

# Theoretical Reflections of Czech Musicals in the Changes of the Political Climate of the 1940s – 1990s

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## Introduction

The following text provides an overview of the development of Czech musicals in connection with the country's radical political and social changes. The treatise begins with an evaluation of the existing literature on the topic. The following overview draws from this literature<sup>1</sup>, from a set of interviews provided by artists and journalists for a television documentary dedicated to this subject,<sup>2</sup> and from contemporary journalism.<sup>3</sup>

For some popular music products, the climate of lack of political and social freedom opens new means of artistic expression such as hints, allusions or hidden messages between the lines. Such interaction between an artist and the public can work well on concerts of folk singer-songwriters or rock bands. However, it can be much more difficult to work with expensive products tied to the music industry, because they are under much stronger control of political authorities. Typical example are musicals – their character in Czechia reflects the political climate of the country very clearly. We can see a swinging pendulum, which roughly corresponds to each decade.

The Czech country used to be a part of the Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1992. Since 1993 there are two independent states the Czech and the Slovak republics. It is due to recall the basic political climate in Czech country in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

1918 – 1938 independent country of two nations Czechs and Slovaks after several centuries  
1938 – 1945 World War II – lack of freedom because of German Nazi occupation  
1945 – 1948 short period of post-war freedom  
1948 – 1958 communist dictatorship, Iron Curtain, political trials and executions  
1959 – 1968 social and political liberation  
1969 – 1984 recovery of censorship and police control of culture (so called normalisation)  
1985 – 1989 social and political liberation  
1990 – 1997 political right – left pluralism, cultural and social freedom  
1998 – 2009 the intersection of politics and business, stabilisation of multinational corporations  
2010 – 2022 prevailing populism

## Theoretical reflections

When Ivo Osolsobě named one of his books *Muzikál je když* (A Musical Is When..., 1967), he was hinting at the difficulty of laying out the boundaries of the subject matter. He went on to define its scope in his subsequent title, *Divadlo, které mluví, zpívá a tančí* (A Theatre That Speaks, Sings and Dances, 1974). His approach was based on semiotics.

It should be added here that apart from theatre this category also encompasses film, and that the song and dance in are meant to propel a musical's plot. Not all musical films and stage productions covered by my research happen to be authentic musicals. However, trying to find any definitive dividing lines would be meaningless. After all, what's most important here is the genre's prime ambition to offer readily digestible entertainment.

Thanks to Ivo Osolsobě (1967, 1974) the awareness of musicals as a distinct artistic discipline grew in our country. He drew on his knowledge of the, at the time understandably very limited, top American works. From this generalisation "through the Iron Curtain" also stems his certain overestimation of the artistic aspect of musi-

cal production, which otherwise bore the common features of commercial production, such as the overuse, repetition and dilution of effective motifs and themes.

Osolobě (1967, pp. 5-7) drew on Leonard Bernstein's theses and refined the central terms he used in relation to musicals. He spoke of 'integration' as an attempt to link musical numbers and story as perfectly as possible, and of 'mother tongue'. This is how Osolobě translated Bernstein's term "vernacular" into Czech, i.e. the folk features of a work that are close to the audience, perceived as native, both linguistically and musically.

Vladimír Bár (2013, 2016, 2020) points out the interrelationship between the Czech musical and the operetta in the title of his seminal work *Od operety k muzikálu* (From operetta to a musical, 2013). There is no gap between operetta and musical; on the contrary, many works oscillate between the features of both related forms. Bár (2013, p. 7), moreover, states that entertainment-musical theatre is "a whole plethora of types and genres". Some of them are closer to *Geamtkunstwerk*, but others are just entertainment and a feast for the eyes. And he extends the thesis further (p. 11) by describing a wide range of styles and genres, from an emphasis on spectacle to an emphasis on verbal communication. He thus attributes to the musical a position between the performing arts and the entertainment industry, between the rules of art and the marketplace. To some extent, Bár (2013, p. 12) justifies Osolobě's assumptions about the musical as art by the fact that in our country musical productions have for years functioned as part of the operations of municipal, i.e. "art" theatres, in short, budgetary institutions.

As Prostějovský states in his book *Muzikál expres* (Musical express, 2008, p. 22), the musical as entertainment and not as great art is attributed to productions in Anglo-Saxon countries. Therefore, the situation in our country also changed when business entities entered musical production after 1989. The casting of roles is done through auditions and not by artificially dividing them according to the types of actors employed by the existing company. The producer becomes the key figure, who, as Prostějovský (p. 455) suggests, decides on all fundamental issues, whether it is an individual or a company.

