

## **The Baroque Theatre of Český Krumlov**

The Baroque Theatre of Český Krumlov is one of the oldest Central-European castle theatres and at the same time it also represents one of the most completely preserved baroque theatres in the world.

Various similar theatres are preserved in Europe till now, for example court theatres in Italy – in Sabionetta, Vicenza or Ferrara, where mainly theatre buildings are preserved, but the original theatre equipment such as decorations, costumes, props etc. are not preserved. Not only building but additionally the torso of stage machinery and partly also the theatre inventory are preserved in German – speaking areas, for example in Ludwigsburg, Gotha, Bayreuth, Schwetzingen, Lambach and Grein. A similar situation exists in France in Versailles and Compiègne.

In Europe, there is only one theatre that is comparable with Český Krumlov – the Baroque Theatre in the Swedish Royal Palace in Drottningholm. Like in Český Krumlov, the original theatre building, technical equipment, decorations, props and costumes are preserved. There all date back to the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The history of the Castle Theatre**

- The tradition of theatre culture in Český Krumlov begins in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The sources regarding the Italian comedy Polixena, whose libretto was copied and deposited in the Castle Library, date back to the later period of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.
- In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a number of theatrical productions were realized at the court of the last Rožmberk. The hand-written library catalogue of Peter Vok of Rožmberk is stored in the Swedish Royal Library in Stockholm. This catalogue mentions a number of theatrical plays by historical authors such as Aristophanes, Suffolk's and Euripides, etc.
- There is document reminding that in the year 1613, two theatre scenes existed in Český Krumlov – one in the castle's hall, the other in the town's Jesuits College.
- In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the physical dimension of the castle's hall did not suit the demands of owners, so in 1682 Prince Jan Kristián of Eggenberg founded an independent theatre building in the fifth courtyard. It was build according to the plans of Italian builders Jakub de Maggi and Pietro Spinetta. At that time a professional music ensemble – Eggenberg's Prince Music Band was active at the castle and what is also unique, since 1675 professional drama company. It consisted of about 15 permanent

actors who acted in theatre performances until the year 1691 when they were dismissed from their services. The work of important authors such as Lope de Vega, William Shakespeare, Moliere, Jean Racine, Calderon de la Barca, Pierre Corneille and others did not belong to the repertoire of Eggenberg's theatre.

- Another blossoming period for theatre life in Český Krumlov was the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the years 1765-1766 Prince Josef Adam of Schwarzenberg had the theatre rebuilt according to Andrea Altomonte's plans. The auditorium and the stage were newly painted in cooperation with artists Hans Wetschel and Leo Märkl from Vienna. They also created a set of the theatre decorations. The work of the famous architect Guiseppe Galli-Bibiena served as a model for this arrangement. The Schwarzenbers's repertoire included ballet and opera by for example Guiseppe Scarlatti, Nicolo Piccini, Giovanni Paisiello, Christoph Willibald Glück, Antonio Salieri, Florian Leopold Gassmann, Vojtěch Jírovec and others. Some of them composed specifically for this theatre.
- In the 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre culture here experienced stagnation. Theatre became the centre of interest for travelling companies. Performances happened only occasionally with the agreement of the owners. In the year 1898 the theatre was closed down because of unsafe condition.
- In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the theatre was used only for a short time. It was from 1954 until 1966 as part of the South Bohemian Theatre Festival. In the year 1966 the building and the theatre inventory was unfit for use to the theatre was closed to the public and in 1966 the restoration work began.
- The restoration works are lingering until now – almost 60 years and are not finished yet. At present, we estimate that about 90% of all theatre inventory has been completed and restored. The introduction of trial visiting periods by the general public commenced in the autumn of 1997.

### **The Philosophy of Restoration and Function of the Castle Theatre**

The basic renovation problem of the Castle Theatre consists of, on the one hand, the philosophy of renovation, and on the other hand, the philosophy of restoration. The aim of restoration works is to keep the maximum authenticity and originality. That is why original materials, technology and even traces of original handwork have been studied very thoroughly and used towards restoration. Our main effort is to restore and preserve the theatre, not to

reconstruct it. The theatre has been nearly 90% preserved in its untouched genuine state from the 60's of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The theatre fund**

At present the original theatre fund consists of the theatre building, decorations, costume, items, props, machinery, special effects instruments, orchestra pit, lighting units, benches in the auditorium, etc. Part of the fund is placed directly in the theatre building itself, while part of the originals are gradually relocated to the depository, which is built in the „Renaissance House“ behind the theatre.

