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## Abstract

In the Library of the Theatre Institute in Prague, there are the so-called *Rádl's albums*, scrapbooks with photographs from productions, dramatic texts, costume designs, clippings and inscriptions, which authentically describe the work of leading Czech interwar avant-garde theatre artists. They are evidence of the period's enchantment with improvisation, play, lightness and style that crossed all boundaries. This original source will shortly be presented as an excellent means of interpreting and correcting interpretations of the Czech interwar avant-garde, including the potential to show its greatest strengths, as well as its weaknesses and limitations.

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**Keywords:** Czech theatre interwar avant-garde, Prague, Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené divadlo), Bedřich Rádl, Otto Rádl, scrapbook

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# A Scrapbook as an Original Source of Research on the Czech Interwar Theatre Avant-Garde

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In recent years, we can observe a significant surge of interest in the avant-garde, a surge happening not only in the Czech Republic nor only in theatre.<sup>1</sup> In the Czech environment, this conjuncture of returns to the avant-garde could be documented by a number of exhibitions, projects, grants, studies and books on this topic.

As far as published books are concerned, let us name at least a few essential authors or titles on behalf of all the others. These are the publications published as part of the international project *Rozlomená doba 1908–1928 (The Fractured Era 1908–1928)*, under the auspices of the European Union and the Ministries of Culture of the Czech Republic, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Hungary and Austria, which presents the world of the Central European avant-garde at the time of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the emergence of the successor states. The book by editor Karel Srp, *Rozlomená doba 1908–1928: Avantgardy ve střední Evropě (The Fractured Era 1908–1928: Avant-Gardes in Central Europe)*, 2018, conceptualised by Lenka Bydžovská, presents the diversity in the works of leading world-famous artists from Central Europe. Mariana Orawczak Kunešová examines the relationship between the Czech and French avant-garde. At the same time, Eva Šlaisová looks at the points of contact between the avant-garde, structuralism, entography and entology. They both presented at the conference, *The Historical Avant-Garde in the European Context*, and contributed to the thematic issue of *Theatralia* (2022). Among the book titles focused on the Czech interwar artistic environment, let us mention the book *Teige: Kapitán avantgardy (Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde)*; 2016) by Rea Michalová, an exhibition with a catalogue dedicated to one of the leading stage designers of the Liberated Theatre, *Antonín Heythum*, prepared by Vojtěch Poláček, Jakub Potůček and Vendula Potůčková Jurášová (2018), as well as a monograph on the same subject with the same title by Vlasta Koubská and Radomíra Sedláková (2022). Also in that year, the

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published monograph *Osvobozené divadlo: Na vlnách Devětsilu* (*Liberated Theatre: On the Waves of the Devětsil* [Butterbur], 2022) by Andrea Jochmanová and Ladislava Petišková. Slightly older, but crucial, was the interdisciplinary university project led by Jan Wiendel and Josef Vojvodík and completed with the publication *Heslář české avantgardy: Estetické koncepty a proměny uměleckých postupů v letech 1908–1958* (*Czech Avant-Garde Entries: Aesthetic Concepts and Transformations of Artistic Practices in the Years 1908–1958*, 2011). Helena Spurná focused on the work of specific personalities of the Czech theatre avant-garde in her books *Emil František Burian a jeho cesty za operou* (*Emil František Burian and his expeditions to the opera*, 2014) and *Divadelní režisér a člověk Oldřich Stibor (1901–1943)* (*The Theatre Director and Man Oldřich Stibor (1901–1943)*, 2015).

In general, these projects, probes and studies fail to avoid one not incomprehensible but, on the contrary, generally valid characteristic of a deep scientific preoccupation with a topic: when delving into the subject of their interest, they are often unwilling to see its limits, to consider it in the context of other concurrent phenomena. If we think about theatre, then, for example, that means in an unbiased comparison with concurrent events on the official Czech mainstage. Nor is it necessary or fair to judge the phenomena retrospectively in a dichotomy: new–original–better versus old–classic–worse. This is a consequence of a particular ahistorical perspective. And a retrospective classification, in which we often overestimate “progressiveness” as a quality (because we already know what followed) and thus tend to overestimate some past phenomena, giving them undue dominance and superiority.

With this deliberately provocative introduction, I do not want to deny the undeniable role and contribution of avant-garde artistic outbursts. I will try to point out some generalisable qualities, as well as the real limitations of key Czech avant-garde theatre experiments, using only one specific material.

