

History of the Jára Cimrman Theater

By Zdeněk Svěrák
Translated by Andrew Roberts

Andrew Roberts
Department of Political Science
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60208
aroberts@northwestern.edu

The Czech nation learned that it had a new genius and that his name was Jára Cimrman from the radio. And we know the exact date: December 23, 1966. The program was called **The Non-Alcoholic Wine Cellar by the Spider**. It was aired once a month on the Praha station and consisted of a mock “live broadcast” from a fictional Prague watering hole. (Authors: Z. Svěrák and J. Šebánek, director H. Philippová, music I. Štědrý.) Serious commentary held the listeners of the “Spider” in the illusion that they were following the happenings in a real music club which was in many respects unusual but not so much as to defy probability.

The show’s permanent guest was Dr. Evžen Hedvábný (real name Karel Velebný), a musicologist who made unbelievable assertions in such a serious voice that one Prague newspaper printed an article attacking his blatherings. The engineer Artuš Lefler (in real life Oldřich Unger), a peculiar inventor, exhibited his “Statues in the Wind” and his reclining telephone booth in the foyer of the wine cellar. Also joining in was the playboy Čejka, a pensioner, who on request would play any sort of game with the guests, from billiards to blindfolded poker.¹ The climax of each broadcast was the performance of the magician-illusionist Jožka Meran Blažejovský, whose top number was his graphic demonstration of the phrase “Bang your head against a concrete wall” and who to the applause of a shocked audience threw out the baby with the bathwater.

We might say that the “Wine Cellar by the Spider” was built from the same raw materials as the Jára Cimrman Theater was later. That is, mystification and pseudo-science, both in the service of humor.

The idea of founding The Jára Cimrman Theater (DJC) came from **Jiří Šebánek**. He described the first impulse in a personal letter addressed to me: “...one evening in the middle of October 1966...I was sitting with Helena Philippová and Vladimír Tomek at the beer tap of the Velkobaráčnicka Tavern on Nerudova St. in Malá Strana. In the neighboring theater the Baráčniks were rehearsing a new play. Their echoes resounded in the bar for a few moments and soon lead me to the idea: If the Baráčniks could have their own theater, why couldn’t we have one too?”

This fit in with his belief that we men were missing a place where at least once a week we could find refuge like our grandfathers did when every Saturday they had their bath and then set off to the local public house to mow down the bowling pins. A place their wives respected as a male domain. This dream was supposed to be brought to fruition by founding a male-only theater. J. Šebánek started from the assumption, later proven correct, that the same humor we cultivated with considerable effect on the radio could find enough admirers in a theater as well.

On October 29, 1966, he confided this idea, worked up in the form of a manifesto, to **Miloň Čepelka, Ladislav Smoljak, and Zdeněk Svěrák**. At first they all laughed heartily, because the proposal counted on them actually performing in the theater. As the evening wore on and the bottle we had bought yielded all its secrets, we were soberly contemplating the purchase of a curtain. At that founding meeting we decided to invite

¹ In the original, he plays simultaneous *mariaš*, a Czech card game.

Karel Velebný, the sculptor **Jan Trtílek**, **Oldřich Unger**, and **Helena Philippová**, the director of the “Wine Cellar at the Spider” and the only female, to join us. To make the results of the meeting more tangible, Šebánek and Svěrák each committed to writing a one-act play by the end of the year.

Then, over Christmas 1966, during the radio broadcast of the “Wine Cellar by the Spider”, Dr. Hedvábný released the following sensational news into the ether: while building a fireplace in his cottage in Liptakov, he had come upon a trunk with the unpublished papers of a forgotten Czech genius.

The name Helena Philippová has already appeared twice here. It turned out that including her in the Cimrman idea put into motion an inexorable combustion engine. She was in fact a passionate founder of theaters. She stood at the birth of the Divadlo na Zábradlí (Theater on the Balustrade) and Semafor, and now placed herself firmly at our cradle.² There began a pilgrimage around the labyrinthine halls of government offices, and crown after crown flew from her purse in the sacred quest for a new theater.

At the start we were frightened by her professionalism. Especially when she quite casually informed us that it would be best if we attached ourselves to the State Theatrical Studio of Prague (SDS).³ We alerted her that we were amateurs and begged her to let us try our luck in private in front of our friends. It was too late. She had arranged a preview performance on June 19 for SDS which would decide whether to take us under its umbrella or not.

We thus began to rehearse the first play – *Akt*.⁴ First in the editorial office of the radio station, then in Reduta, and after that on the old stage of the Malostranská Beseda (Little Quarter Meeting House), which smelled of community theater and public meetings. It was the last one that we liked best. We can never forget what a balm for our lack of confidence was the presence of the jazz musician and composer Karel Velebný, an untiring source of merriment who agreed to perform in the role of Mother Žilová. His distinctive humor set its mark not just on the “Wine Cellar by the Spider”, but also on the poetics of the Cimrman Theater.

As the dreaded June 19 got closer, we became more and more worried that the second play, *Homestyle Pig Roast*, was still unfinished. Later it turned out that our worries were groundless. Since Jiří Šebánek didn't meet his deadline for turning in the play, we had to come up with a replacement program. And that became the “Seminar about the Life and Work of the Genius Jára Cimrman”. The original plan to put on two of the master's one-act plays along with a short informative speech about his life was out of necessity replaced with a feature that later survived in all of the plays. Prior to the intermission a

² Divadlo na Zábradlí was Havel's old stomping grounds. Semafor is associated with the duo of Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr and their brand of musical comedy.

³ The State Theatrical Studio was an administrative unit which in the sixties and seventies included the theaters Činoherní Klub (The Drama Club), Semafor, Reduta, Černé Divadlo (The Black Light Theater), and others.

⁴ In Czech the word ‘*akt*’ has several meanings including “act”, “coitus”, and most commonly “a painting, sculpture or photograph of a nude.”

series of academic lectures by serious scientists, after the intermission a play from Cimrman's unpublished work, performed by these same experts.

