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Multimedia as Kinetic Scenography and an Experimental Form of Narrative in Contemporary Non-Verbal Theatre for Toddlers

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Abstract: This article aims to contribute to the broader debate on the role of multimedia in contemporary theatre, particularly in the context of an interactive and inclusive approach to the youngest audiences. The production *BatoLaterna (BabyLaterna)*, the first ever stage project by the National Theatre Prague – Laterna magika for children aged 6 months to 3 years, directed by the author of the study Hana Strejčková, is a unique example of contemporary theatre for toddlers that experiments with the language of multimedia. This 2022 production develops the traditional principles of Laterna magika, while innovatively transforming them for the needs of early childhood, taking into account its specific characteristics. From a certain point of view, it also blurs the boundaries between live activation – interactive theatre, kinetic scenography and multimedia kinetic composition. Multimedia can thus be seen as a narrative-visual language of non-verbal theatre for toddlers.

Keywords: multimedia, theatre for the very young, rhythmisation of the staging elements.

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Toddlers at Laterna magika = BatoLaterna (BabyLaterna)

Many children are exposed to a variety of aesthetic situations at an early age, accompanied by their guides, which are likely to have a positive influence on their cognitive and psychomotor development, communication skills and the formation of social bonds. And if the above includes theatre in a specific format designed for children aged six, ten or twelve months, or its related equivalents, such as creative workshops using artistic and dramatic-educational methods, playrooms built on aesthetic and activation principles, or environments inspired by the multifunctional Snoezelen method, the child receives sufficient stimuli for personal development. Czech choreographer and educator Václav Martinec supports this idea with his statement: "Theatre is primarily a matter of play. Theatre should turn things around, see them from different angles, and try out what they can mean from different perspectives."[2] Multimedia, i.e. digital graphics, video, animation, photography and related lighting design and other staging elements, also help to broaden the perspective of perception. Multi-layered content has the potential to create a sensory-rich yet consciously regulated and therefore safe environment that encourages attention and curiosity in young children and triggers an emotional response. One of the keys to this multi-layeredness is the rhythmisation of the staging elements. The renowned Czech theatre director Emil František Burian was convinced that everything on stage is necessarily driven by the tempo of the play[3] (for more details, see the chapter "Historical context of multimedia theatre in Czechoslovakia").

The theatrical reality that is created is a manifestation of the moment through scenic, most often audiovisual images, and it affects the human senses to varying degrees. As Hungarian Bauhaus professor and photographer László Moholy-Nagy states: "Everyone has an innate ability to receive and process sensory impressions. Everyone is equipped with sensitivity to colours, tones, the ability to orient themselves by touch and move in space, etc. This means that, by their very nature, all people are capable of sensory perception

[2] Vladimír Hulec, "Václav Martinec: I would not like to spread chaos, but rather establish order," *Orghast*, no. 4 (2005): 95.

[3] Emil František Burian, "Dynamic Theatre," *Nová scéna* 1, no. 1 (1930): 13-18.

in its entirety."[4] Young children in particular are able to grasp the world in their current lived experience through perception. In summary, the connecting elements of theatrical and general artistic-activation projects for infants and toddlers are usually: a sophisticated visual level, including sensitively composed lightscapes (sight) with regard to intensity and colour, a muted soundtrack and musical score that functionally combines melody, rhythm, vibration, silence and real sounds (hearing), and the permeability and plasticity of a barrier-free space (touch and other senses). Psychologist Kateřina Thorová says from the perspective of developmental psychology: "In terms of thinking, children [in their toddler years] have learned to understand the relationships between objects and are able to create mental images in their minds."[5] What they observe or participate in evokes pleasant or unpleasant feelings, favourable or unfavourable responses, and thanks to this, they become familiar with the space that surrounds them and further with the things and phenomena that a given place offers. Through natural selection, they form their attitude of liking/disliking – interest/disinterest – towards everything that surrounds them. Thorová adds: "In addition to the sensorimotor manipulative activity that was dominant in infancy, a newly developed ability for symbolic thinking begins to emerge in toddlers between 18 and 21 months of age. Toddlers are already able to detach themselves from mere perception and create images in their minds."[6]

