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Postdramatic Tendencies in Czech Avant-Garde Theatre

Reconsidering the Case of Director Emil František Burian and His Production of *May* (1935)

Abstract

This article analyses the production *May* (1935) by the Czech avant-garde director Emil František Burian, based on the famous Romantic poem by Karel Hynek Mácha. The production combined voice-band recitation, music, dance and life action with the projection of photographs and film footage. The paper offers a new interpretation and contextualisation of the work in the context of avant-garde theatre, suggesting an alternative perspective and arguing that the production should be reconsidered as a post-dramatic phenomenon of the Czech theatre avant-garde.

Keywords

avant-garde theatre, postdramatic theatre, multimedia in theatre, Emil František Burian, Karel Hynek Mácha, authorial subject

Abstrakt

Tendencje postdramatyczne w czeskim teatrze awangardowym: Rewizja przypadku Emila Františka Buriana i jego spektaklu *Máj* (1935)

Artykuł analizuje spektakl *Máj* (1935) czeskiego reżysera awangardowego Emila Františka Buriana, oparty na słynnym romantycznym poemacie Karela Hynka Máchy. Spektakl łączył recytację, muzykę, taniec i aktorstwo na żywo z projekcją fotografii i materiału filmowego. Artykuł proponuje reinterpretację i rekontekstualizację tego dzieła w odniesieniu do teatru awangardowego, ukazując alternatywną perspektywę i postulując rewizję spektaklu Buriana jako postdramatycznego zjawiska czeskiej awangardy teatralnej.

Słowa kluczowe

teatr awangardowy, teatr postdramatyczny, multimedia w teatrze, Emil František Burian, Karel Hynek Mácha, podmiot autorski

The process of reclaiming the Central-Eastern European interwar theatre avant-garde will never be finished. And this is also in accordance with the logic of performing—one performance starts another in a chain of never-ending process of succession and surrogation.¹

Dariusz Kosiński

The present paper² aims to contribute to the discussion about Central European avant-garde prompted by *Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde*, edited by Dariusz Kosiński in 2023, which is undoubtedly the most current contribution in the field. My paper will propose an alternative, albeit potentially fruitful, perspective in the form of a case study focused on Czech director Emil František Burian and his production of *May*.

The Context of the Research

The *Lexicon* is the culmination of a meticulously conceived, long-term project.³ It introduces frequently under-explored knowledge to English-speaking academic circles and concurrently challenges prevailing paradigms within the domain of avant-garde theatre. Kosiński (along with his team) emphasizes the socio-political and cultural prism of the avant-garde, focusing specifically on the conditions and context of artistic work. This approach logically shifts the focus to centers of transfer³ (exhibitions, festivals, and events) and mobility. “The idea of transnational perspective and collective writing was fully realized in the central chapter on international exhibitions of the avant-garde. Thus this chapter serves as a culmination of this act and a kind of metamodel of the whole project,”⁴ claims the general editor. The book really delivers a surprising demonstration of very distinctive local avant-garde phenomena of Central-Eastern Europe. Furthermore, it suggests new connections and surprising paths of mobility for these inevitably transnational phenomena.

¹ Dariusz Kosiński, ed., *A Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2023), 19.

² The initial version of the paper was presented at *Illusions IN/OUTSIDE the Theatre: Intermedial Performance from the Renaissance Until Today* in Toruń, 2023. I am happy to thank colleagues whose positive reactions supported my attempt to revisit this fragment of Czech avant-garde theatre. I also thank the reviewers of the paper for substantial notes on the structure and argument of my writing, which helped me to deliver a more consistent version.

³ Dariusz Kosiński, “Central-European Theatre Avant-Garde: Reclamation or Reimagination,” *Theatralia* 25, no. 1 (2022): 149–162, <https://doi.org/10.5817/TV2022-1-9>.

⁴ Kosiński, *Lexicon*, 19.

In the context of my research, which is primarily concerned with the analysis of directing methods and the aesthetic aspects of theatre, the third part of the book, which focuses on “crucial aesthetics aspects” of avant-garde theatre, represents the most challenging section. Here the avant-garde appears, as the editor claims, “as an entity enlivened by common aesthetic values, ideas, mode of work, passions and goals.”⁵ The conceptualization of theatre avant-garde in such a synthetic manner is to be encouraged, though it must be noted that this approach is also very risky. It is evident that the challenge is recognized by the editors of the section, Justyna Michalik-Tomala and Marina Milivojević Mađarev, who state that “the terms we proposed allow for a certain synthesis,”⁶ but also express the hope that results “would resemble collage, *an incomplete composition* that, although diverse, would somehow manifest as internally connected composition to be developed in the future.”⁷ They try to provide an active, dynamic paradigmatic vision of the avant-garde as liminal phenomena, “experimental and innovative art that is always in the process of becoming.”⁸ In the forementioned chapter, this statement is frequently expressed in a more declarative manner rather than being analyzed or demonstrated through a detailed examination of specific works. Inevitably, the generalizing logic of the lexicon precludes such an in-depth investigation of individual works.