And so on June 19, shaking with stage fright and surrounded by parents, wives, best friends, and representatives of SDS, we put our art on display in Malostranská Beseda. When it was over, our director Philippová came into the dressing room and announced: "What did I tell you. They bought it."

Now nothing could stop us from launching a campaign on the radio show "The Wine Cellar by the Spider" inviting those interested in the master's work to his theater and the magazine *Mladý Svět* (Young World) from publishing a photograph of Cimrman's invention "preventing falls in the field of bicycling" on its front cover.

With the premiere of *Akt* on October 4, 1967, the Jára Cimrman Theater began its regular operation in the Malostranská Beseda. The emcee Dr. Kubíček (by the way, one of the only real holders of an academic title among the whole constellation of Cimrmanologists) led the first spectators to tables laid with oil lamps and warned them not to play with the wicks because the lamps were the personal property of the members of the theater. He also reminded them that the performance would be followed by a jazz concert of K. Velebný's S&H Quartet, a homage to the original Wine Cellar.

The founding stone of the new theater was symbolically laid by the writer Josef Škvorecký. The press reacted to the birth of DJC on the whole warmly. "A new note has sounded in the scale of experimental theaters. It's not profundity or pessimism, but harmless fun. Making fun of themselves, of scholarly symposia, provincial pretensions, and sterile officialdom," wrote *Divadelní Noviny* (The Theater News). The only one obviously disappointed by the whole enterprise was the anonymous reviewer "rh" of *Svobodné Slovo* (Free Word) who titled his article "Unfulfilled Hopes".⁵ "Experts proceeded one after the other to the lectern and with stoney faces held forth on matters that would split one's sides. That is, matters which split one's sides when we heard them on the radio. Surprisingly, on the stage they lose much of their magic... Perhaps every visualization (filming, staging) inevitably takes the quality down a rung. The second part of the evening is filled with a one-act play from Cimrman's unpublished work. It has several excellent gags. But on the whole it has more in common with those amateur theaters which flare up and then flame out."

We were among other things curious about how the reviewers would deal with our acting abilities. Several tactfully avoided this aspect, for example, the anonymous reviewer "st" in *Večerní Praha* (Evening Prague): "Almost overcome by tears we watched as with extraordinary enthusiasm the researchers threw themselves into difficult feats of transfiguration with the help of all available and unavailable acting styles and systems." It seemed to Václav Hepner in *Práce* (Labor) that "the strength of the jokes added to the professionalism of the amateur performers." On the other hand, Jároslav Pacovský of *Mladý Svět* expressed his impression with the words, "The actors seized their roles with the enthusiasm of amateurs."

⁵ Many newspaper articles are signed with the author's initials.

Roughly a month after the premiere of *Akt*, on November 8, 1967, the Jára Cimrman Theater presented its second production, Smoljak's **The Investigation of the Missing Class Register**. The symposium that came before the play was monothematic. It dealt exclusively with Cimrman's pedagogical activities and along with the school setting of the play formed a tighter whole. "Despite consisting entirely of lectures, the first half is more striking in the compactness and forcefulness of the witty text," wrote "mif" in *Lidová Demokracie* (People's Democracy), "while the second half needs some plot changes and a firmer directorial hand to streamline the clearly inspired play and to get around several textual 'vacancies.'"

The critics unanimously and correctly noticed a certain nervousness and unpreparedness. Only the inscrutable "th" of *Svobodné Slovo* who had earlier predicted our quick failure suddenly felt that "since the last time, the dilettantism has disappeared and surer performances are joined by flashes of character acting." All of which I am hesitant to believe.

The first season was – in terms of the number of premieres – the most fruitful of all. Jiří Šebánek finally came up with a definitive conclusion to his "toilet horror," **Homestyle Pig Roast**. It had its premiere on February 7, 1968.

The seminar, performed before the play, was a return to thematic diversity. It dealt with Cimrman's breakthroughs in the fields of music, puppetry, film, and war, and also made clear Cimrman's role in Kafka's alienation.

As we had become accustomed, the lecture part (which as a rule we wrote and rehearsed at the last moment) was received without reservation in the newspaper reviews. Opinions on the play itself again differed. While "hš" of *Večerní Praha* felt that "this Cimrman piece is one of the less successful," Pavel Grym of *Lidová Demokracie* gives a quiet different account: "...in the cruel and gratuitous adages of the dying but unusually lively grandfather (the delightful creation of Karel Velebný), the author provides a textbook example of deadpan humor. Credit apparently also goes to the director H. Philippová. And so DJC again lashes out in all directions. It seems, however, that they aim more at humor than satire. Their main goal is to make a sad world laugh."

The first season ends with a trip to Cimrman's hometown, Vienna – to the *Wiener Festwochen* (June 3-4, 1968, Studio Metro). We didn't put on any of the master's plays for the Viennese; we just lectured about him in German. Before the performance, the completely unsuspecting public respectfully and seriously surveyed the small exhibition of the Czech genius: Cimrman's bathrobe on its hanger, graciously loaned to us by Dr. Hedvábný, a bucket in which Cimrman carried water, and a grinder in which he ground. After Secretary Čepelka's first lines, however, the audience dared to smile and then laugh, just like Prague audiences, only in German. In the Viennese *Kurier* under the title "Ach, Jára..." we read that our satire was "recht knieweich" [quite weak in the knees], the nonsense we presented "nur massig espritvoll" [not very full of spirit] and that it was altogether "zu lang" [too long]. The paper *Express* praised the performance with the

words, “Sie tragen diese Parodie umwerfend komisch vor, ohne dabei auch nur einmal ihre ernstesten Mienen zu verziehen. Sie bieten Studentenukl für Erwachsene. Mit Intelligenz und Humor” [They perform these parodies of mind-boggling comedy without once moving a muscle of their serious faces. They offer student pranks for adults. With intelligence and humor].

In the second season (1968-9) the Jára Cimrman Theater thus had three plays in its repertoire and was rehearsing a fourth – **The Pub in the Clearing**.

