



Abstract

Trees and their felling appear in classical drama across cultures as a frequent and universally understandable metaphor for vulnerability, the fragility of order, and a threat to balance. In this context, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* comes to mind, but trees are also often symbolically felled in Czech classical drama. However, the metaphor is clearly still relevant in today's postdramatic theatre; it has been adopted by the performing arts, and trees are once again being felled not only on Czech stages but also on Nordic ones. The study interprets the spread, age, and communicability of this theatrical metaphor as evidence of the essential connection between humans and ecological issues. This connection suggests that ecological concerns in theatre are not merely a recent trend, even though ecological themes have understandably become increasingly prominent in recent decades.

The study therefore provides a brief overview of ecology in Czech theatre in recent decades from both perspectives. It also examines the range and resonance of the scenic metaphor of trees and the interesting coincidence that it became the main theme of two theatre productions, one Czech and one Norwegian. Finally, it presents historical examples illustrating the strong tradition and potential of this metaphor in selected Czech and European drama.

Keywords: ecology and theatre, trees on stage, postdramatic theatre, metaphor of trees in drama, Czech drama, European drama

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Trees as a dramatic and performative metaphor

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In this paper, I will begin with a brief introduction to the topic of ecology in Czech theatre.¹ I will then turn to the study's central topic, trees on stage, including the productions that inspired my investigation. Finally, I will attempt to trace the metaphor of trees in selected Czech and European drama classics.

1.

The ecological aspect cannot be ignored by Czech theatre in the 21st century. Ecological considerations began to be discussed more prominently at the beginning of this millennium, when ecology became a topic both in connection with the impact of theatre production and its sustainability, and in theatre production itself. In many cases, these two levels have merged, whether in newly formed theatre groups, themed festival seasons, or in the conceptual approach to entire seasons thematically linked to ecology at the dramaturgical and operational levels.

In 2009, Prague's National Theatre also took several measures to make its operations more environmentally friendly. Through a series of well-thought-out cost-saving measures and upgrades to its technical equipment, it inspired other theatres to follow its example of good practice in sustainable theatre operations (it included the installation of a photovoltaic power plant, one of the largest in Prague at the time, the installation of energy-saving bulbs and LED lights, and a plan was developed to transport stage sets to the theatre by water and so on; cf. Rýgrová, "Zelená").

These measures were reported in the press by Marie Riegrová, who is also the author of a basic introduction to "green theatre", which she brought to the Czech Republic through her journalistic work and her book *Sustainable Theatre*, subtitled *Ecology*,

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Thrift, and Self-Sufficiency as New Signs of Artistic Creation (Rýgrová, *Udržitelné*). The result was a brief, somewhat belated but still useful compendium on environmentally friendly theatre operations. With belatedness, I am referring to the books *Green Theatre* (2007) by Kurt Gerhard Heinlein, *Theatre Ecology* (2009) by Baz Kershaw, and *A Sustainable Theatre* (2013) by Barry Witham.

The connection between the concepts of *ecological morality* or *ecological responsibility* and *art* or *theatre*, which, in fairness, would surprise no one today, was considered a surprising revelation until only recently. While it cannot be said that ecology has become a leitmotif or widely shared theme in Czech theatre, a number of theatres have nevertheless begun to take practical steps towards more environmentally friendly operations. A considerable number of individual events and initiatives in this area have also significantly raised awareness of the topic, which has been reflected upon and elaborated in greater detail by artists, theorists, critics and academics.

In this context, I must also mention the phenomenon of temporary “pop-up” theatres or the architectural “recycling” of old factory buildings and the revitalisation of brownfields, or even the recycling of means of transport, as demonstrated in Czechia by the Forman brothers’ vintage *Ship of Secrets* or the *Cultural Bus* by artist, musician, multi-talented artist and performer Petr Nikl. Authors Vojtěch Poláček and Vít Pokorný provided a comprehensive report on this trend in their book *Recycled Theatre* (2015). The ideal of not only a theatre, but any cultural centre, is – from the perspective of sustainability – a symbiosis between resource conservation and renewability, economic efficiency and freedom of artistic expression.

The focus on ecology and climate emergency also became a topic of discussion and events organised as part of the largest exhibition of scenography and theatre space, the Prague Quadrennial (PQ) 2019, and, a year later, ecology became the theme of the Czech Theatre Night, which is part of European Theatre Night. In 2020, the event took place in a significantly different format than in previous years. Theatres were to connect with their audiences only through online platforms. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, that year’s theme, *Theatre and Sustain-Long-Ability*, became even more relevant than the organisers could have expected. A total of 64 theatres from 17 towns and municipalities in the Czech Republic took part in it. The event included a webinar entitled How to achieve sustainability in theatre and not go crazy in the process. (The phrase “not go crazy in the process” or variations of it has since been repeated at various cultural and artistic events, suggesting a response by the cultural sphere to the widely shared anxiety arising from the climate crisis, intensified by the pandemic and post-pandemic situation and the general acceleration permeating our lives in all spheres.)

