used in the reading were based on Indonesian shadow puppets).<sup>69</sup> The company presented scenes in the Nô, Kabuki and Bunraku traditions. Lord remembers:

...the Bunraku particularly impressed me. That was the direct source for the puppets, and for the technique of using more than one figure to represent the same character ("Shadow Puppets and Prometheus Bound").

Like auteur director Peter Sellars, who first encountered Bunraku at age 13, Lord was inspired directly by the power of the theatricality, although he was untrained in Japanese philosophy or history. Sellars' impulse to use Japanese theatrical styles included a critique of the excesses of capitalism and Western culture (qtd in Flynn 187). Lord's piece included similar critiques. While in 1993 such implied criticism of Capitalism was not popular in Prague, Czech theatre had a long tradition of interest in Asian puppetry and theatre. Prague School theorist Jiří Veltruský analyzed the stage figure in Bunraku puppetry in "Puppets for Adults: The Theatre de Manitous" and Karel Brusák wrote about semiotics in Chinese performance in his 1976 article "Signs in the Chinese Theater" (Quinn 80-81). The reading of *Prometheus Bound* was in English and read by a Greek diplomat; as in *Danse Macabre*, there was a Czech musician.

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<sup>68</sup> The horns and beard of the Jew on the clock were removed from the figure of Greed figure after World War II (Mastrini).

<sup>69</sup> This play was scheduled for production at Asylum in late May 1993, but Lord needed more time to prepare. Postponing was not possible after the venue closed and ultimately it was produced over a year later.

Another production that used puppets was *Trés Mujeres de Espana (Three Women of Spain)* in 1995. Like *Danse Macabre*, this play used allegorical figures in an attempt to represent what Lord described in his program as a “schizophrenic” technical device in which three women portrayed aspects of the same character: Debilidad (weakness), Imprudencia (imprudence) and Tentacion (temptation). *Trés Mujeres* included large shadow puppets, designed and operated by Kate Watson, who had played the Pointless Clown in *Danse Macabre*. It featured two Czech women and one American, and was sponsored by the British Council. The production had two productions in English at the British Council, and one in Czech at a small theatre in a town outside of Prague (nobody involved can remember which town). Český Rohlas (state-run Czech Radio) bought the rights, but never produced it (Lord, Personal Interview).

## Peter DuBois' Academic Experiments

When Peter DuBois, now Associate Director at New York's Public Theater, arrived in Prague in 1992, he was particularly interested in the avant-garde and techniques of deconstruction. On the train to Prague from Vienna he met a contact that led him to Jesse Webb of Artists for Prague. DuBois became an acting coach for AFP's second production of *A Christmas Carol*. In the spring of 1993, DuBois became involved with the student Asylum, and performed there in the nonverbal mask performance *Bez Masky*.<sup>70</sup> After the Asylum space was reappropriated by DAMU as a storage space for props, DuBois looked for other venues to develop his deconstructed investigations in theatre.

After assisting Victoria Jones on the Small and Dangerous production of *Refugees* in the fall of 1993, DuBois directed an original work called *Freeway Fables* at Obecní Dům Gallery (Municipal House) in late May 1994.<sup>71</sup> DuBois had met playwright Nina Vandervoort, a Czech-American, and wanted to do the piece as a semiotic exercise:

...[to explore] the idea that we believe in representations of truth as opposed to truth; the idea that people were not able to tell the real thing from representation (DuBois, Personal Interview).

DuBois succeeded in getting McDonald's to fund the production, because of a monologue delivered in a McDonald's bathroom (DuBois, Personal Interview). William Hollister found the tension between the site and content of performance compelling:

That was for me the great paradox of Americans hanging out there—the denim, the cowboy boots and all. The goatees just didn't cut it in a room where Alphonse Mucha took tea. And somehow doing this play here said that, overtly or by accident (Hollister, "Re: Freeway Fables").

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<sup>70</sup> As discussed in the section on [Asylum](#), DuBois was not one of Asylum's founders, though he did help run it, and worked at the bar along with Victoria Jones. Australian Jason Goodwin and Czech Karel Umlauf first founded Asylum, and it was subsequently run by Raphie Frank and Erica Soehngen.

<sup>71</sup> Black Box's Nancy Bishop performed in the cast, the only time she worked in ELT outside of Black Box in Prague.

Lou Charbonneau's review in *Prognosis* panned both the play and its setting. This review contributed to an ongoing discussion of intercultural worthiness in the English-language theatre, including one from James Thompson, which challenged Charbonneau's praise for Artists for Prague's production of *Other People's Money*.

