

**JIRASKŮV HRONOV FESTIVAL**  
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**HRONOV, the CZECH REPUBLIC**

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I have been in Hronov for this Festival several times before, but I never attended the opening ceremony. I am so glad I did this time. The opening ceremony was impressive and showed how much amateur theatre is appreciated in this country. Having several VIPs at the opening, like the mayor of Hronov, a representative of the Ministry of Culture, a Member of Parliament and others, is an honor. Also the raising of the different flags and the playing of the hymns was very impressive. And to see so many people together who were all there for the Festival, who are all dedicated to theatre – a great feeling.

The Festival is a national one with international participation, this time by Austria, Holland, Slovakia and the USA.

The play **Dvojhlavý orel / The Eagle Has Two Heads** written by Jean Cocteau was a real pleasure: excellent acting, nice costumes, a lot of attention for details, intriguing atmosphere. Even though there was a lot of text it was interesting to see it and possible to understand the action roughly.

Second day of the Festival. A sunny Sunday, many people outside, most of them eating ice cream. Also popular is eating and drinking outside. In the Alois Jirasek Park there was a festive day organized by the cooking school of Hronov because it was the day of their patron Saint, with stalls with all sorts of food and drink and people were taking good advantage of this opportunity. I observed the strollers for a while and counted that eight out of ten had something to eat or drink in their hands.

Next was a performance consisting of three short parts. All visual, so ideal for foreigners who can have their own interpretation and ideas.

First **Sólo pro knížky / Solo for Books**. Nice movements by seven persons, solo pieces as well as ensembles. Everybody is always in a hurry and running against time. But books bring solace... And that is certainly a fact that everybody, from whichever country, knows and can identify with.

The second piece **Enyky benyky Anka banka** was dance theatre by two very fit young women. No real story, only improvised movements related to meetings, interactions, partings - improvised on live music and danced with a lot of energy. I was told that the earlier performance in the afternoon had been different. Some effort!

The third piece was great and a lot of fun. **Kino / Cinema** was a slapstick comedy, which started very funnily with the setting up of a couple of rows of cinema seats in slow motion. What followed was even funnier. All the people who came into the cinema had their own characteristics and succeeded in making them perfectly clear in a very short time. A great moment was when the movie tape broke and by mistake a tape with the music of “Je t’aime moi non plus” was put on, very briefly only, but the spectators were alerted (probably not only the ones on stage). This production started in an unusual way. The group had too many actors, so everybody who wanted to play had to create her or his own character. They did a good job and all the different characters together created a very funny performance, of the right length, in the right tempo and with well-chosen music. One of the best of its kind that I have ever seen on festivals.

**Dekalog / Decalogue** took place in very small cloakrooms and showers in the hockey stadium. It was summer so there were no sweaty hockey players, but actors. Only ten (dekalog) spectators at a time were allowed in for a performance of some twelve minutes during which we witnessed a wedding ceremony, a death and a funeral meeting. The director used texts of and was inspired by several writers, by Christian symbols and more. Since the

rooms were very small the ten spectators were very close to the actors and in the dim light it was even hard to see who was who. I thought of Grotowski: Jerzy Grotowski (1933 – 1999), the famous Polish director who created unforgettable performances in the late sixties and seventies, who revolutionized theatre and is considered father of the then contemporary experimental theatre. The director of Dekalog Ondřej Pumr, certainly knows the work of Grotowski. For whoever is interested, read Grotowski's book 'Towards a poor theatre', from 1968, a seminal book focused on the very root of the act of theatre: actors in front of spectators. A highly interesting performance and I was thankful to the organizers to have selected it for this Festival. Food for thought and discussion.

**Žáby / Frogs**, the greenish contemplative drama by Theatre Kamen from Prague. The group informed us that the play with the same title by Aristophanes has nothing to do with their play. Well, Aristophanes certainly was not writing about real frogs. Not that we saw a real frog in this performance, but apparently there were lots of them. Oscar, the invisible Oscar, got rid of them at the neighbor's house, but for the house on stage they are a problem. It was a text play, which made the audience laugh a lot. A very simple setting. I like that because then one does not get distracted from the acting. The long pauses in the text delivery were intriguing in the beginning, but together with the quiet and deliberate movements they also made the performance quite static. Nice green touches here and there, which showed attention for details.

A trip to Nachod, a neighboring town, where we wandered around the main square, admiring the nice buildings and then climbed up the hill to the castle. After seeing the castle we climbed the tower to see the magnificent view over the surroundings from the top.