It was in many respects a turning point. The theater found itself in the post-August limbo (the premiere of *The Pub in the Clearing* took place on April 17, 1969, the day that Husák replaced Dubček) and at the same time experienced its first inner crisis.⁶ While on the surface it was basking in the sun of public approval, personal and artistic differences within the troupe lead two of its founding members, Helena Philippová and Jiří Šebánek, to leave the theater at the close of the second season. A car accident then knocked Karel Velebný off the stage.

With the operetta *The Pub in the Clearing*, new acting reinforcements with musical qualifications joined the company: the composer **Jan Klusák** and the conductor **Pavel Vondruška**. After a smaller role in *Homestyle Pig Roast*, **Petr Bruckner**, up to then a curtain-drawer and scene-shifter, got his first real opportunity. (When the film director Milos Forman saw him in the role of a timid student of Cimrmanology, he called Bruckner “the greatest living Czech amateur actor”.)⁷ In this “operetta with scenery and costumes” we also presented to audiences for the first time **Jaroslav Vozáb**, who worked during the day as a translator from all languages into all other languages.

Miloň Čepelka, today one of the main pillars of the company, also got his first big role (Baron Zeppelin). We had no idea of the depth of his talent because in *Akt* he was cast only in the seminar and in the *Class Register* he merely appeared in the non-speaking role of the Minister of Education.

The Pub in the Clearing inaugurated a new creative phase. The entire piece was the joint work of two authors (Smoljak-Svěrák) and in contrast to the first three plays, which were in fact contemporary comedies, *The Pub* initiated a series of period pieces that appear to be from Cimrman’s own pen.

The Pub in the Clearing began one additional phase. In 1970, it was the first of our performances that we took outside of Prague, to the Alfa in Plzeň. It initiated a period of tours and has been performed more than any other play (currently 869 times). It met with incomprehension only in Františkovy Lázně (Franzensbad) where the angry public, expecting a classical opera, wanted a refund and forced our scientific team to pack up the scenery in the record time of eleven minutes.

⁶ August refers to the Soviet invasion on August 21, 1968 and the subsequent repression.

⁷ Forman is known for casting non-actors in his films.

For the third season (1969-1970) we wrote **Murder in the Pullman Car**. The idea of presenting Cimrman as a criminologist came to us from the graphic designer **Jaroslav Weigel**. In return we gave him the role of the industrialist Bierhanzel, and it turned out to be the right choice. He became a fixed star of the company and later – in the role of the All-Knowing Grandpa (*Mr. Tall, Mr. Wide, and Mr. Short-Sighted*) the darling of listeners of children's records. He also gave the Cimrman records, programs, and posters their graphic appearance.

Another new member of the company was **František Petiška**, a poet, writer, and district physician in Brandýs nad Labem.

To give the reader an overview, in 1970 the Jára Cimrman Theater had ten performing members: Petr Brukner, Miloň Čepelka, Jan Klusák, František Petiška, Ladislav Smoljak, Zdeněk Svěrák, Oldřich Unger, Pavel Vondruška, Jaroslav Vozáb, and Jaroslav Weigel.

The last show to originate in the Malostranská Beseda was **Deaf Bobeš** (premiere November 24, 1971).⁸ For the first time we abandoned our traditional scheme of seminar-play and tried to mix the two together throughout the performance. It was a pleasant change, offering more comedic opportunities such as repeating the same scene in different interpretations, or immediately offering commentary on the play, etc. The gimmick of the scientist/actor was developed more flawlessly than before – the lecturers moved directly from the lectern to act in the drama they were speaking about and then returned to their scientific text. This of course was at the cost of breaking the traditionally undivided comedy into pieces, though ones consciously composed and glued together. This restoration work, searching for the meaning of textual fragments, competed for the theatergoer's attention with the work itself.

Nevertheless, after trying this method we humbly returned to our old compositional recipe.

In 1972, by decision of SDS, we moved from Malostranská Beseda to the Reduta Theater on National Boulevard, which then belonged to the Studio.

Hardly had the manager of SDS, Mr. Hercik, put himself at our service, then he began to twist in his seat and act unpredictably. He halted all operations in Reduta (the magazine *Mladý Svět* was calling it a drug den) and issued a ban on the Jára Cimrman Theater throughout Prague. We faced the question of whether to comply with the strange order of the manager and we came to conclusion that we shouldn't. Woe then to the theater about which people whispered that it had been banned. In order to prevent the rumor from spreading, we put on a couple of performances in our native Malostranská Beseda and then accepted a helping hand from the manager of the Divadlo na Zábřadlí, Dr. Vodička, who lent us his theater for all of June 1972.

After the holidays we were, out of the clear blue sky, allowed to return to National Boulevard. But different people had taken over. The so-called normalization had

⁸ The title is a play on the popular children's book *Malý Bobeš* (Little Bobeš).

solidified and its broom had completely swept out the underground areas of Reduta. The head of the theater, Dr. Poledňák, had disappeared. The smiling Mr. Širc left to smile at the construction of the Prague metro. And Dr. Trávníček, for a change, departed from this world altogether. The manager of the State Theatrical Studio M. Hercik was, after a lengthy illness and expulsion from the party, replaced by the manager Cmíral. The new head of Reduta was Jan Budlovský, a mysterious figure, transferred there from a completely different field (it was said from the state railway). An apparatchik with the manners of a variety show magician or barber (he combed Smoljak's hair several times before performances), he decided that the Jára Cimrman Theater would be the main attraction of his operations.

There we had two so-called "renewed" premieres. In December 1972 it was *The Investigation of the Missing Class Register*. In contrast to the original version the main change was in the costumes. These definitively placed the play in the Austro-Hungarian Empire so that it would not have anything in common with the current school system. And the minister was turned into an imperial school commissioner.

Akt, which had become unperformable under the harsher circumstances due to the character Pepa, a member of the police force, returned to the stage at the end of 1973. The policeman was changed into a sexologist.

