

THE GREAT KUNDERA (THEATRE IN THE LIFE & WORK OF A NOVELIST)

Petr Christov¹

Charles University, Prague

Abstract: There are not many worldwide acclaimed authors who could be considered as “national” in two different cultures. Besides Samuel Beckett or Vladimir Nabokov, a third name could be added: Milan Kundera (*1929). A Czech(oslovak) novelist who emigrated in France or a French author, born in Czechoslovakia? Both and none at the same time, one could say.

As a Czech theatre historian, I should add that Kundera is not only a novelist but he has touched and affected the world of theatre and drama as well. On top of that, his life is full of theatrical events and acts. And Kundera has played (and still plays!) an important role in dealing with the Czech(oslovak) history and the legacy of the communist era.

From the point of view of Czech readers and theatre makers, it is well known that Kundera has officially authored three plays during his long career. On the other hand, when a French reader opens and flicks through the two volumes of the “complete works” of Milan Kundera published by Gallimard in a prestigious *La Pleiade* edition, he finds only one play included in the book(s): *Jacques and his Master* (*Jakub a jeho pán / Jacques et son maître*). There is not a trace (or maybe exactly only a trace!) of *The Owners of the Keys* (*Majitelé klíčů / Les Propriétaires des clés*) or *The Blunder* (*Ptákovina / La Sotie*) even though Kundera’s play *The Owners of the Keys* has been translated in French in the beginning of the 1960s and was even performed in France back in 1969; this omission is made more striking by the fact that the play has met a large success on the Czech theatre stages in the 1960s.

To talk about Kundera’s work is not an easy task: the work talks to you (as to the reader) and – at the same time – the author tries to guide you and explain how you should read it. However, Kundera repeats again and again that (let us generalize a bit): his work is (simply) his work. But why shouldn’t we try to have a look at his writings for theatre(s)? and to ask ourselves: what does theatre mean for one of the most translated and read novelists of the world? What is the reception of his plays in his two homelands and why, for God’s sake, Kundera’s play *The Blunder* (written in 1969) and considered by its author – as late as 1990 – as “unstageable” has experienced a theatrical comeback in 2008 and is still played on the Czech stage in the 2020/21 season ...?

Keywords: theatre, Czech theatre, playwrights, French literature, Milan Kundera, translation, intercultural approach

“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”

F. S. FITZGERALD: *THE GREAT GATSBY*

¹ Petr Christov is an Assoc. Prof. at the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Theatre critic, university teacher, translator. Research fields: French theatre and drama, medieval theatre, contemporary drama, translation of plays and novels (Jarry, Maeterlinck, Barbery, Djebar, Desportes, Bouraoui, Confino, Assous, Thiéry, Ribes, Gabilly, Roger-Lacan et alii), theatre criticism. Author of the books: *Gérard de Nerval a jeho dvojenec* (*Gérard de Nerval and His Double*, 2017), *Maurice Maeterlinck: Krátké hry o smrti* (*Maurice Maeterlinck: Short Plays about Death*, 2014), *České drama dnes: rozhovory s českými dramatiky* (*Czech Drama Today: Interviews with Czech Playwrights*, 2012).

E-mail: christov@centrum.cz / www.petrchristov.com

“Pour tous les mordus de FIFA, tous les torus qui rappent
Comme Kundera la légèreté de l'être m'est insoutenable
Mais où jeter le lest? Je rêve de m'envoler
Voir s'élever le ciel loin d'ce stress qui veut m'ennôler”
NEKFEU: J'AI LE SEUM

“We have art in order not to die of the truth.”
F. NIETZSCHE: *THE WILL TO POWER*

Three given variables: Life, Work and Time; three major elements, three building stones in the story of an Artist. And what if we add: the life, work and time of Milan Kundera...? Well, the equation would definitely become more difficult to solve. And it is going to get even more complicated or maybe unsolvable when we would like to speak about Milan Kundera and his relation with theatre. However, dealing with Milan Kundera has never been effortless.

“Who is Milan Kundera?” is another question difficult to answer. It seems that Kundera himself would be happy if the answer would be as simple as this: a novelist. Or the Novelist? He would be happy if readers would read his work in the frame of his intentions. And he is and has always been trying to do all his best to succeed in this.

For several decades, he has conscientiously worked on his own image. Kundera's own “public relations” are almost impeccable. What do his readers know about him? Generally speaking: nothing more than what he wants them to know! He continuously writes and rewrites notes and forewords to his texts, always precisely analysing and commenting on his interpretation(s). He allows only a certain (restrained) number of “certified” authors and scholars to write about him and his work. And to write “kunderaly” correctly, of course! He has been almost always trying to persuade everybody that there is none but one Kundera: the Kundera's Kundera².

“Who is Milan Kundera?” Let me repeat the question once more and answer by another question: a Czech(oslovak) novelist who emigrated (in 1975) in France or a French author, born (in 1929) in Czechoslovakia? Both and none at the same time, one could say³.

² The publication of Kundera's work in a prestigious French *La Pléiade* edition by the *Gallimard* publishing house is a specific conclusion of his (lifetime) effort. To be published in two leather bound volumes is considered as an entry among the ranks of the immortal classics. Undoubtedly, it is a consecration of Kundera's literary work. On top of that, France is the only country where his “complete works” have been published; only French culture, the culture which became in 1981 Kundera's “first culture”, has been granted the author's permission to do that. On the other hand, *L'Oeuvre* of Milan Kundera (2011; revised volume 2017) is not edited as traditional “the complete works” edition but as a selection made by the author himself (not by an editor!) which is definitely a breach of the editing policy of the edition. But Kundera wants to be different - unique - and his friend Mr. Gallimard was ready to accept Kundera's project.

³ It should be reminded that there are not so many worldwide acclaimed authors who could be considered as “national” in two different cultures. Milan Kundera could, from this point of view, join and enjoy the company of such stars as Samuel Beckett or Vladimir Nabokov.