DuBois next assisted Peter Schumann of the avant-garde American company Bread and Puppet theatre on a production called *Den je ráno, poledne a večer (The Day Is Morning, Noon and Night)* with Divadlo Archa (premiering in November 1994). Bread and Puppet Theatre, founded in 1961 by the German sculptor-puppeteer Peter Schumann, used giant puppets and figures, often in works that protested rampant capitalism and consumerism, drawing on Christian imagery. The workshop at Archa involved over 100 students, unemployed people, and professional actors, as well as Czech puppeteers, some of whom subsequently traveled to the States to work with Schumann there. It was held in association with Dance Theatre Workshop in New York (Divadlo Archa Press Packet 2).

DuBois directed a deconstructed version of Sam Shepard/Joe Chaiken's *Savage/Love* at Café Radost and with Misery Loves Company's Big Knees in 1994/95, as described in [chapter four](#). He folded in the sexual conduct code of Antioch College to Shepard and Chaiken's text, and conceived of the play as a parable about AIDS, told by ghosts. In the summer of 1995, Black Box hired DuBois to direct Přemysl Rut's *No Tragedy: A Little Czech Macbeth*, in their third summer festival. The production, described in [chapter three](#), used Anne Bogart's "viewpointing" system, and was well received by the ELT community, though Czech critics were not enthusiastic.

DuBois left to for graduate school at Brown in the fall of 1995, returning in the summer of 1996 to produce Nicky Silver's play *Fat Men in Skirts* at the large theatre Ypsilon. It did not attract a Czech audience. Ewan McLaren found the choice particularly disappointing as a representation to Czechs of English-language theatre:

All that play did was spend two hours droning on and on about Katherine Hepburn films... what kind of curiosity can be satisfied by going to a play where you hear about something you know nothing about in a language you don't understand by people who can't act it well, or who nothing about how to communicate to Czech audiences? It builds walls, it doesn't build bridges. (McLaren, Personal interview)

DuBois' work in Prague rarely attempted to cross cultures through its content. However, his idiosyncratic experiments shared an aesthetic with some notable Czech directors, particularly Petr Lébl, known for unconventional adaptations and playfully subjective readings of classics (Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre* 213; Hučín). It was seeing Lébl's production of *The Seagull* that convinced DuBois to return to America to study:

I felt like an imperialist. It felt so distinctly Czech. I didn't belong. I needed to figure out who I was as an American artist... (DuBois, Personal Interview).

Lébl committed suicide by hanging in the Divadlo Na zábradlí building on 11 Dec. 1999.

DuBois' experiences in Prague contributed to his professional life in American theatre: as artistic director of Alaska's PerseVerance Theatre he hired Serbian dramaturg Sodja Zupanc, who had worked with Misery Loves Company, for a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, collaborating with her via telephone and email (Svich, *Trans-global Readings* 153). DuBois hired Richard Toth to recreate a bicultural *King Stag* for PerseVerance in 2003. At the time of writing DuBois is Associate Producer at New York's Public Theater.

## RE: Kvést's Conference of the Birds: Transformative Multiculturalism

Will Rose formed his company RE:Kvést for one 1995 production of *The Conference of the Birds*. Rose had acted in several productions of Artists for Prague, including *A Christmas Carol* and *Other People's Money*. *The Conference of the Birds*, with text by Jean-Claude Carriere and Peter Brook, published in French and English and adapted from a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Persian text by Sufi poet Farid Ud-din Attar, attempted to give its audience “some illumination and inspiration for your own journey onward” (*Conference of the Birds* program). Where Black Box and Exposure performed a kind of Western entrepreneurship as they sought to find Czech audiences, seeking corporate sponsorship and grants, RE: Kvést aspired to perform an intermingling of cultures. Brook's utopian ideals about theatre involve the creation of a “third culture” which is neither individual nor state, but aspires to forge links:

...between man and society, between one race and another, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between humanity and machinery, between the visible and the invisible, between categories, languages, genres (Brook 66).

The name “RE: Kvést” is a clever homonym of the English “request” and “quest” as well as a play on the Czech word for “blossom.” *The Conference of the Birds* was produced in association with Earthlinks, an environmental organization founded in 1991 by Czechs and Americans to “build bridges between the spheres of ecology and the human spirit” (*Conference of the Birds* program). The performance uses storytelling, movement, music and dance to dramatize the story of the birds of the world as they follow their spiritual teacher, the Hoopoe, on a quest for self-knowledge.