On May 3, 1973 the play **Cimrman in the World of Music** had its premiere at the Reduta.

As authors of this attempt to map out Cimrman's trials in the field of classical music and especially opera, we noticed during the rehearsals that the members of the company viewed the text with suspicion. Little of it seemed funny to them and they pestered us so much that we started to mentally prepare for a bomb. The audience, however, gave us back our self-confidence. They welcomed the extremely musically exacting opera sung by musically inexact voices with a surprising mix of laughter and emotion. (Ludvik Vaculik: It's not just humor, my friends, it's something really fine.)

The lion's share of the credit for this feeling undoubtedly goes to Klusák's music. Jan Klusák pilfered and strung together world classics with such shamelessness and at the same time refinement that it would be unjust to call this distinctive work a mere parody.

Rehearsals of the fairytale **Mr. Tall, Mr. Wide, and Mr. Short-Sighted** (premiere October 17, 1974) took place in a darkening atmosphere at Reduta.⁹ There was news that SDS, our so-called organizer, would have to transfer Reduta to the musical agency Pragokonzert. This, in order to fulfill the secret government directive 212, which mandated creating some kind of socially useful programs.

With the passage of time our whole transfer under Pragokonzert began to seem like a perfectly set trap. First the representative of that wily organization, comrade Santo,

⁹ The title is a play on the popular fairytale "Mr. Tall, Mr. Wide, and Mr. Sharp-Sighted" by Karel Jaromír Erben.

assured us, through the dark lenses of his glasses, that his agency would take DJC under its wing. The next step was the announcement that the Ministry of Culture apparently wouldn't allow a musical agency to manage any non-musical activities, and that they thus had to part with us.

The catch was that all our scenery, props, and costumes for the seven comedies in our repertoire remained in the possession of Pragokonzert. That is, under lock and key. The trap had snapped shut.

We felt like an army that had given up its weapons. All our attempts to find a new organizer failed. The manager Cmíral didn't want us back in SDS and didn't intend to speak with us at all.

And again, like once before, the most important thing was not to stop performing, to defend ourselves against the rumor that we had been banned. We found refuge in student clubs (for example, the Strahov Seven, The May Fifth Dorm, The Chemists' Club...). We played the loony bin, i.e., the psychiatric clinic. Tomáš Sláma from the Řeznické Theater offered us a few performances. Instead of backdrops we had signs with labels as in the days of Shakespeare. Our costumes, patched together at home, looked like they were from summer camp sketches. During this crisis it was a relief that the technicians thrown out of Reduta – Václav Kotek, Andrej Krob, Milan Zušćák, and Arnošt Kurrell – remained faithful to us.

Then on March 19, 1975, an interesting troika came to our performance of *Murder in the Pullman Car* at the Řeznické Theater: the manager of the Prague Cultural Center (PKS), Mr. Zvolský, his chief script editor Michajlov, and the mime B. Valenta, at that time an official in the cultural section of the National Committee.¹⁰ I copied down the manager's remarks after seeing the play:

“That's a fine character, that Cimrman. I was entertained. I'm going to sleep well tonight. But it's too bad that it's not contemporary. At least a little. It doesn't need much. Whip things up here and there. Take off the gloves. You don't have to aim high. At the politics of the party or anything like that. You can take a swipe at the local committees, the OPBH.¹¹ The thirtieth anniversary of the liberation is coming up. And you've got what it takes...”

¹⁰ The Prague Cultural Center was an organization responsible for the ideological content of thousands of performers and dozens of groups and for arranging their appearances. Also, 'script editor' is my translation of the common Czech term '*dramaturg*.' According to Jarka Burian, in the Czech system of repertory theater, “A dramaturge not only supplies in-depth information about plays and their authors, but may also function as a translator, reviser or adapter of plays or other text sources, usually in collaboration with a director.” Cf. Jarka Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. 4. Because the Cimrman Theater produced only plays written by Smoljak and Svěrák, all of the dramaturges/script editors mentioned in this history were actually outside censors.

¹¹ OPBH stands for *Oblastní podnik bytového hospodářství* (District Enterprise for Housing Economics) which was the organization in charge of maintenance for all public housing. It was known at the time for its corrupt practices, for example, in allocating apartments.

He also said that the characters in our plays could stay the way they were, but that we should give them different chatter. At first we didn't understand what he meant. Then we figured out that his advice was to write different dialogue for the characters, but that otherwise we could leave the play alone.

The next week the chief script editor came alone and stunned us with another proposal. From the seven plays, we should pick out our best material and make it into two plays. If we did this, the umbilical cord from 1968 would be cut, and we could become a part of PKS.

When we said that we couldn't agree to this, it appeared that they had counted on our refusal and they pulled out a lesser card. Anonymous readers would mark up the plays and we would make revisions in accordance with their comments. We agreed to that. The script editor of PKS, with whom we worked on the text corrections, fortunately happened to be Darek Vostřel. Feeding the wolf without harming the sheep was an entertaining enough experience.

We started the 1975-1976 season in a new workplace, far from National Boulevard, in the rugged periphery of Branická Street, where a cozy hall for 150 spectators was hidden away at #41. We held out there for eight years. To our relief, we learned that theatergoers were willing to travel all the way out there and this at a time when the Vltava Embankment was closed to fix the tram lines and it was practically impossible to get to the theater except by barge.

At the time, our longstanding stage master and occasional actor **Andrej Krob** took up a plan to found the Divadlo na Tahu (Theater on the Flyline) and to use it to direct Havel's adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera*. He was able to do both and the play had its premiere on November 1, 1975 in Horní Počernice.

The at first glance innocent undertaking became a center of attention for the StB (State Security, in other words, the secret police) and the other shoe dropped soon afterward. Krob was interrogated by the police and thrown out of Divadlo na Zábřadlí where he was employed. And so a man who had devoted his life to the theater ended up caulking windows. He was still able though to rehearse several other plays by Havel.