Milan Kundera lives, speaks and writes (and has lived, spoken and written) in two languages and two cultures: emigration from Czechoslovakia to France in 1975, withdrawal of Czechoslovak citizenship in 1979, becoming a naturalised French citizen in 1981, official (re-)acquisition of Czech citizenship in 2019⁴. Milan Kundera has lived a half of his life between two nations⁵. And each of Kundera's cultures, Czech and French, knows a different Kundera!

To understand Kundera, one should be able to speak and understand more than one (of his) languages. The Czech Kundera is not the same as the French Kundera; there is no universal Kundera⁶. This is valid not only in the strict sense of translation but in considering specific parts of the author's work in the context of time and space as well. The point of view becomes crucial⁷.

How many plays?

Let me ask you, my non-Czech-speaking reader, one question: do you know a playwright called Milan Kundera? Yes? As an author of one play – *Jacques and his Master*? Great, but one is not enough! More should be said about the intimate relationship between Kundera and the art of theatre⁸.

First of all, the fact is that Kundera – regardless of what he claims – was a prominent and successful Czechoslovak playwright in the 1960s. Not too prolific but pretty influential. Jindřich Černý, a young theatre critic and historian back

⁴ Each one of these events was highly politicised – the Czechoslovak communist government in the 1970s wanted to banish an unwanted artist as an example of the fate of those who betray socialism; a brand new French political representation (of François Mitterrand) in the beginning of the 1980s wanted to show the country's open-minded politics and – last but not least – Czech populist Prime Minister Andrej Babiš wanted to bask in the glory of worldwide known old man. Shortly, Kundera, an author who wants to deny all political readings of his works, has served (nolens volens?) more than once as an instrument in the hands of different regimes...

⁵ It is notorious that after his emigration to France, Kundera has never wanted to be considered as a part of the émigré literature, as an author serving as an eyewitness about life under an oppressive political regime behind the Iron curtain. On the other hand: a “political” reading of his works is omnipresent, time becoming one of the biggest enemies of Milan Kundera, a universal Novelist.

⁶ Reading, for example, his famous novel *The Joke* in Czech and in French evokes two or even three different receptions – if we take into consideration the Czech original and the two French translations: the first, by a controversial ex-communist Marcel Aymonin (which is after all not as bad as Kundera tries to persuade everybody), and the second, “completely revisited”, “authenticated” and purified by author (which is, in fact, more distant from the Czech original).

⁷ Kundera is aware of the importance of this problematic and likes to reflect on it: he is aware of the different dimensions of the reception of an artist (and his work); he thought-provokingly and inspiringly speaks about three different contexts: small (local), medial (e.g. “Mitteleuropa”) and global. (For a different point of view of local/global tendencies, especially in theatre, see CHRISTOV, Petr. *To Travel or Not to Travel. Open Up Your National Culture! Or Not?. Art Readings. Journeys*. Vol. 2. 2020, 32-43.)

⁸ Kundera is a very seductive theorist, a practising one - as we are going to see later. His volume of essays called *The Art of the Novel* has become notorious. His essays about music are great as well (Kundera has studied music in his youth, his father being student and close friend of Leoš Janáček, one of the most influent Czech composers of the 20th century). It is regrettable that Kundera has not tried to establish stronger links between his theatre/drama practice and his theoretical writings...

then, labeled Kundera as “*the most impressive playwright ever discovered by the National Theatre in Prague in its quest for a modern Czech drama*” (Černý 1962: 5) and he was definitely not the only enthusiast. However, this part of Milan Kundera’s life/time/work is now almost forgotten by the author, at least for an international art (and research) market. At least for non Czech readers⁹.

Although only *Jacques and his Master* (written 1971/staged 1975) was published in the Gallimard’s *Oeuvre* of Milan Kundera, there are two other “officially approved” plays: *The Owners of the Keys* (published 1961/staged 1962) and *The Blunder* (written probably in 1966/published and staged 1969).

However, there is much more theatre and drama in Milan Kundera. In the period preceding his emigration (1970–1975), when Kundera could not officially work as an author or scholar¹⁰, he was – most probably – writing scripts and plays under the names of other colleagues: the play *Juro Jánošík* (based on a story of a legendary Slovak brigand of the 16th/17th centuries, a kind of Robin Hood “à la Slovak”), staged in 1973, was presented as a work of Karel Steigerwald¹¹ (*1945), former student of Kundera’s from the Film Faculty of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) who worked at that time as a scriptwriter at the Film Studios Barrandov. Nevertheless, according to the testimonies of living contemporaries and scholars, the play should be listed (in all probability) among Kundera’s works for theatre¹².

In the 1960s, Kundera’s signature could be found also on the front pages of the scripts of audiovisual adaptations of his own texts shot by Czechoslovak television or Film Studios: *The Joke* (1968, directed by Jaromil Jireš) and *I, Mournful God*¹³ (1969, directed by Antonín Kachlík) are excellent examples of Czechoslovak “new wave” in cinema¹⁴. According to recent research and testimonies, Milan Kundera could (or should) be considered the author of two other TV scripts realised by Slovak television in the mid-1970s as well: *A Game of Chess with Alekhine* (1975, directed by Jozef Pálka) and the TV mini-series *Girl for Two of Us* (1975, directed

⁹ And if not totally forgotten, at least trivialised and marginalised by the author and his official commentators.

¹⁰ In 1970 he has been forced to leave his post of Associate Professor at the Film Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts where he had taught for almost two decades (since he graduated in 1953).

¹¹ This practice of covering works of prohibited authors by names and authorities of the luckier ones was a common ruse in the period of so called “normalisation” in Czechoslovakia (ca. 1970–1989) and we can find it under other totalitarian regimes reinforcing official or unofficial censorship.

¹² As Lenka Jugmannová documented in her recent study (2017), the structure and composition of the play are similar and close to Kundera’s previous writings for theatre, and bear little similarity to the work of Steigerwald, whose later plays are generally written in totally different manner. No doubts, Steigerwald has become one of the most important Czech playwrights of his generation, but he probably started his playwriting career later, in the late 1970s. In 1989, *Juro Jánošík* has been staged again, as always with Karel Steigerwald listed as the author of the play.

