

Conversation with Josef Svoboda

My Shakespeare

A previously unpublished unabridged transcription of the conversation with Josef Svoboda which took place during last year's Venice Biennial. Chairing is Franco Quadri
Auditorium Santa Margherita, Venice. 2nd March 2001.

By Franco Quadri (Milano, 16 maggio 1936 – Milano, 26 marzo 2011).
Critic, writer and editor on theatre.

Josef Svoboda's method of working immediately reveals his creative character. He has always been physically involved in his work and this is made evident by visiting his studio/house to see those theatres in miniature in which he has created each scenario, rounding off scale models and maquettes with the lighting installation and each scenery change planned ahead so as to allow him to manually recreate these representations as often as he likes.

Svoboda celebrated his eightieth birthday in May of this year and was honoured in Prague with the revival of three scenarios, one for each act, of a famous Tosca created in 1947 in that same theatre, the sets of which completely reinvented of Puccini's opera with their aerial perspectives obliquely suspended in space. In Italy an itinerant exhibition has been dedicated to him, inaugurated in Genoa in November, which is currently touring the Reggio Emilia region: the exposition is practically virtual, based mainly on transparencies, which allow comparison among a series of plays and operas among the most significant realized by him, with the possibility in some cases to verify the dynamics of the set.

I will now put some questions to the Maestro, after which a twenty-minute video will be projected, offering a panorama of his theatre, and which dwells on two of his greatest Shakespearian creations: Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet.

Franco Quadri: *Shakespeare is the subject of this meeting and prompts the most obvious question with which to open this talk on Svoboda, who has staged thirteen of Shakespeares's texts (some of them several times and in various editions for a round total of twenty plays, in addition to ballet and musical versions. Maestro, what does Shakespeare tell you in general, what attracts you most in his works and what methods have you considered at the preparation stage?*

Josef Svoboda (with simultaneous translation by Milena Honzìková):

In respect to today's situation, which sees scientists on the verge of discovering the human DNA, I think that Shakespeare had achieved this a great many years ago, because his work already contemplated every possible shade of human behaviour and all that this, at times secretly, entails. Shakespeare was a miracle and the theatre should be eternally grateful for his having given it the opportunity to reveal humanity to us. I love his theatre because it represents the entire world, so much so that to recreate it painters, actors, directors, musicians and dancers are not enough, they all have to participate together: the way in which he saw human nature can be expressed only by the theatre in all its complexity. Shakespeare is a multimedia author ante litteram, because for us he has created an instrument capable of revealing human properties, to play in the same way as other instruments, sadly, tragically, or with great joy. And thanks to this instrument you can express the entire story of humanity.

F.Q.: *I believe your first encounter with Shakespeare was with The Merry Wives of Windsor. And that your first Shakespeare of great significance was Hamlet staged in Prague in 1959 and directed*

by Pleskot where, with a scenography based on blacked mirrors, you resolved, with great originality, the problem of the spectre's appearance.

J.S.: One more thing must be said before passing on to this argument: scenography performs an ancient function, with numerous possibilities, and has its own feeling and moods, to which more attention needs to be paid. In recent years I have worked on these possibilities, trying to put into this medium the knowledge which allows us to express ourselves in ever new ways: I mean that we have to try to best govern this medium which is scenography. This encapsulates further media: architecture, painting, sculpture, the literary text and I could name many other factors, but I want scenography to return to its widest possible conception in the theatre, as long as it serves the theatre and the contrary does not happen. How can one be brief in relating all this? To make possible all that I have said, a scenography must have a good theatrical architecture, and the other factors must be used well in order to fully express the text; that is, they must not weigh down the complexity of the performance but allow a certain velocity of execution. When we staged that *Hamlet* in 1959, the possibility arose for me to begin working in a new way, which mainly consisted in plays of light, to the extent of using them almost exclusively for the effects. Today, there are other methods, but in those days it was like that. But I would like to explain how I resolved the problem of representing the ghost of his father: in that scene only three different sources of light were employed, one which illuminated the whole stage, one which lit the actors and the third which produced a reflection.

F.Q.: *This came about through the use of a mirror.*

J.S.: Yes, there were some panels covered with blacked mirrors and the reflection produced the spirit of his father, which previously we did not know how to stage. All the lights pointed from the rig onto the stage and in that moment we struggled to find a solution in order to represent that presence in an immaterial way, as it could not be brought on stage materially. At first we did not succeed but then, during a rehearsal the reflector was unintentionally moved and out came the phantom! It's one of those things that one discovers without knowing how or why...