As far as theatre production itself is concerned, environmentally oriented themes have appeared in Czech theatre in the 21st century in several different ways. One

notable trend is the didactic message in productions for children (or children and adults). Interest in ecology and sustainable development can also be seen in various site-specific events and performances, and rural “centres for sustainable creativity” have long focused on the principles of environmental responsibility.² Since around the 2010s, ecological themes have become part of the repertoire of established theatres (no longer fairy tales and parables).

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic was a clear catalyst for the further “boom” in environmental themes in Czech theatre, as the closure of theatres and schools and the general uncertainty once again brought climate anxiety to the forefront. In a multifunctional space in Prague in the former Švehlova kolej building (a theatre known as Venuše ve Švehlovce), Jiří Honzírek, director of the independent Brno-based Divadlo Feste theatre, founded a platform for artists interested in climate change called CO2kolektiv. The first production he staged with the ensemble was based on an essay by Martin Vrba, a young philosopher and climate activist active in the Czech branch of the global Extinction Rebellion movement, entitled *Odvaha k beznaději* (*The Courage to Despair*), which was also the name of the new group’s chamber production in 2020.

In it, Vrba develops the idea of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who drew attention to the “ideological trick of hope”, which, as a belief in a happy ending, is not a stimulant for activity, but an opiate that numbs the pain of the reality of one’s situation. Žižek skilfully illustrated this with the case of a smoker who constantly reassures himself that he can quit smoking whenever he wants. However, this belief is in fact an obstacle to any real change: the very awareness of the possibility of quitting smoking creates an obstacle to this possibility becoming a reality (Vrba). Honzírek staged Vrba’s essay in collaboration with the author, and they also applied Žižek’s line of thought to the climate crisis. Honzírek expressed this in an interview using a different analogy: “It is interesting to look at today’s society as a child who, for some reason, is allowed to eat unlimited amounts of sweets, even though we know that sooner or later their teeth will rot” (Haleková).

Vrba’s doom-laden conviction that it takes courage to fully admit that collapse is imminent is presented in the production itself only as one extreme pole of a discussion that the performance seeks to stimulate without taking any a priori stance on possible views of the situation. One-sided apocalyptic appeals are generally not perceived as functional stimuli for change among Czech theatre artists who address ecological issues. Environmentalist and theatre scholar Milo Juráni, who will be discussed further below, agrees with the ideas of American professor and researcher Una Chaudhuri, arguing that this almost self-flagellating acceptance of all blame by

² Since 2012, there has been a map of similar cultural centres in Czechia and Slovakia, called RurArtMap: <https://rurartmap.net/>.

humans is essentially another symptom of the arrogance and human self-centredness of the Anthropocene epoch, “a worldview that has placed humans and their interests at the center of every reality and which also reinforces hierarchical thinking and promotes sexism, racism, and various injustices” (Chaudhuri 27).

When addressing ecological issues, Czech theatre artists deliberately avoid superficial appeals in favour of discussion, aestheticisation and layers of meaning. This was also the case with another in a series of ecologically motivated and interpretable productions – a poetic visual-theatrical collage exploring our roots, dreams and surrounding reality entitled *na houby* (the Czech title is a play on words, it means “for mushrooms” but at the same time it also means “it sucks”), staged by Prague’s Chemické divadlo (Chemical Theatre) at the Rubín A Studio in 2021. The creators drew on ideas from the book by Chinese-American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015). With a motto taken from her book, “We are not mere consumers. We are consumed”, they relativised the stereotypes of the Anthropocene. Inspired by Lowenhaupt Tsing’s surprising perspective, they created a scenic, at times hallucinogenic vision of mushrooms and their mycelium, the internet of the forest as a possible alternative to the internet of machines. Nature in the post-cybernetic age. The internet of mushroom-picking groups, discussions, selfies and videos. Mushroom picking as a “national” phenomenon. Mushrooms as part of the nutrient cycle in nature, mushrooms as our food and as an age-old inspiration for artists, rebels and dreamers of all kinds. And above all this: the reality of climate change, drying and disappearing forests.

Another means characteristic of Czech culture and, by extension, theatre, which theatre professionals use to avoid agitation when addressing environmental issues, is humour – satire and parody. At the beginning of the 2020s, two such productions were staged. One was a staging of the satirical comedy *Kill Climate Deniers* by Australian playwright David Finnigan, which reveals the power of the media and social networks in shaping public opinion. The production at Prague’s Švanda Theatre (2021) plays with the expression of Quentin Tarantino’s black comedies and draws on popular music, yet it still asks urgent questions, such as: Who will force society to start treating the planet more gently? Scientists? Climate experts? Eco-terrorists? Finnigan’s play takes aim at all groups across the spectrum of opinion.