After 2010, a phenomenon that had not yet been sufficiently explored penetrated the Czech Republic – theatre for children aged six months to three years. To this day, it is still very marginal, rare and exceptional in many places, both in terms of the creative environment and audience familiarity. Nevertheless, thanks to more than ten years of systematic work by a few creators and groups, mainly from the fields of movement, dance and puppet theatre, with the support of a modest number of independent production units and publicly funded theatres, productions for the youngest audience

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4 László Moholy-Nagy, *From Material to Architecture*, trans. Anita Pelánová (Prague: Triáda, 2002), 16.

5 Kateřina Thorová, *Developmental Psychology. Transformations of the Human Psyche from Conception to Death* (Prague: Portál, 2015), 381.

6 Kateřina Thorová, *Developmental Psychology*, 375-376.

have become so established that in 2022, the format of theatre for toddlers was given space on the most official and, in terms of hierarchy, the most prestigious stage at the National Theatre in Prague. This is evidenced by the fact that from the premiere of *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) on 16 March 2022 until the closure of the New Stage in June 2025, 251 sold-out performances were staged as a part of the Laterna magika repertoire, making it one of the most frequently performed titles of the first Czech stage in its period and the most performed performance in the modern post-pandemic era of Laterna magika, with never-declining attendance.

An original-authorial project for three performers (a ballerina, a dancer and an acrobat), thematically working with the cyclical nature of time, framed by a single year, more specifically the alternation of the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter) and the phases of the day represented by common rituals (such as waking up, getting dressed, playing, going for a walk, quiet time, etc.). The directorial and dramaturgical concept, aimed at movement and object theatre with elements of classical dance, pantomime and acrobatics, was based on everyday activities, which were, however, significantly developed through the lens of fantasy that toddlers were able to perceive, and even approached the creative intentional principle of object-scenic idiomorphism,[7] for example in the sense of creating and subsequently labelling new creations, objects or images with their own names. After all, as psychologist Otto Čačka writes: "Creativity consists in the more or less balanced application of ideas and imagination, and it is therefore necessary not only to stimulate it, but also to cultivate it."[8] In this way, theatre for the youngest children is an environment for the development of imaginative and emotional functions, supporting the acquisition of habits and, with long-term exposure to social interaction, even socially desirable adaptation patterns. *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) was a safe platform for feedback and interaction. During the performance spectators found both space for quiet observation and the opportunity to step directly onto the playing area, to open a dialogue with their actions and

[7] Idiomorphs (from the Greek ídios = own and morph = shape). In Kateřina Thorová, *Developmental Psychology*, 372.

[8] Otto Čačka, *Psychology of Mental Development in Children and Adolescents with Optimisation Factors* (Brno: Masaryk University, 2000), 245.

raise further stimuli, to which a response was always found, whether by the performers themselves or by images or sounds. For example, the soundtrack was created by combining the work of a classical music composer with melodies, noises and sounds. The sound design then placed four speakers in the corners of the space to make the sound spatial, evoking, for example, the movement of an object or work activity in certain parts of the performance area.

The whole show was connected by multimedia, which was completely natural within the repertoire of Laterna magika. It brought everyone together, anchoring them in both the tangible and imaginative worlds, and, in line with the creative intention, it created harmony and offered "novelty." "The power of immediate interest in objects and phenomena of the outside world is governed by the degree of their novelty and their current significance for the activity and behaviour of a given individual."[9] On a multimedia level, this involved full-surface animation as kinetic scenography enlivening the horizon and floor, as well as video mapping aimed downwards from above onto objects. This was, of course, closely correlated with the lighting composition and the pastel colours of the decorations and costumes.