The material that I want to present as a very telling testimony of the Czech interwar theatrical avant-garde is the so-called *Rádl's albums*, stored in the Library of the Theatre Institute in Prague.

It is very authentic material, each presented in the form of a kind of scrapbook, as I referred to them in the title of my study. They contain a variety of material, including photographs, clippings, costume sketches, scenes, posters, theatre signs, texts, scripts, etc. It is a kind of private archive of various relics and traces of the young theatre collective's activities, in three never-published volumes.

The brothers Otto (1902–1965) and Bedřich (1905–1981) Rádl<sup>2</sup> were not, like many

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed biographical information, including lists of roles, stage directions, set designs and documents of the Rádl brothers and an inventory of sources and literature, see the entry in the *Czech Theatre Encyclopedia*. Available online: [https://encyklopedie.idu.cz/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=204:radl-bedrich&Itemid=111&lang=cs](https://encyklopedie.idu.cz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=204:radl-bedrich&Itemid=111&lang=cs).

other creative personalities from the Czech theatre avant-garde, just theatre people, yet – and perhaps because of this – their contribution and influence in this direction was very significant.

Both graduated in law; they were also valuable to the theatre in this respect (among other things, they helped with the operational agenda, provided minor legal services and worked as clerks in the theatre office). In addition to performing in avant-garde theatre productions as actors (the older Otto also graduated from the acting conservatory, but the more active and more frequently cast was the typically expressive, lanky, slender, dandyish Bedřich – see Figures 1 and 2), they were involved in journalism, film, film journalism, photography and set design. This artistic syncretism is very characteristic of the creators of the Czech theatre avant-garde and beyond. Although theatre and film were initially regarded as competitors, in reality, one art form did not pose a threat to the other, as some theorists and publicists feared under the influence of the rapid development and great reach of film. Instead, they became a source of mutually productive inspiration, which the avant-gardists understood very well and very quickly (I am referring here to the practices of the grotesque, strong stylisation and aestheticisation of artistic expression).

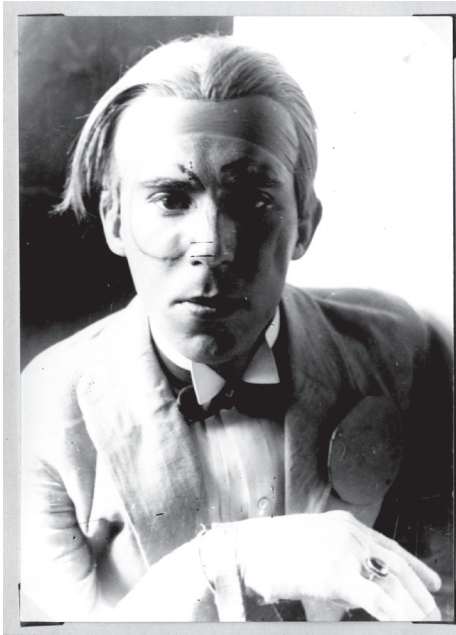


Figure 1

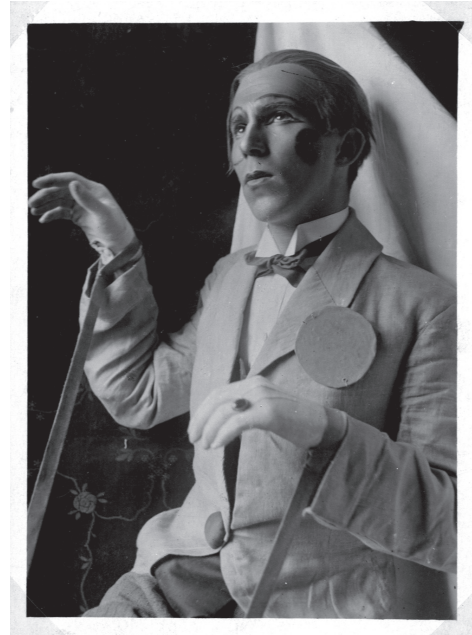


Figure 2

The newly diversified, rapidly changing nature of artistic production and the situation of the theatre has been consistently addressed by myself and critical Czech figures,