A similar message was conveyed by a more intimate production by the socially engaged Olomouc theatre Na cucky, associated with its director Michal Hába, who also wrote and directed the one-man show *Budoucí lokální hvězda Hochman hraje bývalou globální hvězdou Thunberg* (*Future Local Star Hochman Plays Former Global Star Thunberg*), subtitled *Humorous Theatre from the Age of Climate Change*. It was

a bitterly comical statement about the helplessness of individuals and society in the face of the greatest threat of our time, introduced by the motto “How to talk about the climate crisis when the world would rather watch a gala evening full of celebrities than melting glaciers?” The production, full of pop culture references and unexpected connections, once again asked: Do you have to be a celebrity to talk about climate change and be heard? And who does society actually listen to today? Director Hába, known for his politically bold and provocative style, has created an entertaining yet urgent theatrical manifesto in this stand-up comedy, in which “ecopolitics” emerges as the only way forward; an energetic ride full of humour, smoke machines and uncertainty – in a world where greenhouse gases are not the only thing creating a thick atmosphere.

The resonance of ecological themes can also be found in the hybrid new circus genre of Czech theatre, which combines acrobatics with physical theatre, creating complex images imbued with symbolic meaning. Noteworthy examples include productions by the most successful companies of this kind in the country, such as Cirk La Putyka, which in 2024 presented *Hey, Earth!* directed by Thomas Steyaert and Laterna magika, where director Darcy Grant staged *In Our Hands* in the same year (cf. Jedličková).

The legendary HaDivadlo theatre in Brno, which has maintained a leading position in Czech alternative theatre since the 1970s, has devoted itself to ecology through a programmatic commitment. Under the artistic direction of Ivan Buraj, it announced the Nerůst (No Growth) project as the theme for the 2022/23 season. With the slogan “No growth against burnout”, Buraj sought to relativise the mantra of contemporary society, which is focused on GDP growth and performance in all areas. He therefore decided not to stage any new premieres during the season and to use the time and space gained to deepen, vary and expand existing productions in various ways. Creators who had previously worked at the theatre returned to renew, update and advance their productions; debates, workshops, etc., were organised. Above all, a community of audiences and creators was built, which has always been a very important aspect of the theatre’s functioning. This season, the aforementioned Slovak theatre scholar and environmentalist Milo Juráni was hired as the theatre’s resident dramaturg. He had already collaborated with the theatre during the pandemic, which HaDivadlo approached positively within the limits of its possibilities. When it was not possible to perform, the theatre creators seized this unique opportunity to reflect on theatre and recorded a series of podcasts entitled *The Future of Theatre*. In the introduction to the series, they noted that many texts and interviews about the future of theatre refer to the so-called third theatre reform (the term follows the thinking of Kazimierz Braun, who described the first theatre reform as the transformation of theatre at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and the second as events connected with the alternative theatre movement of the 1960s). And they asked what the nature of the third theatre reform should be, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic fulfilled the

vision of German playwright Heiner Müller, who provocatively called for theatres to close for a year so that we could understand their value. In interviews, they pondered what theatre should look like after reopening: Can we start where we left off? What are the most interesting concepts and tools we can use to begin revising theatre? And is theatre in its final throes, or, on the contrary, can it become the leading art form after film, which dominated the 20th century, due to its irreducibility to the online space? Milo Juráni spoke for almost two hours in a podcast on the topic of “Eco-dramaturgy, post-anthropocene in theatre, non-human protagonists”. The theses and ideas of this podcast subsequently became a source for further theoretical discussions and practical actions, not only in the sphere of theatre.

2.

I have summarised only the most significant events and activities in Czech theatre in the past years that have emphasised the theme of ecological responsibility, both in operation and in the creative process itself. My aim was not to provide an exhaustive list (and the above quickly becomes outdated, so an update would certainly be appropriate), but rather to outline the situation, starting points and typologies that I consider useful for understanding and providing the appropriate context for the topic of my study.

A strange coincidence led me to consider the metaphor of cutting down trees (and later on just trees) on stage:

As part of the Czech alternative theatre festival 4+4 Days in Motion, which reflects the latest nonconformist phenomena on the theatre scene, the creative collective Warior Ideal performed in 2023 with a piece entitled *The Primeval Forest, or Who Will Spread the Plague Now?* whose central motif and, in fact, sole content was the cutting up of a felled tree trunk. In the same year, Det Norske Teatret staged *Heil ved*, a production with very similar content: a group of men on stage felled and cut up a respectably long trunk of a mature tree. I do not consider this coincidence insignificant; I mean that these productions appeared in such distant European theatres in the same year, without their creators knowing anything about each other. It testifies to the pan-European resonance of the theme and the semantic richness of the metaphor of trees on stage. This coincidence led me to reflect more deeply on the metaphor of cutting down trees – or trees as such – on stage.