¹³ Based on an eponym short story (*Já, truchlivý Bůh*) from the first edition of Kundera’s *Laughable Loves* (1961).

¹⁴ The list of other film and TV adaptations of Kundera’s works would be longer even if our focus remains in the 1960s: *Nurse of my Nurses* (1963, for TV), *Nobody Will Laugh* (1965) or *Eduard and God* (1969). In 1968 a film adaptation of Kundera play *The Owners of the Keys* was created for Yugoslavian television as well.

by Karol Spišák), both officially labelled as written by scriptwriter Peter Ševčovič¹⁵. Kundera's artistic account from that period could be even charged by one (or two) radio play(s) and a translation of Alexandre Blok's play *The Rose and the Cross* (from the Russian)¹⁶.

Almost all these "small", occasional and circumstantial writings are not considered by Kundera as worth to be mentioned among his own works. For sure, I can agree with him: some of them were written just to earn money, to survive in a difficult period of his life¹⁷. However, at least *The Owners of the Keys* and *The Blunder* (and/or *Juro Jánošík*) should not be denied to those who would like to learn more about Milan Kundera.

As a Czech theatre historian, I can't help myself: I have to consider Milan Kundera not only as a novelist. He has touched and affected the world of theatre and drama more than slightly (regardless of what he claims). On top of that, his life is full of theatrical events and acts. Kundera does not have to be a good actor to be a great player. And he has played (and he still plays, even in his nineties!) an important role in dealing with Czech(oslovak) history and the legacy of the communist era (again, regardless of what he claims).

Well, Milan Kundera – a Playwright: true or false?

I don't like theatre

Milan Kundera, the author of *Ignorance*, likes to repeat that he does not remember certain things and events and has forgotten many specific details. This method of effacing or modifying certain events, actions and works is a powerful weapon in his quest for self-canonisation as a successful and unique novelist. On top of that, Kundera does (and did) not hesitate to change or even invert his statements.

Kundera's first play – *The Owners of the Keys* (*Majitelé klíčů / Les Propriétaires des clés*) – was published for the first time (in Czech) in September 1961 on the pages of the then official and influent theatre review journal *Divadlo (Theatre)*¹⁸.

¹⁵ Some of this information could be found in the recent "unofficial" biography of Milan Kundera published in 2020 by Jan Novák. The book has caused vivid polemics in the Czech milieu, accusing Novák of denigration of Kundera and distortion of the facts. Novák's book is definitely not perfect but shows perfectly another side of a possible biographical approach to the artist completely opposite to what Kundera tries to promote during all his lifetime: an official version authorised by living artist vs. unofficial research, uncensored but based on information of the artist's life and work found in archival documents.

¹⁶ The play has been staged in 1972 in a regional theatre in Pilsen (Plzeň), "officially" translated by an actor of the theatre (Jaroslav Konečný).

¹⁷ Among other "unofficial jobs" Kundera had to do in the years preceding his emigration, is the writing of horoscopes for a popular Czechoslovak weekly magazine (*Mladý svět*) as well. It should be noted that this is not an entirely accidental or superficial activity as Kundera – and his wife Věra – have been interested in astrology for a long period of their lives.

¹⁸ *Divadlo* was an official monthly theatre review journal published since 1949. Following the "socialist realist" era in the 1950s, the review has become legendary during the 1960s, mostly due to the supervision of two editors: Jaroslav Vostrý (co-founder of Činoherní klub theatre) and Milan Lukeš (scholar and translator). Czech readers of the review could get familiar with contemporary plays,

In a short note by playwright, preceding the text of play, one can read: “[...] and I decided to saddle an another horse; it could be that drama has been tempting me for a long long time as the most architectural and the most synthetical of all literary genres; or maybe (and it could be the main reason) what I wanted to tell was possible to tell only in a play. [...] I wrote my play; I finished it, the play is major of age; and I would probably not to obstruct it.”¹⁹ (Kundera 1961: 720).

The (adult) play has been staged for the first time only a few months later. In spring 1962, Kundera’s first play had flown out from the playwright’s nest and has started a successful tour of Czech and Slovak theatres all around the country: 11 shows opened only in 1962, with 6 other performances following in next four years²⁰. The play began its life so enthusiastically and so independently that the author felt an urgent need to react almost immediately and to defend his play, to help it to find its voice and express itself to the public.

The reason was simple: the play and the stage productions had been successful but critics and spectators expressed different emotions and distinct points of view to what playwright had attended. Theatre, as an art escaping generally all attempts for the “total context” (to refer to Jacques Derrida), represents a danger for Kundera the writer: the danger of (artistic) independence and autonomy.

Kundera felt an urgent need to explain how his play and ideas were to be read and understood. In his commentary to the 1962 edition of the play, Kundera gives his own interpretation of the play and disagrees with certain theatre critics²¹: he points out that his play is neither “*any traditional drama from the World War Two resistance period, nor a play in the style of Ionesco*”. He reminds that his play is a “(100 minutes long) one act play” and has to be read not as a simple story but as a complex structure of two parallel stories (the moral one and the banal one) completed by four “visions” of the characters²². Kundera comments also on a mo-

both Czech/Slovak and translated from other languages, and with current events in the world of theatre and drama. The review served as a fruitful connection of Czechoslovak theatre artists with their international companions. On top of that, the review had a brilliant visual layout designed by excellent scenographers and photographers such as Libor Fára and Josef Koudelka. In the beginning of 1970, the communist regime decided to impose a ban on the review, an actual issue of the review was destroyed and Divadlo suddenly disappeared from the map of the European theatre world.

¹⁹ Unless noted otherwise, all translations from Czech are done for the purposes of the study by the author.