especially Václav Tille. In his opinion, the theatre had to adapt creatively to the new conditions to maintain the favour of the audience and the potential to address the audience with unique artistic performances in the increasingly intense competition of popular genres, new types of media (film, radio) and mass entertainment (professional sports). Like another big critical personality, František Xaver Šalda, he was therefore open to new art forms that abandoned the traditional emphasis on mere words. He also asked himself what the uniqueness of theatre art was in comparison to new media. He devoted a number of reflections to the relationship between cinema and theatre, exploring how this relationship would evolve under the pressures of mass entertainment and the cult of star actors. He saw the specificity of theatre and the guarantee that it would not disappear because of cinema in the living relationship between stage and auditorium, between the unique representation of life on stage and the life experiences of the audience. Film is more perfect and flexible in its technical means. However, it cannot express life so powerfully because it is based on mechanical repetition. Therefore, according to Tille, it is useless for the theatre to compete with film and vice versa. Tille, with his extraordinary insight and the personality of a globetrotter, among other things, developed the contacts of the Czech theatre avant-garde with world theatre artists (Alexander Tairov, Gaston Baty, Max Reinhardt, etc.). At the same time, he was precisely the type of theatre critic and theorist who was able to perceive the avant-garde in the context of the whole breadth of contemporary theatre production, including the so-called mainstream. For example, he consistently reflected on the French scenes, which he was able to follow en bloc: he knew and mediated for the Czech milieu both the production of Comédie-Française and contemporary French cabaret. Later, he was attracted to Russian avant-garde theatre.

It is Tille's critical thinking and writing about theatre that well illustrates what I suggested in the introduction. We can see this through a selection of his critical comparative reflections on theatre and his review *Kouzelná moc divadla* (*The Magic Power of Theatre*): In the Czech interwar theatre, alongside the avant-garde scenes and their outbursts, which are generally treated in the abovementioned monographs and publications with an enthusiastic nod to the avant-garde as the only good and vital theatre, there were not only ossified, conservative and stale productions. At the same time, for example, Karel Hugo Hilar was directing remarkable productions of ancient drama and Shakespeare at the National Theatre (cf. Tille 2007). And in this context, we can better see and understand the nature of avant-garde experiments. All this is certainly very substantial and refreshing (even in a departure from a text-centric understanding of theatre) but, at the same time, also – in terms of the possibilities of the depth of the content conveyed – in a sense limited, not only the possible and relevant, and not inexhaustible.

Of course, not only Václav Tille, but other critics of the time were also able to overlook and view Czech interwar theatre in its full range of manifestations (partly also František Xaver Šalda, Jindřich Vodák, Otokar Fischer, Josef Träger, Antonín Matěj Píša, Antonín Martin Brousil, Miroslav Rutte, etc.). We have deliberately chosen Tille to support our argument because he had the greatest insight and the broadest perspective of all.

But let's return to the specifics of the material we want to present as a unique source for the Czech interwar avant-garde theatre research.

The brothers Otto and Bedřich Rádl connected their youthful theatrical enthusiasm to the most important and successful Czech interwar avant-garde scene, *Osvobozené divadlo* (Liberated Theatre). Otto Rádl was also a keen photographer and photographed the theatre in a very specific way. These were unembellished, spontaneous images, which, thanks to the inclusion of the photographer in the artistic team and process, breathe with an authentic atmosphere (see Figures 3, 4 and 5). Three voluminous albums entitled "Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part 1 – From the Beginnings [i.e. February 1926] to 30 June 1927", "Part 2 – From Autumn 1927 to the end of Spring 1930" and "Part 3 – From Autumn 1930 to 1938" document – as their titles suggest – the activities of the leading Czech avant-garde scene from its beginnings to the internal split among its leading artists and even further, until the theatre's demise as a result of political events after the Munich Agreement. Although I will not go into details here about the specific names and their creative approaches, I will mention briefly that the initial experimental character of the scene was determined by the mutually very different theorising directors, Jiří Frejka and Jindřich Honzl, and then by the increasingly popular creative duo of comedians, Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (in tandem with composer Jaroslav Ježek), whose original, initially comic and then, with the sociopolitical developments in Central Europe, increasingly satirical productions eventually dominated the theatre.

One of the key features of the first seasons of the avant-garde scene that I want to highlight in the present authentic material, and which I think has wider validity, is the juvenile, youthful character of this avant-garde art.

The Rádl brothers were not much more than twenty years old at the time of these albums – twenty-one and twenty-four years old, to be precise (and along with them, their other generational contemporaries). The group came together during the high school years of the individual members.