The Czech literature primarily focuses on the theatrical basis of the phenomenon. The one-sided theatrical basis is also accentuated by entries in Czech encyclopaedias (Ivo Osolobě 1983 and Jana Pavlíčková 1997). In the American literature we can find deep tradition perceiving musicals in their dual theatrical and cinematic existence (cf. Stanley Green 1976 and 1981). The Czech theatre literature can be supplemented towards the cinematic specialisation by the old FAMU scripts *Musical Films and the Musical* by Vladimír Bor (1981), or the more superficial overview publication by Robert Rohál and Vitek Chadima *České zpívající filmy* (Czech Singing Films, 2010). An interesting comparison with a similar situation in other countries of the Eastern bloc results from the book *Popular Music Theater under Socialism* (2020). However, the individual contributions of the proceedings summarizing the papers from the Freiburg 2017 congress are focused differently, so a specific comparison is not accurate.

The literature on Czech musical is not very rich. Superficial books with a brief description and many pictures for large public prevails. Only some have grown out of scientific research (Osolobě 1974, Bár 2013 and 2020). Czech musical production since the 1990s is still waiting for professional research.

## The prehistory of Czech musicals

The cultural and political climate during the 1920s and 1930s has been based on independent democratic Czechoslovak state and the majority of young progressive artists was strongly left-wing orientated. The tension between Czech citizens and large German minority (around 22%) living mainly in the border areas increased during the 1930s and the growing influence of the fascism produced many discussions, controversies and disagreements.

In this period, we can see the prehistory of Czech musicals in the tradition of cabarets with singing performances and short skits represented by "Červená sedma" (The Red Seven, 1909–1922), Karel Hašler or Vlasta Burian, in new theatrical plays with songs and dances on the stage represented by "Osvobozené divadlo" (Liberated Theatre with Jiří Voskovec, Jan Werich and composer Jaroslav Ježek, 1927–38) or experimental theatre of E. F. Burian „D 34“, „D 35“ ... up to „D 41“, as well as in the large-scale revue and operetta formats with protagonists such as Oskar Nedbal, Jára Beneš, or Oldřich Nový with his musical comedies in Brno.

Similar personalities stood behind the creation of movies with singing and dancing (for instance *To neznáte Hadimršku* (You don't know Hadimrška, 1931) or *Pudr a beznín* (Powder and Gas, 1932).

## A promising start, but...

The real story of true American musical started after the World War II. Founding fathers of its Czech variant, Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich from former “Osvobozené divadlo” returned from their American emigration with the piece *Finian’s Rainbow* (1947). They styled its Czech-language version, *Divotvorný hrnec* (*Magic pot*) with many modifications to the Czech context. The first performance in March 1948 might have been a good starting point for further development. However, what completely changed the conditions for further development was the communist takeover of February 1948. A drastic change of state policies followed and the consequent criminalization of anything that would have been suspected of showing an inclination towards no-matter-what that was American. Or from the West in general. There, musicals were no exception to the rule.

picture 1: Timeline<sup>4</sup>

(Starts in the next page and takes five pages)



1958 *Expo 58 – Laterna magika*  
1958 *Když je v Římě neděle*  
1958 *Skandál v Lisabonu*  
1958 *Kdyby 1000 klarinetů*  
1958 *Vykradeno!*

1959 *The Sound of Music*

1959 *Člověk z pudy*  
1960 *Pozor, hodný pes!*  
1960 *Zuzana je sama doma ;*  
1960 *Těžká Barbora*  
1960 *Taková ztráta krve*  
1960 *Štafle*  
1960 *Továrnička na snění*

*West Side Story* 1961

*Ztracená revue* 1961

1962 *Štěnice*  
1962 *Jonáš a tingltangl*  
1962 *Rokokokoktejl*  
1962 *Labyrint světa a lusthaus srdce*  
1963 *Kiss Me Kate*  
1963 *Proces s bigbeatovým králem*  
1963 *Drak je drak čili Kterak Žužličti k rozumu přišli*  
1963 *Akce H aneb Město má žízeň*  
1963 *Ukradený měsíc*

*Okurkový hrdina* 1963

*Bylo nás deset* 1963

*Hvězda jede na jih* 1964 (vyrobena 1958)