²⁰ If we read Czech interviews with Milan Kundera from the 1960s, he is depicted primarily as a prominent and promising playwright, his respected and acclaimed career of a poet from the 1950s slowly coming to an end. Shortly, Kundera becomes a famous Czechoslovak writer even before he has ever written a single novel – The Joke was published in 1967, after a couple of years of struggling with censorship.

²¹ In the 1962 edition of the play, there can also be found a “methodical note” by Otomar Krejča, director of the Prague’s stage performance, explaining his attitude to the play. Krejča describes his own approach to the staging of the play and, to conclude, he demonstrates an appreciation of the playwright’s text: “*Kundera’s play is very close to the theatre we wanted to be heading towards. [...] Kundera] has an inclination to use all possible techniques of contemporary modern drama and to use them in a brand new way.*” (Kundera 1962: 12).

²² The play is maybe formulaic in the sense of the subject – story is situated into a small Czech/Moravian city in the period of the Nazi occupation in the 1940s. In contrast, the structure of the

rality of the play and tries ironically to show that he – as a playwright – has not the same morality as his characters do: “Some people would like to bring a lawsuit even against Shakespeare that he lett die an innocent Ophelia” (Kundera 1962: 83-85).

However, in his commentary to the first edition of the play in 1961 (i.e., before the play was staged), Kundera claims that “a play is always a bit cleverer than a playwright” and humbly confesses that the reason for this is to be found not only in the fact that there is the “author’s sense and sensibility” involved in the play but also “experiences of the centuries of an ancient genre” as well. (Kundera 1961: 720) On the contrary, in the playwright’s note to the 4th edition published in 1964 – i.e., no later than three years after the first edition and the first note²³ – readers find completely different words: “Maybe, I would never reveal this secret but I have never felt any attraction for theatre. [...] I have always been deaf to theatre, I have even started to reconcile with this congenital disorder. Before I began writing my play, I could count all theatre shows I have ever seen in my life on the fingers of both hands. But I loved to read plays; drama has interested me forever – but only as a literary issue: same as short story, poem, novel; actor, director, stage can be easily left out of consideration.” (Kundera 1964: 11).

Well, which Kundera to choose? Which Kundera to believe?

Anyway, the fact is that from the very beginning of his career Kundera has been attracted and repeatedly touched by the world of theatre. And he was not alone. He even constituted an integral part of a group of artists - the majority of them being prominent poets - who worked in cooperation with the artistic directors of the National Theatre in Prague in the late 1950s/1960s. This working group called “the National Theatre Workshop” (Dílňa Národního divadla) was created under the supervision of the artistic director of the first Czechoslovak stage Otomar Krejča (1921–2009) and his friend and close artistic fellow-worker, dramaturge Karel Kraus (1920–2014)²⁴.

play is innovative and progressive – partly inspired by Brecht’s narrative dramaturgy of and, perhaps, Sartre’s “théâtre des situation”. In Kundera’s own words: “The first storyline, the one the critics have described, is reminiscent of the regular run of occupation dramas, the second storyline [...] is perhaps more like the unfamiliar dramaturgy of the Ionesco type of anti- or pseudo-drama. [...] Two voices [...] individual strands of thought are gradually examined and reworked by both voices, i.e., by both storylines; meaning that all the strands of thought [...] are in the play illuminated from both sides, from the point of view both of greatness and of pettiness” (Kundera 1962: 83-84; translated by Barbara Day).

²³ It should be noted that the play was met with a huge success, both official and artistic: not only was it re-edited four times in three years – once in a popular theatre review, twice as a book and once as a script in the edition of Czechoslovak literary agency DILIA – but the play was also awarded (1963) the most official “state prize” – named in honour of the first communist president of the Czechoslovakia Klement Gottwald.

²⁴ The stories of the life and work of Krejča and Kraus are perhaps as turbulent as Kundera’s. Krejča and Kraus were banned from the National Theatre in 1961 and founded their own theatre company Divadlo za branou (Theatre behind the Gate) which was liquidated after a few theatre seasons, in 1972 (after Krejča’s expulsion from the Communist party following the events in 1968). Krejča has (similarly to Kundera) lived through both phases – support of the regime (during the 1950s/1960s) and the persecution (after 1968). On the other hand, Krejča’s work as director was known, due to his

Kundera – together with other excellent poets as the (younger) Josef Topol and the (older) František Hrubín – worked in the workshop and “developed” his play for the National theatre. The project of “drama laboratory” really had something to show: the plays written in the frame of the group were staged successfully all around the country and some of them can be still counted among the glories of modern Czech playwriting²⁵. And so, Kundera’s first play was written – officially – for the National theatre in Prague, under the supervision of the artistic duo Krejča-Kraus who tried to support the staging of innovative contemporary plays focusing on contemporary themes²⁶.

Nevertheless, the protagonist of Kundera’s play is: “*immersed in a bourgeois environment of convention, complacency, and romantic love, from which he is roused by a call to arms from the Communist brotherhood*” (DAY, 2019: 133). The play represents: “*a conflict between certainty, as it were, in the justice of the Cause, the resistance to the Germans, and the ‘weakness’ of doubt that plagues the protagonist for whom (inverting Gorky’s maxim) ‘man’ no longer sounds proud, and to whom the responsibilities of family present a counterbalance to those of political activism.*” (Cooke 1992: 80).

Simply put, the play could be contemporary and modern in the sense of structure and narrative form, characters could be progressively “trago-grotesque” (in Kundera’s words) but the content, ideology and morality of the protagonist remains close to the traditional Socialist realism, even though Kundera’s approach would be a (bit) reformist, not speaking about his qualities of poet-playwright. Therefore, this may be – as Barbara Day correctly notes in her book about modern Czech theatre (*Trial by Theatre*) – the reason “*why Kundera has not allowed the play to be published or performed since the late 1960s*” (Day 2019: 133). Kundera, himself, has later on labelled his first play as a “*very late school work*” written in his thirties; this adjusted self-evaluation should serve as a justification for Kundera to remove the play from the list of his complete works²⁷.