The cast consisted of six Czechs, one Russian, one Algerian, one Frenchman, one Scot, one Brit and two Americans. Raphie Frank designed the lights; his partner Erica Soehngen was the stage manager<sup>72</sup>. The production was held at the Social Cultural Center, a non-profit center that had opened only in late April. Rose staged transformation and inclusion by putting the audience within the players' space, following the journey of the cast.

Anthony Tognazzini's Prague Post review, titled “Conference Is a Big Flap,” concluded that the cast could not convey the weightiness of the themes and that it was a “bit far-flung and

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<sup>72</sup> In his review in Theatre News, Christopher Lord credited both Frank and Soehngen with the lighting design; “Rik and Raphie” were almost their own trademark in Prague, but they did occasionally, as in this show, work distinctly.

ridiculous”. Raphie Frank remembers “The production allowed professionals and amateurs of many nationalities to work together in a constructive, collaborative and creative setting” (Frank, “COB Program Stuff.”) Christopher Lord in Theatre News applauded the production’s “sense of quiet magic.” Lord closed his review with a complaint about the damage the Prague Post had done to The Conference of the Birds “with a few well-chosen words of irrelevant nastiness in their listings section.” Like the New York Times, the Prague Post now had an enormous amount of influence on an audience: Prognosis had folded in March, and the voice of the Prague Post was the only English-language newspaper in Prague.

## **Artists for Prague International: Musical Community Theatre**

In the same issue of the Prague Post (21-27 April 1992) that reviewed North American Theatre's final production, Greater Tuna, there is an unsigned item announcing the plans for the arrival in Prague of the blockbuster musical *Les Misérables*:

The show, based on Victor Hugo's story about life in revolutionary France, stars many well-known Czech actors and actresses, including Karel Cernoch, Jan Ježek, Jiří Korn, Helena Vondráčková and Petra Janu. American Jesse Webb from the Artists for Prague International English-language theater is also in the cast.

Jesse Webb and Artists for Prague (AFP) helped lay the groundwork for this first international musical to try out post-Communist Prague as a market. The production of *Les Misérables* not only demonstrated the emergence of Prague as a commercial market, but also demonstrated the financial difficulties many state theatres faced during the early nineties: Novák was able to rent Divadlo Na Vinohradech (Vinohrady theatre) for three months in the summer because the theatre, like many others, sought extra financial resources. While Studio Theatre was regrouping and planning its future life, AFP had already succeeded in integrating into the Czech theatrical community. AFP hired professional Czech actors from its inception. The acting company were always paid. AFP also garnered tremendous coverage in the Czech media: while the company was active, from 1991-1994, articles about Webb appeared in all of the major Czech papers and several of the culture magazines, including Reflex, Česky Deník, Telegraf, Večerník Praha, Lidové Noviny and others.

To understand the context for Artists for Prague it is helpful to consider the state of Czech musicals in 1990. Czech musical theatre tradition resembles cabaret and light opera more than Western musical comedy. American-style musicals had been produced in Czechoslovakia under communism, but only at a few theatres. One was Hudební divadlo v Karlině (Karlin Musical Theatre); its Western musicals included: *My Fair Lady* (1964), *Hello, Dolly!* (1966), *West Side Story* (1970), *Show Boat* (1972), *Cabaret* (1978), *Sugar or Some Like It Hot* (1986), *Funny Girl* (1990). Karlin produced a few Czech musicals, including *Mazlickové* (1974) and



*Clochemerle* (1983, based on a novel by Gabriel Chevalier) (Rigo). The songs of interwar Czech satirists Jiří Voskovec and Jiří Werich were more firmly integrated into the vernacular; in 1999 the rock group Lucie had a hit with a cover of one of their old tunes, “Klobouk ve Křovi” (the hat in the bushes). Law students Voskovec and Werich (v + w) first made a sensation when they produced Vest Pocket Review, a light-hearted, literate spoof on contemporary themes, in April 1927; the production, which had been conceived as a one-off, ran for 200 nights. Voskovec and Werich were always accompanied by “a paid, professional orchestra [playing] contemporary American swing music with lyrics by Voskovec” (Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation*, 41) and were known for their witty improvisation on topical subjects.

