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SCENOFEST SIDEBAR

Frantisek Zelenka, Scenographer (1904-1944)

BY LINDA SARVER

[The first exhibition of the scenography of Frantisek Zelenka seen outside the Czech Republic was installed in the Lethaby Gallery at London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design 5-23 September 1994. The exhibition was made possible by the National Museum in Prague, the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, and The London Institute. It was the touchstone for the inaugural week of the European Scenography Centres' Scenofest!]

A large photo of Zelenka greets me as I enter his exhibit. An attractive man, elegant, urbane, self-assured. In his dark eyes I see a quick wit and sharp intellect, my favorite combination. I want to get to know him better.

This is an extensive exhibition of original designs, posters, cos-



ZELENKA'S SET DESIGN FOR *THE GIANT*

tumes, and photos of Zelenka's work, and none of it has been seen previously outside the Czech Republic. The catalog tells me Zelenka was born in Bohemia on 8 June 1904. He was part of the between-the-wars artistic and intellectual community of *mitteleuropa* that rebelled against traditionalism by embracing the whimsy, irreverence, and playfulness of Dada, Surrealism, and the innovations of the Bauhaus, and that influenced the creators of Action Design in the 1970s. The multi-talented artists of Zelenka's generation moved easily from the visual to the literary to the theatrical arts. Although Zelenka became an architect, interior decorator, furniture designer, and magazine editor, his main interest was the theatre. In 1926 he started his theatrical career by designing posters and a few sets for the National Theatre in Prague. Quickly his reputation spread, and soon the young architect began to work for theatres in Prague, Brno, Olomouc, and Kutná Hora. From 1926 to 1941, Zelenka collaborated with the greatest names in Czech theatre: E. F. Burian, Jirí Frejka, and Karel Dostál.

Most of the exhibit concentrates on Zelenka's scenographic

work. The walls of the large gallery are filled with original artwork and production photographs which encompass his entire career. His first professional design is here, and the exhibition is organized to guide me through his evolving career to his final designs. In 1926, when he was a 22-year-old architecture student, he was engaged to design Shakespeare's *As You Like It* for the National Theatre in Prague. The playful exuberance of a skilled young student is evident in the designs—drawn with bold, confident strokes. The Forest of Arden is filled with trees that look as if they were taken from a child's wooden construction toy set. They're great fun and make no attempt at creating realism, but they make me smile.

Zelenka began working at Prague's Chamber Theatre in the 1930s. One of his most innovative designs there was for Paul Claudel's *Proteus* (1935). I'm not a big Claudel fan, but Zelenka's design quite catches my fancy and makes me wish I could have seen this production. The main object onstage is a large mattress! By variously using only one object, Zelenka takes a radical stand against the defined forms and unambiguous meanings which were so characteristic of the more traditional designs of his day.

With similar economy of design, Zelenka parodies Egypt in G. B. Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1936). Overly cultured Egypt is represented by three massive platforms set on coarse stone cones, connected only with small ladders. The influence of Russian Constructivist design seems evident.

Zelenka was in his heyday, but I notice that the tone of his designs seems to be changing, so I stop to read further in the catalogue. I learn that political events began to change Zelenka's life shortly after 15 March 1938. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was declared, and that signified the beginning of the end for Zelenka. And for millions of others. Registration of all Jews was mandatory. Jews were not recognized as citizens and therefore did not have full civil rights. No Jewish children were allowed to attend school. Jewish adults were forced to quit their jobs. Going to the theatre, movies, and restaurants was forbidden to all Jews. Jews could not use public transportation.

Beginning in September 1941, all Jews living in the Protectorate had to wear the star of David in public. As a Jew, all of these rules applied to Zelenka. With the help of friends, he was able to continue working, intermittently, by using an assumed name. I look about me at the eruption of color, humor, and energy in his designs and I can easily imagine his frustration, a work-driven theatre artist forbidden to design—"Whaddya mean I can't do scenery anymore?! Out of my way, I've got plays to design!" Don't tell the whirlwind when to stop blowing!

On 13 July 1943, Zelenka, his wife Truda, and his son Martin were transported to Terezín, a little town about 40 miles north of Prague. In the 18th century it was a small Hapsburg garrison town. During World War II the Germans forced all of the residents to leave Terezín and converted it into a way station for Czech Jews en route to the death camps in Poland and Germany. Terezín became known by its German name of Theresienstadt. It was still a little town—only now the residents were all Jews. 150,000 Jews were sent to Terezín during the war years. They were pressed into extremely crowded and unsanitary conditions, and more than 30,000 died there. 86,900 were eventually deported to the "real" death camps, mainly Auschwitz. The Jews had been permitted to bring their household goods with them to Terezín, a device for keeping them unaware of their final destinations, and Zelenka, of course, brought all of his theatre designs.

