

# AN OFFER OF WELL ARTICULATED SILENCE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JIŘÍ ADÁMEK

Since the middle of the preceding decade, Jiří Adámek has carved out a unique position on the Czech theatre scene. Beginning with *Tiká tiká politika*, a theatre piece created in 2006, he has presented a distinctive musicalised form of theatre, making use of repetition, variation, and other compositional methods in combination with speech and a heightened bodily presence on stage. In recent years, he has repeatedly crossed over into more musical waters, most notably in collaborations with composers Martin Smolka and Michal Nejtěk. We spoke about his background, his position as a pedagogue, various collaborative relationships, and the importance of faith.

*I'd like to start at the beginning. You're from an artistically oriented family?*

My wife likes to tease me, saying she'll forbid me from saying this - apparently I mention it in every interview (laughs). The most important thing is that my younger brother, Ondřej Adámek (*see also CMQ 2007/2*), is a composer who lives in Berlin. He used to live in Paris and he also spent some time on residencies in Rome and Kyoto, so he's a very cosmopolitan person who has pieces performed by top-class ensembles and orchestras in the west, which he also sometimes conducts.

It's not just about his artistic success, but also about the fact that we have a very close relationship. We grew up in a family that listened to classical music a lot. My parents were not musicians, but their interest on an amateur level was enormous. It's something of a mystery how I arrived at theatre, because it wasn't present in our family at all. But where we've ended up is that Ondřej composes pieces with an excellent sense for their performative component, sometimes extending this towards staged concerts and the like, while I make theatrical works that are conceived using a musical and compositional mindset.



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The greatest enigma is how we both arrived at a somewhat similar approach to the voice and speech, their deconstruction, melodisation, and rhythmisation, to a need to find vocal expression that is not particularly related to singing in the traditional sense (particularly the operatic manner), but also avoids informal speech. This leads to play not only with the sonic component of language, but also with meanings and their transposition. Ondřej studied abroad since he was eighteen, so we weren't that close, but we still arrived at this intersection.

*You say you don't know how you arrived at theatre. Can you try and remember?*

Well, my parents were always listening to classical music. Always. We didn't have a television set, we never listened to the more popular radio stations. Mostly, it was vinyl records. The only theatre they'd take us to was opera. But opera productions in the '70s were just... bad. Miserable. But that's the only way I could get to know theatrical means.

I remember writing a play when I was in third grade. Very funny. I'd love to see it now. It was spread over two notebooks and I remember the characters included

a Butcher and a Beggar – she begged, he was heartless, something like that. I have no idea where it came from. And then, in high school, I developed a passion for reading plays. That’s long gone. (laughs) When I started at DAMU (*the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague – translator’s note*), I’d read more plays than anyone else, whereas now I’m doing poorly.

A very important impulse was when me and my friends from high school started attending productions by Petr Lébl at the Na Zábřadlí Theatre (*sometimes known as Theatre on the Balustrade – translator’s note*). That was an apparition.

***And then you started at DAMU, at the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre.***

DAMU is organised by year groups, and my year’s leader was Ivan Rajmont, who at the time had arrived at a more purely dramatic conception of directing. (*Translator’s note: the Czech theatre scene is, to a large extent, defined by a dichotomy between “dramatic” (čínohra) and “alternative” theatre (alterná). This division begins, to a large extent, at DAMU, where the two central departments are the Department of Dramatic Theatre and the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre.*) He’d take a text, interpret it rationally, analyse it in a lot of depth and detail, and provide a reading of it. Old school, I’d say today. For him, the actor in a situation stood at the centre of everything, communicating a text in the director’s interpretation.

Throughout my time at DAMU, I suffered. That’s not a criticism of anyone – I just wasn’t in a good place in my life; I was struggling with myself. We weren’t a year group that was very adept at communication, and none of the other people who studied directing or dramaturgy are working in theatre today. The only really close person for me there was a friend who was quite special and who later disappeared from the school. They had completely different values and interests than I did. I had this burning idealism that wasn’t shared by anyone there, even among the actors, that wasn’t the atmosphere.

I only admitted this to myself recently, but I really like how students at DAMU are positioned in recent years. I don’t know if it was just our year, but there was really no idealism. It was a reflection of the second half of the ’90s, when the post-revolution ideals had faded away and everyone fought for their place pragmatically, wildly, and rudely.

