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2017

Review of *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape. Cabarets and Plays from the Terezin/Theresienstadt Ghetto*. Edited and with an Introduction by Lisa Peschel.

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KOSMAS



N° 29.1

by the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences (SVU)

KOSMAS ISSN 1056-005X

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Kosmas: Czechoslovak and Central European Journal

(Formerly *Kosmas: Journal of Czechoslovak and Central European Studies*, Vols. 1-7, 1982-1988, and *Czechoslovak and Central European Journal*, Vols. 8-11, (1989-1993).

Kosmas is a peer reviewed, multidisciplinary journal that focuses on Czech, Slovak and Central European Studies. It is published bi-annually by the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences (SVU).

You can find further information about *Kosmas* on the web at the newly-revised SVU website, <http://www.svu2000.org/kosmas>.

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***Performing Captivity, Performing Escape. Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto.* Edited and with an Introduction by Lisa Peschel. London: Seagull Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8574-2-000-8. 420 pp.**

Performing Captivity, Performing Escape. Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto presents Lisa Peschel's edited, revised, and translated into English *Divadelní texty z terezínského ghetta/Theatretexte aus dem Ghetto Theresienstadt, 1941-1945*.

Terezín/Theresienstadt was unusual in that it served as a ghetto with an attached prison, as well as a concentration camp. The Nazi propaganda used this camp to convince the world that life was "normal" in this supposed Jewish resettlement area. For this reason, they allowed cultural life to take place. Peschel's work is an anthology of selected texts originating there. It contains cabarets, puppet play scripts, as well as historical and verse dramas, poems, songs, and satirical radio programs. It embraces humorous as well as serious texts, couplets, songs, radio sketches, even children's texts. Witnesses' and research commentaries, as well as extensive bibliographies, accompany the cited writings.

Famously, the camp was portrayed in two films intended to deceive the Red Cross and the world public about the true nature of Theresienstadt. Though "formally approved," cultural activities there were censored, limited, and conditioned. Ironically, the performances allowed prisoners to experience moments of "normal life," although many prisoners met their death in the camp or were sent to death on the transports. This small fort town, built in the 1780s, was designed to host a population of 7,000. Nevertheless, when used as a Jewish resettlement, the population at its peak reached 60,000 prisoners, creating extremely harsh living conditions with lack of space, water, food, sanitation, and a large death toll (33,000), even though it never served as an extermination camp.

Numerous memoirs and accounts of witnesses share much information about the camp's thriving cultural life, which occurred mostly between late 1942 and the summer of 1944, despite the decreasing population—many were taken on transports, which brought an abrupt end to the cultural participation of authors, actors, writers, musicians, choreographers, dancers, and others. Although many of the works of art and texts have been lost, some of the Theresienstadt works, such as Hans Krása's *Brundibár*, earned international recognition and have become symbolic for the power of art over dehumanizing Nazi practices.

In her introduction, Peschel explains that this edition was created with performance in mind, adapting the translation for performances. This well-researched annotated anthology reconstructs the plays' history as well as the lives and fates of former prisoners; it shares numerous connections, fills in gaps, and bridges available scholarship on the cultural life of Theresienstadt. This large selection contains Czech and German sections (referring to the original language) of texts by Czech, Moravian and Austrian Jews. Each text has an introduction, contains notes and biographical information about the authors, lists actors and other participants, including short biographical information if it could be found. The texts themselves are supported by extensive notes from the survivors. These commentaries help contemporary readership to understand references to life in the camp, as well as to explain subversive remarks and clarify other references which otherwise would be missed or hard to understand.

Peschel's English title refers to the major goals of the performances: to dramatize, satirize and deal with captivity and its realities, to show the power of art to enable escape, to ventilate nostalgia for home, to experience one's humanity in the midst of dehumanization, and to experience aesthetic pleasures amidst misery, trauma, and pain. The texts do reveal coping strategies—art and humor seemed to help many to cope, to overcome their traumatic present and the struggles of daily life. On dealing with trauma through the performative arts, Peschel, who conducted numerous interviews with survivors, summarizes her understanding: In the ghetto, quick adaptation to the new conditions was a matter of life and death. Theatrical performances could not change these conditions, but they could help the prisoners counteract the intense feelings of fear and helplessness in a way that kept them from becoming paralyzed by despair, and enabled them to go on with the daily fight for life (6).

The volume also contains an introduction by survivor Ivan Klíma, who shares his personal memories of seeing *The Bartered Bride*, *Brundibár*, various puppet shows, plays by Chekhov, Gogol, and Langer, as well as to see the poetry of Jiří Wolker, František Hrubín and K. J. Erben being staged. He also recalls powerful communal moments, such as the prisoners singing along with the popular Werich and Voskovec Liberated Theater. Klíma remembers: "Women sang even though it was difficult for the women to bring themselves to sing. They sang because it was a demonstration of free life in a hopelessly unfree environment" (38).