First, however, I will focus on the two productions themselves, which are surprisingly similar in many respects but also carry different connotations. Both can be called performances: the performers carry out a strictly utilitarian, matter-of-fact activity on stage in its entire unabridged real timespan; we can forget about any dramatic

situation here. The audience must gradually give up all expectations of a twist, a plot, a punchline ... it is somewhat reminiscent of the absurd situation of prolonged anticipation in *Waiting for Godot*; in the end, it is really just about coexisting with the unremarkable, explicitly unresolved cutting of a tree trunk and its slicing into logs. The actors do not play anything; they only try to serve the given purpose with appropriate effort. In both performances, this slow, concentrated activity, elevated to a theatrical event, can be frustrating for viewers eager for constant change, twists, ideas and thoughts ... or they can accept it as intentional, as a special genre that we could call a kind of “slow theatre”.

In the provocatively minimalistic and simple Prague performance, *The Primeval Forest, or Who Will Spread the Plague Now?* (Wariot Ideal, 4+4 Days in Motion, Ponec, 12 October 2023), the whole process resembles a ritual to a certain extent. Performers dressed in white shirts and black trousers carry a log of impressive size and weight onto the stage, carrying it together on their shoulders like a coffin; their activity, without unnecessary words, resembles a funeral. It is perhaps only an allusion, perhaps even inappropriately pathetic; it is much more a ritual of simple work. The actors do not act (or at least they try not to); they place the log on supports, cut it with chainsaws, then chop it on blocks (with axes or with the help of a wood splitter) and stack the logs into a pile. The natural sounds of work and machines are recorded and amplified by a sound engineer-musician present on stage using microphones, then multiplied, further refined and mixed with simulations of birdsong, nature and other sounds created using a mixing console on the left foreground of the stage. The second part of this difficult and lengthy, almost contemplative, profane work is created by three actors wearing oversized plush masks depicting forest animals – a hare, a squirrel and a dormouse. They watch the forest being felled on a television screen in the background of the stage throughout the performance. This plan frames the entire performance; it begins and, after the completion of the entire action, the performers-lumberjacks leave first, followed slowly by the animals, after processing the logs into firewood. With a plastic bag in their hands and a cassette player playing forest sounds, they no longer resemble authentic animals; their childish portrayal is a strange mixture of parody, sentimentality and kitsch. The creators seem to be playing on the strings of environmental grief in an overly banal way. This is also evident in the text they published about the performance:

For thousands of generations, human beings considered themselves part of a wider community of nature and cultivated active relationships with other people, animals, plants and other natural phenomena, including the landscape and weather, which we have only “recently” begun to consider inanimate and soulless. [...]

How much work does it take to fell a tree, cut it up and chop it into logs and chips?

But where will the hare, squirrel and dormouse find refuge while loggers ravage their homes?

Love of nature in an era of increasing consumption of barbecue briquettes. (Wariot Ideal; translated by P. J.)

In the performance, the perspective and portrayal of the animals balance on the edge of irony and seriousness; they are a kind of counterpoint to the strictly purist, civilised, and, in its tediousness and simplicity, almost absurd action on stage. With its naive simplicity and directness, the entire performance is reminiscent of *The Little Mole in the City* (1982), one of Zdeněk Miler's best short animated films about his world-famous mole and an iconic half-hour film with a timeless ecological message. In the genre of children's films, it has a surprisingly futuristic-surrealistic atmosphere and sincere pathos, capturing the longing for nature and nostalgia for home. Given the time of its creation and the political situation in socialist Czechoslovakia, this film is remarkable for its clear, artistically uncompromising ecological message.

The title of the Norwegian performance *Heil ved*, which premièred in Oslo on 12 November 2023, can best be translated as "massive" (an idiomatic expression referring to solid wood but also to the character trait of being able to withstand anything; Stehlíková). While the performance is very similar in content, it is, at the same time, a good example of how the same metaphor – cutting down trees on stage – can carry layered and diverse meanings. The ecological aspect is only one of them, and rather a secondary one at that. In Norway and the Nordic countries in general, wood has long been a key fuel source. The performance programme states:

It was the difference between freezing and being warm. It was the difference between ore and iron, between raw meat and a steak. In winter, it was the difference between living and dying. That's how important wood was to the first Norwegians. Gathering fuel was simply one of the most important tasks, and the calculation was simple: if you had little, you froze. If you had too little, you died. And perhaps a few thousand years of frost and suffering have created a unique Nordic heating gene that people in warmer climates do not have? Barely a hundred years of fan stoves and paraffin tanks have not been able to eradicate this reflex – and the joy many people find in gathering firewood may be due to the fact that the wood-burning gene is awakened, connecting us to the gatherers from whom we all descend.