F.Q.: *Maybe it was the real ghost! How did you manage to reproduce it for the public performances?*

J.S.: All experiments have their proper evolution. Usually the experimenter has to follow his own idea, working with hand-picked collaborators with whom he has found a common language: it is not good procedure to join a group of people who have already worked together, without first understanding their method of working. If you instead establish a dialogue, you can also immediately become a creative technician because, despite being very important, technique alone does not suffice, but must be correctly channeled towards the pre-established aim.

While working on the 1959 *Hamlet*, "back lighting", or "Svoboda projectors" were discovered, a method of illumination which all European theatres use today: the lighting is turned towards the stage, so creating new spaces, totally inexistent in the methodology previously used. This technique of back lighting is very interesting and came about through empirical observations. I would often sit on the little terrace at home and the sun in contrast would blind me: I couldn't see a thing and from the light I received a sensation of aggression. Once, I concentrated on this phenomenon for about twenty minutes, following that process until I reached a conclusion. In the theatre we work with a sole direction of light, that is, we point the reflectors frontally towards the actors, so lighting them, but in this way we deprive them of their plasticity.

If to this you add a light from behind, the figures gain a halo: we therefore managed to stage something more than was achieved previously. Becoming more plastic, the actor enjoys more advantages, given the opportunity to combine new elements with the new use of light. Up to fifty years ago this had never been done. The theatre must gather applications from other environments:

those who work in the theatre have to do as I have done and study developments in technology a great deal over the years.

Giorgio Barberio Corsetti: *I would like to add a definition for those who are not intimately familiar with the theatre. The “Svoboda” is a light which is generally used and which gives an incredible lighting effect, as it does not give a direct light but is projected onto a reflective surface to obtain a voluminous light. It’s really extraordinary.*

F.Q.: *I wouldn’t want Svoboda to be thought of simply as an inventor or as a technician, given that, in effect, this great scenographer is very many things: engineer, carpenter, botanist, sociologist, photographer, film expert... but mainly and primarily a poet, who applies these other processes of his to the chosen drama, faithfully respecting the text. However, continuing with the discussion on inventions and the particular use of lighting, I would like to digress and ask him about his latest work on Faust in Prague, directed by Krejca, where he also created a virtual presence.*

J.S.: It has always been my dream to place an image suspended in air. That is, to start off with a set in which to be able to position at will an image in any particular place: on the wall, a banality, but also to project it in mid-air is quite another thing. It is also possible to interpose an image between two actors on the stage, but this is not so important so don’t interpret this as a miracle, because it would be negative. It’s not about wanting to be magical: I simply like the idea of being familiar with the technologies that can produce these effects and to putting them to use. If you go to Prague you can see this *Faust*, but also the new show: *The Trap at the Magic Lantern*, where there are these images in mid-air and the cinema is combined with live performance. It is a very lightweight, I would say clean, technology.

F.Q.: *Four years after the Hamlet realized with Pleskot, where the problems were actually due to the lighting, Svoboda staged another Hamlet directed by Krejca, where emphasis was instead given to the space: as you can see from the video, a theatre in continuous movement, full of doors and trapdoors.*

J.S.: What has always attracted me, when I began theatre, was the possibility of being more a magician than a scenographer, but I’m not saying that this is necessary. The theatre should not be based on these miracles, though they have an important role in suggesting new methods of working. The big difference between the *Hamlet* of 1959 and that of 1965 was in the fact that the former was staged using only the lights, while in the Brussels edition there was also a very heavy architecture, which represented the world on the stage beside the actors. As the world always offers us that which people believe is impossible, the scenery movements were unpredictable, and when the actor moved towards a certain point it closed and disappeared, or another opening appeared: the whole show was based on man’s uncertainty of the world.

F.Q.: *It’s Hamlet’s “world out of joint”... But this passage from light to architecture came about through your own requirements or those of the director? The successive edition of Romeo and Juliet, that too staged with Krejca, in some way is associated with that of Hamlet: there are scene movements and the architecture is more precisely that of the Renaissance...*

J.S.: You are right, those were the years in which we experimented with the space, with distances, with a precise architecture.

