Center Stage

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CHAPTER SEVEN

A Theater for All Classes

Theater Director František Adolf Šubert

The very grandeur of the National Theater posed a challenge to the people running it. It had capacity for nearly twice as many patrons as the Provisional Theater and was equipped with the latest stage technology. The public’s expectations rose in consequence. Prague critics demanded performances which could measure up to those of the major European theaters and especially the Royal Theater in Vienna. New faces were called for to run the new theater. A “great assembly” of the National Theater Association, in which all shareholders were eligible to take part, was held in March 1883 to discuss potential candidates. Rather surprisingly, the writer František Adolf Šubert was elected director of the National Theater.¹

Šubert was only 34 years old at the time and, as the sixth child of a saddler, from a humble background.² His career was an example of the opportunities offered by the Habsburg Empire’s education system. Born in rural eastern Bohemia, Šubert attended high school in Königgrätz and university in Prague. At the time of his appointment he was known only among a small circle, mainly for his 1882 play Probuzenci (“The Re-awakeners”). He was elected thanks to support from Rieger and his affinity with the Old Czechs, who may have hoped to maintain their own influence by appointing a relatively inexperienced director. Endowed with only limited powers at first, Šubert required the approval of the National Theater Association’s managing committee on important issues such as the engagement and dismissal of soloists. From the outset, then, the Prague theater director’s position was far weaker than that of the director in Dresden or the impresario in Lemberg. The managing committee was also elected by the great assembly, which met twice a year and embodied the National Theater’s grounding in Czech society. The committee and votes ensured that the theater’s organization contained a strong democratic element—something which was totally absent in Dresden and only indirectly represented in Lemberg by the provincial diet and its theater commission.

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Despite his meteoric career, Šubert did not forget his humble beginnings. His popular dramas depicted the life of simple folk and sympathized with the fate of the workers. Aesthetically, his main influence was Emile Zola. He soon warmed to opera, which was initially alien to him, realizing that music theater was crucial for the financial well-being of his institution and hence for his own position. Although the general aims of the National Theater—strengthening Czech culture and the audience’s national awareness—lay close to his heart, he was not a narrow-minded cultural nationalist. Immediately after his election he declared to the great assembly of the National Theater Association that he intended to “always combine ideal efforts toward artistic achievement at the theater with constant consideration for practical necessities.” In concrete terms this meant that, if need be, he would place box office considerations over those of a national and educational repertoire. Thus he set the course for a fundamental conflict during his tenure, which lasted 17 years, from 1883 to 1900.

Šubert was not involved in everyday politics but he understood the dynamics of the new mass society better than the Old Czechs’ leadership. He saw the population’s involvement in the National Theater project as an opportunity to broaden its public. For Šubert the theater was an instrument of osvěta, the education of the whole nation. He had experienced the mood of national awakening and the laying of the foundation stones as a youth and wanted to create a theater for all social strata. Toward the end of his tenure, his late-Enlightenment and egalitarian convictions transformed him from a conservative to a sympathizer of the Social Democrats.

Theater Trains and Workers’ Performances

It soon emerged that Šubert had considerable organizational talent. While the National Theater Association was preoccupied with the grand opening, in fall 1883, Šubert set about publicizing specially arranged “theater trains” (divadelní vlaky); an offer he had devised to bring the rural population to the National Theater, often with an overnight stay included. Just ten days after the theater opened, on November 28, 1883, the first train arrived from Kolín, a town 50 kilometers east of Prague in the Bohemian heartland. So many people in Kolín had wanted to take the opportunity to see The Bartered Bride and the new National Theater that they could not all be accommodated in one weekend. After the initial group of 630, two further trains brought a total of 1,560 visitors from Kolín in January. Hence about a sixth of the town’s population of 13,000 traveled to the National Theater in the first three months of its existence.

Theater trains were soon offered across Bohemia. In ten months, 114 trains took passengers from all regions of the Czech Lands to Prague. In 1884, a contingent of 184 emigrants even arrived from the US via Hamburg. Not only members of the middle class but also farmers and laborers who had donated to the
National Theater and wanted to see the final product—the “golden house” in Prague—took advantage of the theater trains. According to the records, they were very pleased and even moved by what they saw.