Cutting and chopping wood on stage thus carries a certain archetypal significance; we all have some kind of relationship (even if subconscious) with wood and trees, whether we are activists sounding the alarm and drawing attention to the climate crisis or its deniers. Both performances build on this, with the Norwegian one focusing more on the theme of identity, although harmony with nature is certainly part of it for Norwegian men.

The Norwegian performance is much more comprehensive than the Czech one. It is based on the popular book *Norwegian Wood (Hel ved)* by writer Lars Mytting from

2011, from which we quoted a selected passage used in the programme. In addition to practical advice for cottage owners and fireplace owners, the book summarises what wood has historically meant to the inhabitants of the Nordic countries, describing traditions and legends associated with it, including completely contemporary stories. Its text is only fragmentarily incorporated into the production, through voice-overs and subtitles. To a certain extent, it also inspired the songs composed specifically for the performance by Norwegian singer-songwriter Torleif Stein Bjella. They sing about the value of slow, hard work in an overly fast-paced “black digital sea”. But even the Norwegian performance is not without lighthearted humour; in songs based on Norwegian folk music and American country, Bjella gently pokes fun at the lumberjacks’ stubbornness and taciturnity, as well as their distinctive dialect. In the production, he sings, plays the guitar, violin, double bass, accordion and chainsaw, and even performs with his own tractor, which he had to drive 200 km from his hometown to Oslo for this purpose. The sounds of working with wood effectively complement the production’s musical side.

This unusual theatrical spectacle appeals to all the senses: in addition to the catchy “lumberjack” music, there is the smell of wood, diesel and petrol from chainsaws and a crackling fire – lit right on stage. The rawness and authenticity of all the components effectively contrast with the classic proscenium stage of the Norwegian National Theatre. This continues until the entire large birch trunk ends up as neatly stacked logs, known as a *hráñ* (a pile of timber with gaps between the logs, intended for drying, which is an important part of Norwegian culture, as we can also read in Mytting’s book: girls in rural Norway used to choose their husbands based on the shape of the woodpile).

As I have tried to describe, both performances, based on essentially the same idea of cutting and chopping a log into pieces, have a similar meaning in some respects and differ in others. The common thread running through both productions is a certain, almost meditative mood; a deliberate, almost irritating slowdown. We can also perceive them as a response to the general acceleration of a globalised society, overwhelmed by the technological development of communication media to the very limits of its capacity. Alongside the climate crisis, the effects of the pandemic and military conflicts, this is another significant source of anxiety, as Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes in his books (e.g., *The Tyranny of the Moment*, 2001).

Nordic studies scholar, critic and translator Karolína Stehlíková wrote about the performance in Oslo: “The theatre artists create a kind of meditative space in which the audience is allowed to observe others performing quite monotonous but meaningful work while conducting their own dramatic monologues in their heads”

(Stehlíková 76). This also applies to the Prague performance. The fact that nothing else happens on stage throughout the evening except cutting a tree trunk and splitting logs naturally provoked a controversial reaction. Critical reflection included both: sharp rejection of this “simple, straightforward, and [...] completely useless action” (Hulec) and understanding and sympathy with its contemplative tone (Žantovská; Král). The simple activity of the performers – lumberjacks in its real time (seeming even longer in theatre time) – opened up space in the minds of the audience, unbound by the action on stage, for associations and their own thoughts. One of the bards of Czech theatre criticism, Karel Král, wrote on his blog that at that moment he had before his eyes the disappearing forests near his cottage:

I already have the impression that in this once green, now grey, thinning forest, it is not only the trees that are dying. It is not very habitable. Only parasites are demonstrably thriving there. For example, deer ticks, which began successfully driving even me out of “our” forest several years ago. Of course, I suspect that we are responsible for the destruction and that it would greatly help nature if people, the most dangerous parasites, left it alone.

With its consistent simplicity, the Czech performance provoked some to resistance and others to contemplation, for example, about human parasites. What the Norwegians were contemplating, Odin knows, perhaps their roots.

3.

Let’s take a brief look at the history of the metaphor of cutting down trees (or trees themselves) in drama and theatre.