Voskovec and Werich’s home venue, the Liberated Theatre (Osvobozeně Divadlo), was privately supported. They performed on a Western model, producing one event that ran for a limited time, rather than developing an alternating repertory. Their critiques of fascism led to trouble and the Liberated Theatre closed in 1938. Voskovec and Werich emigrated to the US in 1939. They returned after the war but had trouble reaching the same pinnacle of popularity; the Communists who came to power in 1948 disapproved of their political satire. Voskovec emigrated permanently to America and became a respected actor (anglicizing his first name to George), appearing in the film *12 Angry Men*, as well as in many roles on Broadway. He never returned to Czechoslovakia, in part for fear of the Communist police (Mikule). Werich had a successful theatrical career in Czechoslovakia until he supported of during the Prague Spring of 1968. He was banned from public life for five years after signing a pro-reform manifesto in 1972 (Horaková, “Actor, Comedian and Writer Jan Werich Was Born 100 Years Ago.”). The last thing the pair produced did together was an American musical, *Finian’s Rainbow*, in March 1948, starring Werich and directed by Voskovec (Mikule; Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre* 71). With a plot that includes a racist Southerner turned into a black man by an Irish leprechaun, *Finian’s Rainbow* mixes social commentary with whimsy. Czech theatre prided itself both on its playfulness and its role as a moral beacon.

Musicals in the cabaret/opera vein were produced in the Communist era at the Czech theatre Semafor, founded by singer/lyricist Jiří Suchy and composer Jiří Šlitr in 1959. Semafor, which is the Czech word for “streetlamp,” is also an acronym for “Sedm malých forem”—seven little forms: “i.e., song, dance, instrumental music, mime, poetry readings, skits, dialogues, thus suggesting the essential nature of their productions, which proved to be of immediate and lasting

popularity” (Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre* 118). The name also suggests the lucky seven of hearts (Day, "Czech Theatre from the National Revival to the Present Day"). Suchý and Šlitr wanted to maintain the tradition of the Liberated Theatre in blending entertainment with commentary (“We Go On Introducing of Our theatres: Semafor Theatre“). The organization was extremely popular in the sixties. Šlitr died in 1969 of a gas leak that some suspected was a suicide (Willoughby) and Suchý’s work was banned by the Communist regime. Suchý was forced to step down as director of Semafor, but in November 1991 took over the theatre again as a private theatre. In 1993 the Semafor space in the Alfa Passage off Václavské Náměstí was returned to its original owner under the Restitution act. Semafor was in residence at Divadlo Komédie for two years before moving to Hudební divadlo v Karlíně (Karlín Musical Theatre) where it remained until the floods of 2002. In 2004, Semafor re-opened its doors in its own space in the Dejvice section of Prague (Semafor Theatre, Home Page). It was at the Czech theatre Semafor that Artists for Prague opened with *The Fantasticks*, in the summer of 1991. Suchý enthusiastically endorsed AFP in the program for *The Fantasticks*:

When the Semafor theater was created in 1959, I had before me one great model: the American musical. But because I saw things realistically, I didn’t start to compete with Broadway and we looked for more modest methods. As we amassed our first experiences, we discovered that the American musical is not only the famous big production; not only “My Fair Lady”, but also more modest, artistically more valuable in many cases, works of small theaters. Many years ago, we mounted one of these musicals here, namely “They’re Playing Our Song.” And not long after that, we were in Dresden admiring a charming production of another American musical, “The Fantasticks,” by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt. I fell in love with this performance, but I never expected that so much time would pass and I would see it performed in the Semafor. In short, the ARTISTS FOR PRAGUE collective was searching for a space to put on this performance and I am very happy that they accepted our invitation.

On the facing page Artists for Prague thanks their supporters, describes Semafor, and includes a 1986 quotation from Vaclav Havel that praises Semafor as “an elementary, spontaneous manifestation of a feeling for life.” (*The Fantasticks* Program, Artists for Prague). Webb had chosen *The Fantasticks* as his first production not only because of its small technical requirements, but also because he saw it as a bridge between Czech cabaret and Western-style musicals (Webb, Personal Interview).

