

“A gauntlet thrown at the reader’s feet”

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Otokar ZICH. *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy*. Prague: Charles University in Prague, Karolinum Press, 2024. 476 p.

Introduction

Otokar Zich’s bulky volume, the *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy* was originally published in 1931, and finally appeared in English translation accompanied by a meticulous and erudite Introduction and Afterword at the end of 2024. At last, as the complete translation of Zich’s paradigm-changing work practically crowns the efforts of a decade invested in making Zich’s unusual and vastly inspiring writings accessible to a wider and international audience.

Now, simply resorting to celebratory clichés, calling Zich’s book a cornerstone of theatre theory, a seminal work offering profound insights into the nature of dramatic art, or praising Pavel Drábek and Tomáš P. Kačer’s meticulous English translation, or even calling David Drozd’s *Introduction* a great service to the international community of theatre studies, would not exaggerate, yet, would hardly suffice. Let me explain why the roughly 500-page English edition of the *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* deserves attention and why we must appreciate the strategic vision and tireless work of the Czech theatre scholars from the 2010s who translated and managed to gradually integrate Zich’s theatre-theoretical oeuvre into the international theatre studies scene.

What is now regarded as the foundation of Czech theatre theory, Otokar Zich’s *Aesthetics*

of the *Dramatic Art*, was published in 1931. Just a few years earlier, some young ambitious cosmopolitan scholars founded the Prague Linguistic Circle and put forward their *Theses* to

“elaborate a functional-structural approach, extend it from a purely linguistic to a broadly aesthetic system of thought and tackle art as a fact in its own right. At that point, a renowned peer academic of the previous generation publishes a volume entitled *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* in excess of 400 pages in length, in which he tackles many of the issues that have been, metaphorically, waiting on *their* desk.”¹

The slight irony of the situation is not lost on Drozd, the general editor of the English edition and the author of the Afterword; clearly, Zich’s *Aesthetics* is apparently his and his team’s lovechild. What we are reading now by the Czech aesthetician, logician, folklorist, composer, and musicologist Otokar Zich (1879–1934) is much more than an interesting or even unique theory of dramatic art, or one of the earliest contributions to the emergent field of future performance studies. What we must appreciate here is much more than Zich’s book translated into English. To grasp the true significance of this volume, let us look at the efforts of the Czech scholars in the past decade.

¹ David DROZD, “Afterword”, in Otokar ZICH, *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy* (Gen. ed. David DROZD, trans. by

Pavel DRÁBEK and Tomáš P. KAČER, 329–405 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2024), 380. [Emphasis mine – G. R.]

*Introducing Zich's oeuvre
to the Global Discourse*

The first English translation of a text by Zich that I am aware of was published a decade ago, when an entire issue of *Theatralia* (2015/2) was dedicated to puppetry. Co-editor Pavel Drábek translated Zich's 1923 essay, "Puppet Theatre", and appears to have been (one of) the driving force(s) behind the Czechs' over-a-decade-long Zich-project. In "Puppet Theatre," Zich employs a phenomenological approach to illuminate the complex artistic and mental processes of stylisation and abstraction that take place as we watch puppetry. In the first decades of the twentieth century, several theatre practitioners in Europe, among them Craig, Reinhardt, Zich, and Hevesi, were searching for new, non-realist ways of dramatic, unified visual expression, experimenting in the fields of acting, puppetry, and scenography. Craig's way was to passionately present puppets in letters to Hevesi or in papers like "The Actor and the Übermarionette" (1907) published in the *Mask*. Hevesi provoked Craig's ideas; "Halten Sie die Marionetten für natürlich?" he famously asked Craig in a 1909 letter,² pondering about the realness of the puppet. In a decade's time, Zich came up with the fully rounded concept of the (dual) aesthetic perception of lifeless objects that represent humans, i.e., puppetry. It is in this 1923 essay that Zich calls puppetry a medium,³ and at

² György SZÉKELY, ed., *The Correspondence of Edward Gordon Craig and Sándor Hevesi (1908–1933)* (Budapest: OSZMI, 1991), 169.

³ Otakar ZICH, "Puppet Theatre" [1923], trans. by Pavel DRÁBEK, *Theatralia* 18, No. 2. (2015): 505–513., 512.