Regardless of the fact that the play has never been staged in Czech theatres since 1966, *The Owners of the Keys* was very quickly ready to start an international career: shortly after its publication in Czech, the play was translated into French, English, German, Russian (several times!), Bulgarian, Hungarian, Italian, and

international connections, also in French and German speaking countries as well (Belgium, Switzerland, Austria).

²⁵ Including *Srpnová neděle* (The Sunday in August) or *Křišťálová noc* (The Crystal Night) by František Hrubín or *Konec masopustu* (End of Carnival) or *Jejich den* (Their Day) by Josef Topol.

²⁶ However, Kundera’s play encountered a period of “strong resistance, artistic and political, to Krejča’s leadership, and official complaints about the (ideological) pessimism of his productions” (Day 2019: 131). The 1960/1961 season was already the last one for Krejča as an artistic director of the National Theatre but as Kundera’s play had already been seen in Ostrava and Olomouc (Spring 1962), approval for the play was granted for the production of the National theatre even though it was directed by Krejča and scheduled for the next season (1961/1962).

²⁷ In 1991, Kundera revealed that when he read (“two years later” after the premiere of his play) Ionesco’s play *Délire en deux*, he realised that “*it was exactly what I wanted to write when I started my Owners of the Keys...*”.

Spanish. In 1962, the National theatre's stage performance of the play was invited to the prestigious *Théâtre des nations* festival in France. French theatre critics and artists²⁸ had been writing about inspiring Czech playwright influenced by Armand Salacrou and Eugene Ionesco but the project did not achieve the goal – the French audience could not yet enjoy a Czechoslovak theatre performance of Kundera's play, to an enormous disappointment of the playwright²⁹.

As numerous productions all over the world have demonstrated, the success of *The Owners of the Keys* was radiant and immediate. The play has found – in the 1960s – enthusiastic spectators in Moscow, Kyiv, Minsk, Tallinn, Göttingen, Frankfurt, Paris and even Montevideo. The popular poet had definitely become a promising playwright.

Briefly speaking, during the 1960s, Kundera is far from a negligible persona in Czechoslovakia: he is everything but the insignificant author that he – later on – will try to present to his new colleagues, friends and readers in the West. After his emigration, Kundera has continuously diminished the role he played in the Czechoslovak culture and society during the 1950–1960s and maximised his share in the reformist activities, including the influence of his opening speech during the famous congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers in 1967³⁰.

In the interview with his future close friend, the famous writer Philip Roth (November 1980), Kundera said that “*forgetting is a form of death ever present with-*

²⁸ Even an influential Louis Aragon who saw the show in Prague, found the play very interesting and promising. Just a short reminder: Aragon became a key person for Kundera's international success, not only in France. He wrote a famous foreword for the French edition of *The Joke* (*La Plaisanterie*) published shortly after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Aragon's text was highly political and provoked the reading of Kundera's novel primarily as a testimony of life under the communist regime which was completely opposite to the intentions of the author. On the other side: Aragon's commentary has caused a wave of interest for a Czechoslovak author. The political reading of Kundera's novel definitely helped to spread his international fame.

²⁹ In Kundera's beloved France, the play has not been staged more than twice: the first time was no sooner than in 1969 (dir. by André Reybaz); for the second – and the last time – the play was staged in Théâtre de l'Est parisien in 1974 (dir. by Georges Werler). Further productions have not been allowed by the playwright. However, surprisingly for many Czechs, in 2020 a production of the play has been announced by the National theatre in Brno, the city where Kundera was born. After more than half of a century, Milan Kundera has finally allowed his play to come back to his homeland. Kundera's restrictions were lifted but COVID-19 sanitary restrictions have postponed the opening night to 2021. (In 2016, one independent Czech amateur theatre company presented a short run of the play in Prague and the Arasbaran cultural center in Tehran announced a production of Kundera's play directed by Mr. Nader Naderpour in 2015).

³⁰ Kundera, as one of the official members of the executive committee of the Union, did not deliver his official speech but spoke provocatively about the role of culture in the life of small nations. However, he was not the only “rebel” speaker of the congress: Pavel Kohout, Václav Havel, Ivan Klíma, A. J. Liehm had also been very critical about the actual status quo of Czechoslovak culture and society. However, Kundera's “disobedience” did not destroy his position in the party and official cultural structures – he got only an official reprimand from the officials of the Czechoslovak Communist party. Kundera remained a communist and tried to support a reformist wing in the Party: “*Je suis persuadé que la cause d'un socialisme démocratisé n'est pas perdue*”, Kundera claimed in a short interview for the French radio during his visit to Paris in October 1968 (on the occasion of the publication of *La Plaisanterie*).

in life.” And a few lines later he adds: “[Czech] history has been rewritten, monuments demolished.” Talking about Czech/Czechoslovak history, Kundera talks about himself as well. In 1980, Kundera of the 1950s/1960s is (or should be) definitely dead. Or at least a controversial part of him.

A Symbol lost in translation?

“*What failed: The Blunder. I have written this play, I guess (I really guess: I have never been writing any diary and all re-dating depends on my less reliable memory), sometime in 1966, during one happy week in Turčianské Teplice spa. Unlike The Owners of the Keys, I like the play very much. However, it is more of a draft than a definitive and accomplished work. I have gone back to the play several times, to repair structural imperfections of the play but I have never succeeded. Maybe, one day, I will try once again. I don't know*”, writes Kundera in his commentary to the first Czech edition of *The Joke* published after 1989.

The Blunder (Ptákovina / La Sotie) is a kind of *The Joke* in the shape of a play. Both written in the mid-1960s, the play and the novel deal with a similar situation caused by a silly joke, by an ambivalent provocation. A seemingly innocent “prank” takes a turn to absurd, tragic-comical consequences, to an existential tragedy which is nevertheless grotesque and brutally funny.