The work of Czech theatre director Emil František Burian, who is the focus of this paper, is mentioned often, explicitly in a section on theatre synthesis (see especially *A Carnival of Eclecticisms* by Alexandra Chiriac) and of course Martin Bernátek gives much attention to Burian in the final section of his essay on *Thinking Practise, Shaping Art: Aesthetics of Czech Avant-Garde*. He in general characterizes very pertinently Burian’s theatre vision as attempt to create “orchestrated integrating theatrical event.”⁹ What remains still as a challenge is to describe the inner structure of this “integration” or “synthesis.” My analysis of one of Burian’s productions is thus intended to form a complementary analysis to the generalizing attempts of the *Lexicon*.

My paper is also situated against the actual state of Czech research about avant-garde theatre. Martin Bernátek, to mention him again, states in his book review that “The impulses and activities of the interwar avant-garde in Czechoslovakia

⁵ Kosiński, 19.

⁶ Kosiński, 470.

⁷ Kosiński, 470 (emphasis D.D.).

⁸ Kosiński, 471.

⁹ Kosiński, 526.

are fundamental for the meta-narrative on Czech modern theatre.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, he follows, many new Czech books on the topic remain very descriptive and positivist, lacking sufficient methodology; “there is an absence of theory or at least some explicit reflection on what avant-garde theatre actually is and how to define it historically and theoretically.”¹¹ Here a conceptually grounded approach to Kosiński’s project is more than deserved. Martin Bernátek’s essay in the *Lexicon* does in fact address his own challenge, as formulated in the final paragraph of the book review:

The study of Czechoslovak avant-garde theatre, as with any historiographical work devoted to a crucial point in cultural history, requires, in addition to the study of the material itself, a *critical archaeology of the epistemological layers of previous interpretations and a heightened sensitivity to the theory and methods of study*.¹²

My paper is thus positioned at the intersection of Czech and Central-Eastern European discussion on the conceptualizing of theatre avant-garde. It also reacts to a provocative statement of Josef Vojvodík who, in his introduction to *A Glossary of Catchwords of Czech Avant-garde*, critically admits that “Czech literary and art history has constructed. . . an all too simplistic, smooth transition to postmodernism, ignoring retrospective ties to avant-garde.”¹³ The same might be said specifically of the theatre history of the Czech avant-garde, which still lacks any considerations of links between avant-garde and postmodern art. Thus I will try to introduce into my interpretation of Burian’s performance alternative conceptualizations of Burian’s performance, including postdramatic theatre as coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann.

Contexts and Sources of Production *May* (1935)

The work of E. F. Burian (1904–1959) has a firm place in the Czech context (and to some extent in the world context) of theatre history. Burian is regarded

¹⁰ Martin Bernátek, “New Book on the Czech Avant-garde Theatre,” *Theatralia* 26, no. 2 (2023): 239, <https://doi.org/10.5817/TV2023-2-18>.

¹¹ Bernátek, “New Book,” 242–243.

¹² Bernátek, 244–245 (emphasis D.D.).

¹³ Josef Vojvodík, “Introduction,” in Petr A. Bilek, Josef Vojvodík, and Jan Wiendl, eds., *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art 1908–1958*, trans. David Short (Praha: Togga, 2011), 22.

as a seminal figure within the Czech interwar avant-garde, a theatre director who experimented with sound and music (particularly the phenomenon of the so-called voice-band¹⁴) and the combination of theatre and film (so-called theatregraph¹⁵), and who also envisioned a new concept of theatre space suitable for avant-garde theater practice (see the projects of the Theater of Labor¹⁶).

The production of *May* (1935) marks a significant milestone in Burian's directing career as his first stage production based entirely on a poem and integrating photo and film projection, establishing the concept of "multimedia" theater. The production is frequently regarded as a forerunner to Burian's most mature works, including *Spring Awakening* (1936), *Eugene Onegin* (1937), and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1938), which exemplify the complex integration of film and photography into stage storytelling. While this perspective is relevant, it reduces *May* to merely a preparatory step in Burian's creative development. I propose an alternative reading: viewing the production as a unique artistic event in its own right that, from the perspective of contemporary practice and theory, bears many aspects of postdramatic theatre.