So I had no idea what to do about this. I’m probably a bit strict, but I think maybe one piece I did in those four years was any good. Then I went through a puppetry period. I felt closer to that, but the real moment of saving grace came with three influences at the same time: one was a stint as assistant director to Jan Antonín Pitínský in Zlín, where I’d spend whole days with him because he had nothing to do in Zlín, so he was happy to have me there. Another was that I studied dialogical acting for a year and a half with Ivan Vyskočil at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at DAMU, which twenty years ago was a department that had quite a spark. And finally, I did my first internship in France. And these three things really opened up the possibilities.

***Growing up listening to music, when you later discovered the possibilities of musical work in the theatre, what are the elements or approaches that entice you? What specific potential do they offer?***

I wouldn’t say they entice me. I just didn’t have anything to hold onto. With the talent I have, the rigorous dramatic education I was given did not awaken a development of my talents. It’s not about enticement, it’s about necessity. To this day, I am fascinated by the amount of things that happened in a short period that opened up the possibilities.

I discovered that when I compose a staged form, not when I interpret a text and try to complete a narrative through dialogues and situations, but when I compose a staged form with its components, time, and space, that's when I feel at home, immediately, particularly when this has to do with the voice, sound, the acoustic component, the meaning of the spoken word. So it was more about uncovering where I felt free.

And as for what I'm drawn to, that's always developing. I find it most interesting, of course, to speak about what's happening now. And I'd call that a post-political direction. When the political scene began collapsing - we can say that was marked by Miloš Zeman's first victory in the presidential election and later ANO's win in the parliamentary elections - nobody could let it be, so theatres started heatedly producing quick political responses.

That had to happen and I'm glad it did, but in my experience as an audience member, most of them were considerably provisional. And this happened to me too. We did a show at the National Theatre, *New Atlantis*, which I think had many substantial attributes, but also many provisional, disordered elements it shared with these other quick reactions to the problem.

I really tried to find a response to this experience, and I discovered I was after something more universal and transcendental than an immediate political response to the immediate political situation. In the last four or five years, my personal life has turned towards spiritual questions; faith has become very important to me. This has led to a number of developments, spiritual experiences, and so on. And



*The Infinity of Lists*

PHOTO: MARTIN POPELÁŘ 2x

I realised there was no reason not to take this into account. And that leads to a quieting, a refinement – I think this happens to most artists: something develops and we don't even know how, and we only reflect upon it and define it retroactively. So I gradually discovered that what I create is a quieting and a refinement, including minimalist acting and a general narrowing down of means I work with. And that's where I see my personal politics: in the possibility of stopping, of letting things affect me in a more subtle way. In pricking up my ears and eyes, experiencing individual words. That's what all my current projects circle around.

*It seems to me that these two approaches – the sonic or compositional versus the political – are in a kind of opposition. The compositional approach often leads to abstraction, whereas politics are often specific. With your work *Tiká tiká politika*, it makes complete sense – it's not about anything specific, but rather about linguistic structures explored through sound.*

I think it has to do with both the developments of the times we live in and my own development. I don't think there has to be an opposition. One of the really important productions I did was *Europeans* in 2008. That was completely specific. The connection of form, musicality, and specifics – Bush's invasion of Iraq, the failure of the EU Constitution, and the like. But now, I'm over forty, I have three kids – everything changes. As a student, I had this enormously angry critical position towards the world I lived in. And I just don't feel it anymore. I feel things differently, I feel the beauty of things, my roots...

It also has to do with the means we use: in *Europeans*, we created what I consider a virtuosic scene to do with the arguments among MEPs, how they can't understand each other, with twenty-eight languages sounding at once. It was really funny and also a strong statement. But I can't do the same today, because I would be put in the camp of eternal critics of the EU. And I'm not part of that camp – I'm pro-EU. But being pro-EU doesn't provide good material for a strong ironic scene.

*I know you once mentioned irony is no longer sufficient as a political statement.*

You just can't do that today, because we're split into tribes. One thing you can do is to express your tribe's position well – and I simply can't do that. The other option is to see politics as such from a different angle than those adopted by the tribes. I therefore feel closer to an offer of well articulated silence and perhaps even a vain attempt to reach somewhere inside oneself. More transcendental, universal things.

It's very important that I was very liberated by a specific kind of humour – that has to do with my development too. I realised I enjoy an almost boyish playfulness; that I don't have to know my way around the meanings and seriousness of the things I do – not that they're not there, but that I don't have to know my way around them – and I can approach these with the strange “around the corner” humour that is created therein.