The play was published, similarly to Kundera's first play, as a supplement of the theatre review journal *Divadlo* (January 1969), side by side with the Czechoslovak premiere of the play which had taken place in a regional theatre in Liberec (Reichenberg). During the same turbulent year, *The Blunder* opened in another four Czech and Slovak theatres, including the famous Theatre at the Balustrades (*Divadlo na Zábřadlí*) in Prague³¹. However, all the productions were removed from the programme in the first months of 1970, despite the great acclaim by the audience³². The reasons were all but artistic; Milan Kundera became an unwanted author and all his works were censored. His novels and short stories disappeared from bookshops and libraries, his plays were no longer allowed to be staged.

The Blunder, a play about power, control and manipulation, could be considered as an absurdist play influenced, perhaps, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt's “model plays”. The language of Kundera's second play is playful and demonstrates a high topic on a low, bed story: all set in popular milieu of a school. Zdeněk Hořínek, the then dramaturge of the theatre in Liberec and editor of above mentioned *Divadlo* review, has aptly written in the programme for the first Czech production of the play that “*The Blunder comes from the family of ugly comedies: with Vitrac's Victor as its cousin, Grabbe's Comedy, Satire, Irony and Deeper Meaning as its uncles and Macchiavelli's, The Mandrake as its great-great-grand... mother. But above all, it*

³¹ The play has been staged in Brno as well, where it was presented under a different, original title: *Two Ears, Two Marriages* (Dvě uši, dvě svatby).

³² In 2015, a recently discovered audio recording of one of the last runs of the play at the Theatre at the Balustrades was officially released. Enthusiastic reactions of Czech audience on the recording prove that the play has been interpreted in a very political way, as a satirical allegory of the contemporary situation the society was in.

proudly proclaims its family relationships with the monstrous grotesques about Ubu by Alfred Jarry. However, Hořínek adds, “*despite such an international family tree, the play is unmistakably local. [...] This story with these characters could happen only right now, right here, in our specific and complicated pettiness*”. The fact that *The Blunder* has never been staged abroad is telling as there really was something very special and local about the play. How is it possible that other absurdist plays of “regional” (middle-European) playwrights such as Václav Havel or Slawomir Mrożek have been very successful not only in their respective homelands?

The problem consists neither in the story presenting a kind of a “show trial” with an innocent defendant, nor in the subject of auto-censorship of our own acts and speeches. The trouble comes from a symbol which is – paradoxically – not easy to translate into any other language, a symbol representing a vulgar indication. At the very beginning of the play, a figure of a rhombus with a segment of a line in the centre is drawn on the blackboard by a school headmaster³³. This symbol represents the female sex and it is understood – in the region of the Central Europe – as a vulgar sign, a kind of “f-word”. How to deal with a locally well-known symbol which does not seem to be understood in other cultures?³⁴

In the reviews, we can read lines about “*an ancient sign of rhombus*” dating back supposedly to old runic letters but spectators of the 1969/1970’s Czechoslovak productions could also read about “middle-European” locality of the symbol in the programs of the stage productions. Soon the theatre companies – directors, dramaturges and actors – became completely aware of the specificity of the sign. However, when Milan Kundera would later on comment on the reasons why he had never let the play be staged abroad, he would slightly change his attitude and perspective on time. In the last 30-40 years, Kundera regularly declares that he “*thought that the symbol is known worldwide. But then I realised that it says nothing to the French people and that this dirty sign is understood maybe only by the Czechs*”. Kundera tries – once again – to persuade his readers that the progression of events was a bit different than what is revealed and attested in the archives. It is as if he was surprised by the fact which he definitely should have known earlier.

For a long period of time – almost four decades – *The Blunder* remained unstaged. As late as 2008, the director of the Czech literary and theatre agency DILIA Jiří Srstka (as a playwright’s agent who was in personal contact with the author), persuaded Kundera that the play should be given a chance to be staged. Kundera did agree, under one condition: the production had to be directed by Kundera’s friend and colleague with whom he worked in the 1960s Ladislav Smoček (*1932), a theatre director and playwright himself with a great sense for absurdity and the

³³ The symbol is written/drawn by a school headmaster, just as a simple joke; later on, he even adds his name to the symbol and would like to enjoy watching what is going to happen. But everything breaks bad and – at the end – the one who has started off as a “joker”, becomes a victim of his own joke, a helpless observer of cruel games and events played all around him and with him as well.

³⁴ In my humble opinion as a translator and theatre scholar, I would suggest a possible solution: to substitute a purely visual symbol by a partly readable four letter English word (beginning with F). Surely, it is not the same, but it would serve well for the purposes of the play.

nonsensical³⁵. Kundera made some slight alterations to the text but the play did not change a lot. What had changed though, was the political situation and therefore the context the play has entered and encountered. In 2008, an atmosphere of growing disillusion with the development of the society after 1989 was almost tangible – and the new socio-political context definitely helped for a concrete reception of Kundera’s play.

At the same time, Kundera’s *The Blunder* joined a wave of revival of works by the older generation of Czech playwrights. The Czech audience had re-discovered once famous and popular authors who have been silent for a long time: new plays such as Milan Uhde’s *Miracle at the Black House* (written 2002, staged 2007) and Václav Havel’s *The Leaving* (written 2006, published 2007, staged 2008) have become – together with Kundera’s theatre comeback – top events of the seasons³⁶. The old generation of Czech playwrights has shown its artistic vitality and proved that it understands the contemporary world. The legendary Czech “drama school” of the 1960s (of what we like to call the “golden sixties”) have touched the hearts of spectators in the 21st century.

In Kundera’s “*absurd grotesque about power and sex*” there was definitely less politics and more of “*common bollocks*”, as critics pointed out in 2008. Kundera’s anti-Ubu came back and struck once again. On top of that, in 2019, Kundera did allow another Czech production of a nearly forgotten play in a regional theatre in Hradec Králové – directed by enfant terrible of Czech theatre Vladimír Morávek. The playwright has come to the decision that he has nothing to be ashamed of, that *The Blunder* is not such a bad play and it could become an integral part of Czech drama patrimony.