*Konkurs* 1964

1964 *Funny Girl*

1964 *Hello, Dolly!*

1964 *Šumař na střeše*

*Perný den* 1964

*Mary Poppins* 1964

*Mrazík* 1964

*Limonádový Joe* 1964

*Starci na chmelu* 1964

1964 *Černá kočka přes cestu*  
1964 *Chan & Son Company*  
1964 *My Fair Lady*

*My Fair Lady* 1964

1964 *Král Vávra*  
1964 *Trampoty profesora Prilta*

*Kdyby tisíc klarinetů* 1965

1965 *Dobře placená procházka*  
1965 *Čekání na slávu*

1966 *Cabaret*

*Dobře placená procházka* 1966

5.6.1966 *Dáma na kolejích*

*Dáma na kolejích* září 1966

1967 *Šeherezáda*  
1967 *Král zlatokopů*  
1967 ***Gentleman***  
1968 *Svoboda v Kocourkově*  
1968 *Filosofská historie*

1969 *Malá noční hudba*

1970 *West Side Story*  
1970 *Pan Pickwick*

1972 *Kytice*  
1972 *Zbojníci a žandáři*

1974 *Sladký život blázna Vincka*  
1974 *Mazlíčkové*

1975 19. 3. *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*  
1975 7. 4. ***Balada pro Banditu***  
1975 *Kráska a zvíře*  
1976 *Holky na ocet*  
1977 *Titanic*  
1977 *Planetárium*

1978 *Dialog s vesmírem*

1978 *Sestřičky*

1979 *Daniela*

1980 *Ze života hmyzu*  
1980 *Muzikál*

1980 *Prázdniny na Zemi*

1967 ***Hair***

1969 *Tommy*

1970 *Jesus Christ Superstar*  
1971 *Jesus Christ Superstar*

***Cabaret*** 1972

***Jesus Christ Superstar*** 1973

1975 *A Chorus Line*  
1975 *Chicago*  
*Cikáni jdou do nebe* 1975

1977 *Tricet panen a Pythagoras* 1977 (výroba 1973)

1978 *Evita*

***Hair*** 1979

1980 *The Wall*

1980 *Lés Misérables*

*Šíleně smutná princezna* 1968  
*Popelka* 1969

*Svatá hříšnice* 1970

*Sto dukátů za Juana* 1971

*Toulavý Engelbert* 1973  
*Noc na Karlštejně* 1974  
*Přijela k nám pout'* 1974

*Hvězda padá vzhůru* 1975  
*Romance za korunu* 1975

*Balada pro Banditu* 1979

1981 *Chemikál*  
 1981 *Ulice*  
 1982 *Sluneční hodiny*  
 1983 *Zvonokosy*  
 1983 *Křídlení*  
 1984 *Laboratoř*  
 1986 *Cikáni jdou do nebe*  
 1987 *Memento*  
 1987 *Juno a Avos*  
 1987 *Odysseus*  
 1989 *Show Tomáše Tracyho*  
 1990 *Checkmate*  
 1991 *Sny svatojánských nocí*  
 1992 *Les Misérables*  
 1992 *Hvězdy na vrbě*  
 1993 *Zahrada rajských potěšení*  
 1994 *Bastard*  
 1994 *Jesus Christ Superstar*  
 1994 *Pěna dní*  
 1995 *Dracula*  
 1996 *Krysař*  
 1996 *Vlasy*  
 1998 *Babylon*  
 1998 *Evita*  
 1999 *Rusalka*  
 1999 *Hamlet*  
 2000 *Monte Christo*  
 2000 *Svět plný andělů*

1981 *Cats*  
 1981 *Юнона и Авось*  
*The Wall* 1982  
 1986 *Phantom of the Opera*  
 1989 *Miss Saigon*  
 1992 *Elisabeth*  
 1996 *Rent*  
 1999 *Mamma Mia!*

*Trhák* 1981  
*Koncert* 1981  
*Planetárium* 1983  
*Fontána pro Zuzanu* 1985  
*Chemikál* 1986  
*Dva na koni, jeden na oslu* 1987  
*Discopříběh* 1987  
*Pražská pětka* 1989  
*Kouř* 1991  
*Discopříběh 2* 1991  
*Fontána pro Zuzanu II* 1993  
*Šakalí léta* 1993  
*The Lion King* 1994  
*Mňága – Happy end* 1996