The animation for the *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) production was created in collaboration with the Czech multimedia artist Matěj Procházka. The starting point for the two projections was a watercolour painting, from which emerged wax crayon-like outlines suggesting, in varying degrees, constellations, human dwellings, plants, leaves and other symbols of the seasons. The projection essentially served to colour the environment, its shades and shapes meaningfully referring to spring, summer, autumn and winter. It gave the space a sense of wholeness and created a backdrop for layering theatrical symbols. It was also a full-fledged partner in the stage action and one of the sources of interactivity with the audience. To give an idea, I will give an example of a part of the animation that figuratively "spilled over." During the artistically subtle transition from a winter night to a spring atmosphere, the blue sky with stars lit up into a hanging string on which huge socks were drying. Water dripped from them. It turned into drops that (as if) ran down the canvas, and

[9] Josef Linhart (ed.), *Fundamentals of General Psychology* (Prague: State Pedagogical Publishing House, 1981), 419.

the subsequent splashing of the drops then happened on the floor. Thanks to the multimedia approach, the illusion was created that rain was falling from the clouds and the drops were splashing on the ground. When it rains, puddles usually appear. The painted water spread across the surface until it formed a lake, providing an opportunity for a duck to swim up, build a nest and raise its young. Here, the artistically rendered fantasy world met with performers and objects – the animated world led the dancers to "splash" and "paddle in the water" and, on an object level, welcomed the mother duck and her ducklings (objects made of plush). And at that moment, the world of theatre completely erased the already flexible boundaries of the stage and auditorium and merged into one great joy of performers and children who celebrated the very presence of play.

Theatre for young children cannot be abstracted from interactivity; after all, it would be deprived of immediate reactions. Without some form of participation, young audiences quickly lose attention and look for other stimuli. However, interaction here does not mean running around the space or deliberately disrupting the performance in order to draw all the attention to oneself. For older, more cognitively advanced children, it was appropriate to encourage active observation from the auditorium and to correct their involvement. On the other hand, for those who were just learning to crawl, it was beneficial to motivate them to try to be independent and to encourage freedom of decision-making. Director, poet and publicist Miloš Horanský shared his experience in a review entitled "Breastfeeding is allowed on stage. *BatoLaterna* is worthy of Alfréd Radok's spirit of initiation": "The demands on the creative intelligence of the dancers are extraordinary: to improvise and follow the rules, to inspire children to work together, but to set limits on possible discord. […] Not even a hint of chaos. Playfulness, freedom and mutual impulses prevailed throughout."[10]

The video mapping in *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) consisted of moving beetles, earthworms and unspecified shapes that swarmed the stage, as they were projected to evoke the plasticity of summer, or the impression of being

[10] Miloš Horanský, "Breastfeeding is allowed on stage. *BatoLaterna* is worthy of Alfréd Radok's spirit of initiation," review of *BabyLaterna* by Hana Strejčková, directed by Hana Strejčková, National Theatre – Laterna magika, Prague, March 16 2022, *Lidové noviny*, May 31, 2022.

surrounded by tall grass teeming with small creatures, which, thanks to the theatrical possibilities, took on a large dimension. The mobility of the drawn animals and creatures motivated the watching children to another wave of action. Their spontaneity led them to behave naturally – following the movement of the projected structures, which positively dissolved the tension of their desire to try everything, but above all, often out of an interest in verifying the "authenticity" of a painted beetle or plant, touching a leaf or a star in the sky.