Who is the Master here?

Maybe it is a sign of the age but Milan Kundera has (perhaps in celebration of his 90th anniversary?) decided to be more open to his (ex-first) homeland and he donated his personal library to the Moravian library in his beloved Brno. Czech readers and researchers should be able, in the near future, to gain easy access to many of Kundera’s books gathered from all over the world. A nice gesture? Or a kind of reconciliation? Who knows?

However, in the catalogue of the exhibition devoted to Kundera’s work³⁷, entitled “*Kundera (not lost) in translations*”, there could be found, once again, only one theatre play. *Jacques and his Master* has been for a long time the only play Milan Kundera considered worth labelling as: “a play by Milan Kundera”.

The story of the only official Kundera’s play included in the Gallimard’s *La*

³⁵ Smoček is the author of great plays such as *Dr. Burke’s Strange Afternoon* (1966; *Podivuhodné odpoledne dr. Zvonka Burkeho*; the play has been translated in 14 languages!) and the one-act plays *Pique-nique* (1965; *Piknik*) and *The Maze* (1966; *Bludiště*). He was also a co-founder of *Činoherní klub* theatre (est. 1965), one of the most inspiring Czech drama theatres in the last 50 years.

³⁶ Perhaps the new play by Pavel Kohout, *Éros*, could also be added to the list of these playwrights’ comeback at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

³⁷ Exhibition and book organised and published by the Moravian Library in 2019.

Pleïade edition is no less interesting than the stories of the two previous plays. If *The Blunder* could be described as a “drama variation” of a novel *The Joke*, this play, *Jacques and his Master*, plays with the novel by Kundera’s favourite writer. A “drama variation” on Denis Diderot’s novel *Jacques, the Fatalist* could be, in some way, seen as a conventional approach of one playwright (or dramaturge) to the classic literary work. However, as usually in the case of Kundera there is more than meets the eye.

The play was written in Czech (most probably in 1971)³⁸ and staged for the first time in the regional theatre Činoherní studio in Ústí na Labem in December 1975. Just a reminder: 1975 is the year of Kundera’s emigration. The play has been staged as an adaptation of Diderot’s novel entitled *Jacques, the Fatalist* and it was presented as the work of theatre and film director Evald Schorm who covered Kundera as the author of the adaptation in order for the play to escape the communist censorship.

However, the play has been scheduled (but not staged) previously in the programme of the Prague’s Theatre at the Balustrades – bearing the name of its real author. On top of that, the play was to be staged in Zagreb, Yugoslavia as well (the production did not appear before 1980), once again with Milan Kundera listed as its author in the programme. These “details” have undoubtedly passed unnoticed by the official surveillance and communist censors, so that the young, thirty years old, director Ivan Rajmont (1945–2015) could create a stage production which became famous and has remained in the repertoire of the theatre until 1989 – and only a few insiders had any idea about the real identity of the playwright. The life of the first and almost the only Czech production of the play before 1989³⁹ was nearly independent of the playwright living in France.

After 1989, this very production got its second (and even third) life: since 1993 *Jacques and his Master* (with the same cast and in the same stage version) has been presented as a production of a private theatre (Theatre without the Balustrades) established and owned by one of the actors of the original cast. An almost underground, unofficial production has turned into a theatre business but – to be honest – it has succeeded in keeping (at least partly) its atmosphere and free spirit. The actors in the supporting roles have been changing unlike two main characters performed by the original cast: Jiří Bartoška (Jacques) and Karel Heřmánek (Master). The production ran – with several short breaks – from 1975 until 2014. Just imagine: the two main characters began performing their roles when they were 28 years old guys and completed the run of the production as 67 years old men!

³⁸ Kundera knows well that he wrote his play in Czech but this does not prevent him to ignore the following misleading question of writer and editor Jordan Elgrably without making an attempt to correct his interviewer (in the interview taken in 1987) – J.E.: “*You have written a play in French, Jacques et son maître, a homage to Denis Diderot, as well as several essays. When did you begin to feel comfortable using the language?*” / M.K.: “*Oh, in the last three or four years. When writing an article, I now write directly in French...*” Well, once again: just a small modification of reality which suits Kundera’s goals and intentions.

³⁹ The play – always presented as authored by Evald Schorm – was staged again shortly before the Velvet Revolution, in April 1989, in a regional theatre in Ostrava.

For Kundera, his own intermedial variation on Diderot's theme represents a playful complement of his search for a theory of the novel. The play is not only a contemplation about life and fate; Kundera deals with possibilities of narration as well. The dialogues between Jacques and his Master are – in a certain way – a stage version of the theory of drama. It is as if Kundera drew on his experience as a scholar giving lectures on theory of literature and workshops on scriptwriting. Anyway, Milan Kundera managed to put theories of dramatic narration into practice⁴⁰.

On top of that, *Jacques and his Master* is a well written play: conventional in its form but inventive in terms of its ideas. The play represents a kind of slapstick comedy where physical actions and ass-kicking are replaced by words and dialogues. Jacques and his Master are two clowns, somehow related to the absurdity and existential fatality of Beckett's waiting vagabonds. The motto of Kundera's couple could be a simple variation of famous ancient *Dum spiro spero*: while I narrate, I live⁴¹.

Kundera's variation on Diderot is occasionally staged all around the world. The playwright-novelist prefers "poor theatre companies", he does not have confidence in private professional companies. To focus on Czech theatre productions – more than 20 theatres in the Czech Republic have included the play in their repertoire since 1990. The 1990s could be definitely considered as a period of a real boom of Kundera – the playwright on the Czech stages – in the same vein as other previously prohibited authors and playwrights – but only 4 new productions of the play since 2010 are registered in the reliable database of the Czech Arts and Theatre institute.