Although most of performances were staged and performed for hundreds of prisoners as Klíma noted, there were also performances staged for the benefit of sick and immobile prisoners in their rooms, quarters, corridors, or yards. Such

philanthropic performances were most notably arranged by Leo and Myra Strauss (known as Strauss Kabarets) or the Hofer Kabarets, also represented in the volume. The contribution and atmosphere of Strauss performances is explained in a few of the included essays. Phillip Manes, a prisoner, provides the following description:

The light muse has moved out into the courtyards, the posts and boards have been set up. It is the Strausses, those steadfast bringers of merriment, who with their ensemble have provided the elderly with two entertaining and often contemplative hours over two thousand times. They bring a colorful music, dance, seriousness and cheer, and above it all sounds the accordion, this rescuer of those in need of difficult-to-arrange accompaniment (227).

From the few texts included, it is clear that such cabarets moved between light and darkness, with the major aim to cheer the suffering audiences, the old and the sick. The unbelievably large number of Strauss cabaret performances—around 2000—serves as proof of the determination and belief in the power of art to help people to bear the unbearable. It is hard to believe that despite the ever-decreasing number of artists risking exposure to sickness and illnesses, the performances were ongoing, numbering about twenty a week, cheering the ill, the bedridden, the desperate, and the dying. These cabarets, sung in German, were frequently inspired by Viennese literary cabarets, containing combinations of good humor and social commentary.

Besides well-known operas, concerts, and traditionally popular puppet plays, the cabarets proved to be the most popular genre in the camp, as they were as popular in pre-war theaters, bars, and clubs, thus they are well-represented in the anthology. Cabarets satirized everyday reality, criticized the local hierarchy, favoritism, the daily rules, even German camp terms and procedures. Also included are also the so-called revues associated with the Liberated Theater style, consisting of short satirical sketches accompanied by jazz music from the pen of popular composer Jaroslav Ježek (represented by texts of the comic duo Josef Justing and Jiri Štefl). The most popular cabaret performers recognized in the publication were Karel Švenk, Felix Prokeš, Vítězslav Horpatzky, Pavel Stránský, Kurt Egerer, and Pavel Weisskopf.

From the lesser-known cabarets, the anthology also contains a short excerpt from a “women’s” cabaret by Lisa Zeckendorf-Kutzinski. It was staged once on New Year’s Eve and performed before 350 prisoners. This cabaret satirizes the fashion, hairstyle, and even the figure of “the new camp woman”:

Smooth-shaven feminine skull is one of the most attractive features of the new woman. It looks exquisitely young and provocative. And now about your figure, the new shape is uber-slim; one wears one’s bones in view, not with little cushions of fat in the right places. You are all much too fat—so, off with that cumbersome fat; slim and bony is sexy. European scientists developed new diet. We will reveal the secret to you. In the morning, black chicory coffee, refusing milk and sugar, of course, and with one piece of dry bread—by no means no more. At midday, a thin soup, made with turnips that are actually intended for cattle, but that contribute greatly to the weight

loss. In the evening black coffee again, this time with two pieces of dry bread. Weight loss is guaranteed, and with long-term maintenance of this diet, success is dead certain. The highest acceptable weight is eighty pounds, but she who can bring her weight up to seventy pounds is a queen (402).

One of the most interesting contributions is the poetry of young authors, such as by Georg Kafka, who perished before he was able to write more; he died at the age of 22. Georg Kafka (Franz Kafka's relative) became a critically acclaimed young author in Theresienstadt. He worked as a typist during the day and wrote at night. His poem, *The Death of Orpheus*, seems devoid of any direct reference to camp life, but it reflects on his own inner life and on the nature of being an artist:

Perhaps you could look deep into his heart
 By listening to the rhythm of his verse.
 Play out your life the way that we perform this play,
 Present it earnestly, but oh, never forget:
 It's just a play. Regard our tale,
 So quickly here then gone,
 As a model for your own life, if it pleases you (338).

Peschel's book shows that many brave men and women contributed to the rich cultural life of the Theresienstadt camp. The reproductions of posters, sheet music, and photographs enhance the volume's immense scholarship, extensive comparative textual and archival research, numerous interviews, as well as correspondence with survivors. They help one to comprehend the complex art climate in the camp, inasmuch as the texts were created alongside the visual works of art. There were also individuals who drew and wrote diaries in secret since such attempts, when discovered, were harshly punished. Clandestinely and under the threat of capital punishment, prisoners conducted seminars, lessons, lectures and issued magazines and newsletters.

Performing Captivity, Performing Escape. Cabarets and Plays from the Terezin/Theresienstadt Ghetto helps the reader comprehend the immense creative spirit that was present in such a dehumanizing space. It bears witness to the tremendous loss of creative human capital, as it narrates and testifies to the power of art and to the creativity of people forced to live and die in such truly absolutely horrendous conditions. This work bears witness to a common bilingualism and transnationality that was later uprooted in the postwar national cleansing, making these bilingual and transnational texts unfit to be included in postwar national canons. The anthology serves as a powerful incentive for and window into a timely and conditioned transnational art that largely exists outside of traditional national literary canons.

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