When Burian¹⁷ first staged Mácha's *May* in 1935, he was already—at the age of 31— a respected and well-known figure of the avant-garde theatre scene. Burian's work with the Voice-Band group had already garnered him respect and European recognition within the context of contemporary experimental music in the late 1920s. Voice-Band was a group of performers presenting only through their voices, which they used as musical instruments (only occasionally singing, but rather chanting, whispering, rhythmically declaiming, or ranting) to present Burian's compositions textually based on poetry. These compositions were never just choral recitations, but polyphonic vocal compositions foregrounding the materiality of sound and the word and its assonants and consonants as well as the rhythmic pattern of verses. In 1933 Burian finally founded his own theatre company D, envisioned as a cultural center. He was then involved in the organization of lectures, art exhibitions, and presentations of new poetry,

¹⁴ See Andrea Jochmanová, "Voice-Band," in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art 1908–1958*, ed. Petr A. Bilek et al. (Praha: Togga, 2011), 423–432.

¹⁵ See Lucie Česálková and Kateřina Svatoňová, *The Dictator of Time: (De)contextualizing the Phenomenon of Laterna Magika+* (Praha: National Film Archive, 2019).

¹⁶ See Martin Bernátek, "Theatrical Apparatus and Social Change: The Divadlo Práce Project," in *Reclaimed Avant-Garde: Spaces and Stages of Avant-Garde Theatre in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. Zoltán Imre and Dariusz Kosiński (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2018), 118–133.

¹⁷ For an elementary overview of Emil František Burian's work (and life) see the respective chapter in Jarka M. Burian, *Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theater* (London: Routledge, 2002), 40–58.

and the editing of a monthly cultural journal. However, this analysis will not consider the social and political implications of Burian's endeavors; instead, it will focus on the aesthetic aspects of his production of *May*.

The second season of his theatre company D saw it establish itself as a significant contributor to Prague's (and not just the avant-garde) theatre culture. This was when Burian decided to stage the romantic poem *May* by Karel Hynek Mácha. There were a number of reasons for this artistic decision: Burian had already staged adaptations of novels and scripts composed as montages of poetry, so it was a logical progression to master an entire poem as a stage piece. He was consistently testing different ways of using cinematic projection in theatre, and the performance being based on non-dramatic, poetic text challenged him to explore different possible connections between sound, stage actions, and projected images. Also, prior to *May*, Burian had presented shorter compositions for voice-band, based on small lyrical texts. The complexity of *May* rests in its length and the variability of its versification, which represents a relatively new challenge for voice-band. Lastly, *May* is regarded as the cornerstone of Czech poetry and the founding oeuvre of modern Czech poetry. Thus, in the staging of *May*, Burian is both challenging and appropriating the tradition.

May (first published 1835), by Mácha, is a lyrical epic poem consisting of four cantos and two intermezzi. Its narrative draws on a conventional romantic crime motif: Vilém, banished by his father, becomes the leader of a band of robbers and murders his rival in love—unaware that the rival is his own father. He is imprisoned and executed, while his beloved Jarmila commits suicide by drowning. Mácha, however, presents this story only indirectly, privileging lyrical atmosphere, nature imagery, and philosophical reflection. The cantos juxtapose blossoming spring with impending execution, depict the prisoner's nocturnal meditation on death and nothingness, stage the brutal execution and torture in contrast to natural beauty, and conclude with the poet's reflection on transience upon encountering the hero's skull.¹⁸

Mácha's work resists straightforward narrative encapsulation; its essence lies in linguistic complexity, lyrical evocativeness, variable versification, and metaphorical richness. The concluding sequence of the poem's third canto exemplifies this approach: following the protagonist's execution, Mácha shifts perspective to meditate on human transience and ephemerality. These paradoxical notions are expressed at the limits of linguistic capacity through oxymorons.

¹⁸ For much detailed summary and analysis of the poem see Milada Součková, *The Czech Romantics* (Berlin: Mouton, 1958), 69–77.

