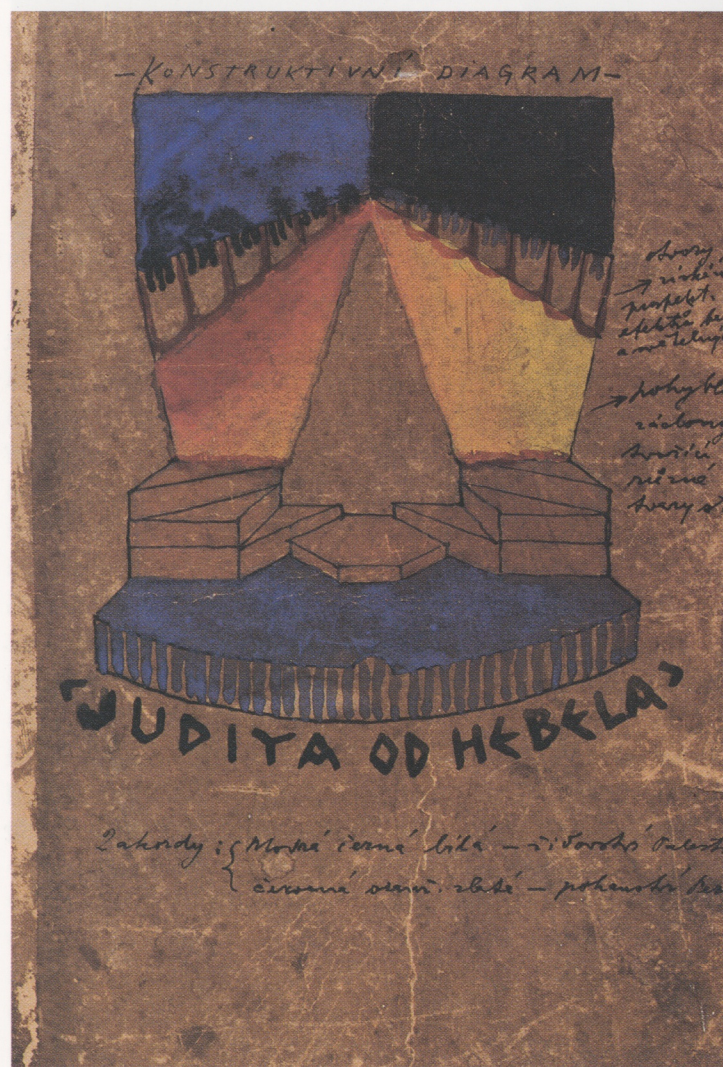


My Evolution in the Theatre

Originally published as Vlastislav Hofman, "Můj vývoj na jevištní scéně," Josef Kodíček and Miroslav Rutte (eds.), *Nové české divadlo 1918–1926: Sborník Dramatického svazu*, Prague, 1926, pp. 78–80. Translated by Deirde MacBean.