A similar identity-forming function is found in Henrik Ibsen’s dramatic poem *Peer Gynt* from 1867, in which the playwright sharply satirises the character traits of the Norwegian people through the arrogant, self-satisfied, yet half-hearted and indecisive title hero. In the third act, Gynt cuts down a tree deep in the forest, amid the inclement grey autumn weather with snow falling. The entire first scene of the third act is devoted to this. Felling a tree is a symbol of confrontation with an obstacle, and, in Gynt’s case, this confrontation is typically boastful (talkative): it has the character of a struggle with an opponent. Gynt talks to the tree as if it were a character. He scolds it, addressing it as an “ancient churl” in a “chain mail shirt” and boasting that he will defeat it despite all its resistance; he comments on his struggle with the tree and its trembling branches: “you’re shaking your twisted arms” (then he realises that it is just a tree). He talks about hard work, about life in nature, about how difficult it is to be independent, self-reliant, left to fend for oneself. He reflects on his condition as an outcast from normal society. The image points to a desire for autonomy, even a boast-

ful determination to achieve it, but at the same time reveals that it is a hard, cruel path, full of adversity. Gynt experiences the obstacles with some excitement, giving them an almost personified dimension The scene ends with a tree falling and Peer cutting off its branches The contrast is provided at the very end of the scene by the appearance of a young boy who cuts off his finger with a sickle to avoid military service. Such a determined solution – even if it is a matter of escaping responsibilities – is unavailable to Peer, who distances himself from it.

The metaphor of cutting down a tree has a special meaning here; it is more of a battle; from Gynt's perspective, the tree becomes an interlocutor with whom he engages in a kind of dialogue (almost in the manner of Don Quixote). There is also exaggeration, a certain demonisation and personification of obstacles, as seen through the eyes of a loudmouthed, narcissistic pseudo-hero. When I think about it, it is the only moment in the dramatic poem where Peer is somewhat of a decent person (or at least tries to be, for a moment), but soon he runs away from work and from Solveig. So, woodcutting could also be seen here as an attempt to be a good, decent person.

[Deep in the pine-woods. Grey autumn weather. Snow is falling.]

[Peer Gynt stands in his shirt-sleeves, felling timber.]

PEER (*hewing at a large fir-tree with twisted branches*). Oh ay, you are tough, you ancient churl; but it's all in vain, for you'll soon be down. (*Hews at it again.*) I see well enough you've a chain-mail shirt, but I'll hew it through, were it never so stout. Ay, ay, you're shaking your twisted arms; you've reason enough for your spite and rage; but none the less you must bend the knee! (Ibsen, *Peer Gynt: A Dramatic* 113–114)

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov worked with the metaphor of trees in a completely different way. If we think about the metaphor of cutting down trees on stage, it is certainly this playwright who gave it its key dramatic form, and whose *The Cherry Orchard* we remember as the first and most striking example. Chekhov used the symbolism of trees as early as his play *Uncle Vanya* (1897), where the doctor Astrov, on the contrary, plants trees. Frustrated by his personal life, relationships and material circumstances, he sees hope precisely in planting trees, in caring for the forest as a factual and symbolic possibility for growth and positive values. Significantly, his actions remain misunderstood and overlooked.

Iconic is Chekhov's metaphor of cutting down trees in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), which serves as a lyrical condensation of the drama's overall tone. The orchard of old fruit trees on Ranevskaya's estate is a symbol of the past, tradition, aristocracy, beauty (not only when in bloom), but also stagnation and the unsustainability of the former lifestyle. The unseen but sensed image of the cherry orchard being cut down, which brings the drama to its climax, symbolises a painful blow to the roots, memory and ideals. The dramatic

note prescribes: “They hear the sound of axes in the distance, cutting down the orchard” (Chekhov, *The Cherry* 95). Ranevskaya then comments directly on stage: “Oh, my dear, sweet lovely orchard! My life, my youth, my happiness, farewell!” (27) At the same time, none of the characters could or knew how to change the situation leading to this outcome. The orchard, which no one could maintain anymore, became a burden for the indebted family in a difficult existential situation. Its value was incalculable and difficult to explain in the pragmatic new era. The felling of trees symbolises the end of the old aristocratic era, the demise of values and the inability to adapt to the new era. Sentiment stemming from emotional attachment to the past, feelings of loss and the desire for security are confronted here with pragmatism based on the need to act effectively, deal with the present, or plan for the future. But what can the future be without roots? Chekhov’s metaphor of cutting down trees is imbued with a strong melancholy. A scenic depiction of trees being felled – expressed mainly through sounds and shadows, according to the author’s notes; but all the more powerful for it – evoking sadness and vulnerability. And also human weakness and the impossibility of holding on to everything we love.