The towns are far off like a white cloud in the blue,
 Across them into distant lands the dead gaze flew,
 To lands, where once as a child—O fair—fair age!
 Age now carried far away by times' rude rage,
 Far away is its dream, dead as a shadow's shade,
 As white towns' image sunk in the lake's lap,
 As the last thoughts of the dead,
 As their names, the noise of ancient battles,
 Age-old northern lights, their extinguished glow,
Wrecked harp's note, torn string's tone,
Vanished age's action, dead star's gleam,
Perished comet's track, dead beloved's feeling,
 Forgotten tomb, eternity's fallen dwelling,
Extinguished fire's smoke, molten bell's voice,
 That is the fair childhood age of the dead.¹⁹

It is generally acknowledged that poetry in any form is considered virtually untranslatable (but there are four different attempts to translate *May* in English, not mentioning the German renderings). This fragment attempts to convey at least some of the intensity of Mácha's metaphors. The images in question retain their potency to this day, as evidenced by Burian's own explicit commentary on this aspect of Mácha's language. The images are strikingly concrete and ostensible, or to put it another way, they are strongly *material*. The sequence of oxymorons represents one of the most powerful passages in the poem, which thus transcends the boundaries of romanticism. In the 1930s, this quality also led the Czech surrealists to regard Mácha as their precursor and a truly modern Czech poet. Burian was well-aware of the features of Mácha's poem and used them as a point of departure for the concept of his production.

Production of *May* (1935, 1936): Fragmentary Description

The following description is based on a reconstruction provided by Bořivoj Srba,²⁰ but it is retold from a contemporary theatrical and theoretical perspective to

¹⁹ Translation by James Naughton available online at <https://czech.mml.ox.ac.uk/karel-hynek-macha-maj-1836>.

²⁰ For a complete description see the respective chapter in Bořivoj Srba, *Řečí světla* (Brno: Janáčkova akademie múzických umění, 2004), 167–202. The book also includes the most extensive and up-to-date list of all existing archival sources. Burian staged *May* subsequently in 1935 and 1936. The visual concept was quite similar, and

open a new interpretative perspective, which will be outlined in the last section of the paper. I am also foregrounding selected primary sources, especially period reviews. These sources not only provide testimony to facts about the production but sometimes describe the emotional impact and affects that the production triggered. These details permit the production to be contextualized in a new way within the context of Czech avant-garde theatre history.

Burian explained his intention in a lengthy text in the program. Two passages are quite instructive:

To stage this poetry among poems is above all a difficult task, and perhaps that is why we were tempted by “this poem *May*,” which strikes violently at the reader’s most delicate feelings, but remained unrecognized as *material spatial poetry*. We wish to refute the claim of literary men who say that they present poems only to be silently read. A verse, in order to be written, had to be elicited from a gross (latent) scale of words. We *capture those eavesdropped verses in space and return them to the viewer’s ear*. . . . We try to *provoke the feeling of that poetry in the audience directly, immediately*.²¹

Already here we can glimpse Burian’s tendency to understand theater as immediate material experience, not just re-presentation of dramatic story (or characters). In the closing parts of his program text this becomes even more clear:

The production of Mácha’s *May* does not want to be and is not a transcription of a poetic plot. It does not feature the persons of the drama. We have tried to realize Mácha’s visions *in space in parallel with the text as a poem of tones, light, colors and shapes*.²²

Furthermore, the somewhat inelegant way I have presented the poem serves to illustrate that it is not possible to dramatize or adapt it for the stage in such a way that the “dramatic” story can be represented. The strategy employed by Burian is markedly distinct and radical. Burian chose to present the text of the poem in its entirety, reciting it as a voice-band performance, occasionally accompanied

the voice-band part remained the same. Even though footage for the second version was made anew (first copy of the film simply did not survive), all the documents agree that in principle the concept remained unchanged. Thus, I am not drawing out differences between the versions of the production as they would not influence my argument.

²¹ Burian’s programmatic text quoted in Lola Skrbková, *E. F. Burianova voicebandová kompozice Máchova “Máje”* (Brno: Městské kulturní středisko S.K. Neumanna, 1977), 40 (emphasis D.D.).

²² Skrbková, *E. F. Burianova voicebandová kompozice*, 44 (emphasis D.D.).

by live music on the harmonium and prepared harp, which employed quarter-tone scales. Parts of the poem were spoken chorally or by different sections of the group. The voice-band speakers/performers could occasionally be perceived as personas, examples here perhaps being the prisoners who observe the execution of the protagonist. However, for much of the time, they were situated behind the set, with only their voices audible within the space. The ensemble comprised eight performers, four women and four men. This enabled Burian to utilize contrasts in vocal timbre and pitch, or the repetition of text in different voices, to achieve a high degree of polyphonic complexity. The voices, which were most of the time devoid of their bodies, were on the verge of becoming personas and mere, but very material, sound. As evidenced by numerous reviews, the sound was particularly immersive and encompassing. Mácha's evocation of a romantic spring landscape (or desperate atmosphere of night in prison) were turned into *soundscape*.