2000 *Johanka z Arku*

2001 *The Producers*

2002 *Kleopatra*

2002 *Olympic aneb Jak se lita vzhuru*

2002 *Muzikály z Broadwaye*

2003 *Galileo*

2003 *Rebelové*

2003 *Excalibur*

2004 *Tři mušketyři*

2004 *Cats*

2004 *Zahrada divů*

2005 *Láska je láska*

2005 *Ondraszek – Pan Lysej Góry*

2007 *Čas růží*

2007 *Angelika*

2007 *Děti ráje*

2008 *Touha*

2011 *Kat mydlář*

2013 *Touha jménem Einodis*

2015 *Mýdlový princ*

2018 *Trhák*

2018 *Legenda jménem Holmes*

2019 *Kvítek mandragory*

2019 *Jak se dělá muzikál*

2020 *Osudová komedie – III. Ráj*

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2001 *Rebelové* 2001

2002 *Rok d'ábla* 2002

2003 *Wicked*

2007 *Kvaska* 2007

2008 *Mamma Mia!* 2008

2011 *V peřině* 2011

2015 *Hamilton*

2017 *Girl from the North Country*



Here we see an overview that confronts Czech premieres of musical theatre and film performances with foreign, mainly American ones. The comparison shows, among other things, the repeated loss of contact with world developments and the delayed absorption of the impulses necessary for the development of domestic production.

It took no less than another 16 years before Czechs were allowed to stage another American musical: namely, *Kiss Me Kate*, mounted in Plzeň, in 1963. Interestingly, this particular musical's world premiere took place in the same year as that of *Divotvorný hrnec*. Czech creators then had no contacts with the international scene, and so naturally also lost touch with the development of the genre. Thus they were left with no other choice than to keep within the limits of the official doctrine and produce their own variants of entertainment and experiments (Laterna magica combining theatre and film or roots of new wave of small theatrical forms). As Bár describes in detail (2020, p. 194) more space was left for traditional operetta, as long as its content did not contradict the established communist ideology.

### A short golden era of the 1960s

The turn of 1950s and 1960s brought a rapid change in the cultural and political climate. It was a belated consequence of the liberalization of conditions in the Soviet Union after Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin's cult of personality. Censorship was lower, the authorities were more open, the media was developing, and a strong generation of creators took over. The rapid development of smart small theatres combining music with spoken word played very important role during this era. They influenced the pop music scene of the whole country. They didn't represent real musicals but small theatrical forms as well as films with songs prepared fertile ground for genuine works that can finally be described as the first musicals of Czech origin.

We could see a rapid change of image of actors and singers on the stage and on the screen. From this climate arose two important films: *Starci na chmelu* (The Hop-Pickers, 1964)<sup>5</sup> and *Dáma na kolejích* (The Lady of the Tram Lines, 1966).

The inspiration from the film *West Side Story* is obvious. Although the regime did not allow it into the cinemas, its non-public professional screening set the bar very high for Czech filmmakers and theorists. Directed by Ladislav Rychman *Starci na chmelu* (Hop-pickers, 1964) and *Dáma na kolejích* (Lady of the Tram Lines, 1966) were written by the script writer and song lyricist Vratislav Blažek, working with the trio of composers Jiří Malásek, Jiří Bažant and Vlastimil Hála. The characters speak, dance and sing their stories. Those movies' emotionally charged and rebellious plots touched upon the perennial dichotomies of good versus evil, and fairness versus injustice. In the process, comic situations are juxtaposed with moments of high drama. Its clear bias against snitching and in favour of youthful rebellion won *Starci na chmelu* a status of something close to a generational revolt that became typical for the 1960s pop culture as a whole. In its turn, the conjugal troubles dealt with in *Dáma na kolejích* rang the bell notably for the middle-aged audience, the film's feminist elements of the wife's rebellion actually even coming somewhat ahead of their time.

Unlike *Starci na chmelu*, "Lady" was then readily transplanted onto the stage in several productions, while for its part, another important work *Dobře placená procházka* (A Walk Worthwhile), directed by Ján Roháč for the stage of "Semafor" theatre, was replicated a year later as a television film directed by Miloš Forman.

During the 1960s, American musicals or Italian music comedies were staged on operetta or drama stages. Among the most popular were *My Fair Lady* or *Hello, Dolly!* (see the timeline). It was not until 1970 that they dared to perform *West Side Story* in Brno and Prague.

The original Czech work grew more out of pop music scene based on small theatres mentioned above. While stone theatres remained in operettas style, pop singers were engaged to act in new musicals.