Although AFP’s first production followed Studio’s first production of *Crimes of the Heart* in the spring of 1991, Artists for Prague International had incorporated earlier, in the

summer of 1990. Webb had been performing in Europe for three years, having gone to Vienna as a dancer with the European tour of *Cats*. He visited his friend Allison Smayle, AP Bureau Chief in Prague, in 1990, and felt inspired by the energy and optimism of the city. Smayle later joined the board of directors of Artists for Prague. AFP's mission statement mirrors Peter Krogh's manifesto for North American Theatre: Webb reprises the historical moment and declares an intention to found a theatre that would serve as a "cultural bridge across Czechoslovakia's newly opened borders and horizons" (Artists for Prague, Mission Statement). By December 1990, Webb, who was still resident in Vienna, had received letters of support from Jaroslav Koran, the Mayor of Prague, as well as from Petr Oslzlý, Cultural Advisor to the President, for his proposal to "establish the first permanent English-speaking theatre in Prague." Oslzlý offered his support for Webb's aim "which I suppose will help in cultural cooperation and enhance Prague's reputation as an international cultural center" (Oslzlý). Koran wrote that the project "brings the Western World a little closer—acting as cultural bridge and enhancing Prague's reputation as an international cultural center."

The production of *The Fantasticks* was reviewed in four Czech newspapers, and its opening was noted in the Czech wire service. Unlike North American Theatre's modest Xeroxed program on pink paper, the program for *The Fantasticks* is a glossy, four-color 8" by 14 souvenir booklet, with official show logos. Its ads include full-page notices from Pepsi and Casinos Czechoslovakia. Where Krogh's cast and crew were primarily from Cornish College in Seattle, Czech actors had large roles in *The Fantasticks*, including Tomáš Trapl as Matt. The orchestra was entirely Czech. Webb's primary approach to ELT was English-language theatre production strategy number one, re-presenting the Performer's culture for the consumption of the Host culture. Webb offered two-tiered pricing for Czechs and others (AFP and InsideOut were the only two ELTs to do this consistently).

AFP followed *The Fantasticks* with a production of *A Christmas Carol*, adapted by California playwright Doris Baizley, directed by David Schweitzer (both were affiliated with Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum). Her adaptation rested on the conceit of a band of players performing Dickens' story. The cast included Jiří Datel Novotný, a Semafor actor who eventually joined the board of Black Box, Scottish actor Robert Russell, North American Theatre's Karen Christensen, and English actor Richard Zajdlíc, who later became a successful playwright and screenwriter in London. The production played for a week at Hotel Atrium,

before transferring to Semafor for another week. AFP produced *A Christmas Carol* twice more before Webb left Prague for good. Webb directed the subsequent productions, which performed at Divadlo Minor and Divadlo Na zábradlí. *A Table and Two Chairs*, in the spring of 1992, was an assortment of scenes that re-presented the Host Culture, the Performer's Culture, and images of Culture Clash: it consisted of excerpts from *Jacques and Master* by Milan Kundera, from *The Fantasticks*, from *The Foreigner* by Larry Shue, from *Between East and West* by Richard Nelson, *Vanities* by Jack Heifner and *Largo Desolato* by Václav Havel.

The producer for *Les Misérables*, Adam Novák, offered Webb the role of Javert in the first Czech production. While *Les Misérables* ran in the summer of 1992, Artists for Prague was on hiatus; Webb, however, became a Prague celebrity. Czech journalists seemed fascinated with "The American who Sings in Czech," which was the title of a profile which appeared in the women's magazine *Vlasta* in the autumn of 1992. This profile of an American performer describes the way *Les Misérables* had rehabilitated the musical from a despised form (Šimšová, Věra and Jan Adam). The growth of this American-style form was clearly linked with the presence of an American performer.

AFP put on a "Thanksgiving Ball" in November 1992 "Traditional Thanksgiving Ball" which included a sketch by writer John Allison. The second production of *A Christmas Carol* included the talents of Clare Goddard and Peter DuBois as assistants; AFP had become a true ELT community theatre where individuals with differing aesthetics found common ground. Webb had planned to produce *Grease* in the spring of 1993 but lost the rights, producing *Pippin* instead, at Divadlo Komedie. Black Box's Victoria Shobris performed. Along with the frustration of dealing with the American licensing agency, Webb had to recover from McDonald's, a major sponsor for the show, backing out shortly before rehearsals started. The married couple Randall Filer and Barbara Forbes surfaced to help. Filer, an economics professor, had served on the Board of Directors of the Public Theatre in Boston. Forbes had worked professionally as a costume designer. *Pippin* received excellent Czech reviews but was panned by the Prague Post. Webb was beginning to suffer from exhaustion and burnout:

Artists for Prague existed in a deficit. My first apartment was a grand luxury apartment. The next one was not quite so wonderful. By the time I left I was staying with the family of one of my actors in an extra bedroom. I kept putting my money in (Webb, Personal Interview).