Also in Czech drama, the metaphor of trees was frequently used with both similar and specific connotations. The motif of the tree plays a significant role in Alois Jirásek’s drama *The Lantern* (*Lucerna*, 1905). The play was originally intended to be called *Our Linden Tree*, so we could even say that the linden tree is one of its most fundamental symbolic elements. It is clear from this that this specific, traditional Czech national tree, a powerful symbol for the Czech nation, especially during the National Revival, also carries these connotations in the drama. However, everything is wrapped up in a well-acceptable, not ideologically garish, friendly tale drawing on old legends from the region and including supernatural beings; the play is rightly called the Czech *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for its form, mood and popularity. The main character, the miller Libor, comes into conflict with the authorities because he refuses to cut down an old linden tree growing on the land near his mill. The linden tree stands in the way of the lords’ new plans, blocking their view. Libor is the only one who rebels against this, even at the cost of personal consequences, but I do not want to get bogged down here in describing the twists and turns of a relatively rich plot full of symbolic meanings. For our topic, it is perhaps clear even from a brief outline that the linden tree in *Lucerna* is one of the most striking examples of a tree as a symbol of freedom, tradition and national identity in Czech drama. Historically, this motif resonated with the ideals of the national revival, which Jirásek helped to shape in his writing. In the visual design of the drama productions, it therefore always appeared as a prominent, central element of the stage: its existence and the threat of extinction are the driving force behind the drama.

The scene around the linden tree is the play’s conflictual climax – the moment when it is decided who has power: the authorities or a conscious individual with an unyielding conscience. Libor, the miller, defends the old, sprawling, majestic linden tree by the

mill with the words: "I will not cut down the linden tree. It has been growing here for ages, and it has a right to grow here" (Jirásek, *The Lantern* 45). His unyielding defence shows that the tree is not just a "thing" but a bearer of values (not unlike those attributed to trees in Chekhov's metaphor).

The symbol of tree felling also appears in *Anežka* (1912), the final drama by Vilém Mrštík, author of *Maryša*, probably the best-known Czech realist play. Mrštík wrote *Anežka* with his wife, Božena Mrštíková, née Pacasová. It is an introspective play about the creative struggle of an artist who, in an existential struggle, becomes a craftsman producing artistically worthless artefacts and desperately seeks his own expression in a polemically diverse field. The play also addresses the conflict between artistic creation and the responsibilities that arise from a relationship; another theme, albeit more marginal, is the relationship between tradition and modernity. The introduction to the drama is noteworthy for our topic. The author's note prescribes the evocation of the felling of an old tree-lined avenue: in the background, we hear the blows of an axe and the rumbling of falling trees.

The sound of the axe is an invisible actor that dramatically heightens the tension. The axe "speaks" instead of the characters; it is the voice of change and violence against nature and tradition. This activity is then commented on in the dialogue itself: "ANEŽKA: What a pity, what a pity about those trees! ... The mill's most beautiful adornment ... and now it's gone! Their corpses lay on the wagons as if on a bier, and as they hauled them away, it seemed to me like a funeral – no one spoke, everyone was just hurrying, and tears welled up in everyone's eyes ... [...] That I, of all people, had to live to see those oak trees murdered ... PAVLA: They cut them down, cut them down – what murder is there in that!" (Mrštík and Mrštíková 6, translation PJ). This dialogue highlights differences between people and their values and sheds light on the title character's sensitivity. Once again, the avenue is not just a group of trees, but a bearer of identity and family history. In the Mrštík couple's drama *Anežka*, the felling of the avenue is also a significant dramatic and symbolic element. In Chekhov's play, it was a powerful finale; in the Mrštíks', it is a similarly significant overture. What they have in common is the scenically effective depiction of evocations, i.e., actions that are not shown on stage but are nevertheless unquestionable. The pathos and resonance of the symbol – scenically performed at the level of suggestion – is thus only reinforced. The sound of axes and falling trees functions as a quiet but powerful "voice" of change and destruction. The play uses this motif to deepen the theme of the loss of tradition and resistance to the superficial, barbarically heartless modern world.

Similar to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* or Jirásek's *The Lantern*, trees represent a symbolic fragile link between the past and the new era. This symbolic potential of tree-lined avenues, which mark old roads as connecting links, is also evident in Ib-

sen's *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). Here, the avenue is not cut down, but stands as an important space of transition; the entire drama is introduced by the stage note: "Beyond, a road along the seashore. An avenue of trees along the road. Between the trees are seen the fjord, high mountain ranges and peaks [...]" (Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea* 1–2). The avenue, which connects the house/garden to the sea, plays a significant symbolic role here: it is a transition from the outside world to the inner space of the drama. A channel through which the past flows back into the present. A path along which comes a challenge that shakes the existing balance. The Stranger, who is the embodiment of Ellida's suppressed past, comes this way, and the avenue is thus also the space through which that past enters the present. The alley is also a passage to freedom. Ellida is the "lady of the sea", married into the interior, but her inner identity remains connected to the wildness and freedom of the seaside. The alley is therefore a passage – a safe place where she can choose between these worlds.