One account by a Polish commentator, then living in Bohemia, bears witness to this: “We arrived in the Golden City before the performance began and went as a body to the theater. There was something tremendously beautiful, uplifting, somehow allying, about this procession to Prague’s shrine to art; a certain warmth prevailed, a special mood which simply cannot be put into words.” For many the trip to the National Theater was one of the best days of their life, not only on account of the performance but also the experience of community. The quasi-religious tone of the account above was characteristic of a widespread attitude. The National Theater’s audience behaved as if in church. The people sat in reverent silence, devoting their attention to the action on the stage, which had in a sense replaced the altar. Only the saints were missing, but they were found in time. The recently deceased Smetana was the first to be enshrined in national memory.

Running theater trains made above all economic sense. In 1884 alone, the National Theater realized 80,000 guilders from visitors from the country. That was equivalent to a quarter of box office revenue. Thus guests from outside Prague yielded a greater profit than the primarily local, bourgeois subscription holders. This income was vital in the early days of the National Theater and made it far more robust than the Polish Theater in Lemberg, which suffered frequent financial difficulties in the 1870s and 1880s, partly because it had no appeal beyond the Galician capital and its environs. Šubert’s ingenious idea was soon imitated elsewhere in Bohemia. In 1888, the newly opened New German Theater installed a special train service to lure the German-speaking population from the border regions to Prague. However, not only did the predominantly German-speaking towns such as Reichenberg have their own theaters but the inhabitants of the border regions could also travel to Dresden or Vienna with relative ease. Consequently, this train service did not prove as popular.

Emboldened, Šubert set about trying to reach the urban lower classes. In 1893, the National Theater introduced so-called “peoples’ performances” (představení pro lid) in the afternoons. These enabled craftsmen, junior clerks, young teachers, and maids to attend at little cost. Social tensions were rising, and Šubert feared the disintegration of the Czech nation into a mutually detached middle class and industrial under class. He viewed the Germans in Bohemia as a timely reminder that social elitism could weaken a community. They had dwindled to a minority in Prague two generations earlier, having alienated many of Bohemia’s bilingual inhabitants. Moreover, the theater scene threatened to fragment if the industrial workers evolved their own subculture, as they did in Berlin and Vienna. The National Theater, to Šubert, was the place to preserve the unity of the nation and its cultural life.
In view of this, he began to promote the integration of workers both within the theater and without. Not content with convincing some labor associations to buy season tickets for the National Theater, Šubert pushed through a proposal to open the theater exclusively to the Social Democratic laborforce on the eve of May 1, 1898, against opposition from the National Theater Association and the provincial diet. On this occasion, then, workers not only stood in the fourth circle but also occupied the best seats and boxes in the house. To open this politically controversial night’s show, the orchestra played the dramatic overture *Husitská* by Antonín Dvořák, which was inspired by the history of the Hussites and lasted nearly quarter of an hour. It was followed by some poetry by Svatopluk Čech and a tableau vivant of laborers designed by the director-in-chief of the National Theater, Josef Šmaha. For the finale, the theater presented *Služebník svého Pána* by František Jeřábek, a naturalist tragedy and critique of capitalism written in 1870.

Extending the plan to open the theater to new sections of society also paid off financially. The workers, who filled the theater to capacity, left over 800 guilders in the cash box—distinctly more than an average evening’s takings for spoken drama. Politically, too, the occasion was a success. The enormous police presence in the street in front of the National Theater, ready to nip any disturbances in the bud, was not called upon. The simply but neatly dressed workers entered the theater, handed in their coats—as the Social Democratic newspaper *Právo lidu* had advised in the previous day’s issue—and went silently to their seats. But the calm ended when the performance began. Every item on the program was followed by thunderous applause and there were repeated ovations calling for the curtain to be raised after Josef Šmaha’s tableau vivant. František Jeřábek’s play elicited strong personal reactions. During the scenes in which the dishonest and exploitative factory owner Dornenkron came into conflict with the ordinary Czech workers, the spectators grew so excited they could not stay in their seats. They animatedly followed every twist and turn of the plot, applauding in agreement or calling out objections. Finally, when the aristocratic factory owner with the German name and the Czech protagonist tragically perish, the audience was so stunned it remained seated for some time. *Právo lidu* ran an in-depth review the next day, describing the evening as a “great moral triumph for the proletarian cause.” And the workers had proven that they could be almost as disciplined an audience as the middle class. Yet while the working-class press praised Šubert for opening the theater up, the Young Czechs, who had dominated Bohemian politics since 1889, unleashed a storm of criticism. They called Šubert a traitor to the national cause for handing over the National Theater to internationalist Social Democrats but ignoring the Czech “national workers’ political club.” The following year, this conflict was avoided by giving two successive workers’ performances.
Ultimately, Šubert achieved his aim of broadening the theater’s public by means of these special arrangements. While theater trains began to run less frequently toward the end of his tenure, more than ten percent of all performances were still “peoples’ performances.” In addition, the National Theater provided reduced price tickets on three to four afternoons a week and a special arrangement for schoolchildren and students once a month. In this way, sections of the population were integrated into the audience which would have been confined to the highest circle and standing room in the Royal Theaters in Vienna and Dresden and in Lemberg. As far as possible for the day, Šubert had created a “theater for all.”