F.Q.: *Getting back to Romeo and Juliet, in which there was an architecture a bit suspended in a dreamworld where, together with a suggestion of Renaissance loggias, there was a multiple, divergent use of the space: the same place which represented the piazza, where the young men meet and later clash, could then become first the lovers’ bed and then their tomb.*

J.S.: They were the first strained efforts in realizing an architecture in motion on the stage, and it was necessary to eliminate the noise and keep the space clean. These were the two problems that we had to resolve: but those elements of the set which appear to fly, as you will see from the video, were fixed tight to the floor, as the actors moved above them.

These are problems which are solved step by step. In *Romeo and Juliet* the architecture was clean, we worked just with wood and jute, but the lighting made it look like sandstone. And we could talk for hours about the music...

F.Q.: *Could you say something on the Shakespeare comedies, that of A Midsummer Night's Dream, of As You Like It, or of Twelfth Night.*

J.S.: In "Dream" the sets were a reference to Nature, there were leaves, the rain...

F.Q.: *And the music, which you have just mentioned, what happens when it makes its entrance, when, for example, to Shakespeare you add Verdi, as in Macbeth...*

J.S.: Well, then everything becomes much more complicated, because a battle can then occur with the music... Once the music is added, the sets have to conform. And, what's more, the sets make a noise.

F.Q.: *Is there a Shakespeare text which you would have liked to do yet have not?*

J.S.: I don't know... I think that my thirteen Shakespeares are the most important.

F.Q.: *I think that, in order not to tire the Maestro too much, we can pass on to the video and continue afterwards, if there are any questions.*

Barberio Corsetti: *I'd like to ask a question now. Is there some new technology which you are particularly curious about? I mean the use of video, of video projections, of television screens...*

J.S.: The mediums which you have listed are already well-known, and could belong to an "old fashion style". There are enormous possibilities for the future, for instance, we have talked about projecting a geometric form within the space, and this wouldn't be a video technique but a cinema reflector with a certain geometry. This is how the effect of an image suspended in the void came about. There are enormous possibilities, but you need to know more diverse disciplines. For each objective there are hundreds of possibilities to create.

Barberio Corsetti: *Another thing which I would be interested to know is if the rapport with the director and with the staging went hand in hand with the construction of the sets. How did it work?*

J.S.: It has to be clear from the outset that the director and the scenographer have the identical thing in mind. For this reason I always say that the director must be 50% scenographer, and vice versa.

Barberio Corsetti: In the end it's teamwork...

F.Q.: *As for the use of mediums, I think that Svoboda has been a pioneer of the video, right from when, in 1958, he put on at the Expo of Brussels that which would later become the Magic Lantern, with immaterial sets of pure images. He has always gone beyond, doing crazy things: for instance, when he had to mount The Magic Flute in Munich and lasers had just arrived on the scene, he decided to split them: he went to Philips, who had their HQ nearby, told them what he required and, unlike certain Italian firms, they listened to his request so he was then able to exploit the new invention for his show. He was the first to split the laser for scenic use.*

J.S.: You have to be really audacious, because it could also be dangerous and the risk is very great. Today, it is less so, because these things are better managed and controlled. Invent and discover: this has always been the best part of my work!

F.Q.: *I have a couple of queries. If, when you previously referred to the images suspended in air, you were referring to the new frontier, that of holography; and, given that we are in Venice, if you could give us an anecdote regarding Intolerance 1960 by Luigi Nono.*

J.S.: In the theatre which Franco Quadri talked about, the Faust with Krejca, one did cite holography, while for *The Trap of the Magic Lantern* was simply a geometry. You have to try everything, including that which you can obtain with holography.

F.Q.: *And on Intolerance 1960, which you also took to America?*

J.S.: In Venice we took the first steps in the method of realizing Intolerance, which was then staged in a more complete way in America.

F.Q.: *What space does Shakespeare's text occupy within Svoboda's creative and scenographic studio? I have in mind the advice which Gordon Craig gave to a young set designer: "I read and read and read, even up to twelve times Shakespeare's text and then I design, and I trust my first impression."*

J.S.: What Craig said was good advice: read, read and read before designing, though at times neither the first nor the thirtieth design works well. At that point you can go for long walks in the hope that something comes to light. Sometimes days pass before it happens. Craig was right in expressing how fundamentally important the design is. From the professional point of view, our work is very heavy and requires attention. One can always improve upon the representation of the text.

F.Q.: *What advice can you give to young production designers as regards future set designing? Which areas of experimentation can you advise on?*

J.S.: One doesn't experiment for experiment's sake, but according to necessity: you need to start with the most simple problems and then develop them slowly, this is how you learn to work in this field. The starting point is the text and all that it has to say, or the music, because the experiment to its own end does not have a great value.