*Let's talk about your current projects. The first on the list is *Before the Law* which you did with Martin Smolka.*

*Before the Law* was commissioned by the ensemble ascolta, which, in order to secure funding, found two crucial and fantastic co-producers: the Wittener Tage festival for new music and the Lucerne Festival. Ascolta is an ensemble for the performance of exclusively contemporary music which has existed for about fifteen years. In addition to being excellent performers of any crazy progressive new music, they also have a direction towards more playful and slightly performative projects. They have a series of pieces they've commissioned to accompany silent films. They've done several pieces that are



essentially musical theatre: like one where they sit around a table and the score includes gestures or head movements.

I think the very first composer they approached when they started was Martin Smolka. They only told us recently that for years, they'd been hoping to do an evening-length piece with him. And I had the good fortune that they only approached him after we'd done *The Infinity of Lists* (an opera commissioned by the New Opera Days Ostrava festival and later moved to the Alfred ve dvoře theatre in Prague – translator's note), so Martin immediately told them he wanted to work with me.

I asked them right away that we do a four-day workshop. We discovered that some of them are capable of specific forms of musically inscribed vocal acts, once again on the borders of speech and song. We also found that they are playful and open to everything, and that they're extremely fast with gestures: they can pick something up, make a sound with it, put it down, and already have another thing in their other hand.

The problem was that we knew the texts would have to be in German, or at most in English, which is hard for me. I proposed Franz Kafka to Martin – we both have a deep love of his work, but we also have almost too much respect for him. We decided we'd do it but we felt a bit awkward. So I suggested to Martin we had to free ourselves of the heavy, depressive, dark Kafka, and I showed him extracts that also had a certain humour.

***Max Brod has a short essay on Kafka's humour.***

Right. So we arrived at this lighter, more playful colour and then we attempted once again to find a highly organic combination of what I bring and what Martin brings: gesture, sound, text and its dismantling, which Martin can do for the notes or I for the meaning...



*I imagine you selected the texts in dialogue?*

We spent a lot of time on it, we went to my cabin several times for a few days. I think the idea to use Kafka came from me, and I also found this lovely selection of aphorisms, put together by one of Kafka's Czech translators under the title *Leopardi v chrámu* (*The Leopards in the Temple*), which helped us a lot. But I also know the last text in the piece was Martin's idea and it helped a lot.

*That's why I'm asking: in the materials I've found, you are credited as librettist and director, but it seems like this is one of the occasions on which we could say you are both authors.*

Maybe it's a mistake. I also experienced an equal relationship this with Michal Nejtěk's opera in Brno, *Rules of Good Behaviour in Modern Society*. I have no problem when composers rework my libretto and I'm also not coy about adding my opinion on the music. But



Jiří Adámek's new work *Before the Law* (*Vor dem Gesetz*), a commission by the ensemble ascolta created in collaboration with composer **Martin Smolka**, was premiered at the Wittener Tage festival in May 2019. On the 24th of November 2019, the Contempuls Prague Contemporary Music Festival will present the work in its Czech premiere. The performance will take place at the new DOX+ hall at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, and will be preceded by a panel discussion with Adámek and Smolka led by Boris Klepal.

[www.contempuls.cz](http://www.contempuls.cz)

*ensemble ascolta performing Before the Law*

the problem is that in the western model of contemporary music, the composer is a huge title; a pampered star. You wouldn't believe it - when Martin comes to Germany, everyone nothing short of worships him. I would feel awkward proposing to Martin that we present ourselves as a duo - he's in a much higher position than I am in that context.

*I feel like this is one of the big differences between, say, opera or musical theatre within contemporary music, and how authorship is viewed at the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre at DAMU, where it is mostly attributed collectively.*

Sure. But the difference - and something I completely respect - is that up to a certain point, we can meet, write texts, rework them, but then there's always a moment when the composer shuts off for months upon months, and nobody can do that for him.



*And at that point, you stop working together?*

That would be impossible. They have to completely immerse themselves in their inner world and their inner ear, writing note after note. And that's where the composer's dominance is unambiguous. I totally respect that, and what's more, as a theatre-maker, I know I exist in an unusually democratic environment - I can withstand the scenographer telling me how the script should be changed and the dramaturge discussing the set design and the actors having their input into the conceptual foundations. They can all do that. It takes up time, but I love it.