The musical *Gentleman* (Gentlemen, 1967) marked the peak of collaboration between composer Bohuslav Ondráček and lyricist-librettist Jan Schneider. The two first met in the Plzeň fringe theatre *Alfa*, and subsequently co-authored a plethora of successful songs and stage shows. In its turn, *Gentlemen* came as another Czech response to *West Side Story*.

And a fairly accomplished one, to be sure, however belated it was.

Let's remind that on the international scene, the tailcoated Fred Astaire from the 1930s was succeeded in the early 1950s by Gene Kelly in a t-shirt, paving the way for Jerome Robbins' concept of dance as a metaphor. But then, his and Bernstein's *West Side Story* had premiered a decade before *Gentleman*. In fact, by the second half of the 1960s the waters of the world musical theatre circuit were already teeming with different fish species, including the likes of *Hair* which inaugurated a novel rock-inspired poetic, or *Cabaret*, imbued with the mesmerizing detail-crazed talent of Bob Fosse.

Hereabouts, Ondráček, Schneider or choreographer Luboš Ogoun could only dream about residencies in New York or London. And yet, even so they did manage to produce a funny scene or two – such as, for instance, *Vesoly karandash*, parodying the then universally disliked compulsory Russian classes at school.<sup>6</sup>

Coming up in 1967 was yet another musical, namely: *Šeherezáda* (Sheherazade). Playwright Vratislav Blažek and a trio of composers, Bažant, Malásek and Hála, were linking up there with their previous successful cinematic missions. Actually, *Šeherezáda* stayed in the shadow of its predecessors, as it was not made into a film, and nor has it survived in the form of a recording, or even as a photographic reportage. That notwithstanding, it too did contain its abundant share of current affairs hints targeting the totalitarian regimes of the time and their bureaucratic absurdities, and over the months following its premiere received productions outside Prague, in Hradec Králové, Brno and Ostrava. At least a handful of photos have survived from the last two of those venues.

Attempts to mount larger-scale musical plays were likewise made by various major theatres outside Prague, though these larger companies with their own histories of operetta productions were finding it hard to come to terms with the ways of modern musical theatre. For instance, composer Harry Macourek had a try at this, along with librettist Ivo T. Havlů, in *Malá noční hudba* (A Little Night Music), shown in Brno in 1969, and in Ostrava in 1970. In Prague, in the late 1960s the challenge of a full-scale musical production also tempted Prague's *Rokoko* theatre. Eventually, however, its ambitious plan to stage the off-Broadway musical *The Fantasticks*, was shelved. Instead, the company mounted two fairly large-scale pieces with music by Zdeněk Petr, *Filosofská historie* (A Philosophical Story, 1968), and *Pan Pickwick* (Mr. Pickwick, 1970). Their music, encompassing different styles and genres, changed in tune to the development of the plot or the characters' moods.

## Joyless standardization of the 1970s and 1980s

More often than not, musicals mounted by large theatre companies during the “normalization” period (1970s and party 1980s, i.e. during the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops led by the Soviet Union) smacked of operetta. Competing with them were small theatres based on actors who can sing and dance in a natural civil way. Within the production of musical films the kitsch prevails in the 1970s and weak disco movies in the 1980s. Of course there were exceptions like *Balada pro banditu* which were done by smaller theatre groups usually specialised on comedies and dramas (not on music theatre).

Not everyone was well enough informed then to be able to find their way to club-style theatres active on the alternative scene. In the late 1970s and early '80s the average young person was thus offered an attractive albeit makeshift alternative: namely, LPs made by pop-rock bands, coming out with folded double covers, colour pictures including photos, and in particular those albums' staged versions flooded by lights and involving dynamic action, gaudy costumes, decorations and screen projections. In fact, had adequate funding been available, along with production teams and so on, perhaps we would have witnessed the emergence of Czech parallels of *Hair*, *Tommy* or *JC Superstar*. Slide shoes picture from a stage presentation based on the LP project with a story.

The gradual revival of the late 1980s was undoubtedly influenced by political events in Gorbachev's Soviet Union. In Czechoslovakia, it manifested itself, among other things, in the surprising return of the good tradition of *Laterna magika* by *Odysseus* (1987) with music by Michael Kocáb. And even with the original set designer Josef Svoboda. A unique musical and scenic work, created without Czech language even for foreign audiences.<sup>7</sup> The Russian *Juno and Avos* (1987) and the Hungarian staging of *Evita* (1989) also smelled like bait for big musicals. In November 1989 came the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, in which musicians, actors and other artists were heavily involved.