Upon his arrival, Zelenka quickly established himself as the theatrical impresario of Terezín. He found spaces in attics, dormitories, cellars, and barracks, and turned them into theatres and put

on plays. The works displayed in this part of the exhibit are a testament to Zelenka's productivity, spirit, and genius.

Brundibar, the Organ Grinder, an opera by Hans Krasa and Adolf Hoffmeister which was performed by children from the Prague orphanage who had also been relocated to Terezín, is the first rendering. Zelenka's design has the same whimsy and playfulness I associate with the works of Marc Chagall and with Boris Aronson's set for *Fiddler on the Roof*. The opera was a huge hit, more than 55 performances, playing to packed houses, and everyone in town sang the show tunes from *Brundibar*.

The Nazis used *Brundibar* as part of an infamous incident to dupe a visiting International Red Cross inspection committee into believing that the awful ghetto way station was actually "an exemplary German camp for the re-education of Jewish citizens." As part of their visit on 23 June 1944, the delegation was treated to a performance of *Brundibar* which had been given 'enhancements' by the Germans. The production was transferred to the Theresienstadt Sokol Hall, an orchestra of excellent musicians was provided, and Zelenka's design included a backdrop of flats depicting the Prague suburbs which created an attractive social context for the opera. This was such a successful propaganda tool for the Nazis that they made a film of the production entitled *The Fuhrer Gave the Jews Their Town*. Everyone connected with the show, including Zelenka, was forced to participate in this project which provided a deceptively sweet picture of life in the ghetto, a picture intended to mislead the world public.

In the 13 months of his life in Terezín, Zelenka designed two dozen more productions, and I'm drawn to the renderings for a late Baroque folk play, *Esther*. It tells the Biblical story of the evil

Haman who wants to destroy all the Jews, but the beautiful Esther defeats his plans and leads him to the scaffold. How Zelenka managed to maintain the light touch and playful quality of his work under such appalling circumstances is a mystery to me.

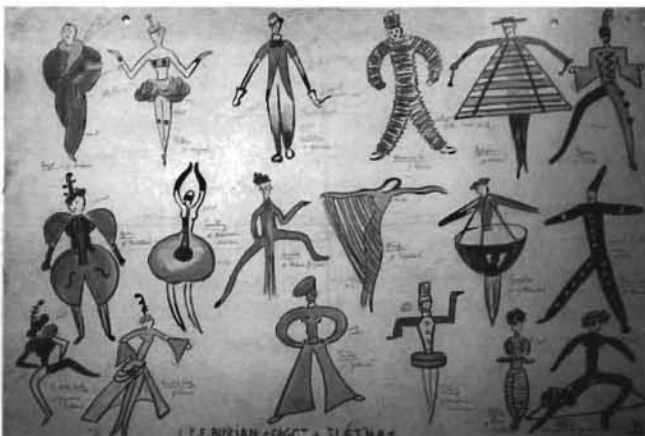
His setting for *The Third Sound of the Bells* (1943) by V. V. Stech is bursting with vibrant color and whimsical line. Nothing in the design suggests the difficulties of daily life and the uncertainty of the future. Only in his designs for Georg Buchner's *Wozzeck* (1944) can I see the toll of that stress. The gaunt figures are sketched in an almost invisible line of ink, much like ghosts, and they remind me of George Grosz's drawings. These are no longer the silly caricatures I'd laughed at in *Much Ado About Nothing*, but people confronting a tragic fate.

On 19 October 1944, Zelenka, his wife, and eight-year-old son Martin were transported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. There are no more designs for me to look at.

I'm surrounded by the immense output of this extraordinary designer, and it seems like a miracle to me. The man perished, but his work lives on. Nobody is quite sure what happened to his work after his death. Most probably his mother saved his designs. She was not deported, and in 1952 she sold the majority of her son's stage and costume designs to the National Museum in Prague where they were kept, mostly unseen for many years.

This exhibition is breathtaking on three levels. The designs are extraordinary. The life was extraordinary. And the inspiration this exhibit provides for *Scenofest!* cannot be put into words.

—LINDA SARVER



FOUR OF ZELENSKA'S DESIGNS: (ABOVE, LEFT & RIGHT) COSTUMES FOR *THE BASSOON & THE FLUTE*; SETTING FOR *THE THIRD SOUND OF THE BELLS*. (BELOW, LEFT & RIGHT) SCENOGRAPHIC RECORD OF *BRUNDIRAR, THE ORGAN GRINDER*; COSTUME SKETCHES FOR *ESTHER*.