Only occasionally were there performers on stage: for example, imprisoned Vilém in the second canto or a wanderer in fourth canto very embodied by an actor, but in very static poses, speaking in the same stylization as voice-band chorus, entering into dialogue with it. But parallelly, sequences with Vilém were also part of the film footage. Jarmila was performed partly by a dancer, another actress appeared in film and "voice" for Jarmila, who almost does not speak, emerging from the voice-band chorus. Thus, personas were deconstructed in their stage presence.

The visuals were characterized by a minimalistic simplicity. The stage floor was green, the backdrop was otherwise neutral, and it contained a projection screen, which could be considered an image within an image. The actors were dressed up in a highly stylized way, so any reference to the romantic setting of the poem was absent. The performers' faces were concealed beneath black and white makeup, and their attire consisted of rags, jute, and wigs crafted from ropes. Visually the actors might even have been described as expressionistic.

The stage was sparsely filled with only a few objects. These included a rusty pipe with some flax hemp thread gasket on it, a wire grid, a piece of coiled mesh, a few stones, rabbit skins stretched over a piece of wood, and hanging ropes. Once more, these objects bore no resemblance to the romantic imagery evoked by the poem. They were, in fact, tangible, everyday objects or even junkyard debris, rather than the imaginative objects of a poetic fantasy. They could be more accurately described as *found objects*.

According to reviews, however, these objects in specific lighting could evoke prison bars, a skull lying in the grass, flowing water, a harp created from streams of moonlight, or a skeleton on an executioner's wheel. In the pauses between each

section, however, Burian killed the theatrical “magical” lighting and left the space illuminated by the working light for a while—i.e., he not only broke the illusion, but emphatically demonstrated the harsh, everyday *materiality* of the objects.

The film footage that was used was only loosely connected to the recited text, never directly illustrating the words, rather creating its own series of visual associations: footage of clouds, trees of wild running waters (but with no sound!). Jarmila appeared in film as a “lyrical girl” with wild blond hair—again a rather contemporary expressionistic vision of young women rather than a cliché of a romantic fallen virgin; another sequence captured her face as below water, suggesting Jarmila had drowned herself. Vilém was sometimes simultaneously on stage and in the projection—yet according to reviews the actor’s vivid, tortured face (on stage) was said to contrast with the impenetrable expression of the same face seen in the projection. Some of the images could sometimes be very abstract—just black and white moving hands etc.²³

All reviewers speak of the intensive atmosphere, the dramatic changes of light, the impressive contrasts between the melody of the speech of persona, and the rhythm of the chorus and the music. These seem to be the key words: contrasts, dissonance, intensity, and immersion.

Let us look at their comments in more detail. Václav Růt characterized the style of performance as “cubistic,” “striving to deconstruct shapes and light into visual elements.”²⁴ This might be another way to capture the associative structure of the show, in which action, projection, and sound were relatively independent, thus providing different perspectives and inviting the audience to synthesize them. Josef Träger highly appreciated the performances and in fact confirmed that Burian accomplished what he intended:

[Burian] successfully avoided the danger of illustration, *consciously avoided the idea of stage transcription* and actually created *a stage poem of surrealist fragility, dreamlike clarity and intangible form* to Mácha’s words. He combined all the theatrical components and *elements into a coherent composition of polyphonic richness*, balancing the musical component with an equally composed visual component.²⁵

²³ The second version of the film footage, used in the production in 1936 (created by filmmaker Čeněk Zahradníček and E. F. Burian), provides at least a glimpse into the visual stylization of the show. It is available on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg3carjcaQs&t=236s>.

²⁴ Václav Růt’s review quoted in Skrbková, E. F. *Burianova voicebandová kompozice*, 162.

²⁵ Josef Träger, “Máchův Máj na jevišti”, *Listy pro umění a kritiku* 3 (1935): 251 (emphasis D.D.).

Träger also identifies intriguing, provoking moments in the complexity of stage composition: “It creates *uncanny irritation* when Mácha’s verses are accompanied by *syncopations* of jazz rhythms and *discordant* quarter-tone music, unusual at the first-time of hearing.”²⁶ A few other reviewers expressed similar opinions. These opinions describe an uneasy yet intriguing effect, or even a mesmerizing one, created by the deliberate dissonance between the verse and its sound (and music). Another potential source of dissonance can be identified in the relationship between the verses and the visual elements. Olga Srbová complained that “the most beautiful evocation of nature is recited in a sterile hospital setting,”²⁷ but still could not deny the emotional intensity of the performance. Her statement succinctly captures a tension between a relatively empty, abstract, and bare stage and the emotionally evocative text. It could be argued that the intentional contrast between simple stage design and the variability of the poetic text supported the affective effect of the voice-band recitation. The dissonances (or tension in the structure of the performance) may be perceived as the consequence of a cubist or surrealist, possibly deconstructivist and anti-illusionist approach.