Over the last decade, during the directing and staging of our repertoire, many problems cropped up that the demands of modern theatrical expression forced us to solve. Naturalistic Realism and Impressionism were no longer suitable for contemporary creative work. There were the Expressionist and Cubist movements, followed by Purism and Constructivism. The intentions that led me to create artistic forms on the set can in a few paragraphs be described in terms of their development and the thought processes behind them. It is a creative process, which, although it could be categorized as being in one style or direction or another, in fact grows directly out of the needs of the theatre, and is not just the application of artistic or architectural doctrines of this or that kind. A certain love for the theatre is essential, because the designer, as the director's collaborator, is unwittingly forced to take into account not only his artistic concerns, but also the requirements of the director and the actors. Because of this, I want these notes to express chiefly the intellectual tension under which I transformed theatrical sensation into artistic reality for the stage. For theory's sake, I have divided my development into several sections here. ——— 1. Synthetic scene as a picture. A set made up of pictures. Not a random segment of nature. The ephemeral nature of Naturalistic designs must receive a firmer sense of dramatic inevitability. In the very first play I designed the stage for, Arnošt Dvořák's *Husité* [The Hussites], I was aiming to "strengthen" the moment. From the whole spectrum of moods that reign on stage, always the strongest – the one that lasts throughout the whole act – was chosen. The artistic interpretation of one theatrical moment transformed into an unchanging image on stage. Scenes with the horizons painted in the background in strong contrasts and outlines so that the dramatic effect of the play is displayed on the backdrop, either as a final effect towards which the individual acts flow or as an effect that lays the ground for what will follow on the stage. Clouds on the stage in the "The Death of Žižka" scene, for instance, have a different dramatic function from what they do in "The Battle of Lipany" scene. An atmosphere always charged with one of the strongest moments of the many that make up the whole play. Instead of impressions, here is expression, revealing the internal meaning, the fundamentals. My purpose was to achieve a synthesis that would allow a monumentality of the atmosphere on the stage and give the set a completely opposite role in the dramatic experience from that of the descriptive style of Realism and Naturalism. The decorative scale of the set is enlarged, its line and the rhythm composed so as to make the staged picture play together with the gravity of the plot. Even objects on the stage, their shape and colour should express some of this drama. Lighting effects are not so significant in this approach to stage design because dark and light, the drama of things, should be expressed graphically. Unusual (from the point of view and conventions

of Naturalist observation) "smudges" on the backcloth, various slanting lines, perpendicular and parallel layers (in a picture) are all part of the theatrical effect. ——— This artistic interpretation is evident in my later stage sets for Arnošt Dvořák's *Bílá Hora* [The White Mountain] and [Stanislav Lom's] *Žižka*. The feeling of heavy monumentality in the scenery for *Žižka*, produced as enormous wood engravings in dark colours, had its source directly in the artistic technique used. The synthetic artistic technique thus again expanded the scale of the thing. ——— 2. Spatial use of colour. An example: [Fibich's] *Tempest* (in Czech as *Bouře*), [Otokar Fischer's] *Herakles* [Hercules], Claudel's *L'Echange* [in Czech as *Výměna*] The space lit up by colour as in a dream. Fairy-tale atmosphere. A synthesis of colour. Colour enhanced by light, projection of light (the director's idea). By making the colour transparent it is brought to life, made to glow. An Expressionistic, striking, stable, and permanent ele-