The Limits of Social Cohesion

All these achievements and even the overwhelming success of the National Theater at the International Music and Theater Exhibition in Vienna counted for little when it came to reelecting the theater’s management in 1900. The provincial diet, under the sway of the Young Czechs, voted to entrust the National Theater to the Young Czech National Theater Association (*Společnost národního divadla*). They promptly launched a press campaign against Šubert and he was forced to give up his post.

Another major change introduced by the new management was an independent opera director. Karel Kovařovic, a conductor and composer of several popular operas and ballets, who had achieved some fame as director of the orchestra at the Bohemian ethnographic exhibition of 1895, was appointed. In contrast to Šubert, he came from a financially secure, bourgeois Prague background. Irritated by the orchestra’s supposed lack of dynamism and precision, the occasional imprecise entry, and intonation problems, Kovařovic made it his primary goal to iron out all the Šlendrián—the “sloppiness”—in the now independent opera department. He increased the number of rehearsals and scolded individual musicians in front of the entire orchestra. Singers or musicians who protested against his methods faced dismissal.

Kovařovic’s arrogant, uncompromising approach soon precipitated a disaster. On February 9, 1901, during a performance of *Carmen*, Kovařovic became embroiled in an argument with one of the principal violinists, whom he accused of having played off key in rehearsal. The next day he dismissed the violinist for intentionally scratching the strings during the performance. That night—a performance of *Tannhäuser* was scheduled—the orchestra refused to play. Gustav Schmoranz, Šubert’s successor as director of the National Theater, rushed to the scene to urge the musicians into action, since the audience was already waiting. But displaying neither tact nor sensitivity, he failed to defuse the situation. The members of the orchestra would not take their places until the deputy chief conductor stepped in.
The next day, the orchestral musicians published a statement to the press listing the reasons for their strike. These included several attacks by Kovařovic on individual musicians, in which he hurled abuse and threatened them with dismissal. On one occasion he even accused the entire orchestra of playing like hurdy-gurdy men. Yet it was not only humiliation at the hands of Kovařovic that caused the ensemble to strike, but also economic injustice. While the fees for soloists had more than doubled since 1883, the wages of chorus singers and musicians had barely risen. At a strike meeting, one member of the male chorus calculated that “90 percent of the staff subsists on 30-40 guilders” while the fees paid to Schmoranz, Kovařovic, and star tenor Karel Burian amounted to 68,000 guilders in one year.

A day later, the strikers made it clear that they would not return to work until “the social differences in this ‘golden house’ are at least brought to a tolerable level.” The music journal *Dalibor* and a section of the daily press supported their demands. Solidarity also came from abroad. The Lemberg orchestra sent a telegram urging the strikers to “hold out” and colleagues at the New German Theater and in the Viennese musicians’ association declared their support. Meanwhile, the musicians and choir gave concerts to help fill the strike fund.

Like unscrupulous industrialists, the directors of the National Theater responded to the strike by dismissing the entire orchestra, followed by the male chorus and the stage technicians when they joined in support. The musicians were easily replaced, some well-known singers criticized the strike, and the pickets crumbled. Kovařovic rehearsed intensively with the new orchestra and on March 9, exactly a month after the dispute erupted, the opera department of the National Theater staged a complete performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Police patrolled outside the building and in the foyer. Plain-clothes policemen were deployed among the circles and in the standing room area in the orchestra level to ensure that order was maintained, and the gallery in the fourth circle was closed as a security measure. The following night, the opera *Werther* by Massenet went off without disturbance. Kovařovic had won out. The new orchestra was no worse than the old one and more obedient.