Not long after this we took the play *Akt* to České Budějovice. Although Andrej Krob was part of the tour only as a technician and didn't appear on stage, the Budějovice party organs received a tip to expect a theater connected with Horní Počernice and they bought up all the tickets for themselves. It was a disastrous performance. Nothing, absolutely nothing made the audience laugh. They kept on the lookout for attacks on the establishment and when they couldn't find anything, they left in disappointment.

This incident belongs in the history of the Jára Cimrman Theater mainly because even we made it clear to Andrej that it was his fault that the theater was in danger.

This is without a doubt unflattering testimony about the depth of our civic courage, but that's the way it was. At the time the majority of us considered it obvious that we all had to choose: either be a member of our suffering, bureaucracy-fighting theater or enter into open conflict with the regime. We believed doing both at once to be impossible.

During the 1976/77 season **Jan Klusák** left the theater after seven years of working there. We were sorry to see him go, but his decision was definitive.

On the other hand, **Jiří Menzel** joined the company and took over Jan Klusák's roles as the All-Knowing Grandpa in *Mr. Tall, Mr. Wide, and Mr. Short-Sighted*, as Meyer in *Murder*, and the doctor in *Deaf Bobeš*. It turned out, however, that a film director of world renown was only an apparent windfall for the theater. Jiří was constantly on the road and his performances became fewer and fewer until after several years he silently disappeared altogether.

The composer **Jaroslav Uhlíř** joined up as the conductor of our opera performance. Since then he has had the position of actor/stand-in: when Pavel Vondruška, now conductor of the orchestra at the National Theater didn't have time, Uhlíř was called in.

The Prague Cultural Center, our organizer, wanted us to write and rehearse a new play that would be genuinely current and address contemporary issues. That was the order on whose basis we wrote **Messenger from Liptakov**, containing the one-act plays *Messenger of Light* and *Visionary*. The representatives of PKS reacted fairly well to the performance. The only one who genuinely didn't like it was Comrade Kepáková, a reinforcement fresh from the Central Committee of the party. Boris Michajlov called the production a step forward. It bothered the worker-manager Zvolský that we hadn't chosen a specific target and didn't criticize anything. Otherwise, however, he laughed heartily, but strangely enough – as he said himself – “at different places than the young people in the audience.”

The premiere took place on April 20, 1977 in Braník. During the three generally peaceful seasons in our new workplace, our eleven-member company was joined by a stable crew of technical help: Václav Kotek, responsible for operations in the theater, Jan Kašpar, Tomáš Edel, Milan Zuščák, Jiří Kalina, Geňa Rumlena, Jan Hraběta, Ivo Maurenc, Dan Pokorný, Arnošt Kurell, Petr Dvořák, and Aleš Duda.

The 1978/79 season started unhappily. **Oldřich Unger**, a former radio director and member of the company from its very start announced that he had filed an application to leave the ČSSR (Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) and that he was cutting all contact with the theater. (After a yearlong agony he emigrated with his family. Today this robust red-head lives in California.)

A second blow is **František Petiška's** heart attack.

O. Unger's role in *Akt* is taken on by **Josef Koudelka**, a student of photography at FAMU who had worked in the theater from our time at Malostranská Beseda as a

stagehand and then in smaller acting roles. (**Eva Vondráčková** was the first photographer of the Jára Cimrman Theater. Koudelka captured our time at Reduta and Braník in his engaging pictures. **Pavla Otáhalová** then took over and documents our progress today.)

One day Miloň Čepelka caught the lighting engineer **Jan Hraběta** in his booth reciting the text of Havel's *The Garden Party* which he knew by heart from his long years of lighting at the Divadlo na Zábřadlí. Given our dearth of actors it was a happy coincidence. Hraběta was quickly moved from the lighting booth to the stage and he learned the roles of Unger, Petiška, and Klusák with such rapidity that he soon had the biggest head in the whole company (which remains true to this day).

The manager of the District Cultural House in Prague 4, which we fell under at the time, was Dr. Neumann, a Slovak lawyer and former military officer.¹² We got along with him well. He didn't interfere in the ideological side of things. He mainly took care that not too many people went to the theater without tickets. In 1979 he was replaced by Mr. Štefanka, a young man also from Slovakia, who managed the cultural affairs of Prague's largest district during the day and studied law in the evening. He was at two of our performances, one of which he slept through.

Our organizer, PKS, also had a new manager. If the incompetence of Zvolský seemed to know no ceiling, the new manager Maršík, despite his small size, added a whole new floor.

In September 1979, we turned in the manuscript of a new play entitled *The Mess* to PKS at their headquarters in the Obecný Dům (Public House). We waited two years for its approval. And it was no wonder. The relatively round anniversary of the liberation was approaching and right behind it the even rounder anniversary of the founding of the party. Cimrman's drama didn't suit either one of these. That didn't mean, however, that the cultural organization was asleep.

For example, it banned our play *Akt*. The uninitiated might not be familiar with how a play is banned. Very simply. On May 6, 1980 an official from the Obecný Dům telephoned to tell us that on May 8 we should replace *Akt* with another play. I asked for the reason why and it was recommended that I not ask and that I adhere to the injunction.

I then went to ask the apparatchik in person whether the ban was valid only for the day in question and was told that it was valid permanently. I then sat down and wrote a letter to the manager Maršík, in which I requested an explanation and a face-to-face meeting. The manager, however, didn't answer my letters even after several reminders. Curiosity wouldn't let go of me and I forced the then head of OKD for Prague 4 to ask Maršík on the telephone in my presence.¹³ From the telephone call it emerged that the banning of

¹² Prague is administratively divided into numbered districts.

¹³ OKD, short for *Okresní kulturní dům* (District Cultural Building) was an institution often comprising several buildings (centers) and providing cultural life – concerts, classes – for citizens of individual districts.

Akt was only the beginning of a progressive ban of all the other plays. When Štefanek returned the telephone to its cradle, he pointed skywards, indicating that the ban apparently came from higher places.

At a conference in the Obecný Dům I ran into the manager Maršík and asked him why he didn't answer my letters. He just walked away unruffled. It appeared that the manager didn't even answer direct oral questions.