474 A STAGE-CONSTRUCTION DIAGRAM

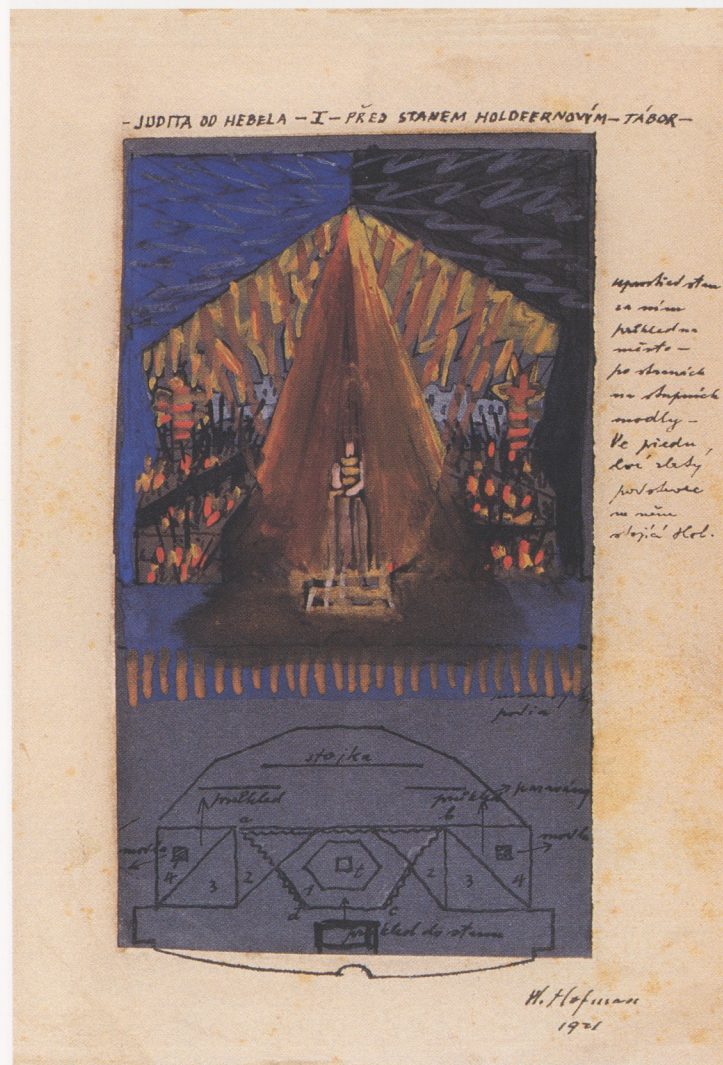
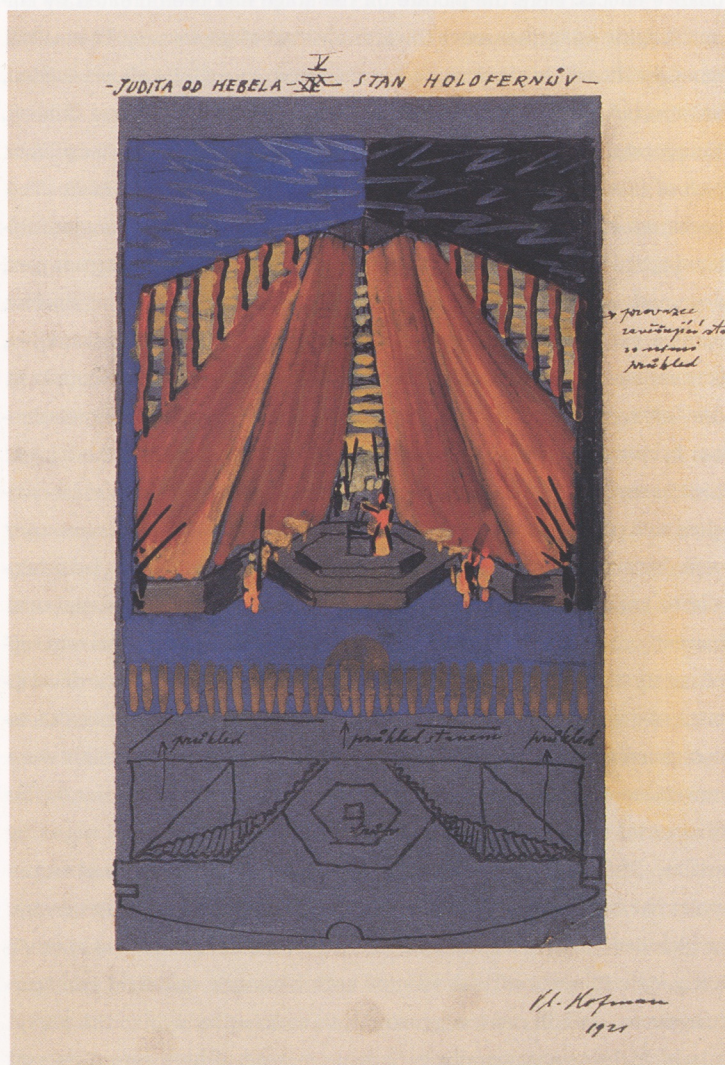
FOR FRIEDRICH HEBBEL'S JUDITH

1921 / never made / tempera and Indian
ink on cardboard / 23.5×15.2cm

475 DESIGNS FOR TWO SCENES FOR

FRIEDRICH HEBBEL'S JUDITH

1921 / never made / tempera and ink on
cardboard / 22×14.5cm



My Evolution in the Theatre



476 STAGE DESIGN FOR SOPHOCLES'

ANTIGONE

1925 / directed by Karel Dostal at the National Theatre, Prague / pastel on paper / 56×50 cm