That summer Webb also taught at the short-lived (three months) Prague Musical School, teaching acting, improvisation and audition techniques. All of the other teachers were Czech. Webb recalls that although it was badly organized:

It was fun. Kids wanted it NOW—everybody in Prague had the feeling of “missing out”—their background was Cabaret (Personal Interview).

Forbes and Filer officially joined the staff of Artists for Prague. Webb returned to Vienna to perform in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, commuting to Prague for two days each week. AFP did not produce *A Christmas Carol* in 1993.

While AFP was regrouping, Czech musicals grew stronger. Richard Allen Greene wrote about two musicals in Czech for the Prague Post that planned their openings in November 1993: *Hello, Dolly* and *West Side Story*. Egon Kulhanek, producer for *West Side Story*, told Greene that he had already sold out most of the November performances through word of mouth (“East Side Story”). Much of Greene’s article describes the way the musicals are funded and advertised, and positions the commercial musical’s existence as a subset of the transition to Capitalism. *West Side Story*, which was produced at the Karlin musical theatre, had corporate sponsors that included the tabloid Blesk, F1 Radio and West, a cigarette manufacturer. The concept for the production had been brought to Kulhanek, who in his late twenties symbolized the youth of Czech entrepreneurship, by choreographer Richard Hes, of the experimental jazz troupe Uno. *West Side Story* had last performed in Prague in 1971 (Greene, “East Side Story”); the musical was occasionally broadcast on television and was viewed as a musical that criticized bourgeois society (Ficová).

Jana Machalická wrote about the growth of Western-style musicals in an article for theatre czech in December 1994. Her article, titled “An Opportunity for a Musical?” describes the new wave of such musicals as an “invasion” which had peaked in the previous season. Machalická notes the imported large-scale musicals, like *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Les Misérables*, which had arrived late in the Czech Republic, but finds more interesting “the original productions which allow themselves the ambition of meeting the standards of the great musical models.” She classified them into two types, the large-scale musicals, and the smaller

musicals that followed more in the tradition of the Liberated Theatre. Of the former she examines an original musical based on Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (called *451 Fahrenheit* in Czech), produced at Hudební divadlo v Karlíně (Karlín Musical Theatre) by Adam Novák, who had also produced *Les Misérables*:

...was intended to be a protest about the deification of the market and also about superficiality. A praiseworthy endeavour, the production itself does not only deny this idea but it is actually an expression of the attitude against which it is struggling.

Other original musicals Machalická describes include TA FANTASTIKA association's *The Garden of Heavenly Pleasure*, based on the life of Hieronymus, with onstage nudity which "wearies the audience to despair" and included elements of black theatre and pantomime, an adaptation of a novel by Boris Vian, *Pěna Dni (The Froth of a Daydream)*, which Machalická found "a simple kitsch love story." AFP regular Tomáš Trapl performed in this production.

In general Machalická prefers the smaller musicals that worked with Czech musical tradition. While she recognized that the opportunity to do large musicals was welcome, she found that works "emerging from domestic traditions capture audiences with their distinct features and individuality." These productions often work with retrospective themes of the sixties or the First Republic. The musical *Stars on the Willow*, produced at Brno's theatre Ha-Divadlo, was set in a small village just before the Soviet occupation of 1968. It used domestic rock and roll hits as well as the Doors to "reliably bring out the spirit of the era." Machalická found that:

The grotesque conclusion in which the authors present their heroes during the years of normalization and also after November 1989 is, despite its ironic, sarcastic tone, an unusually strong testimony of the state of society.

Karlín's *My Fair Josefina*, based on the novel *Josefina* by Vladislav Vančura, dramatized the cultural and social life of the First Republic. Machalická's response to the growth of Czech musicals demonstrates Czech critical tendency to demand social currency even in light entertainment.

AFP's penultimate show, not a musical but a recent Broadway hit, was chosen in part because of its relevance. *Other People's Money* by Jerry Sterner dramatizes a hostile take-over of a small family-owned company, and Czechs were interested in capital and corruption, both of which were in the news. Webb delegated responsibility for the show to Filer and Forbes.

American director Terry Layman came to Prague for the production. Playwright Sterner also attended. Sterner's visit, as well as the timely subject, attracted favorable Czech attention. Karola Štapnová in *Lidové Noviny*, interviewing Sterner, observed that "*Other People's Money* tells a lot about a market economy, how and where money is made, how business affects people's lives..." Sterner replied:

When my friends from Wall Street learned that *Other People's Money* would be performed in Eastern Europe they warned me: why ruin capitalism when it's just being born? .... the main question of this play is, how to reach a balance between the needs of the company and the individual, or whether the primary purpose of a company is to provide jobs, or make money ("The Road from Wall Street Straight to Broadway").