But it's true that I write the text and I direct it, so I know very well how that position of authority works. However, I really enjoy giving up control and trying to pinpoint the composer's idea; surrendering myself to it. Being at once contemporary and yet retaining piety towards their piece. Sometimes I feel like I'd really like to find out if I could direct an opera.

*An older one?*

Baroque - that's what I'd enjoy most. Though I've also had some - as yet inconclusive - talks with a theatre about Benjamin Britten. There are things I wouldn't know how to approach and things I'd very much like to do. But my vision is that it can be set in a very contemporary, progressive language, but it doesn't have to go violently against the music. I have the good fortune of being able to read and understand music quite well.

*In October, Prague will host the EFB Festival, dedicated to the work of pioneering composer and theatre-maker Emil František Burian, one of the key figures of the interwar avant-garde. As I understand it, you're doing an adaptation of Burian's May, so is that one of these cases when you're directing without such an authorial position?*

Not quite: I studied Burian's voiceband version of *May*, but then I responded with a setting that is entirely my own. That's an example of a project where I can't separate my position as an author and as a director. I have the form in my ear, and that's what I communicate to the actors. These are the situations I love.

*Does that mean you prepared a score?*

Yes.

*With notes?*

No, not with notes. The score I made for myself is very detailed: slide down on this word, a glissando here, a crescendo here, a diminuendo here, down a half step here. What I give to the actors is a considerably more concise version that only gives them a sense of it. And then I teach them that, I demonstrate a lot of things, but in many cases, they also offer better solutions - we're really well coordinated and they're fantastically musical, so they perfect a lot of elements.

*How do you seek out the actors that might be interested in this kind of work and who have the appropriate skills?*

That's a good question... I'm very grateful for every time it connects. When I first wrote *Tiká tiká politika*, it was such a different process for me, so distant from how I was taught it was done, that I essentially called the actors I dared to call, begging them to do it. And of the four that had the time, three stayed on. So it was really... well, not by chance. It's kind of chemical. They're the people I felt I could call, the people who had the compunction to do it.

And it only took a few years of my teaching at DAMU before I started working with my students. Before it happened, it never occurred to me that it could. But now, the teaching feeds right into practice.

*And institutionally?*

The actors I work with from the alternative department have an inimitable working method. I've never experienced that with anyone else. I worked at the National Theatre twice – both times, I brought guests, and both times, the theatre was generously accommodating in letting me work only with people with whom we could find a mutual understanding. Both were wonderful collaborations. But still, the way the actors work there is somewhat different to what I'm used to and I had to adapt to that.

*If we were to take some of the theatres you work with – Alfred ve dvoře, home of alternative and experimental theatre in Prague, the National Theatre, and the Minor Theatre, which focuses on performances for children, how do they compare?*

At Minor, the circuit of actors has enough overlap with the people I work with, so I can just work with them. In Alfred, I only work with my group, and at the National, it's the ensemble actors with whom we can understand each other, plus my guests. I consider all these three institutions absolutely professional, each in their own direction.

A big difference is the type of commission: you just can't trick an audience of children at Minor. You can repeat a thousand times that it has a good theatrical idea or that it's clever, but if they're not entertained, they're not entertained. In most cases, this worked out very well, but twice, it didn't.

At the National, this is quite difficult for me: *Po sametu (Post Velvet)* seemed to hit the spot and I'm still happy with the production now. But I was also left with a feeling of having danced to the audience's tune a little too much. In *New Atlantis*, I tried not to think about the question of who it was for, and in a way, it backfired a little.

It's obvious that my function in these theatres is specific. When they invite me, they know it will be more demanding, that perhaps it will help the actors advance in some way, and that it will be a little complicated for the audience.

*You mentioned that faith has become more important to you in recent years.*

I occasionally think about whether I should talk about this in public. I'm quite introverted on this topic. Some four or five years ago, I was baptised as an evangelical, though I don't feel especially evangelical. When I have the time, I really enjoy going to masses led by Tomáš Halík, a Roman Catholic priest, and reading his books. I've also discovered *exercicia*, spiritual "exercises", which are often run by Jesuits and other groups tied to Christian mysticism. This mysticism then often links to Eastern teachings. And in terms of origins, I'm three-quarters Jewish. But you could say that the language through which I approach this field is Christianity.

*And is this reflected in your work?*

Internally and in an introverted way. So far, I see absolutely no reason to make it more straightforward. It's more about a change of values, and also about an amplification of what I always had: the perception of words in the Bible and Christianity opened up further layers of my relationship to words, language, and speech.