## Musical boom of the 1990s

Bár concludes his contribution (2020, p. 201) with the period of the early 1990s: “The previously unchanging theatre network, which was controlled by the state, started to change.” What happened? Political transformation after 1989 brought the establishment of parliamentary democracy and the return of free private business, which of course was also reflected in culture. Pop stars from communist era lost their privileges as well as interest of the audience. But not forever. We had a real boom of Czech musicals since 1992 and musicals helped to older pop stars to come back on the stage.

Bringing the London version of the French musical *Les Misérables* to Prague was actually a very bold step. There was no local experience, and nor was there the requisite infrastructure. Premises for the project were eventu-

ally made available by Prague's *Divadlo na Vinohradech* theatre, but only for the time of its own summer holidays. As it was, audiences would have continued to come but the above-mentioned time limit turned the whole thing into an economic catastrophe. Even so, this became a major event of 1992, indeed one which shook the entire Czech pop music scene.

By then it had already proved untenable to rely on the existing local operetta ensemble. There were no real musical actors around who would have adequately combined the skills of acting, singing and dancing. An audition and casting call had to be made, inevitably involving star performers established under the old regime who had thus far been left out of the newly established circuit. These re-established ties ultimately helped both sides. They made possible performing comebacks and returns to both public awareness and the media for the likes of Helena Vondráčková, Jiří Korn, Karel Černoš and others. Moreover, *Les Misérables* does not really abound in either dialogue or dance numbers, its focus being very much on singing. The production proved attractive to local audiences. Consequently, before long further experiments followed suit. Several specialized production teams were formed, and in due time this country's conservatories introduced specialized courses for musical performers. The next international musical to receive a Prague production was *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1994).

## Distinction Prague versus Brno and other cities

While Prague became the domain of competing private production companies and desire to make money at any cost, in Brno musical productions were made around the government-granted municipal theatre. Also, whereas in Prague the productions' attractiveness was built on the appeal of time-tested – and well worn – images of pop stars, Brno witnessed the birth of a new generation of stars, recruited mostly from the ranks of graduates of the conservatory or specialized courses at the Janáček Academy, catapulted onto the orbit on the wings of new musicals.

The Prague batch of musicals was more often than not using separate teams, juxtaposing singers who were often less than adept at performing dramatic action, and dancers or dramatic actors who in their turn could not sing. In contrast to that, in Brno, and in fact also in Plzeň and in Ostrava, the prevailing policy was to cultivate actors' comprehensive musical-style skills. While in Prague the musical part of a production would be mostly limited to recorded tracks, with the singers handling it in karaoke fashion, in Brno the ambition was clearly to have a live orchestra and chorus on stage. The main figures of the Brno musical scene were director and author Stanislav Moša and composer Zdeněk Merta collaborating since the early 1990s.

The success of Prague adaptations of international musicals inspired other Czech composers and lyricists to create at home. And it is typical again that there were mostly authors established on a pop music scene. There, the translator of the libretto of *Les Misérables*, and easily Czech pop music's busiest lyricist, Zdeněk Borovec, took charge of the words, and the composer of that earlier vehicle, *Noc na Karlštejně* (A Night at Karlštejn Castle), Karel Svoboda could freely compose arched melodies enabling grand theatrical gesture: The musical *Dracula* (1995) was a starting point of genuine Czech production in Prague.<sup>8</sup> From the beginning there was a success and more and more authors wanted to take a part. And new specialized theatre stages or even houses began to be built.

## Mystification, retro and jukebox

The Czech musical boom began to fulfil various typological variants of content and style:

1. A musical comedy based on mystification. This subgenre is most at home in the domain of film, as these stories feature authentic widely popular figures, acting for themselves with no stand-ins allowed, who are placed at the centre of a fictional sequence of weird developments. Solid examples of this come from the pen of screenwriter and director Petr Zelenka: *Visací zámeček 1982-2007* (VZ Rock Band 1982-2007, 1993); *Mňága – Happy end* (1996), featuring the band *Mňága a Žďorp*; or *Rok ďábla* (Year of the Devil, 2002), with Jaromír Nohavica, Karel Plíhal and the band *Čechomor*.

2. The form of a retro-cabaret with vintage songs in a parade cemented by a plot. On stage, this is exemplified by *Hvězdy na vrbě* (Stars in the Willow, 1992), and on the silver screen, by *Rebelové* (Rebels, 2001). Both were based on popular songs of the 1960s.