The National Theater’s public image, however, had been severely damaged. The working-class newspaper *Právo lidu* wrote with dismay: “The performance on Saturday, which took place under police protection, with the united cudgels securing the artistic and aesthetic values of the Czech bourgeoisie, did not do the theater administration credit. Nevertheless the truth must be told that the Czech bourgeoisie completely dominated the performance, even if only with the help of the police.” The sincerity of the theater’s national mission was called into question by strikers and the left-wing press who accused the Young Czechs of using national arguments as a pretext for glossing over social divisions. The strike was called off, but a note of discord lingered. Schmoranz continued to vent his anger...
at the insubordination in the theater’s annual report. The “minor theater staff” he declared, must have hoped for a “social revolution, by God” from the new theater directors. This distinction between “important” people in the theater and merely “minor staff,” which Šubert would never have made, was characteristic of the new generation of developed bourgeoisie, as Marx would have it. Meanwhile, one positive outcome of the strike was that an independent Czech Philharmonic Orchestra was founded, by musicians of the National Theater orchestra who were laid off in 1901.

The Czech population was rapidly transforming into a modern class society. Since the 1860s, the small Czech elite had been joined by the *haute bourgeoisie* and a large working class. The names and professions of the National Theater’s season ticket holders reflect the patterns of social change. While the records for the Provisional Theater and the first years of the *Národní divadlo* show many artisans and small shop owners, after 1900, there were mostly industrialists and property owners. Rather than signifying one social group’s displacement by another, this was chiefly a sign of the social advancement of the founding generation. This new elite, like the nobility at the Estates Theater previously, treated their subscriptions like family heirlooms, making it increasingly difficult for newcomers to find vacancies.

By and large, the nobility withdrew from the theater. The Young Czechs, who were constantly agitating against the Bohemian nobility in *Národní listy*, were now in control. On the day that the strike began in February 1901, the lead article in the features section indirectly attributed it to a lack of aristocratic patronage at the National Theater. The Schwarzenberg, Waldstein, and Thun families, who had generously supported the theater project in the 1850s and after the fire of 1881 and paid considerable sums for boxes, must have perceived this as gross ingratitude. They retreated to the Estates Theater and withdrew their names from the list of subscription holders. The loss was not deeply felt by the National Theater. The doyens of the newly prosperous Czech middle class simply took their places.

Nevertheless, the National Theater could not avert an acute financial crisis in early 1902. Within the space of a few months, the theater’s deficit had grown to over 120,000 crowns (60,000 guilders in old money), for which the members of the National Theater Society were liable. Angered at the losses and the delay in being informed, the entire committee resigned in May of that year. To make matters worse, the chairman of the society, Alois Wiesner, had become involved in an embezzlement scandal surrounding suspiciously high printing costs for tickets, the theater journal *Meziakti* and the National Theater’s annual report.

Yet the manner in which this situation was handled proved how efficiently the National Theater was run in comparison to Dresden’s Royal Theater and the Lemberg Theater under Pawlikowski. Any corruption on a financial or adminis-
trative level was soon uncovered by the monitoring of the democratically orga-
nized association of sponsors. Once identified, the irregularities could be attended
to. Wiesner was forced to resign and a commission was set up to devise econo-
mizing measures. The greatest financial challenge, meanwhile, lay in the steadily
rising costs for fees, stage sets, and lighting. These expenses, which continued to
grow exponentially after the turn of the century, made it difficult for the theater to
provide seats at low prices. The amount of peoples’ performances stagnated and
the number of lower-class members of the regular audience declined.

Around the turn of the century, a series of additional playhouses—mostly
for the working and lower classes—opened in Prague’s suburbs. In 1907, the
defunct National Theater Association led by Šubert founded a prestigious theater
in the Vinohrady district of Prague (Divadlo na Vinohradech) with its old capital
stock. All these new venues vied with the National Theater, especially for the
ordinary public. Moreover, the rural population no longer had to travel to Prague
to attend the theater, since smaller towns such as Pilsen and Mlada Boleslav now
also had theaters. Although the establishment of these local institutions was theo-
retically consistent with the aims of the early Czech theater activists, in practice
it meant an end to the unity of all classes under one roof. The new theaters in
Prague competed with the National Theater especially in the fields of operetta,
comedy, and revues. The National Theater asserted its superiority—and justified
its markedly higher subsidies since 1895—by offering distinctly sophisticated
entertainment. But the highbrow repertoire did not have broad appeal and some-
times played to only half-full houses. The Enlightenment utopia of theater as a
site of universal education had reached its limit.