⁴ It emerged as part of a 2011–2015 research project titled „Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre" (grant no. GA409/11/1082) at Masaryk University, Brno.

⁵ Otakar ZICH, "Principles of Theoretical Dramaturgy", transl. by Pavel DRÁBEK. In *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings*,

once recognises a demand for a particular puppet dramaturgy and scenography that the medium requires. In the last part of the paper, he considers the suitability of available dramas for the stylised or non-realist/non-naturalist stage. Drábek's English translation in 2015⁴ illuminated Zich's original analytical potential and at once began to situate Zich's works beyond the Czech context within the European intellectual milieu of the 1920s and 1930s.

The next step in the process of integrating Zich was—wisely, not Zich's opus magnum, but—the publication of the *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings* (2016), edited by David Drozd, who also served as the general editor of Zich's *Aesthetics* in English. To produce the 2016 *Theatre Theory Reader*, Drozd collaborated with Drábek, Kačer, and Sparling; almost the same team with which he would later work on the *Aesthetics*.

The *Reader* provides thirty-eight key texts related to what is now known as theatre semiotics from the 1930s and early 1940s, the most active period of the Prague Linguistic Circle, and includes Zich's *Principles of Theoretical Dramaturgy*.⁵ This essay was accompanied by an explanatory and contextualizing section, "The Prague School Theatre Theory and Otakar Zich",⁶ in the Afterword. By foregrounding theatre theory, a field often underrepresented or entirely absent from other publications⁷ about of the Prague School, the *Reader* stood as proof of the richness and

ed. by David DROZD, Tomáš KAČER and Don SPARLIN, 34–58 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016).

⁶ Pavel DRÁBEK, with Martin BERNÁTEK, Andrea JOCHMANOVÁ and Eva ŠLAISOVÁ, "The Prague School Theatre Theory and Otakar Zich", in David DROZD, Tomáš KAČER and Don SPARLING (eds.), *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings*, ed. by David DROZD, Tomáš KAČER and Don SPARLIN, 616–620 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016).

⁷ E.g. F. W. Galan's monograph, *Historic Structures, The Prague School Project: 1928–46* (1984, 2014), Peter Steiner's essay collection,

intellectual momentum of Prague theatre studies. Published at the time when theatre and performance studies were in full bloom (Erika Fischer Lichte’s *Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* came out in 2014, Katalin Trencsényi’s *Dramaturgy in the Making* in 2015, and Christopher Balme’s *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* in 2015, to mention a few from those addressed to students and a wider, general audience), the *Theatre Theory Reader* helped renew scholarly interest in the Prague School. As Marvin Carson remarked, it provided “contemporary theatre scholars with a clearer idea of where they have come from and an inspiration for where they may be going.”⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte likewise praised the *Theatre Theory Reader*,⁹ particularly noting its structure—grouping the essays by theme rather than by author—and the inclusion of an extensive Afterword. This arrangement offers contemporary readers an insight into the thematic dialogues within the Prague School and allows the writings to speak in their own voice. The Afterword provided additional context without overshadowing or pre-digesting the essays themselves—a structure that Drozd would later continue when editing the *Aesthetics*.

The English edition

The *Reader’s* organizing principle works well with Zich’s *Aesthetics*, too, and deserves particular commendation: Zich’s highly complex work is framed by substantial contemporary research by a roughly 40-page *Introduction* and a roughly 70-page *Afterword*. Both are indispensable, as even a brief reading of Zich’s text will immediately demonstrate. The *Introduction* by David Drozd, with Pavel Drábek and Josh Overton, serves as a carefully constructed guidebook, preparing readers for a demanding but rewarding ascent toward

unprecedented conceptual heights. It initiates its target audience, including theatre practitioners and students of theatre studies, into Zich’s distinctive intellectual world, either by clarifying Zich’s unconventional terminology or by highlighting notable landmarks, such as his polemics on the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and his definition of dramatic art, which embraces sung and spoken drama but excludes dance. Drozd, Drábek, and Overton describe the Czech theorist’s system as a synchronous, coherent theory, and they succeed in illuminating the internal logic of Zich’s thought.