Petr Dudek's review of the production in *Lidové Noviny* praised the production for its timeliness, writing that "we can envy Prague's English-speaking and English-understanding audiences." He concluded by complaining that Czech audiences would have to wait for Czech theatre, film or television to set a good play in the financial world, while Sterner's play was a "witty morality play about the power of money and the double-edged beauty and cruelty of capitalism" ("The Splendor and Misery of the Traders").

The reception of the English-language press was split. Louis Charbonneau in *Prognosis* found the production flawed but relevant:

This is, after all, a country where hundreds of inefficient companies are falling to similar 'restructuring' (to use Larry the Liquidator's term), a process that often sends long-term employees packing.

He praised Jesse Webb's play selections, and called Artists for Prague a "cultural organization... that is making an intelligent (not superficial or clichéd) effort at bridging the proverbial "cultural gaps" between the expat and local cultures" (Rev. of *Freeway Fables* and *Other People's Money*). Richard Allen Greene at the *Prague Post*, however, condemned the "weak script," concluding that although:

...the producers clearly believe that this alleged examination of business and ethics has some relevance to the Czech Republic as the country shifts to a market economy...far from being a modern-day examination of universal values, the play is simply a long-winded look at a bunch of fundamentally uninteresting stereotypes (Rev. of *Other People's Money*).

Greene was often dismissive of English-language productions that followed English-language production strategy number one, that of re-presenting the Performer's culture, the more so when done in a commercial context.

*A Christmas Carol* 1994 was AFP's last production. Robert Russell performed as Scrooge. Jitka Sloupová included a paragraph about the production and the company in her article on English-language theatre "Theatre of the Expatriates" in Svět a Divadlo in March 1995:

These performances are a unique chance for the Czech audience to really see what the genre is about – it has very little in common with pantomime, actually. ... The anti-illusive setting managed to cover here and there present non-professionalism and the technical deficiencies of all occasional hosting productions. As one could expect, the director Jesse Webb paid much attention to study English Christmas carols – together with the Czech *Nesem vám noviny*<sup>73</sup>, that accompany the performance. The aim of the performance – to create the real English Christmas atmosphere – was fulfilled.

The production was successful both critically and financially. Webb left for Vienna after it closed, however, canceling the spring production of David Ives' *All in the Timing*. *Other People's Money* had opened a rift in the group. Webb resented the way Filer and Forbes pushed beyond the resources of what he had envisioned as a community theatre. While *Other People's Money* was in rehearsal, Forbes, who was the executive producer for the play, had faxed Webb in Vienna daily, sometimes with eight-page documents (Webb, Personal Interview). Both Forbes and Filer were later on the final Black Box Board of Directors that fired Artistic Director Nancy Bishop. Filer himself felt that Webb was the strength of the organization, and without him nobody wanted to keep it going (Filer, Personal Interview). Many of the people who had worked with AFP began working with Black Box.

If AFP's mission had been to teach an American-style of musical performance, by the time Webb left in 1994 it had achieved its mission. Several of the Czech performers in *Pippin*

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<sup>73</sup> "We're Bringing You the News"



went on to perform in the Czech production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, including Martin France, Pavel Polák, and Tomáš Trapl (Trapl took over the starring role of Judas in 1997). *Jesus Christ Superstar*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, opened in Prague at the brand new Spirala Theatre on 22 July 1994 and ran for five years. The so-called “first Czech musical,” *Dracula*, by Karel Svoboda, Richard Hes and Zdeněk Borovec, premiered at the Congress Centre on 13 October 1995 and ran through late 1997. Egon Kulhánek, who had produced *West Side Story*, was one of its producers. Hes’ contribution included a striking use of dancers who shadowed Dracula and symbolized blood. By the autumn of 1996 one out of every 20 people in the Czech Republic had seen it—the producers packaged the show with domestic as well as international tourist agencies. The *Dracula* cast album, released in 1997, became a gold record, with a hit single, “Jsi můj pán” (“My man”), sung by actress and pop singer Lucie Bila. In 1998-99 it had productions in Slovakia and Korea. Still, the English-language influences on this Czech musical were undeniable. The translator for the English-language libretto, Brad Stratton, remembers that the show’s creators had actually timed the length of songs, scenes and reprises to those in Andrew Lloyd-Webber productions (Stratton). The second act of *Dracula* takes place in London, but in a London that is suspiciously like Prague, with casinos in its center. Although Webb did not work on *Dracula*, many of AFP’s company did, including Tomáš Trapl. Misery Loves Company’s Ewan McLaren directed the English-language version of *Dracula*.