Josef Koudelka also decided to leave the country. He performed for the last time on May 22 in *Murder* and then said farewell. He now works in Berlin as a professional photographer and uses the name J. Koudelka-Bergstein so as not to be confused with the photographer who shares his name.

We performed *The Pub in the Clearing* in Břeclav on December 14. We found out by telephone that **František Petiška** had died. It was the first death in the company.

In June 1981, it seemed that enough water had gone under the bridge since the "Počernice Affair" that we could afford to employ **Andrej Krob** as a stage master. Andrej himself had one condition: he would return only if everyone agreed to it. That, however, didn't occur. "What kind of world do we live in," wrote Smoljak, expressing the feelings of most of us, in a letter he sent me at the end of the 1980-81 season, "when a group of people in their own ways extraordinary, a group which gives people something of unquestionable value, is so lacking in morals that it closes its doors to a person like Andrej?"

With both the anniversary of the liberation and the anniversary of the founding of the party behind us, the play *The Mess*, which had been approved for two years, could finally come up for an airing. When we authors reread it after all that time, however, we felt that it needed a rewrite. That's what we did and we handed in the result to the editorial staff of PKS.

On November 12, 1981 we performed **The Mess** for the certification commission. Besides the manager Maršík, several ordinary office workers from PKS were also in attendance. And they disrupted the certification performance with their laughter. Especially a Mrs. Žárská.

When Václav Kotek gave one of the bigwigs a ride from the theater, he dared to ask the comrade manager whether he had a good time at the play. The answer sounded thus: "For a good time there are other comrades."

After a few days we received comments.

If I look now in my notes, I see that I should quote all of them:

- change the title *The Mess*. It evokes an undesirable generalizing impression of society-wide disorder. (We decided instead for the title **The Downpour**)

- the word ‘*tovaryš*’,¹⁴ especially in connection with foot rags, inadmissible, in as much it suggests the Russian for comrade (replaced by ‘vagabond’)
- the sentence on page 11 where the author of the joke is fortunate that he can’t be tracked down – cut
- Cimrman’s opinion on sex, the tendency to collectivization and common effort just as in agriculture – cut
- page 17: Cimrman sentenced to a year for his joke “The Emperor in the Munitions Warehouse” – cut
- page 13: He spits from the window on a lettuce patch and a hog (changed to: He spits from the window on a rose garden and a pig)
- page 14: the Ministry of Investment approves being replaced by another ministry, e.g., Welfare, because the Ministry of Investment has the same initials as the Ministry of Interior.¹⁵
- page 14: not pleased with the phrase “provocative anecdote” (replacement: anecdote #1 – bait for the popular masses)
- page 16: replace the correctional facility at Bory with another correctional facility, best in Austria (changed to Salzburg)
- page 19: cut the lascivious double entendre about the miller’s log
- page 20: Someone lets his tongue wag and then worries that he’ll end up behind bars – cut
- page 24: the miller’s remarks about excrement: it already moved, so it can’t be mine – cut
- page 25: Gentlemen, you are witness to a moment of historical significance. The Pihrts have just become extinct. Next to the giant coffin of the monarchy, mankind will also bury the tiny coffins of its toadies. The children you bring into this world, Mr. Forman, won’t know the word Pihrt – cut the entire passage

Even after including these suggestions into the text, we weren’t in the clear. The National Committee of the city of Prague apparently wanted a new preview on January 7, 1982. And Com. Trojan their official responsible for culture wanted to see it for himself.

To perform a comedy for apparatchiks with notepads on their knees is an unpleasant activity for any actor, to put it mildly. But what we experienced on January 7 was so painful that it could only be compared to the performance for the functionaries in Budějovice. Unbelievably, the manager Maršík made a meticulous selection of comrades who were allowed to attend and then strictly forbade them to laugh. The only two who didn’t respect his order were the chairwoman of the Union of Czech Dramatic Artists (SČDU), Jiřina Švorcová, and her friend. On the one hand they didn’t know about the ban and on the other they weren’t subordinates of Com. Maršík. Com. Trojan didn’t attend.

After a year and a half we were allowed to perform *Akt*. And do you know what was really behind the ban? During the May celebrations someone apparently called PKS to tell them we shouldn’t perform around the ninth of May because the play had an

¹⁴ In Czech, the word means ‘journeyman’.

¹⁵ The Interior Ministry was responsible for the secret police.

inappropriate title, reminding one of the “act of liberation.”¹⁶ The comrades there understood it as a lifetime ban. In the end, everything was explained and turned for the better.

In December 1982 we requested a hearing with the OKD manager Štefanek, because we couldn't ignore the rumors that he was preparing to cancel our engagement. The hearing shocked us. Economic difficulties were apparently forcing him to parcel the theater up into classrooms and so at the end of the season he would have to part with us. It was an obvious lie. Not long before he had invested considerable resources in fixing up the theater, and economically classrooms couldn't earn him as much as a prospering theater that was sold-out on a daily basis.

The young manager simply smiled at our arguments and even smiled at our threat to use all available means to foil his barbaric plan. The highest available means for us was Jiřina Švorcová, chairwoman of the theatrical union. Even her intervention, however, didn't help. It was clear that the instructions to expel the Jára Cimrman Theater came from either unseen heights or the darkest depths. The Branice Hall never turned into classrooms and after eight seasons we had to again look for a new place of work.

It's not easy to find a theater in Prague. We tried to get an old movie theater that no longer showed films, but the manager of the Prague Film Company had little sympathy for our plan. There was once a beautiful theater in the Hussite Congregation in Vrřovice. We found out that for years it had been serving as a warehouse for the Research Institute on Heavy Machinery. But the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, the owner of the building, had little interest in returning the theater to its original purpose because laughter and applause would interrupt services and reach the urns on the second floor, whereas the warehouse was quiet. But in the end we found the right place.