Reviews could be compared with Burian’s own proclamations about his artistic methods. Already in 1926, he wrote a music-theatre manifesto called *Polydynamics*, in which he described his vision of a future synthetic art: “Every dynamic element in polydynamic art is *interdependent, functioning only in contrast to another*, contrast unifying dramatic flow.”²⁸ This dictum is pronounced in the production of *May* very explicitly. In his program text Burian interpreted Mácha’s poetry as a project of new theatre reality. He praises the poet for his

dynamic rhythm (which *could be presented only performatively, on stage*) and for a dialectic depicting of reality. . . . *Metaphor is for Mácha in poem and prose, what is for new theatre visual material*. Mácha puts two real phenomena in contrast to reach supra-reality. . . . from the combination of two concepts a third one, the poetic, rises—theatre is aiming for the same effect. Only the sum of two real things can uncover a new reality, connected to real life through conflict.²⁹

²⁶ Träger, “Máchův Máj na jevišti” (emphasis D.D.).

²⁷ os [Srbová, Olga], “14 dní v divadle”, *Literární noviny* 7, no. 12 (1934/35): 8.

²⁸ Emil František Burian, “Polydynamika”, in *Emil František Burian a jeho program poetického divadla*, ed. Bořivoj Srba (Praha: Divadelní ústav, 1981), 17 (emphasis D.D.).

²⁹ Emil František Burian, “Mácha nám objevuje jeviště”, in *Emil František Burian*, 83 (emphasis D.D.).

The performance of *May* can be considered a tangible manifestation of Burian's aspirations for a polydynamic, material, and poetic theatre. The utilization of archival sources and reviews as a basis for the production aligns with the reviewers' observations.

Considering the contemporary perspective, I would argue that while Burian sought to create an artistic unity, he also attempted to aesthetically shape the individual components of his performances accordingly with their inherent logic. In the case of *May*, objects remain objects, the recited text emphasizes not the meanings but the musicality, i.e. the materiality of speech, the actor's action is stylized into dance and thus remains a physical movement rather than dramatic acting, and the stage presence of personas is deconstructed through the use of different media. Connections between elements are deliberately loose. Interpreted in this way, Burian's idea of a new synthetic theatre is not only avant-garde, but virtually postdramatic—it is theatre of an intensive performative presence, of a deliberately decentered and open structure, which includes intentional contrastive and anti-illusionist moments.

Emil František Burian in Multiple Perspectives

Before I develop further my preliminary observation of the production, let's see Burian through the existing interpretative tradition on the avant-garde. In the Czech context the authoritative interpretation is provided by Bořivoj Srba.³⁰

Srba interprets Burian's effort to create a "theatre-poem", lyrical theater, or poetic theatre – to use a few terms Czech avant-garde theatre directors used in the formulations of their theoretical ideals (or programmatic visions). Srba refers to these efforts as attempts at *subjective theatre*. Srba's theory is derived from the writings of Jan Mukařovský, particularly his theory of the authorial subject, and has been adapted for use in theatre practice.³¹ In his 1971 initial study on Burian, Srba builds upon Mukařovský's work to demonstrate how

³⁰ For Bořivoj Srba (1931–2014), the individual and theatrical work of Emil František Burian constituted a lifelong topic of interest and fascination. The inaugural publication on the subject was the book *Poetické divadlo E. F. Buriana*, which was followed by an edition of Burian's program texts and theoretical reflections entitled *E. F. Burian a jeho program poetického divadla* and other partial publications. The research is concluded with the summarizing book *Řečí světla*, which, like the first book, focuses solely on Burian's productions utilizing projections (in particular, the so-called theatregraph).

³¹ Mukařovský developed his concept of the authorial subject in the book *Máchův, "Máj": Estetická studie* (1928). This particular book is not available in English, but Mukařovský later developed the theory in three connected papers: "Intentionality and Unintentionality," "Dialectic Contradictions in Modern Art," and "Personality in Art"; see Jan Mukařovský, *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1978).

modern drama, which is considered the most objective genre since Hegel, can also be subjectivized through the application of particular dramaturgical methods.³² Srba's concept is in fact a theory of consistently authorial theatre. He posits that it is only the director who can become the authorial subject of a theatrical production by subordinating the expression of all the components involved in the creation of the theatrical artefact, including the authorial message of the author of the text:

There is no place for two or more subjects in a subjectivated work. The director, as the central creative subject, to whom all the elements of theatre expression are subordinated, is the only individual with the right to a personal statement about life, the world, and himself.³³

Srba's theory can be considered a modernist concept of theatre directing. In this aesthetic paradigm, the theatre director is dominant within the dynamic yet stylistically coherent theatre structure. In this framework, Srba provides an interpretation of the theatre productions of Burian, focusing particularly on the strategies employed by Burian as director. In fact, Burian was often responsible for writing scripts, directing, composing music, and collaborating on projections used, thus establishing himself as the sole authorial subject of his theatre productions. Srba's thesis, formulated in the 1960s, is a consistent development of Mukařovský's period statement from 1948:

There are actually only two parties in Burian's theatre, himself and his audience. Everything else that is between these two parties is in his hands, is his instrument. . . . And so Burian's stage system is entirely geared towards a passionate dialogue between director and audience.³⁴

Srba's concept of directing is evidently consistent with the concept of the director as *an auteur*, which is frequent in film theory from the 1960s, but of course is present in the theory of theatre directing also.³⁵ For Bořivoj Srba, the avant-garde theatre movement represents the ascent of the director as *an auteur*. This has

³² Here Srba's thoughts are parallel to theses presented by Peter Szondi in his *Theorie des Modernen Dramas* (1956), which in the Czech Republic in the 1970s had not yet been significantly received.

³³ Bořivoj Srba, *Poetické divadlo E. F. Buriana* (Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1971), 22.

³⁴ Jan Mukařovský, "D34–D48 ve vývoji českého divadla", in *Studie z estetiky* (Praha: Odeon, 1966): 327.

³⁵ Compare to Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova, *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially the chapter "Director as an auteur".

two consequences. Firstly, it results in the marginalization of other means of theatre synthesis (and other artists). Secondly, it leads to a linear reading of the artistic development of the directors. For instance, he comprehends the performance of *May* as a preparatory foundation for more advanced works. Josef Vojvodík's statement that "Czech literary and art history has constructed . . . an all too simplistic, smooth transition to postmodernism, ignoring retrospective ties to avant-garde"³⁶ might be rephrased in the case of Srba to posit "an all too simplistic transition from modernism to avant-garde."

I would rather suggest conceptualizing Burian's performance of *May* as a point of rupture which challenges continuity in the Czech history of avant-garde theatre. One potential approach to addressing this rupture is to consider the concepts of analytical and synthetic avant-garde, as defined by Aage A. Hansen-Löve³⁷ and explained by Josef Vojvodík. He defines analytical avant-garde as a style tending towards radical aesthetic idiosyncrasy and deformation (namely futurism, dadaism, surrealism), whilst synthetic avant-garde employs more coherent structures and reestablishes relations to traditional forms.³⁸ Burian's later productions, especially Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* (1936), and adaptations of *Eugene Onegin* (1937) or *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1938), could be seen as synthetic avant-garde, because here Burian tends to create a coherent story and stable hierarchy of theatre means while using a complex manner of multi-media stage narration. But *May* can be regarded as analytical avant-garde, as it keeps very strong links to other artistic forms and retains their specific logic. There is evident inspiration from surrealism (especially in attempting to clash disparate images or found objects in the space of the stage), the visuality of film sequences draws much from expressionism, the movement stylization takes advantage of the schooling of performers in modern dance, and the voice-band and over-all style of music maintain strong links to jazz and experiments with atonality. Andrea Jochmanová describes principles of the voice-band in the following way:

All such projects more or less deliberately involved a change in how language was handled, the most distinctive among them going against conventional declamation, consciously destroying the meaning of words and investing speech sounds with unexpected rhythms. *All this was meant to mobilize the*

³⁶ Vojvodík, "Introduction," 22.

³⁷ Aage A. Hansen-Löve, "Jan Mukařovský v kontextu 'syntetické avantgardy' a 'formálně filozofické školy' v Rusku," *Česká literatura* 42, no. 5 (1994): 451–495.

³⁸ Vojvodík, "Introduction," 26.

*audience's attention and add a new dynamic to the relationship between stage and auditorium.*³⁹

I argue that in the case of *May* the whole scenic composition was intently created with certain inner discrepancies or tensions, in order to destroy any possibility of theatre illusion and activate audience imagination.

This consideration can be taken further. Features of analytical avant-garde, developed mainly in the field of poetry (and literature) connect well with Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theatre. In my reconstruction I have already tried to foreground various aspects—mediality and materiality, the relative independence of elements, and the deconstruction of dramatic story and persona—to suggest that connection.