During the *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) performance, multimedia became a patient guide for toddlers through the theatrical world of illusion, while taking into account the needs of children at different stages of development. It enabled them to convey more complex content, such as the four seasons, the world of plants and animals, etc., through visual metaphors and symbols that are more understandable to young audience than abstract concepts or symbolically guided expressive movement. The kinetic "painted" scenography, or thoughtful animation, consciously developed the main motif and sub-elements, adhering to a unified artistic and thematic framework. It carefully considered colour tones and sensitively complemented the lighting composition, regulating the intensity of light and colour. It unfolded at a slower pace, responding to music, sound and rhythm. At times, it seemed static or one-dimensional. For some children, this visit to the performance was their very first encounter with theatre in their lives, and therefore it was absolutely essential that the creative process leading to the principles of Laterna magika, and above all their adaptation or innovation towards a new audience, was about responsibly balancing the scenic lines to create a favourable, clearly articulated and safe environment.

It follows from the above that the relationship between multimedia theatre and child audiences is based on complementarity – technology expands the possibilities of stage expression and makes theatrical language more attractive, but only if the basic principle of theatre is preserved: the present encounter between performer and audience. Multimedia theatre can thus be not only a source of playful and stimulating sensory experiences for children, but also a means of developing their imagination, sensitivity and ability to actively perceive. However, several aspects are key to establishing a functional relationship between technology and child audiences, the first of which is

the balance of sensory stimuli (perceptual and cognitive accessibility) to attract and maintain attention. The second aspect is playfulness and the creation of magical, dreamlike and abstract worlds, to which children gain access through active observation and interaction. In this respect, interactivity is a tool for deepening emotional engagement.

Historical context of multimedia theatre in Czechoslovakia

Theatre that is attractive to audiences and of high quality is a well-thought-out interplay of staging elements, technical support, human intuition and effort. Structuralist Jan Mukařovský considered theatre as a whole to be a "complex interplay of forces" or "the result and source of dynamic impulses."[11] Despite today's technological advances, the meaningful and rhythmic interaction of live actors with film projections, lighting and music remains universally fascinating. Its experimental beginnings date back to the last century. The Czech interwar avant-garde laid the foundations for progressive theatrical experimentation in the field of synthesising staging elements, which included the technological achievements of the time, such as film. Theatre director E. F. Burian spoke of his work as a mutual composition of all kinds of art:

> "The stage is the poet's most natural platform. Movement, lights, the beauty of make-up, masks, the living space in the auditorium – all of this is created for the poet's verse, for the rhythm of metaphors that encircle the stage illusion like a bracelet. The stage itself, in its immediate poeticism, the stage as it is without a libretto, the pantomime stage or the stage of a light fountain, already arouses poetic emotions in us that cannot be killed by stark reality."[12]

He drew inspiration for his work from contemporary inventions, such as film and innovations in stage lighting, etc. However, it is essential to note that Burian considered film projection to be only one of the possible tools of

[11] Jan Mukařovský, *Chapters from Czech Poetics, Part I* (Prague: Svoboda, 1948), 329.

[12] Emil František Burian, *Sweep the Stage: Theatre as a Platform for Poets* (Prague: Nová Edice Publishing House, 1936), 33-35.

scenography, for example, for transforming the perspective of space. He demanded that film be an indescribable mediator of semantic shortcuts, a carrier of metaphorical images. With his visual conception of stagings, he perceived film as a superstructural, non-narrative tool that expanded the spectator's imaginative and associative field. In collaboration with architect and scenographer Miroslav Kouřil, they gradually arrived at a combination of film projection with photography and acting with light composition, which in 1936 gave rise to a unique technological system known as the Theatregraph[13]:

> "The Theatregraph combined the stage action of a film actor with film or photographic projection in order to express the inner feelings and thoughts of dramatic characters in a specifically aesthetically appealing style. Static and film projections were incorporated into the directorial and scenographic concept in a dramatic and coherent manner; they were not merely intended to complement or emphasise the poetic work. They were carriers of meaning."[14]

In accordance with Miroslav Kouřil's statement, it is appropriate to analyse not only "what the work consists of, but also what connection should arise between its components in order to maintain the balance of forces that characterises every good work of art. We agree that theatre is the result of the interaction of individual components of art."[15] He adds that it arises as a

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[13] Theatregraph is a combination of the projected image and the stage action. The technique (image), then functions as an important, meaning-making component of the theatrical production as it could shift the plot, create an acting partner, enabled metaphorical expression, etc. E. F. Burian was engaged in this experimentation at the D 34 Theatre in Prague. He introduced the system with the production of Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* in March 3 1936, when the image was projected onto a transparent tulle, behind which the actors played. Burian's Theatregraph did not function only as an illustration, but as an active semantic component of the work.