On June 28, 1983 we moved our decorations and backdrops for the nine comedies in our repertoire from Prague 4 to Prague 10, to the Solidarity Theater. It was an inhospitable hall, but our backstage team lead by **Genadij Rumlana** fixed it up over the holidays.

The first months in Solidarita are relatively faithfully described in the film **An Uncertain Season**.¹⁷ When one district expels a theater, it's unusual for another district to pick it up. Party circles in Prague 10, apparently alarmed by party circles in Prague 4, began to doubt the correctness of this move. If only someone from the theater was in the party. But the tickets for all of September were sold out, so let them perform and in the meantime we'll think it all over, do some investigating, and then decide.

We ended up performing under the watch of functionaries from the District National Committee (ONV) and the District Committee of the Communist Party of

¹⁶ May 9, of course, is the holiday celebrating VE day. After the revolution the holiday was moved to May 8.

¹⁷ A description of the film can be found in Andrew Roberts, “Normalization and Normal Life in the Films of Zdeněk Svěrák and Ladislav Smoljak,” Northwestern University, unpublished manuscript.

Czechoslovakia (OV KSC) who were sent in twos to the theater to report their impressions.

When the observation period was over, the vice-chair of ONV Mr. Dolinek, a man obviously sympathetic to the theater, relayed to us these conclusions: The Jára Cimrman Theater is a problem theater. It fulfils none of the party's cultural-political aims. It provides no ideological nourishment for the theatergoer. It merely entertains him. But because Prague 10 has 170 thousand residents, i.e., more than a provincial capital, and the cultural resources in the district are worse than in a provincial capital, we are willing to reconcile ourselves to you for a time.

The vice-chair, under the watch of two female comrades, expressed himself very circumspectly. On the one hand, he had to communicate the standpoint of the commission. On the other hand, he wanted to indicate that he was of a different opinion. He did this with a meaningful postscript: I expect that our collaboration will last a long, long time.

And so we signed a contract with OKD Prague 10 for regular performances. Because our representatives were suspicious that we had prepared an ingenious surveillance system to warn us whenever an inspection team was present, and that this would allow us to alter our performance, they added a new paragraph to the contract:

“1/h: Proof of intentional deviations from the script approved by the PKS agency may result in annulment of the contact on the part of OKD.”

It turns out that the 1983-84 season was not a dead one. Richard Němec became the new manager of PKS. This was good news. In comparison with previous heads of this institution, he was an intelligent and communicative head. Although later, especially in the second half of the eighties, our mutual relations had improved so much that we remember it as a time of reasonable coexistence in which one side silently acknowledged where the other side could and could not yield ground, the first face-off of the match was not a happy one.

After the new director gratified us with his declaration of how much he enjoyed the humor of Jára Cimrman, he chilled us with an unexpected proposal: we already had enough plays in our repertoire and so it would be no problem to stop performing the latest one, i.e., **The Downpour**. To make it even more clear which way the wind was blowing, he added that complaints had been raining down on *The Downpour* and that we could tell jokes about cops at home, but that they didn't belong on the stage.¹⁸

To this first move, we responded with a counterattack, which riled the manager. We filed a complaint against him in a letter to the SČDU – to Jiřina Švorcová, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. (The reader finds her name here for the third

¹⁸ The problems with this play stemmed from the fact that it featured Czechs telling jokes about the Habsburg regime and being overheard by the Habsburg secret police.

time and not by chance. She stood up for the theater several times, often, however, in vain.)¹⁹

I'm not at all surprised that Richard Němec flipped his lid over this. He wasn't in an enviable situation. Pressed by the police to ban and by the party to permit, he sent us a registered letter in which he advised us to look around for another agency.

There followed a meeting of the hostile parties. Our position sounded like this: Comrade manager, we weren't looking for support against you when we went to the SČDU, but against those hidden forces which in our judgment were forcing you to ban the play. As our ally you wouldn't have taken such a step on your own initiative.

The result of the meeting was the demand that we propose a number of changes in the text. Neither the chief script editor at the time, M. Hercik, nor his unhappy subordinate Řeřichová, however, was able to tell us what changes in the text would be desirable.

And so we (Smoljak and I) sat down to work, to a type of work comedians seldom and hardly anywhere else sit down to. We ourselves searched out the places in the play where the audience laughed the hardest and we changed the formulation so that it wouldn't laugh at all or at least not so much.

We never received a reply to our forthrightness.

Apparently the manager considered our revisions a mockery. *The Downpour* was stricken from the repertoire. We said farewell to it on October 23, 1983 at the Reduta in Brno.

It almost looks like the history of the DJC was merely a sequence of tiresome skirmishes with the bureaucracy. This mistaken impression is caused by the fact that we made quite detailed notes on these struggles. There are no notes on the uneventful seasons when the theater merrily performed and audiences merrily filled the rows. The following eight years at Solidarity were such a time.

The composition of our ensemble experienced several changes. We took on a new member, **Bořivoj Penc**. After rubbing off the rough edges in smaller roles, he studied the bigger part of the chief in the forthcoming **Conquest of the North Pole**. He alternated with the former stagehand **Jan Kašpar**, a hothead of considerable talent. Another hothead, **G. Rumlina**, our stage master, also appeared on the stage more frequently as an actor. **Václav Kotek** who for years was part of our backstage team, but also headed DJC's operations, applied himself in our comedies in a dramatic capacity. (The path from the backstage darkness to the stage usually wends through the role of the shy student in *The Pub in the Clearing* and the inconspicuous, but vital part of the technician handing us props in the *Missing Class Register*. With these tasks an adept of acting gains courage and proves his ability in deadpan comedy, which is exactly what we need.)

¹⁹ Švorcová, however, was one of the few actors in the country who sincerely believed in communism and continued to believe even after the revolution.

The Conquest of the North Pole by the Czech Karel German had its premiere in Brno on October 17, 1985. On the one hand, we paid tribute to the fans of a traditional stop on our tours. On the other, we were able to put on a still raw play eight times in front of a kinder Moravian public, and only then perform before the colder Praguers. The Prague premiere took place on October 25 in the Jiří Wolker Theater.