Lehmann defines postdramatic theatre as anti-mimetic and self-reflective, and observes at least preliminary attempts to achieve this already in historical avant-gardes: “self-reflexivity remains a permanent potential and necessity, forced by the coexistence and competition (paragon) of the arts.”⁴⁰ Burian's early visions of theatre (formulated especially in *Polydynamics*) are of course charged with the same challenges as film (and other audial and visual media) posed for traditional “dramatic” performance. The production of *May* is then exactly this avant-garde exploratory work. It also aligns with attempts to find new form or drama, or just the text for stage. “New forms of texts develop that contain narration and references to reality only in distorted and rudimentary shape: Gertrude Stein's ‘Landscape Play’, Antonin Artaud's texts for his ‘Theatre of Cruelty’, Witkiewicz's theatre of ‘pure form.’”⁴¹ Burian does not need to create such a text—he recognizes it in Mácha's romantic poem, and uses it in quite a similar way to that which Stein or Artaud envision, as physical material *per se* (the words of the poem, as reviewers testify, really physically affecting the audiences) and also as chance to create from literary descriptions of *landscapes* new *soundscapes*. The fact that Burian had no theatre education but came to the theatre with a schooling as a musical composer and jazz-band musician parallels the fact that “Gertrude Stein's texts exhibit a relation to Cubism. Witkiewicz came to theatre from painting.”⁴²

Seen in this way, this particular Burian's performance, I argue, not only fits Lehmann's interpretation of historical avant-gardes as precursors of postdramatic

³⁹ Jochmanová, “Voice-band,” 431 (emphasis D.D.).

⁴⁰ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), 51.

⁴¹ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 49.

⁴² Lehmann, 62.

theatre but could also be interpreted in terms borrowed from Lehmann's chapter "Panorama of Postdramatic Theatre." In my description of the performance, I implicated a *retreat of synthesis* and *non-hierarchical* structure. In the structuring of the stage composition was a mostly prominent *musicalization* and probably also a rudimentary form of *visual dramaturgy*. The moments when Burian demonstrated stage objects as such, in their everyday actuality might be connected to the *irruption of the real*.

Quite a surprising moment of comparison provides the short subchapter "Stage Poetry," dealing mainly with an unrealized vision of the symbolist to create new poetry on stage, which Lehmann ends with a very skeptical closure: "the merely episodic existence of lyrical drama could also be due to the fact that practitioners did not yet have the technical means for giving the stage poetry such a density that poetic word and stage reality would not hopelessly fall apart."⁴³ Unfortunately Burian's theatre work is not known so vastly that it could be used by Lehmann at the appropriate point in his treatise as a possible example of a more successful—both artistically and technologically—attempt to realize a poetry *of* stage, not only poetry *on* stage. Burian tried to describe his idea of stage poetry (or stage metaphor) in many manifestos, here comes his directorial vision of the storm on stage, formulated in 1938:

The old opera composers composed chromatic stage storms for the strings, lightning for the piccolo and thunder for tympani. . . . An obvious metaphor would emerge from this example if the orchestra was playing from the speakers in the auditorium and there were several projection screens placed on stage, showing enlarged rain drops falling towards the audience. The stage would be covered in silver mesh, reflected by the mirrors into the audience. *The rhythm of the whole stage picture would have to correspond with the rhythm and the color of the orchestra. The audience would probably run away in fear that they will get wet or stricken by lightning.*⁴⁴

This is not only a historical sample of an avant-garde manifesto, but a utopian project of a postdramatic multimedia performance, isn't it?

Burian's formal experiments lead to a vision of a new theatre building (the Theatre of Labor) which he worked on with Miroslav Kouřil, stage designer and architect. The structure of the new space was—aesthetically speaking—a vision

⁴³ Lehmann, 60.

⁴⁴ Emil František Burian, "The Stage Metaphor," in *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings* (Praha: Karolinum Press, 2016), 500 (emphasis D.D.).

of a kind of a transformable cinema studio combined with black box theatre.⁴⁵ Unlike other utopic avant-garde projects, they did not want a large mass theatre, but a building with various flexible spaces, some of them quite intimate. This raises the legitimate question of what kind of theatre they would make in such an envisioned space. In fact, my new attempt to interpret *May* supports the hypothesis that in addition to the external dynamism and the technological development of the multimedia form of this theatre, Burian would probably also experiment with the internal structure of stage compositions and arrive at further versions anticipating today's postdramatic practices.



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⁴⁵ For more detailed discussion see Martin Bernátek, "Theatrical apparatus and social change: The Divadlo práce project," in *Reclaimed Avant-garde*, 118–133.

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