And yet the aura of the “golden house” overlooking the Vltava River was
remarkable. Even Czechs who never visited the theater knew it and identified
with it. Although the extent of its social appeal was stagnating, Czech opera was
gaining popularity. The Bartered Bride, for example, was performed nearly 500
times between 1883 and 1915 at the National Theater alone. Cautiously estimat-
ing that there was 80 percent attendance at each performance, at least three-quar-
ters-of-a-million people must have seen this opera in this period. Other works
such as Dalibor, Lohengrin, Aida, and Faust also played to six-figure audiences.
This matched attendances at the New German Theater, where the most popular
pieces, including Manon, Lohengrin, and Mastersingers of Nuremberg, attracted
200,000 to 300,000 patrons over the space of ten to fifteen years. Music theater
was, then, not only high culture but also popular culture. Opera was disseminated
via other channels beyond the grand theater stage. Smetana’s comic operas were
performed in countless smaller theaters and open-air venues, and piano scores
were published in editions of tens of thousands. The Czechs became an opera
nation, as in love with the artform as the Italians.
Notes

1. On Šubert’s election, see NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 97/12, Protocoll of the Great Assembly of the National Theater Association (hereafter PVA) of March 12, 1883.

2. A family tree drawn by Šubert can be found in his book Vývod Rodu Šubertův a Wobořilův ve východních Čechách s jejich nejbližším příbuzenstvem.

3. In his writings, Šubert made frequent reference to Zola’s 1881 publication Le naturalisme au théâtre.


5. See Šubert, Dějiny, CXXX and CXXXI. A more detailed account of the theater trains program can be found in Šubert, Dějiny, 76–77.

6. On the theater trains in the first year of the National Theater, see the theatre’s annual report, which can be found in the Archive of the National Theater (hereafter AND). Here: AND, Annual Report 1 (1884), 20 (Until 1900, the annual reports of the National Theater were drawn up by František Adolf Šubert, from 1900 by his successor as director Gustav Schmoranz. The numbering was included in the titles of the reports, which are therefore První rok Národního divadla, Druhý rok Národního divadla etc.).


8. See the annual balance sheet of 1884, which shows total income and expenditure of 450,000 guilders; Šubert, Dějiny, CXXXVII.

9. See Národní listy, April 19, 1888.


12. See Šubert, Dějiny, CIX.

13. It is interesting to compare the reports in Právo lidu, May 1, 1898, 2, and the conservative newspaper Hlas národa, May 1, 1891, 3.

14. On the debate on workers’ performances see Hlas národa, April 30, 1891, 2; also NA, Fond ND, Sign.D. 51, 527.

15. On Kovařovic’s career and compositions, see Němeček, Opera Národního, 19–53.

16. See Národní listy, Feb. 11, 1901, 3. The conflict is closely considered in Němeček, Opera Národního, 59–80. Němeček is clearly writing in defence of Kovařovic. For a similar view, see also Kvařil, O čem vím, 306–12. For a more critical view of Kovařovic, see Nejedlý, Opera národního divadla od roku 1900, 33–45.

17. See the orchestra’s statement in the journal Dalíbor, Feb. 16, 1901, 54–55.

18. Právo lidu, Feb 16, 1901, 3.

19. Právo lidu, Feb 17, 1901, 5.

20. Právo lidu, Feb. 17, 1901, 3; also Němeček, Opera Národního, 70.


22. Právo lidu, March 11, 1901, 2.


24. On social developments since the 1848 revolution, see Urban, Die tschechische Gesellschaft. On the social standing of subscription-holders, see the list of names of the same, printed annually in the theater diaries of the National Theater; Divadelní Kalendář, 1882–1914.


26. Prince Jiří Lobkowitz was the only aristocrat to keep his box after the turn of the century.

27. On the resulting losses, see NA, Fond ND, Společnost ND, Sign. 17, folder for 1902, no pagination, (my thanks go to the National Archive for making the unprocessed files available); and Němeček, Opera Národního, 137.
28. See the list of new theater buildings in, Česka Divadelnì, 53.
29. See Tancsik, Die Prager, 58–60.
30. Any assertion of the popular appeal of opera should, of course, be founded on precise theoretical considerations. Among the groundbreaking studies of Italy in this field is, e.g., Leydi, Verbreitung und Popularisierung, 321–28.