Next was Bertolt Brecht's **A Respectable Wedding** directed by Jozef Krasula (Slovakia). I had seen this performance last year at Scenic Harvest in Martin and was looking forward to seeing it again because I liked it a lot. And this time I liked it even more. The performance had gained in quality. It was some twenty minutes shorter and much more intense and the various characters had gained in effectiveness. An excellent performance with good acting by all actors, solo as well as in ensemble play. It was fascinating to see how a respectable wedding falls apart, how not only the furniture collapses literally, but at the same time the bourgeois façade of all these people collapses, figuratively speaking. Many little details in the mise-en-scene showed that the director has used all the possibilities that the text offers. This is one of Brecht's plays that deserves to be performed because it is of all times and has a universal value.

Off to **Hotel Beránek / Hotel Lamb**, a wonderful puppet performance, highly enjoyable in all aspects. Apparently the text was very funny, the spectators laughed out loud most of the time, but also for foreigners the plot was more or less clear. A lot of fantasy, jokes, lots of surprises, lovely puppets, inventive scenery and all done with quite simple means. I wonder how many hours the group rehearsed to reach the high artistic level of this production.

**My Monster** (Mein Ungeheuer) written by the Austrian playwright Felix Mitterer was a very complex performance with several layers. Violence and tenderness, insult and pain, good and bad memories, destroyed lives and love, the unveiling of the feelings of guilt, the depth of the human soul. Forgiveness and redemption. It was all there. This text play, in an Austrian stage dialect by a group from Salzburg, offered beautiful images that touched me, as well as the excellent intense and emotional acting of both actors who did not have moment of weakness. I think it is brave to put a serious and difficult play like this on stage.

Henrik Ibsen's **NORA** is a play I often saw before, but never I got a lump in my throat like I did now. This performance, a guest professional one from Prague, was excellent in every aspect of it. What a fantastic theatre country the Czech Republic is!

**Beautiful Summer Day or Who We Are, Where We Go and How Much Time We Have for It.** A nice collage of puppets, music, songs, men and women. Refreshing to see this

performance next to the serious plays. It was proven again that the writings of Daniil Charms offer good material for performances.

**Closely Watched Trains** I found difficult to understand since it is a text play and the action on stage did not make clear what the plot was. However, the acting was good and there were impressive images and nice imaginative details.

There was also funny street theatre. The Festival offered something for every taste and all of high artistic quality. Also, there was a large number of workshops with various subjects.

The two workshops that I observed several times (non verbal theatre and creative dance) were interesting to see and were proceeding towards a presentation on the last Festival day. Amazing to see how much can be achieved by the workshop leaders with the students in a few days.

On day 6 I had lunch in Poland! For the first time in my life I was in Poland; the border is just some kilometres away from Hronov. I saw a lot of nice old houses, drank some of the healthy but smelly water and crossed back over the (no longer existing) border into the Czech Republic.

The Dutch performance **Old Sweat** by group KROV. Since the Dutch language is totally different from the Czech one (they belong to different families of languages) the text was totally lost in the Czech audience. However, there is a lot of visuality in the performance and the acting is physical, so a high level of understanding is possible. The audience was enthusiastic and applauded even during the performance.

The American performance (off Festival) was easy, language-wise. The youngsters from a very small town in Oregon, presented an all-American vaudeville show with singing and dancing and a large variety of costumes. The generation conflict is always a success on stage because of all the confrontations between parents and children. In this show it worked well as the leading theme around which the history of music of the last century was arranged. I liked the alternation of more quiet scenes with just a few actors and scenes with all actors going all out. What impressed me was not only the ability of the youngsters to put this show on, with acting, with songs like Age of Aquarius (well done) and some acrobatics as well, but also the radiation of positiveness in it. Americans remain so positive, whatever happens (9-11-2001), it always amazes me. I talked with a couple of the youngsters who told me how much they enjoy their visit to this country and how much they learn from it: different food, different habits, history and so on.

In **Knellerův letní tábor / Kneller's Summer Camp** they eat a lot of pasta, I learned. The idea of a place where all self-murderers go I found interesting (never saw it on stage before) and a lot of things happened to the people in that place, but it went on too long. However, I did like the many imaginative details and the live music. Live music on stage is hardly ever done in Holland for financial and practical reasons. In Hronov I have witnessed it several times.

I enjoyed my stay in Hronov tremendously and went home with lots of good memories and my mind full of images and ideas.