477 LEAR INSANE, KING LEAR

1929 / coloured ink on paper / 38.5×52 cm

ment. One colour tone dominates. Sometimes the dramatic bows to the poetic. The changing intensity of the light was clear for instance in the "The Crystal Cave" scene in *The Tempest*, or in "Paradise," the last scene in *Herakles*, where a kaleidoscopically colourful scene rises from the mist. In *L'Echange* I wanted to create the colours of the rainbow. Singing, melodious colour, in contrast to that of *Husité*. It was an attempt to make a composition of gently progressing colours rather than the strong contrasts of synthetically painted pictures. By now we considered the use of transparent scenery and projections to be more acceptable and more constructive theatrical elements than synthetic painting, despite the fact that as an artist I always felt closer to the painterly approach. The expressive nature of colours was used to the full in Emile Verhaeren's *Les Aubes* [*Svítání* in Czech]. Atmospheric space, itself suggesting drama. Projected stains of colour and whole areas of coloured light cross the round back of the stage (this was the first time that a director in this country used a cyclorama, made up of high walls) in a mass of lines and surfaces, again crossed by beams of light that burst out from all sides. The eruptions of light are to suggest the cosmic space. The scale expanded this time by a new element, coloured light. The composition had of course been designed in advance because these were not just chance effects. Here the picture on the stage had been created by coloured lights – a further move towards abstract stage scenery. The overall mood for the whole act remains, but the projection of light allows sudden, unexpected, frantic changes. ——— 3. Grotesque tragedy and Cubism.

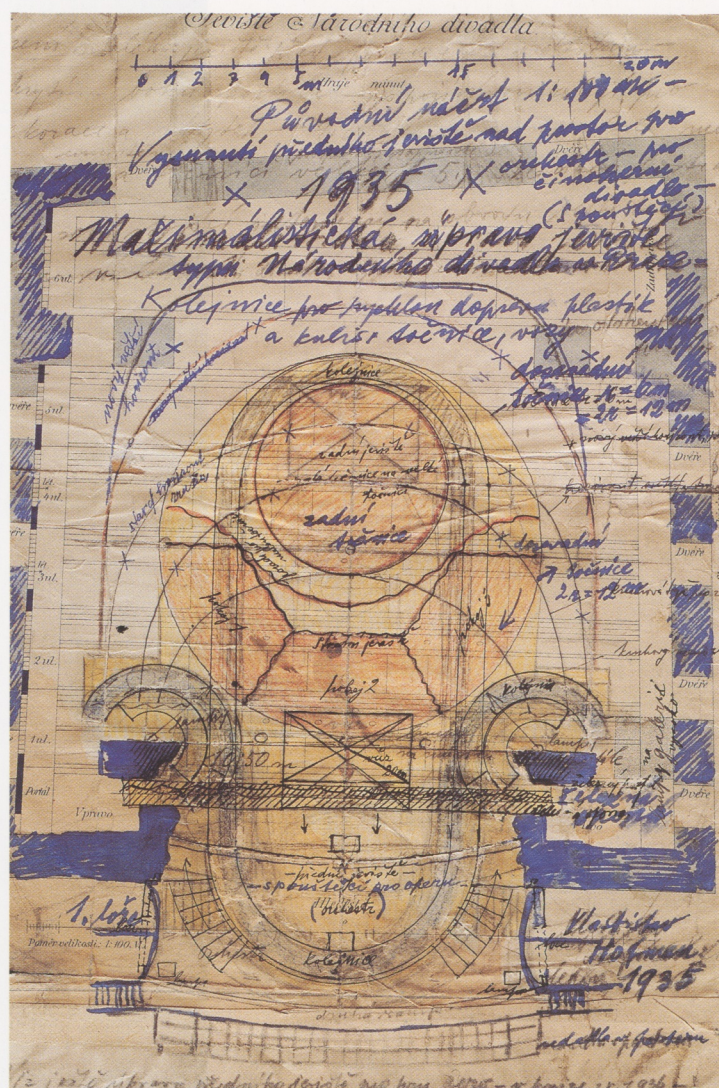
Exaggerated, broken lines, angled planes. An example: "The Coup," first part of [Fibich's] *Hippodamia* and similarly [Beethoven's] *Fidelio*. The barbarian effect of large surfaces, the subsiding perspective, angled, collapsing, twisted stairs, irregularity, gathering of mass, sharp angles, asymmetrical outlines, secret corners, contrasts of light and shadow, bizarre costumes, modelled masks. Perverse, exhausted harmonies, screaming shapes, a plainer, greyer colour scheme than for example in *Les Aubes*. Allusiveness of the scene (thundering stage music). Expressionism gains material features. A kind of directorial tyranny was the biggest controversy at this phase of our development, which was the most-criticized one of all, but which we could not skip. It was simply a necessary period in the evolution of dramatic abstraction, a period which led gradually to another level of development – a move towards more classical harmony. ——— 4. The move towards symmetry and functional non-representationalism.