[14] Jan Grossman, "Theatrical Roles of Film," *Divadlo* 10 (1959), 420 in Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, "Miroslav Kouřil and his journey to structuralism as a method and programme," *Theatralia* 19 (2016): 145, doi:10.5817/TY2016-1-7

[15] Miroslav Kouřil, *Theatre Space* (Prague: Institute for Teaching Aids for Industrial and Technical Schools, National Library of the Czech Republic – Library Collections and Services, call number: I 035312, scope: 123-[I]; 8°, 1945), 27.

combination of opposites and parallel relationships between them, with a clear direction towards its goal, its purpose. Stage material, as directors of the Czech avant-garde theatre in the 1930s claimed in their reflections, is a mediator between the author of the stage libretto or director as the creator of multi-layered events and the impression aroused in the audience. Theatre is thus one of the arts that "has its own specific characteristics and links to other arts. Theatre very often combines many features of other arts into its own whole."[16]

Laterna magika as a historical phenomenon

"After Theatregraph [...] Laterna magika appeared in 1958 as a distinctive type of light theatre, incorporating systematic static, but above all film projection into the directorial and scenographic composition."[17] The world's first multimedia theatre, Laterna magika, was founded in 1958 on the occasion of the Czechoslovak presentation at the EXPO world exhibition in Brussels. The concept of a multi-media theatre, backed by personalities such as director Alfréd Radok and set designer Josef Svoboda, was based on combining live stage performance with film projection and all other components. Their approach creatively expanded the boundaries of the genre and increased its popularity with audiences. In their conception, projection became an active partner, rather than a mere accessory, allowing for situations in which an actor communicated with his film image, a dancer danced with a projection, or a character stepped from the stage into the space of the film. Dynamic collages were created, combining perspectives and rhythms, where live action was an equal part of the multimedia montage. The success of Laterna magika at the Brussels Expo led to its establishment as a permanent ensemble, which became part of Czechoslovak theatrical identity and an "export item" abroad. From the 1960s onwards, Laterna magika experimented with technological innovations in the field from synchronised projectors to the use of new materials and lighting effects to architectural stage designs that allowed real

[16] Miloslav Klíma, *On Dramaturgy* (Prague: Pražská scéna, 2016), 52.
[17] Jan Grossman, *On the Combination of Theatre and Film* (Prague: Film Institute, 1968), 66.

space to be combined with the illusion of projection. The common denominator of all these principles was the play with the boundary between reality and illusion. The audience was led to constantly question what was real and what was mediated by the medium. The historical principles of Laterna magika, such as media synthesis, the interaction of live action and projection, multi-screen montage, technological innovation and the poetics of illusion, undoubtedly represent a unique contribution to the development of 20th century world theatre.

The *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) production built on these historical principles, adapting them to contemporary audiences and drawing on new technological means. It combined live performances with visual projections, lighting effects and music, with all components sensitively adapted to the perceptual abilities of the youngest viewers. The projections were not used to create the illusion of a dramatic story or a causally unfolding plot, but to support sensory experience and discovery. The live contact between the performers and the children was complemented by visual stimuli that developed playfulness, imagination and curiosity. Thus, the principle of interaction between reality and illusion, so typical of classic Laterna magika, was transformed in *BatoLaterna* (*BabyLaterna*) into a form of interaction between the performer, the child and the visual medium. The multimedia components were not an end in themselves, but became a means of creating a safe and inspiring space that supported early aesthetic experience and first contact with theatre.

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