This is one of the essential aspects to be considered: As historiographers, we often tend to canonise avant-garde theatrical explorations and to hold them up as something superior, sophisticated and polished. Not that this is entirely inconsistent

with or exclusive of the aforementioned youth; I just want to draw attention to this circumstance, also evident in the material presented here. It is quite apparent from it that these were youthful attempts with all that entails. Thus, they exhibited as characteristic features a natural lightness, lightness of touch, unintentionality, situationality, improvisation and playfulness.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Historiographers can (and often do) overinterpret something that could have been the result of circumstances, a situation or an improvisation. An example of this would be the brilliant costume of the actress Světlá Svozilová, who stood in at the last minute for an indisposed colleague, and, lacking a costume, hastily sewed a dress out of a piano cover (see Figure 6).

Another generally valid specific feature of the work of not only this avant-garde scene but also in the entire theatrical avant-garde, is the abovementioned inherent syncretism, combining naturally different kinds of art into one changeable, free and playful form. This feature is quite clear from the sketches, manuscripts and photographs captured directly by the actors themselves and pasted into the albums under discussion.

What is significant here is the interconnection of theatrical creation with dance-movement, music and visual arts, to such an extent that it is almost impossible, even out of place, to talk about drama or other theatrical genres.

The collaboration between choreographers and dancers was essential. One of the most outstanding ones was Mira Holzbachová. An important representative of Czech expressive dance, she continuously enriched her movement expression under the influence of artistic impulses of contemporary dance and artistic movements, starting with expressionism. Her acting creations corresponded to the ideas of Jiří Frejka and Jindřich Honzl on biomechanical acting. As a choreographer, Holzbachová contributed to the formation of the staging style of the avant-garde in accordance with its constructivist and poetic premises. The perceptive team and laboratory nature of the early days of the Liberated Theatre also allowed her to present her own conception of dance mime and, in her time, completely original improvised “dance evolutions” (see Figures 7 and 8). The theatre scholar Ladislava Petišková aptly summed up the contemporary reception of these creations, which the audience often did not know how to handle; if they were convincing (far from convincing for everyone), it was mainly because the charismatic creator and performer herself was convinced of them: “She gave the impression that she was dancing just for fun” (Jochmanová – Petišková 108). However, a number of dancers and choreographers collaborated with the stage, including choreographers Jarmila Kröschlová and Milča Mayerová.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Another related feature of these avant-garde attempts was the increased self-reflection and attempts at theoretical grasp of their own artistic work compared

to the creators of the official scenes. This is especially true of the aforementioned leading personalities in the position of director and dramaturg (Honzl and Frejka); Holzbachová also made sporadic attempts to theoretically grasp her own conception of dance art. For example, she was involved in the lecture series of the Liberated Theatre for the public with her reflection entitled *Taneční gymnastika a její jevištní užití* (*Dance Gymnastics and Its Stage Use*, 1926).



Figure 7



Figure 8

As far as the artists collaborating with the Liberated Theatre were concerned, these were often the first attempts of later famous, big names. And they also had all the features of such “first attempts”. In the albums, for example, the costume designs of Otakar Mrkvička, who later became a stage designer on leading representative stages, are captured through his original drawings. He collaborated on them with one of the most prominent and inspiring personalities of the Czech avant-garde, the multi-talented theorist Karel Teige, who was rightly called “the captain of the Czech avant-garde” in art historian Rea Michalová’s latest compendium (Michalová). The drawings bear the aforementioned playfulness, lightness, unbridled freedom of creation and enthusiasm for stylisation (see Figures 9, 10, 11, 12). At the same time, these characteristics and unquestionable qualities are also their maxims. Apart from the aforementioned avant-garde artists, Antonín Heythum, Adolf Hoffmeister, Otakar Mrkvička, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen collaborated with the Liberated Theatre in their creative beginnings.

To a large extent, the musical component also played a dominant and sometimes completely determining role. The composers Miroslav Ponc and Karel Šrom collaborated with the Liberated Theatre. Emil František Burian was a prominent actor and musician. The jazz musician Jaroslav Ježek later completed the creative tandem with the comic duo of Jiří Voskovec and Jiří Werich.