Smoljak is of the opinion that it's our best play. But you don't have to take him seriously; he often waxes this way after the birth of a new child. Although in this case...

The 1986/87 season is our twelfth. We celebrate the anniversary in our birthplace: Malostranská Beseda. It seems smaller than it used to be, as it always is when returning home.

In 1988 two misfortunes hit our theater. The first was the death of **Jaroslav Vozáb** (4/3/1988). Theatergoers lost a popular actor of inimitable expressions. We lost a colleague of rare qualities and education. To make a road trip with Jaroslav Vozáb in the car meant participating in a free class in history, architecture, classical music, and world languages. In some matters he was fiercely anti-modern, but you couldn't not like him.

He approached his roles in the theater with the humility and responsibility of a man of the old school and with gratitude to fate for, at the end of his life, being granted the honor to entertain people.

On the way to Velvar, where we applauded over Jaroslav Vozáb's grave, I received a second unhappy piece of news. The Budějovice Hospital notified me over the telephone that in a fall from a tree, **Jan Kašpar** had suffered a serious injury to his spine and paralysis of his lower extremities.

I never stop admiring Honza Kašpar for the bravery with which he has borne his confinement to a wheelchair, for the humor, which he finds in himself to come to terms with this without pathos. He had to give up the roles he performed in, but it occurred to us that several of the comedies have "sitting" roles, where the audience doesn't know that the actor can't walk. And so Kašpar alternates in the role of the All-Knowing Grandfather (*Mr. Tall, Mr. Wide...*) and in the role of the industrialist Bierhanzel (*Murder...*). In the play we were working on, *Blaník*, we wrote the role of the knight Smyl Flek of Nohavice just for him. When we take our bows, the audience is often caught by surprise; some theatergoers, seeing an actor in a wheel chair think for a moment that it's another bit of comedy. Slowly they become aware that the comedy is over. Perhaps they ultimately realize that the handicapped don't want society to pity them, but simply to accept them as equals.²⁰

Smoljak and I wrote the play **Blaník** (premiere May 16, 1990) at the end of 1988 and the beginning of 1989. The idea that the legendary underground army will again fail to appear, even though it knows how much the nation needs it, seemed to us right out of

²⁰ Svěrák is actively engaged in charities for the wheelchair-bound.

current events.²¹ The more the old helmsman of the ship of state felt that the ship was sinking, the more obstinately they held the rudder and created an oppressive atmosphere on deck.

When we read the “boys” the script of *Blaník* (it was June 1989 in Karlovy Vary after the last performance of the season), someone said: “You want to do that?” We authors think that it would have been possible to put it on even before November 1989, if we had had time to rehearse it. It was a period when they were already worried about banning just about anything. Cleverer heads in cultural-political functions were preparing themselves for any eventuality. It showed up in the approval process of the film *An Uncertain Season*. The apparatchiks who two years before would have taken a bite out of the script, to our surprise now simply nodded.

Nevertheless, the Velvet Revolution came.

The Jára Cimrman Theater, together with every other theater, turned into a political center, where, instead of humor, audiences received news on the state of the uprising. Cimrmanologists whose work had always consisted in pulling us out of our patriotic pathos, now sang the national anthem evening after evening with a knot in their throats, and Miloň Čepelka recited a new poem at every performance.

With freedom we encountered a new atmosphere in our country, one we had not counted on. If up to now the performances of this unusual theater had been, as spectators said, a small light in the darkness or a refreshing splash of water, what would it be now? Will we maintain our twenty-year tradition of sell-outs? Or will the Master’s work disappear together with the regime in which it grew and under which it had for years suffered?

During the summer holidays in 1992, the following announcement was plastered all over Prague trams: Since it has been decisively proven that Jára Cimrman lived on Štítný Street in Žižkov, his theater would also be located there. It was our first voluntary move. Expecting competition over theatergoers we decided to take the matter directly to them by moving closer to the center of town.

We thus began the 1993/94 season in the Žižkov Theater TGM. To the eleven comedies was added a twelfth – **The Stand-In** (premiere March 27, 1994).

It’s a good thing that we came to the writing of this homage to theater only now and not before. Without a quarter of a century of touring around far-flung halls, without all the troubles under our skin, we wouldn’t have been able to draw so prodigiously from our own experiences. This explains why *The Stand-In* is so full of laughs.

Our worries about the public’s interest turned out to be groundless.

²¹ According to legend, the Knights of Blaník will emerge from their underground fortress and rescue the Czech nation when it is in mortal peril.

If we survey the lines for tickets, which stretch from the box office on Štítný Street all the way to Cimbrukova Street, we note with amazement that twenty-year-olds are coming to see us sixty-year-olds. What is it about old Jára Cimrman that attracts the younger generation? I don't know. Someone else will have to investigate.

On October 4, 1997, it will be 30 years since we started. We'll have to celebrate. When fate lets a person perform in one piece for that long, it's a real gift. We'll celebrate with a new comedy, our thirteenth.²² It's called **The Plum**. It's a play from Cimrman's dotage, from his "blathering period". The work caught Ladislav Smoljak and me in the same part of our lives. We don't know if it's any good.

On Tuesday (May 6, 1997) at three in the afternoon, in the dressing room of the Žižkov Theater of Jára Cimrman (that's how it's named now) we read it to the members of the company for the first time. They laughed. We'll see what the audience says about that.

Performances from 10/4/1967 to 7/1/1997

Akt:	632
The Investigation of the Missing Class Register:	866
The Pub in the Clearing:	869
Murder in the Pullman Car:	720
Deaf Bobeš:	646
Cimrman in the World of Music:	699
Mr. Tall, Mr. Wide, and Mr. Short-Sighted:	671
Messenger from Liptakov:	720
The Downpour:	432
The Conquest of the North Pole:	582
Blaník:	420
The Stand-In:	386

Total: 7643

²² The theater is currently planning a fourteenth play entitled *Afrika*.