F.Q.: *What training did you have in order to learn the use of lighting for the theatre?*

J.S.: My way has been a bit complicated, briefly, it was the course of my life; I finished high school, I was a carpenter, I did interior design, I attended the school of architecture and then began to work in the theatre, where there were true professionals. I learnt lighting techniques while working in the theatre, and not elsewhere. If you are already a professional, even if you are a carpenter, you have no difficulty in learning, because you can better understand even other professions. I didn't conduct studies which lay outside that environment in which I worked: everything I have done has been the result of work.

F.Q.: *In your opinion, has the spectator's perception changed in recent years? To give a banal example: the first people to witness on film the running of a train backed away, intimidated. Do you think that the spectator of the new millennium has a new sensibility, and has lost that sense of wonder?*

J.S.: The perception has certainly changed, but for the better: the spectator begins to reflect and wants to understand what is happening. However, a bit of sensibility has been lost due to all the banalities which we see, the spectator is too used to seeing images and is not able to reflect sufficiently, he wants everything “laid on a plate”. It’s not easy to reply to your question.

Josef Svoboda Profile

by David Jays (Writer and editor on theatre, dance and associated stuff (Sunday Times, Guardian, Dance Gazette).

The scenographer Josef Svoboda, who died earlier this year, was a pioneer of the term “scenographer” rather than “designer”. He claimed an interpretative rather than decorative function. Svoboda studied art history and architecture, and designed his first production in 1943, strongly influenced by visionary designers like Craig and Appia. Head designer at the National Theatre in Prague from 1951, in 1958 he and Alfred Radok developed *Laterna Magika*, an interplay of live action and filmed sequences for the Expo ‘58 in Brussels. Juxtaposing disparate elements created a swift, sardonic form, the stage action heightened or provokingly contradicted by film and projection. *Laterna Magika* became a theatre company, almost a research institute in theatre technology and Svoboda was artistic director from 1973 until his death.

Through imaginative and technologically supple means such as reflective surfaces, swiftly moving scenery and an adventurous use of film, projection and closed-circuit television, he created multiple perspectives in every production.

Some of his sharpest work reimaged canonical texts, in particular freeing Chekhov from sentimental realism in landmark productions of *The Seagull* and *Three Sisters*. Notable operatic reinventions included two Ring cycles with director Götz Friedrich during the 1970s at Covent Garden and Geneva. The following conversation between Svoboda and Franco Quadri, from the Venice Biennial in 2001, focuses on his celebrated Shakespeare productions. Svoboda’s fluid stagings and dynamic lighting were perfect for these multi-location plays. *Romeo and Juliet* (directed by Otomar Krejca in 1963 for the National Theatre in Prague) featured a delicate floating gallery that became Juliet’s balcony or hovered like windows in the dreaming heroine’s bedroom. The set passed through myriad configurations, just like the play’s hasty emotions. “The whole production” writes Zdenek Stribrny, “voiced an impassioned protest against the futile grudge and cold-hearted cruelty of the old generation who had turned the world into a battlefield”.

Svoboda also designed three Prague productions of *Hamlet*. In 1959 (with director Jaromir Pleskot), it was set against a labyrinth of black plastic panels reflecting distorted fragments of the action. The ghost of Hamlet’s father appeared as a swirl of spotlights, which settled as a pair of glaring eyes. In this alienated world, Hamlet spoke his central soliloquy in silhouette, back-lit by reflected dazzle. The ghost’s words were again spoken by Hamlet himself in Krejca’s 1965 production. Amid a maze of steps and platforms, the prince met his own image in a vast mirror above the stage: “Two great birds confronting each other in space” in Svoboda’s words. Even more audacious was the 1982 *Hamlet*, directed by Miroslav Macháček. For virtually the entire evening, the action seemed confined to a forestage shrouded by heavy black drapes. Only at the very end did the terrified king clasp the drapes and drag them to the floor, revealing a massive staircase fogged in blue light down which Fortinbras’ army marched. The final moment, writes Dennis Kennedy, “was unparalleled in Shakespearean staging.” To the sound of music and cannon-fire, four soldiers bore Hamlet’s corpse up the misty steps as if to heaven, allowing a last-minute escape from a constricted realm, its wreckage left behind. The astounding deferred spectacle exemplified Svoboda’s interpretative dexterity and scenographic daring.