In contrast, the *Afterword* addresses the scholarly community of performance studies, offering a meticulous account of the translation histories of Zich’s chapters and of his reception both in Czechia and abroad. It situates the author within his immediate intellectual context, tracing his sources and inspirations as well as the subsequent afterlife of his oeuvre. The back matter features a remarkable annotated *Glossary* of terms, as asterisks in the main text guide the reader to the corresponding entries in the *Glossary*. Here, each term, also provided in Czech, is defined by Zich and supplemented by an independent contemporary explanation. Among these are such essential notions as theatrical illusion, stylisation, mimetic and non-mimetic arts, sung drama, or transbodiment, among others.

The structure that was employed in the *Reader* and now in the English edition of the *Aesthetics* warrants attention for yet another reason: it actively supports a generously facilitated yet critical close reading of Zich’s text. Drozd and Drábek’s team facilitate reading without pre-digesting Zich’s work, instead carefully establishing context and opening up interpretive perspectives. It is undeniable that without their *Introduction* we would be some-

The Prague School. Selected Writings 1929–46 (1982, 2012)

⁸ Marvin CARSON’s recommendation on the distributor’s webpage of *The Reader*.

⁹ Erika FISCHER-LICHTE’s recommendation on the distributor’s webpage of *The Reader*.

what lost, yet the researchers consistently keep the spotlight on Zich himself. Without this self-effacing and collaborative attitude, the rich treasure that is Zich's theatre-semiotic legacy might not have been shared, democratised, and made as widely accessible as it is today.

By 2020, the English translation of Zich's book was already underway, as Drozd and Kačer reported on its progress in the *Archive* section of an English-language issue of *Theatralia*, once again devoted to Prague Structuralism, though this time focusing entirely on Zich. In this issue, several Czech-speaking scholars were invited to engage with Zich's work, not only to showcase the breadth of his oeuvre but also to demonstrate the multiple ways in which his distinctive concepts could be interpreted. The essays in the first part of the issue illustrated what the translating team in the *Archive* section emphasised: that understanding and interpreting Zich's terminology constitutes a complex undertaking, not merely because of the dated nature of his language but because of its intrinsic conceptual intricacy. The challenges of translating Zich were further acknowledged in the issue's interview section by Emil Volek and Andrés Pérez-Simón, who had by then translated Zich's chapter *The Theatrical Illusion* into English. Their reflections corroborated Drozd and Kačer's observations concerning the linguistic and theoretical complexity of Zich's language.

Remarkably, the present editorial team both honoured and critiqued Kostomlatský and Osolsobě, the earlier translators of Zich's *Aesthetics*. In their 2020 *Theatralia* report, Drábek and Kačer included facsimiles of Kostomlatský's 1975 typescript with annotations penned by Osolsobě, which they analysed and compared to their (Drábek and

Kačer's) new translation. This comparison demonstrated why, in Drábek and Drozd's view, producing a complete, new translation, rather than making a series of minor corrections, was indispensable. Not merely the translation of "a terminologically crucial part"¹⁰ in Chapter 3, *Analytic Theory* was at stake, but the need to establish Zich's terminology in its entirety. Given the complexity and the analytical rigour of Zich's thought, it was essential to provide a stable and coherent vantage point for scholars, a unified point of reference that earlier, isolated translations of individual chapters could not offer. Zich never intended his concepts or technical terms to align neatly with those of other theorists (hence "an almost complete absence of references"¹¹); rather, he constructed his own system. He expected his readers to linger over his formulations, and discern his meanings through active engagement. This complete and terminologically coherent English text now enables the reader to revisit Zich's numerous terms and explore his arguments; an essential condition for understanding his theory.

*Zich's Aesthetics –
The Book within the Book*

As Drozd and his team justifiably note, Zich's book may be a hard nut to crack, yet it ultimately opens up into a challenging but coherent and richly reasoned universe. Much like his early essay on puppetry, the *Aesthetics* approaches the dramatic and tributary arts from a distinctive vantage point, that of the spectator, and, as Drozd and his collaborators argue, articulates an ahistorical, synchronous theory. The justifications and findings gained from translating the essay on puppetry, the studies in the thematic blocks of *Theatralia*,¹² the 2020 comparative study of earlier trans-

¹⁰ Tomas KAČER and Svitlana SHURMA, "Editorial", *Theatralia* 23, No. 1. (2020) 7–11., 11.