Interestingly also, even newly written songs may be tailored in retro style for inclusion in a film, as was the case of Ivan Hlas's fine soundtrack numbers for *Šakalí léta* (Years of the Jackal, 1993).

3. A specific type of retro-musical draws exclusively on the hit catalogue of a single singer or band. The first Czech hit-musical, or perhaps more precisely, jukebox musical, *Olympic aneb Jak se lítá vzhůru* (Olympic band, or How to fly up, 2002), was made in the form of comic takes documenting the history of the oldest Czech rock outfit. Similarly, the crazy comedial *Láska je láska* (Love Is Love, 2005), built around then still fairly fresh songs of a singer Lucie Bílá, was most of all a sketch-dotted recital lacking anything like a truly eventful plot. In what has been a more standard practice though, a thoroughly new, and as a rule also as thoroughly rudimentary storyline is implanted to frame an assortment of songs coming from the same source. The song numbers are stuck onto this frame like as many decorations on a Christmas tree. On the international scene, this method was introduced by the screen entertainment using music by Abba, *Mamma Mia!* (stage 1999, screen 2008). Czech pop stars' playlists thus fuelled the restart of the career of Sagvan Tofi. He took part, as an actor and in several cases also as screenwriter, in the making of the musicals *Děti ráje* (The Children of Paradise, 2009), *Mýdlový princ* (Soap Prince, 2015), *Čas růží* (The Time of Roses, 2017), and *Kvítek mandragory* (Mandrake Flower, 2019). The second and fourth titles of this series were written and directed by versatile specialist on musicals Radek Balaš.

## Overproduction after 2000

What followed after 2000: A penchant for lavish historical themes (denial of Bernstein's original starting points about the need for the current plot). Amount of schematic creation, especially in Prague - singers sing, dancers dance and actors talk (denial of essentially musical acting). Of course, not everything was bad, it is due to distinguish, but in general it was the real overproduction.

Before the covid era one Prague season saw 26 musical production openings.

This was truly out of proportion compared with, say, four premieres taking place in the same season in a much larger city like Hamburg. Unlike in Hamburg, Czech musical shows were attended by tourists from abroad. They were not meant solely for Prague audiences; rather, the productions entailed a well organised system of bringing in visitors from the provinces. The productions operated on fairly restricted budgets; of course, at a time of ever more sophisticated reproduction technologies, an orchestra might be found dispensable, with music supplied by playback. This necessarily deprived shows of all immediacy, authenticity, and a genuine sense of personal involvement.

And yet, visitors were still happy and proud of having gone to theatre. There, musicals were conjuring up an illusion of high culture and cosmopolitanism. Even more so, to be sure, as they would draw on a repertoire of lofty subjects familiar to everyone: classical antiquity, the ancient Rome, literary classics<sup>9</sup>, lives of historical figures.

Typically, a musical is nurtured by an ambition to offer a witty portrayal of current life, with focus on the young generations, charting suspenseful social affairs and relations, viewed through a prism of hyperbole and irony. This might be said of *Starci na chmelu* or *Gentlemaní*. In contrast to that, what has prevailed and gained much wider popularity over the last two decades in these latitudes is a concept of stories highlighting timeless protagonists of past history.

Apart from that, as regards the ratio of sung numbers and dialogue, the evolution has in these parts likewise been oriented predominantly towards the "operatic" lane. This has been especially true in Prague, where audiences tend to go to musicals to see pop stars appearing on stage as actors (as in *Dracula*, *Johanka z Arku*, or *Kleopatra*). In contrast to that, a good many musicals, including notably older ones, would rather seem to resemble more than anything else plays built on spoken dialogue, only now and then interspersed with song and dance.

Karel Svoboda followed up *Dracula* by the musicals *Monte Christo* (2000) and *Golem* (2005), whose success, however, was not quite as unreserved. The competition was gaining ground, too, with others trying to seize their opportunity. Of those, Michal David tried out an album of songs with pre-recorded vocal track for the ice revue *Princezna zmrzlina* (Princess Ice Cream, 1999), setting off a conveyor belt of productions. While leading Czech musical librettist Zdeněk Borovec died in the middle of work on texts for *Kleopatra* (2002), his place on that commission was taken over by Lou Fanánek Hagen, the leader of the rock band *Tři sestry*, who then went on to furnish texts for *Tři mušketýři* (The Three Musketeers, 2004), *Angelika* (2007), *Kat Mydlář* (Mydlář the Executioner, 2011), and more.