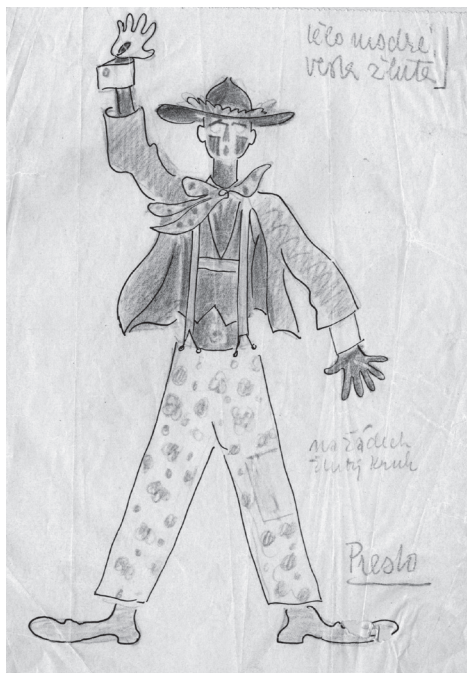


Figure 9

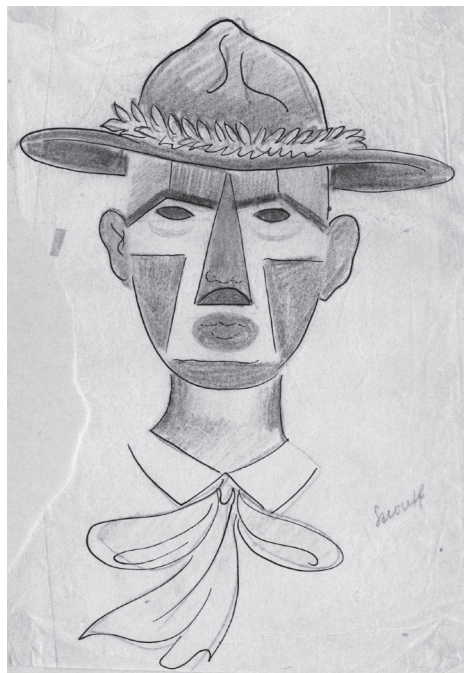


Figure 10

All these artistic components completed the multifaceted, synthetic and original theatrical expression of the Liberated Theatre. The *Rádla* albums under discussion, in their entirety, mirror very well the obvious, overarching philosophical underpinnings of this young theatre art. The Liberated Theatre was founded as a theatre section of the avant-garde group Devětsil (Butterbur), made up of writers and poets, artists and theorists. The artistic direction they manifested and then represented declaratively was called poeticism (poetismus). It originated in the 1920s and never spread beyond the borders of Czechoslovakia. Poeticism did not want to be merely a literary programme but had the ambition of becoming a way of looking at life, to be a poem. The goal of poeticism was complete freedom from politics and an optimistic view of the world. Hence, its style develops lyricism, playfulness and lightness of touch (punctuation was removed in literature, for example).

In line with this were the main staging principles of the first seasons of the Liberated

Theatre, which were the synthetic nature of the actor's performance, the denial of illusory realism and decorativism, the emphasis on the functionality of all stage elements in relation to the actor's expression, and the dominance of directorial direction. They were reflected in the non-literary lyrical conception of the production as an authorial statement of the director-poet, rejecting the Aristotelian definition of the dramatic and speaking to the audience in the same spirit as the poets of Devětsil (Butterbur), whose works were, moreover, numerous represented in the repertoire of the theatre (for example, Vítězslav Nezval, Vladislav Vančura and others). Alongside them, the works of the French precursors of the avant-garde (Guillaume Apollinaire: *The Breasts of Tiresias*, 1927; Alfréd Jarry: *King Ubu*, 1928) and its contemporaries (Yvan Goll: *Methuselah*, 1927; Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes: *The Mute Canary*, 1926; *The Peruvian Hangman*, 1929; Jean Cocteau: *Orpheus*, 1928). In them, the richness of the bold, mutually disparate stage metaphors, whose sequence shaped the poetic construction of the productions, was fully unleashed (Čeporanová, Scherl and Just 2000).

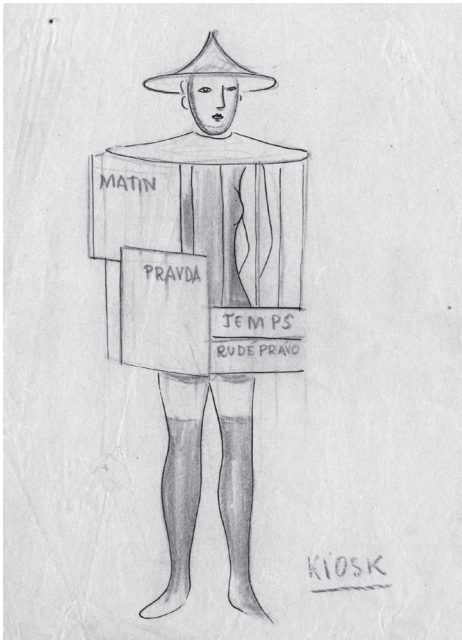


Figure 11



Figure 12

Part of this playfulness was also a parody of the staging tradition and the realistic and naturalistic tendencies that had dominated the acting and set design of the official theatre houses up to that time. The comic duo of Jiří Voskovec and Jiří Werich (see Figure 13) impaled the naturalistic acting convention on the barb of satire in their famous *Vest*