¹¹ David DROZD, with Pavel DRÁBEK and Josh OVERTON, "Otakar Zich and his *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art*: Introducing a Seminal Work

After a Century", in Otakar ZICH, *The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*, 12–46 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2024), 15.

¹² Issues 15 (2012), 17 (2014), 19 (2016), 23 (2020).

lations, and the knowledge and terminology consolidated in the *Reader* all directly inform the *Introduction* and the *Afterword*, which produce an accessible English edition of the *Aesthetics*, a book within the book, ensuring the clarity essential for navigating Zich’s intricate theoretical terrain.

It is impossible to briefly summarise the topics and arguments unfolding in the more than 400-page *Aesthetics*; even the detailed *List of Contents* that Zich provides as a guide for lay readers cannot for a minute convey the extraordinary density of each thread of thought or chapter. It is valuable that Drozd’s team chose to preserve the original *Contents*, *Foreword*, and *Introduction*, and even to reproduce the original typographical distinctions between the argumentative text printed in standard type, and the illustrative examples supporting Zich’s claims, printed in smaller type. This layout proves advantageous for multiple reasons: it makes clear that Zich’s ideas are firmly grounded in concrete evidence, and allows readers either to skip unfamiliar examples or, conversely, to immerse themselves in the abundance of his engaging small prints. Zich’s conceptual thinking is clearly far from prescriptive; it is descriptive, inductive, and synthesised from minute observation, and yet it maintains a remarkable hold on the reader’s attention.

Zich apparently enjoyed visualizing his ideas—perhaps he was even sketching them on the blackboard during his lectures. For instance, when he explains the so-called “French scenes”¹³ as the basic units of performance, he employs charts to represent dramatic relations; he turns to vectors and diagrams, an academically rigorous yet highly unusual method of discussing theatrical performance. Zich’s distinctive voice resonates both in his personal *Foreword* and in his university lectures, which served as the basis of the book’s chapters. Addressed to the general public, the lectures/chapters combine

mathematical precision with accessible, concrete examples, requiring of the reader only patience (and time) to fully grasp his ideas.

Across the ten chapters of its three parts, the book systematically addresses virtually every question that might arise in a discourse on theatre. With the same systematic logic that we already saw in Zich’s essay on puppetry, the first part, *The Concept of Dramatic Art*, defines the key features of the dramatic work in three chapters. For instance, he clarifies why “dance does not belong to the dramatic art”¹⁴: because it is non-mimetic, and because dancers “do not represent a persona,”¹⁵ whilst theatre, or more precisely, dramatic art, including spoken and sung drama, consists of the interaction of dramatic personas. As per his definition, “dual simultaneous perception,”¹⁶ being a listener and a spectator at once, is necessary to perceive dramatic art; and he thinks dance does not fulfil this criterion either. Dramatic art, inclusive of opera, for instance, as well as prose theatre, implies the personas’ tactile (inter)action and is directly available to the senses. He calls this dimension of dramatic art inner tactile perception, and through it refers to both the ostensive (distinct, demonstrative) images/ideas and the bodily sensations that arise in us while we watch and empathise with the actor’s figure/persona during interaction. In this constellation, which involves all the senses, the text serves only as one of the components of the performance, which itself constitutes the true work of art. The fact that Zich challenges the traditional dominance of the dramatic text resonates with many contemporary efforts. His rejection of logocentric performances establishes him as remarkably ahead of his time and uniquely relevant to contemporary theatre practices. (This view positions Zich beside Lehmann’s postdramatic theory, even closer to Erika Fischer-Lichte’s idea that theatre/performance is an unrepeatable event, than to Eric Bentley,

¹³ ZICH, *Aesthetics...*, 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

whose 1964 concept famously defines theatre as “A impersonates B while C looks on.”) Zich’s performance theory thus acknowledges, respects, integrates, and through the introduction of the new concept, even focalises theatre’s characteristically non-intellectual but physical-visceral impact on the spectator, an impact that has often been overlooked in other twentieth and twenty-first-century theories. As the *Introduction* remarks, “this is a gauntlet thrown at the reader’s feet to pick up the debate of representation crisis and judge how present-day performative theories and postdramatic aesthetics interact with Zich’s claims about the specifics of the dramatic art.” (22)