Jacques and his Master soon found its way to the Slovak stages as well: the first Slovak production dated back to 1983. One decade later, in 1996, the Czech radio recorded a broadcast version of the play with Czech-Slovak cast: popular Slovak actors Julius Satinský (Jacques) and Milan Lasica (Master) speaking Slovak and the rest of the cast performing in Czech. This bi-lingual radio adaptation perfectly proves the comical potential of Kundera's play: the scenes of duo of excellent actors (comédiens) in which mainly Slovak is spoken are great examples of what good actors can do with Kundera's dramatic text. Lasica⁴² and Satinský are far from

⁴⁰ During his long career, Milan Kundera has also written a couple of inspiring forewords and commentaries to the editions of the plays of other playwrights. Kundera has commented, among others, bothon Jean-Paul Sartre's plays translated into Czech (1967) and Václav Havel's plays (*Audience*, *Vernisage*, *Pétition*) translated into French (1980).

⁴¹ The ending of the play shows an incontestable affinity with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: "Jacques: All right, then, I want you to lead me... forward... / Master: (*Looking around, highly embarrassed*) Very well, but where is forward? / Jacques: Let me tell you a great secret. One of mankind's oldest tricks. Forward is anywhere. / Master: (*Turning his head round in a circle*) Anywhere? / Jacques (*Making a large circle with one arm*) Anywhere you look, it's all forward! / Master: (*Without enthusiasm*) Why, that's splendid, Jacques! That's splendid? (*He turns around slowly in place*) / Jacques: (*Melancholy*) Yes sir. I find it quite wonderful myself. / Master: (...*sadly*) Well then, Jacques, forward!" (Kundera 1985: 89) At the end of Ivan Rajmont's stage production, the actors stood still, precisely as Beckett's final stage direction requires: "*They do not move.*"

⁴² On top of that, Milan Lasica has produced an excellent translation of Kundera's play into Slovak.

devoted to every Kundera's word but their detached view helps a lot to express the meaning of the play. It is simple: actors could be, not only in this case, a bit cleverer than a play. And a playwright.

Theatre or novel!

And here we touch on, once again and for the last time, a substantial essence of Kundera's attitude to playwriting. Kundera requires from drama the same as from the novel: total context, absolute subordination to author's intentions. However, drama and theatre are not the same as a novel or a short story. Drama escapes the absolute control of its author. It is well known that for more than a century, the playwright is no longer the unique master of the show; the director stole some of his privileges. But Kundera wants to be different even though he has claimed, as we have seen, in the beginning of his playwriting career that "*the play is always a bit cleverer than the playwright*". To be a playwright in modern theatre means to become a part of a team. To join a collective work. On the contrary, to be a novelist is a solitary job. Choose what you want!⁴³

Theatre has shown to Milan Kundera that if he wants to exercise control over all his literary work, he has to renounce theatre practice which is a pity because he would be a great playwright. If he would like to...

After all, I have to confess that I have written a study about Milan Kundera who does not exist. That is, according to his opinion. In my opinion, Milan Kundera is (and always was) an inspirational playwright. In my opinion, Milan Kundera is one of the greatest performers of contemporary art as well: he has built himself as a living monument, as an exemplary model of himself. Milan Kundera denied himself in order to create Milan Kundera. And theatre helped him a lot in the process of his self-creation.

Milan Kundera is a great player. The pretentious one. One of the greatest.

His translation has been used for all the Slovak productions.

⁴³ As we know, Kundera has made his choice. On the other hand, the theatrical can be found, in a certain way, repeatedly in his novels as well: the structure of *The Farewell Waltz* is close to the form of vaudeville; one of the main characters in *The Festival of Insignificance* is a (wannabe) actor, with the meaningful nickname Caliban; to "act" and to "pretend" becomes a crucial topic of Kundera's last novel (which includes many allusions to the marionette theatre).

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ВЕЛИКИЯТ КУНДЕРА (ТЕАТЪРЪТ В ЖИВОТА И ТВОРЧЕСТВОТО НА ЕДИН РОМАНИСТ)

Петър Христов

Карловия университет, Прага

Резюме: На пръсти се броят световноизвестните писатели, смятани за „свои“ в две различни култури. Към автори като Самюел Бекет или Владимир Набоков може да се добави и името на Милан Кундера (р. 1929). Чех(ословашки) романист, емигрирал във Франция или френски писател, роден в Чехословакия? Човек би казал, че е и двете определения са едновременно верни и неверни.

Като чешки театрален историк бих добавил, че той е не само романист, но и е оказал влияние върху света на театъра и драматургията. А и животът му е изпълнен с театрални събития и действия. Кундера и до днес играе важна роля за интерпретирането на чехо(словашката) история и наследството на социализма.

Чешките читатели и театрални дейци знаят, че през дългия си творчески живот Кундера е написал три пиеси. От друга страна, когато френският читател прелисти двата тома „събрани съчинения“, издадени от „Галимар“ в престижната поредица „Плеяда“, ще намери само една пиеса – „Жак фаталистът и неговият господар“. Нито следа (или може би само следа!) от „Собствениците на ключове“ или „Грешката“, макар „Собствениците на ключове“ да е преведена на френски в началото на 60-те г. на XX в. и дори да е поставена във Франция през 1969 г., да не говорим за огромния ѝ успех на чешките театрални сцени през същото десетилетие.

Да се говори за произведението на Кундера е нелека задача – то ти говори като на читател, а същевременно авторът те насочва и ти обяснява как да го четеш. Кундера обаче повтаря ли, повтаря (нека все пак обобщим), че неговото произведение е чисто и просто негово произведение. Нека спрем поглед върху драматическите му произведения и да се запитаме какво е театърът за един от най-превежданите и четени романисти? Как се приемат пиесите му в двете му родини? И защо, за бога, пиесата му „Грешката“ (1969), смятана от самия автор през 1990 г. за „несценична“, се завръща на сцената през 2008 г. и все още се играе на чешка сцена през сезона 2020–2021?

Ключови думи: театър, чешки театър, драматурзи, френска литература, Милан Кундера, превод, межкултурен подход