*Pocket Revue*. However, the light-hearted, playful atmosphere of the first productions, full of humour and detachment (e.g., in *The Breasts of Tiresias*), wore off rather quickly. By the end of the 1920s, the steamy horrors of the destructive outpourings of the subconscious began to appear in productions (e.g., in *The Peruvian Hangman*). In the context of social-political developments in Europe, the humour of the comic duo V + W became increasingly satirical and therefore political. Poeticism on the theatre had, of necessity, only a yuppie life. At the same time, it certainly inspired many later reminiscences.



Figure 13

There is no doubt that the avant-garde brought refreshing impulses to European theatre, undoubtedly in response to the horrors of World War I, which fundamentally shook the certainties of human existence. That is why it was what it was – light-footed, reckless, playful, experimental, unencumbered, free, seemingly almost limitless. But for all the fascination and sympathy that is rightly its own, it would be a disservice to uncritically exalt and overestimate its manifestations without acknowledging that it also had its limits. It was capable, as youth is, of making indelible suggestions, but these often fell short of deeper content. And therefore, it had to be transformed in

later stages, as its creators matured and gradually turned to more intimate, classical and serious formats and forms.

In the environment of the Czech interwar theatre avant-garde, the process of maturation and ageing of creators and forms met with artistic stagnation and the crisis of the large official stages. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theatre artists from both camps felt the possibility of mutual enrichment. There was a kind of symbiosis.

The avant-garde was becoming dangerously hampered in the realisation of its aims by the restriction to small venues of an experimental nature and was also beginning to suffer from the traits of dilettantism which amateur or semi-professional operation necessarily entailed. The leading creators of the official scenes – at least the artistic personalities who excelled above the average – were again beginning to realise that the official theatre was in danger of stagnation (Scherl 206).

Therefore, the intention to use avant-garde impulses as rejuvenating injections gradually matured. Studio stages were set up at the large stone stages in the Czech theatre centres of Prague, Brno and Ostrava, with artists from avant-garde small stages invited to lead them.

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## Figures

### Fig. 1 and 2

Bedřich Rádl as Dandy (Vítězslav Nezval: *Madrigal*, Liberated Theatre, 1926), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

### Fig. 3

Jarmila Horáková as the chambermaid Klaudina, Miroslava Holzbachová as Angela and Jindřich Vacín as the lover Klitandr (Molière: *Cirkus Dandin*, Liberated Theatre, 1926), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

### Fig. 4

Stanislav Neumann as the servant Lubin and Jarmila Horáková as the maid (Molière: *Cirkus Dandin*, Liberated Theatre, 1926), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

### Fig. 5

Lola Skrbková as Colombina, behind her Bedřich Rádl as Dandy, Jarmila Svatá on the swing, Jindřich Vacín in black leotard below, Věra Hlavatá as Hortensie behind

him, Saša Machov on the right (Vítězslav Nezval: *Madrigal*, Liberated Theatre, 1926), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

**Fig. 6**

Světlá Svozilová as the cashier Veronika (Yvan Goll: *Insurance against suicide Madrigal*, Liberated Theatre, 1927), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

**Fig. 7 and 8**

Mira Holzbachová during her typical dance evolutions in Liberated Theatre, photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

**Fig. 9 and 10**

The costume and mask design for the character Presto was the work of Otakar Mrkvička and Karel Teige (Guillaume Apollinaire: *The Breasts of Tiresias*, Liberated Theatre, 1927), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

**Fig. 11**

The costume and mask design for the character Kiosk was the work of Otakar Mrkvička and Karel Teige (Guillaume Apollinaire: *The Breasts of Tiresias*, Liberated Theatre, 1927), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

**Fig. 12**

Otakar Mrkvička and Karel Teige – costume design of Dr. Kulečnick (Yvan Goll: *Insurance Against Suicide Madrigal*, Liberated Theatre, 1927), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.

**Fig. 13**

Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich parody in a naturalistic way acting and staging a la Ibsen (Jiří Voskovec – Jan Werich: *Vest Pocket Revue*, Liberated Theatre, 1927), photographer B. Rádl. Library of the Theatre Institute, Prague, B. Rádl: *Liberated Theatre. Documentation. Part I: From the Beginnings to 30 June 1927*, typescript, 1961.