And finally, the book illustrates Zich’s systematic logic and the incredible depth of his analysis of the multiple functions of music in the opera as dramatic art; this time contrasted to a brilliant contemporary, a Hungarian librettist, dramatist, theatre and opera director, Sándor Hevesi, often called the Hungarian Reinhardt. In 1919, Hevesi, a great essayist himself, also theorised about the power and the several layers of musical expression in opera:

“There are forces in music that only the stage can bring to life, so music must contain dramatic possibilities that do not exist in words and therefore cannot be expressed in ordinary written dialogue. And here lies the source of all the paradoxes of opera. Music has a dramatic potential that makes ordinary human speech seem poor in comparison. Ordinary human speech can only convey the drama of human actions, one after the other. The characters can only speak one after the other, and only acting and facial expressions add some simultaneity to this succession by silently expressing the actor’s state of

mind while their partner is speaking. And this is where music has a huge advantage over words. Music can voice two, three, four, or practically countless human souls at once, thus is able to express dramatic conflict simultaneously.”¹⁷

Hevesi’s (indeed pioneering) findings in the above passage bear resemblance to those of Zich; however, in Zich’s 1931 *Aesthetics*, such findings about sung drama, including opera and melodrama, receive around 70 pages of profound, meticulous, and systematic elaboration in Chapter 8, *Dramatic Music: The Composer’s Creative Work* (277–349). Zich begins with the mimetic qualities and the pictorial and expressive capacities of music in painting the situation, the context, or the persona’s soul, mimics, and speech. He then considers the musical potential for expressing a character’s motives, memories, and desires, through quotations and leitmotifs. When treating the vocal expression of a (type of) persona, he examines multi-vocal (ensemble) singing and even the national character of declamatory singing. He also discusses the dimensions the ensemble, chorus, and orchestra can add to sung drama. He argues that the dramatic composer’s creative work lies not in setting the text to music, but in setting the music to situations. He elaborates on plot-turns, foreshadowing through music, and such ordinary functions as situational music, dramatic synthesis, scenic and entr’acte tasks, and so on. The list could, but should not, go on, as it stands here only to whet the reader’s appetite: last, but not least, Zich’s distinct flow—like the editors’ passionate voice and lingering irony—is a true asset.

Conclusion

As of late 2025, Zich’s oddly spelt name still does not appear in *Britannica* and barely

¹⁷ HEVESI, Sándor, „Az opera paradoxonja” [1913], in *Az igazi Shakespeare*, 139–147 (Budapest: Táltos, 1919).

occupies half a page on Wikipedia—an omission that leaves future theatre studies students ample space to fill. Yet the new accessibility of his major work in English, through both the translation and the annotation, will undoubtedly inspire generations of theatre scholars to come. Zich’s Czech oeuvre and theoretical insights once served as crucial points of departure for members of the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1920s and 1930s, and even Keir Elam gave Zich’s *Aesthetics* “a place of almost symbolic significance” in his 1980 *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, but because “no one mustered the courage to translate the book as a whole [...] the book remained unknown and unassessed in its specifics and its detail.”¹⁸ A century later, the availability of Zich’s thought in English—his inductive methodology, his analytical approach to spectatorship, and his insistence on theatre as a live, performative event—promises to invigorate contemporary theatre theory. Thanks to David Drozd’s, Pavel Drábek’s, and their collaborators’ dedicated work over more

than a decade, and at least two large projects funded by the Czech state, Zich’s complex yet luminous vision of theatre, indeed one of the foundational treatises of modern theatre theory, can now enter the global discourse as a living presence rather than a historical footnote in a small Central European language. In this sense, the dream of theatre scholar and classical philologist Eva Stehlíková (1941–2019) has finally been realised: that “the ‘family silver’ of Czech theatre theory—that is, Prague School theory and Otakar Zich—should be made available to the wider world in translation.” (9) The publication of this “self-standing integral theory” (15) thus represents not only a carefully built-up, and long-overdue act of recognition, positioning Zich beside other significant European contemporaries like Craig, Reinhardt, Appia, and Stanislavsky, but also a moment of renewal for the Anglophone reception—one well worth celebrating, in Czechia, Central Europe, and far beyond.

¹⁸ ZICH, *Aesthetics...*, 386.