### ***The Lighting***

The lighting played a very important role in the theatre atmosphere. The spectator could perceive the illusive baroque scene correctly only through certain light intensity. Each effect relies heavily on the flickering candlelight. This challenge is solved with the use of Swedish patented lighting, which is used in royal Theatre in Drottningholm. These are electric bulbs that closely resemble a candle light with its intensity, colour, but above all else – with flickering effect. The principle is used in the auditorium, but in the future it will be used on the stage as well. Real candles are used in the orchestra pit.



### ***The machinery***

The principle of the baroque scenery depends on the quick change of its wings. That was made possible by means of theatre machinery that is located partly in the space below the stage and partly in the rig loft above. The moving of side wings was managed from the space below the stage. The machinery in the rig loft above was used for the change of backdrops and borders. The change of scenes was performed by 8 or 12 technicians (operators) in the course of about 8 – 12 seconds. In this short period of time the amazed spectator could find himself at the seaside, in the streets, in



the garden, in the forest or in the prison – and that all smoothly without curtains or blackouts. Today's theatres usually draw curtains between the scenes. This problem was solved in the baroque theatre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The stage machinery is about 80% in working order, even though its complexity is not fully understood yet. It is an object of further studies and research.

### ***Decorations***

The preserved theatre inventory includes more than 350 decorations and scenic supplements made till the year 1766. Decorations consist of 13 basic stage scenes – for example: the Town, the Garden, the Forest, the Military Camp, the Burgess's Room, the Banquet Hall, the Harbour, the Prison and others. The big challenge was how to place each decoration on the stage. Studies and experiments confirm that



various combinations of scenes and scenic supplements made it possible to carry out several variations of basic scenic layout. Out of the original thirteen scenes, four are already completely restored.

### ***Scenic Effects***

- The theatre performances also included a number of scenic effects. Some of them have not been researched yet. Angels and supernatural creatures appeared on the scene with the aid of a flying machine. Hellish creatures turned up with the aid of four trap doors. Waves gave the illusion of a sea storm from which a whale or a dolphin emerged. Boats and ships that constitute part of the preserved props floated on the sea. Machines that produced sound effects imitated wind, thunder or rattle of horse's hoofs. We cannot overlook a machine for the sound of rain. The lightning, the effects of a sunset or a sunrise constitute part of the lighting effects collection. We have just finished restoration of the wave effects equipment.

## **The Interpretation Practice**

The castle theatre is restoring in its entirety.

Similarly, just as each detail of the theatre inventory is restored, so a number of experts and scholars try to study and „to restore“ the original atmosphere of the baroque theatre. In the last five years, regular trial rehearsals were held here. We use

contemporary theatrical repertoires during these

rehearsals. Musicians play authentic contemporary instruments of their replicas. Singers and actors wear replicas of baroque costumes and corresponding make-up. Contemporary choreography is presented on the stage, the contemporary interpretation practice is respected and all former rules, valid for 18<sup>th</sup> century actors, are kept during the trial rehearsals. Each emotion, each situation on the stage was accompanied by a certain stance, facial expression, and certain gesture. The gesture was part of the given cannon and was of necessity for each actor. These gestures resembled extreme poses of baroque statues and religious paintings. All aspects of the contemporary theatre practice are studied and within the framework of trial performances, are brought to life on state in original theatre environment.



## **The current and planned use of the Theatre**

The aim of the aforementioned work is to open the theatre for theatre production in 3 to 5 years from now. There will never be a mass production but only 5 or 6 performances a year.

They will be mainly for scholars and study purposes. A bigger production would cause considerable climate and humidity changes as well the attritions of the original equipment.

The date of completion of the theatre restoration depends largely on scholastic and restoration study work, and on the amount financial support gained. Restoration is financed by the Historical Monuments Departement in České Budějovice. Another important contributor has been The Foundation of the Baroque Theatre of the Castle Český Krumlov since 1992.

Sponsors and supporters have been the third important source of financial support for several years. There are many financial institutions, firms, and also private individuals for whom the participation in the restoration of this world-unique monument presented an opportunity to pass their name on to the next generation. The result of all this effort will be the restoration of the spirit of baroque culture in its authentic environment. Nowadays, this is possible only in two places in the world: in the Swedish Drottningholm and in Český Krumlov.