It is not possible to mark out clear borders in the development of our directing or stage design (for example, [Ibsen's] *Queen Christina*) since much of the grotesque remained; but here the verticals were now calmer and the symmetry of the stairs, which was similar to the directorial style of Leopold Jessner's productions (a parallel noted by critics). The symmetry of the actors' entrances on the set and of the stairs led to a more regular stage design. Before this, the stage design in [Schiller's] *Don Carlos* and, later, [Hilbert's] *Kolumbus* was consistently strictly symmetrical. Painted sets, hangings, and light constructions were used, in mere suggestions, to convey the style of the period in which the play takes place. Screens instead of high sets. Sets and

screens were not, wherever possible, painted, but were covered with colourful fabrics or lacquered canvas (*Don Carlos*), decorated profusely with gleaming silver and gold (costumes too), with lacquered entrances, as for example in *Le Jeu de l'amour et de la mort* [in Czech as *Hra o lásce a smrti* by Romain Rolland], to name but a few. A whole range of new materials were thought up so as to abolish the painterly, illusionistic look of the stage. — In smaller, more intimate plays, the scenery tended to adopt a purely non-illusionist look, whose roots can be seen several years back in various guises. Here we see a certain type of style which made its way through the middle of Expressionism to provide a plainer more down-to-earth mode of direction and stage design. The scenery in [Jan Bartoš's] *Krkavci* [Ravens] was already built in a non-illusionist way. The set for [Edmond Konrád's] *Širočiny* [Broad axes] was consistently non-illusionist with nothing but doorways and curtains placed in front of neutral background. Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* [in Czech as *Probuzení jara*, Spring awakening] with indications of landscapes and interiors, [Fibich's] *The Courtship of Pelops*, [Jiří Mahen's] *Dezertér* [Deserter], *The Post Office* [*Poštovní úřad* in Czech, by Rabindranath Tagore], and others, were also designed in the same style. While designing all of these sets, I felt more and more strongly that it was necessary to take a breather after Expressionism, and that it was essential to try to use a simpler line. — 5. Purism and the vertical line. I arrived at this departure from Expressionism and Cubism through the general evolution of modern art. The sets of the second and third acts of *Hippodamia* are designed consistently along the vertical line. As early as in the first act, the scenery of the last picture of the sea looked different from the other sets of the first act, illustrating the entrance into the town. Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Fibich's *Hedy* (Haidee) and *Pád Arkuna* (The Fall of Arkona), Sophocles' *Antigone*, the crosses scene in *Otroci* (Slaves) by Otokar Fischer, and Racine's *Phédre* [in Czech as *Faidra*] – in all these plays, I was striving simultaneously for vertical harmony and an exaggeration of the space. The harmony of the subdued colours, the "Gothic cathedral-like" lines, the stylization of the costumes in view of the architecture of the scene changed into blending shapes as opposed to the sculptured shapes of Cubism. Painting gives way to architecture and sculpture. In *Antigone*, the set is cubic (the director's decision), but it exploits the Purism of unadorned bodies. This phase for me still has validity; not everything has been said. Because there are new signs here of contemporary poetry, which will go as far as interpreting Purism as anathema to *civilismus*, although this *civilismus*, buffoonery, and clownery still matter and in terms of stage design they have not yet been exploited enough. Even though Constructivism is not yet done with or completely exploited, a new theatrical style of expression is now being sought and this will be a continuation of Purism and Neo-Romanticism. — 6. Towards the Constructivist stage. Every phase has its temporary forms. And thus, as far as Constructivist stage design is concerned, for Carl Sternheim's *Die Hose* [Trousers; *Kalhoty* in Czech], I used an open plan, transparent interior space in which framed scenery with gaps created a structure, rising up above the