Another example of tree symbolism can be found in Samuel Beckett's most famous absurdist drama, *Waiting for Godot*, from 1952. Here, only one tree remains from the avenue – like an anchor in uncertainty and even nothingness, a silent witness to waiting and ultimately a symbol embodying a seed of hope ... Beckett introduces the drama with laconic stage directions: "A country road. A tree. Evening."

The road with a single tree is a symbol; every road leads somewhere, or at least it should, creating the illusion of a transitional space, but this time without any real transition.

The tree is a key symbol; it is the only visible object in the empty space, even though at first it appears to be dead:

VLADIMIR: What is it?

ESTRAGON: It's a tree.

VLADIMIR: What does it say to you?

ESTRAGON: Nothing.

VLADIMIR: It looks like a dead tree. (Beckett, *Waiting* 7–8)

Even so, it can be more than just physical support for the characters.

However, at the beginning of the second act, it turns out that it is alive:

VLADIMIR: (*halting before the tree*) Leaves.

ESTRAGON: Leaves?

VLADIMIR: On the tree.

ESTRAGON: Are they new?

VLADIMIR: I'm asking you.

ESTRAGON: (*after close inspection*) It must be spring. (Beckett, *Waiting* 58–59)

The tree is covered with leaves. Symbolically, in the static atmosphere of futile waiting, this is the only tangible proof that time is actually passing in the drama. A sign of the natural cycle – spring. A possible hint of hope, but ultimately it does not change the situation: Godot still does not come, and the waiting continues. There is a cruel irony in this; a change that could herald something is meaningless. Nevertheless, amid all this inactivity and rigidity, the tree becomes the drama's only active actor or presence. Beckett also relativises any meaning and possibility of self-reflection of the characters by referring to the frailty of their memory: when change comes, the tree grows leaves, and they are almost unable to recognise it with certainty.

The tree is a serious and ironic reminder of the characters' despair and their inability to act. Soon after the beginning, and then again during the play, they consider hanging themselves from it.

ESTRAGON: Let's hang ourselves immediately!

VLADIMIR: From a bough?

ESTRAGON: We can always try.

VLADIMIR: Go ahead.

ESTRAGON: After you.

VLADIMIR: No no, you first.

ESTRAGON: Why me?

VLADIMIR: You're lighter than I am. (Beckett, *Waiting* 12–13)

However, these are just empty words again. The tree thus also symbolises possible death, or rather a place of waiting where even death does not occur. Its presence thus underscores the absurd, endless state of waiting and indecision at the heart of the play.

Conclusion

The fact that ecology is an increasingly relevant topic for theatre is clear, understandable and indisputable. In the first part of this study, we attempted to use specific examples to demonstrate how the ecological theme entered Czech theatre in full force in the first decades of the 21st century, both in the sustainability of theatre operations and in the content and themes of theatre productions. We also pointed to a clear moment of acceleration in these themes: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The remarkable coincidence that the metaphor of tree felling was foregrounded on European stages – specifically in the Prague performance *The Primeval Forest, or Who Will Spread the Plague Now?* (2023) and the Norwegian production *Heil ved* (2023) – led us to reflect further on the relevance and resonance of this metaphor in theatre and drama more generally. The study thus primarily seeks to highlight the deeper

continuity of a kind of ecological thinking that was inherent in theatre and drama even when these topics were not yet explicitly called ecological.

In the history of European and Czech drama, we find numerous examples of tree metaphors. We have highlighted only a few of the most striking ones and attempted to interpret and explain their meaning. These include the symbolic meanings associated with trees in Henrik Ibsen's dramatic poem *Peer Gynt* (1867) and drama *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), the powerful metaphor of tree felling in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) and the symbol of a lonely tree as the only scenic object in Samuel Beckett's most famous absurdist drama *Waiting for Godot* (1952). The symbol of the tree is also used in Czech classical drama – most notably in Alois Jirásek's *The Lantern* (1905), where trees represent a symbolic fragile link between the past and the new era, similarly in the plays of Vilém Mrštík, specifically in the drama *Anežka* (1912), which he wrote with his wife Božena, née Pacasová. And we could go on; we would certainly find more similar examples.

These examples show that trees are, and historically have been, carriers of powerful and significant scenic metaphors, whether in contemporary performances, where their thematisation and symbolism are often linked to the importance of the environment and identity, or in earlier drama, where trees and their stage presentations also functioned as powerful metaphors. Their meaning was often also linked to identity and symbolised roots, certainty and tradition. They could also become challengers, means of confrontation and bearers of change and hope.

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