Ondřej Soukup came with *Johanka z Arku* (Joan of Arc, 2000), *Láska je láska* (Love Is Love, 2005), *Elixír života* (Elixir of Life, 2005), *Robin Hood* (2010), plus more. No less prolific, Michal Pavlíček produced *Excalibur* (2003), *Obráz Doriana Graye* (The Picture of Dorian Gray, 2006), and *Dáma s kaméliemi* (La Dame aux camélias, 2007). Ledecký carried on as well, bringing out *Galileo* (2003) and working on *Cyrano i Iago* (with staging continually put off until the opening in 2017). Like Ledecký, Daniel Landa too wrote not only music but also

skeleton librettos and song lyrics for his musicals: *Krysař* (Pied Piper) was followed by *Tajemství* (Secret, 2005), *Touha* (Desire, 2008, a stage adaptation of the film, *Kvaska*, of 2007), and *Klíč králů* (Key of the Kings, 2012).

As after some time the musical pie was beginning to stale, a new teams and authors appeared trying to spice it up: Petr Hapka and Michal Horáček built their “lyrical”, *Kudykam* (Wheresoever, 2009) on verse; Pavel Holý and Milan Levý (*Kladivo na čarodějnice/Witchhammer*, 2009) used texts by Jan Krůta; and Ondřej Gregor Brzobohatý (*Já, François Villon/I François Villon*) set texts by Pavel Vrba, or, in *Legenda jménem Holmes* (The Legend Named Holmes, 2018), he wrote the words himself.

## Conclusion

We can summarize how the political climate influenced and determined the development of Czech musicals. It is like a swing or spiral:

1930s – the promising development of theatre and film with songs and dances, but its interruption with the war after 1945 – the promising start of the Czech musical embodied by the adaptation of *Finian's Rainbow*, but interruption of the development with the takeover of power by the communist party in 1948

1950s – strong censorship, many prohibitions and restrictions, hidden accumulation of creative forces for the following decade

1960s – the first rise of Czech musical production with bold political allusions

1970s – censorship again, essential personalities emigrated or died, kitsch production and small scenes tried to be an alternative

1980s – liberation of the situation but as late as at the second half of the decade

1990s – rapid change of everything, the return of private enterprise, conditions for real boom of Czech musicals, pioneering era with interesting results

after 2000 – overproduction due to free and partly financially supported creations by city budgets; partly produced by pop music business units; as well as due to a large number of audiences with rather lower taste demands.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Especially Osolobě 1967, 1974, Bár 2013 and Jensen 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *PopStory 4/6. Divadlo a Film. Czech TV 2020* (dir. Jakub Skalický). <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/11066934013-popstory/218542151320004/>. Accessed 15 Juni 2022.

<sup>3</sup> „Divadelní noviny“ (Theatre Newspaper, 1957-1970 and since 1992), „Divadlo“ (Theatre, 1949-70), daily press and others.

<sup>4</sup> The Timeline was created by Aleš Opekar for his exhibition *Opera pro chudé? Proměny českých muzikálů v čase i nečase* (Tourist –Class Opera? Czech Musicals Through Good Times and Bad), held in Prague’s Popmuseum in 2020 (pdf in Czech is available: <https://www.popmuseum.cz/vystavy/opera-pro-chude>).

<sup>5</sup> Hop harvest used to be the compulsory summer job of students in Czechoslovakia. The context of such brigade was therefore suitable for a plot from the lives of young people. There is one example of the song “Chmel je naše zlato” (Hops are our gold): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beHHozHfq2g>.

<sup>6</sup> A record of the entire performance has been preserved. A year after its premiere, this „East Side Story“ was also performed in Budapest and Giessen, West Germany. The example of the song mentioned above, the Vesjoly karandash (a happy pencil) you can watch on footage 1:28:45 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB2Zv7VzcVg>.

<sup>7</sup> You can see a sample here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lz8pH56BND8&t=358s>.

<sup>8</sup> At the sample of *Dracula* we can see divided professional roles, typical of the Prague scene: singers sing, dancers dance...: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SpF2vE9ono&list=PL43F5C827143505AD>.

<sup>9</sup> For instance *Three Musketeers* (2004), you can see a sample here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9tP3b8iQvU>.

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## TV Documentary

*PopStory. Divadlo a film (Muzikály)*, Czech TV 2020 (dir. Jakub Skalický), <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/11066934013-popstory/218542151320004/>. Accessed 15 Juni 2022.