**478 SKETCH OF THE STAGE
FOR ALOIS JIRÁSEK'S GERO**

National Theatre, Prague, 1:100, never
produced / 1935 / coloured ink, pencil,
and coloured pencil on paper / 34×22.5 cm





479 PROLOGUE, ARNOŠT DVOŘÁK'S

HUSITĚ

1945 / directed by František Salzer at the
Lidové divadlo, Karlín / watercolour and
pastel on paper / 65×49 cm

designed layout – in line with the director's needs – completely irregularly I used a similar solution for the interior set structure in Fernand Crommelynck's *Les Amants puérils* [in Czech as *Dětiní milenci*]. It was simply one piece of scenery sliced up and divided exactly to the layout. In Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* [in Czech as *Živnost paní Warrenové*], a garden conveyed by a round green canvas backdrop. I made further attempts at creating Constructivist sets in [Bartoš's] *Hrdinové naší doby* [Heroes of our time], partly in [Mahren's] *Dezertér*, in the first scene of [Eugene O'Neill's] *Emperor Jones* [*Císař Jones* in Czech] and in [Dyk's] *Revoluční trilogie* [Revolutionary trilogy], which are the most recent plays I designed. In [Šalda's] *Tažení proti smrti* [Campaign against death], I used a strictly transparent space "without scenery," where only the bare frame structures, delimiting space, were visible in outline. Some Russian productions, which marked the first application of consistent Constructivism, however, drew directly from the influence of Chinese and Japanese commedia dell'arte, even with the traditional use of "a platform," ladders and a thundering series of stage noises. Expressionism disappears here to be replaced by the frame of the space. The transparency of the space, the bare structure, the naked stage machinery on display. In these stage designs, the abstraction of the space is almost laughable compared with the naturalistic, illusionist picture. The earlier over-individualized shapes, that is to say, the Expressionist, make way for the plainer, geometric, and standard engineered shapes with no architectural segmentation, such as the square, triangle, semi-circle, and whole circle; there arises a seeming independence between the objects and shapes on the stage. It is really about the abstraction of flat surfaces as opposed to the abstraction of angled planes in Cubist architecture, about creating a "scene-setting space" in place of a "scene-setting picture." This scene-setting space appears unconnected, "dismantled" and its functionality in terms of theatrical movement is limited. Through its construction and mechanics, the scenery should itself be transformed into a kind of machine, a vehicle for the theatrical "process." In the end, it is always about some process needed by the director to turn the author's literature into a staged performance and a theatrical effect. It is the "relative" mechanics of the stage. — The words "spirit of an engineering construction," by which we mean Constructivism in scenery, are for the moment a kind of excuse, so far as there is not enough experience or enough words, which could be used to express these new demands of the theatre. And this too is the point to which my own development in stage production has so far taken me.



**480 COSTUME DESIGN FOR TANTALUS,
IN ZDENĚK FIBICH AND JAROSLAV
VRCHLICKÝ'S THE ATONEMENT OF
TANTALUS**

1925 / directed by Vojta Novák at the
National Theatre, Prague / mixed media on
paper / 32×16.5 cm

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