

Theater from cruelty

A rediscovered play from Terezín receives its English premiere

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By Steffen Silvis - Staff Writer



Decades after its demise, this Nazi holding camp is still producing interesting art.

There is, perhaps, no greater monument to the transformative power and vitality of theater than the upper barrack rooms at the Terezín internment camp, which approximately 140,000 people, primarily Jews, passed through on their way to the death camps. In this tempered hell, a Potemkin village to hide the lie of Auschwitz and Sobibor, an astonishing flowering of art took place, an improbable Renaissance of painting, music and theater.

Theater proved to be stronger than fascism and its horrors throughout the Nazis' network of camps. The famed Czech theater innovator E.F. Burian created cabarets in Dachau, while artist and writer Josef Čapek participated in performances of Goethe and Shakespeare in Sachsenhausen. But it was at Terezín that an astonishingly rich theatrical culture was created and sustained, even in the face of the transports.

Amid the makeshift stagings and reimaginings of Chekhov, Cocteau, Mozart and Gogol, new work was also being created. Perhaps the best known, which are still regularly staged and recorded, were the operas

from Terezín, particularly Viktor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* and Hans Krása's *Brundibár* (completed with Adolf Hoffmeister before his arrest, but reworked within the camp).

Much, understandably, was lost of the new work. Recently, though, various scripts and fragments of other work have been coming to light, some due to the diligent work of the scholar Lisa Peschel, an American theater historian.

Voices of Terezín: Smoke of Home

When: Sunday, April 26, at 2 and 8

Where: Divadlo Inspirace

Admission: By donation

Peschel has spent many years hunting down surviving pieces of Terezín's theater. As a good historian must also be a detective, Peschel found a lead through various sources to a forgotten original play that was penned and performed in the camp: *Smoke of Home* by Zdeněk Eliáš and Jiří Stein.

A chance conversation with a professor and Terezín survivor led Peschel to Seattle, Washington, and to the home of Eliáš's widow. (Eliáš, who had survived the war, had moved to America. Sadly, his writing partner, Stein, perished at Auschwitz.) Given a description of what Peschel was hunting for, Mrs. Eliáš miraculously found the very manuscript the historian had been seeking among her husband's papers.

Smoke of Home is set in the middle of another horror - the Thirty Years' War. It was inspired by a piece by Rainer Marie Rilke, and the title is thought to have come from Aleksandr Griboyedov's verse comedy titled *Woe from Wit* that was being rehearsed at Terezín at the time: "After a long journey, when one returns / The smoke of home is soothing and sweet." The title turned out to be cruelly ironic, considering the fate of the play's characters, as well as that of their creators.

The scripts and odd surviving scenes discovered by Peschel were primarily in Czech and German; a bilingual collection was just printed in Prague by Akropolis. But now the work is beginning to appear in English, and the second world premiere (the first took place outside the gates of Terezín) of *Smoke of Home* will be staged this weekend for two performances only (*Smoke of Home* will also be restaged at Terezín, perhaps in the very barrack where it first saw life, May 20 at 7 p.m.).

This English production is co-produced by the Prague Playhouse, Prague's Academy of Performing Arts, the Spitfire Company and American University. The script has been adapted and directed by Gail Humphries, a Fulbright scholar currently residing in Prague, and will be performed by a cast of locally known Czech, English and American actors, including Matthew Blood-Smyth, Mirenka Čechová, Jim High and Adam Renc.

With any luck, there will be enough enthusiasm for this important project that other stagings of work salvaged from the smoke of the Holocaust might take place (there have already been staged readings in Czech of Peschel's finds at Prague's Divadlo Komedie).

Meanwhile, Peschel's search, as well as those of her colleagues, continues. There are certainly boxes throughout the world's attics that contain other missing pieces of Terezín's theater history, perhaps even a copy of a one-act titled *Glass Mountain*, also written by Eliáš and Stein, which is still lost.

The Czech theater historian Bořivoj Srba said of Terezín, "The elementary power of theater to elevate a person to a truly human level demonstrated itself in no other surroundings in the years 1939-45 as convincingly as it indeed did here - behind bars and barbed wire."

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