Marie Reslová observed that the construction of new theatre spaces in Prague since 1996 was a direct result of the success of the blockbuster musicals *Les Misérables* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Subsequent Czech Western-style musicals have included *Rat-Catcher* by Dan Landa, a skinhead musician (the musical was filmed in 2002); *Rusalka* (1999), a new rock musical based on the Antonin Dvořák opera; and *Hamlet*, a critically acclaimed musical version of Shakespeare’s play (1999); *Galileo* (2003) and *Excalibur* (2003). There have also several successful Czech productions of Western musicals including *Hair* (1996) and *Evita* (1998). With Czech producers’ success in raising millions of crowns from private investors for Czech-created musicals, there was no longer any reason to have a musical community theatre in Prague.

## ARTISTS FOR PRAGUE

Founded by **Jesse Webb**, with Robert Mitchell and Annika Eysel Šonka, in **March 1990**

### **First Production:**

*The Fantasticks*, by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt

Directed by Jesse Webb

Cast includes Timothy Breese, John R. Lang, Annika Eysel Šonka, Sabine Vollgruber, **Tomáš**

### **Trapl**

Semafor

Alfa Pasáž, Václavské Náměstí 28, Prague 1

16 July - 5 Sept. 1991

### Subsequent Productions:

*A Christmas Carol* by Doris Baizley, adapted from the novel by Charles Dickens

Directed by David Schweizer

Cast includes **Jiří Datel Novotný**, **Robert Russell**, **Karen Christensen**, Liz Bagley, Marry Bonner, **Richard Zajdlíc**, Jenifer Chamberlain

Hotel Atrium

Pobřežní 1, Prague 8

13 – 17 Dec. 1991

Semafor

Alfa Pasáž, Václavské Náměstí 28, Prague 1

19 – 23 Dec. 1991

*A Table and Two Chairs*; an evening including scenes from:

*Jacques and His Master* by Milan Kundera, *The Fantasticks*, *The Foreigner* by Larry Shue, *Between east and west* by Richard Nelson, *Vanities* by Jack Heifner and *Largo Desolato* by Václav Havel,

Cast includes **Gene DeWild**

Alfa Pasáž, Václavské Náměstí 28, Prague 1

Spring 1992 (exact dates unavailable)

“Traditional Thanksgiving Ball”

Holiday Songs, and one-act play *A Thanksgiving Story* by John Allison

Cast includes **John Allison**, **Deborah Michaels**, Jiří Datel Novotný, Vladislav Solovar, Jesse Webb

Praha Hotel

Sušickéa 20, Prague 6

27 Nov. 1992

*A Christmas Carol* by **Doris Baizley**, adapted from the novel by Charles Dickens

Directed by Jesse Webb

Assistant Director **Clare Goddard**

Movement and Acting Coach **Peter DuBois**

Cast includes Gene DeWild, Sophia Zannis, Richard Zajdlíc  
Diavdlo Minor  
Senovážné Náměstí 28, Prague 1  
13 – 23 Dec. 1992

*Pippin* by Roger O. Hirson, Music and Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz  
Cast includes Jesse Webb, Gene DeWild, Tomáš Trapl, **Victoria Shobris, Andrea Miltner,**  
Richard Mašek  
Costume Design **Barbara Forbes**  
Stage Manager **Jennifer Yeager**  
Divadlo “Ká”  
Jungmannová 1, Prague 1  
9 June – 4 July 1993

*Other People’s Money* by Jerry Sterner  
Directed by Terry Layman  
Cast includes Dennis Predovic, Jiří Datel Novotný  
Divadlo Na zábradlí  
Anenské Náměstí 5, Prague 1  
27 May -11 June 1994

*A Christmas Carol* by Doris Baizley, adapted from the novel by Charles Dickens  
Directed by Jesse Webb  
Lighting Designer Raphie Frank  
Sound Designer William Hollister  
Cast includes Robert Russell, **Chip Persons, Taline Sherrif, Will Rose, Michael Halstead**  
Divadlo Na zábradlí  
Anenské Náměstí 5, Prague 1  
17-30 Dec. 1994

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