



Obyčejní  
lide



Divadlo  
Archa

普通人

Ordinary  
people

Archa Theatre  
Prague  
Living Dance Studio  
Beijing



The performance is a co-production by the Archa Theatre and the Hellerau European Centre for the Arts, Dresden within the European project Theatron and with the financial support of the Culture Program.



Premieres in Prague on 22 and 23 January 2017 and in Dresden on 27 and 28 January 2017.

The performance is a collective project shaped by the life experiences of its creators. The performers are themselves the authors of the text presented on the stage. In addition to these authentic texts, the performance features:

Part of an interview with Miloš Zeman for Chinese television station CCTV on 27 October 2014 during his state visit to China.

An aria from Bedřich Smetana's opera *Dalibor* [1868]. German libretto Josef Wenzig, translation into Czech by Ervín Špindler.

Questions inspired by the medieval morality of *Everyman* – published in the magazine *Divadelní revue* 8, no. 4 [1997], p. 79-104 translated into Czech by Pavel Drábek.

Song by Chinese rock singer Cui Jian "Nothing to My Name", which in spring 1989 became the anthem of the students demonstrating in Tiananmen Square.



**Ordinary People**  
**A joint theatre project by the Archa Theatre**  
**and the Living Dance Studio, an independent**  
**theatre in Beijing.**

**Performers**  
**Wen Hui, Vladimír Tůma, Jiang Fan,**  
**Philipp Schenker, Wen Luyuan,**  
**Jan Burian, Li Xinmin,**  
**Jaroslav Hrdlička**  
**and Pavel Kotlík**

**Directed by: Jana Svobodová and Wen Hui**  
**Music and sound design: Jan Burian**  
**Video art: Jaroslav Hrdlička**  
**Light design: Pavel Kotlík**  
**Assistant director: Valida Babayeva**  
**Dramaturgy: Ondřej Hrab**  
**Dramaturgical assistance:**  
**Lonneke van Heugten and Carmen Mehnert**  
**Translations: Ian Yang, Anna Vrbová,**  
**Andre Swoboda**  
**Subtitles: Haruna Honcoopová**  
**Production: Jindřich Krippner**  
**Special thanks:**  
**Martin C. Putna and Zuzana Li**



## Vladimír Tůma



In 1960, when China's Great Leap Forward culminated and turned into a humanitarian catastrophe, Vladimír was 18. He danced banned rock and roll at the Alfa café, trained as a universal toolmaker, and was a walk-on at the National Theatre in Prague in opera crowd scenes. He has since worked in various state enterprises. In the Year of the Goat (1991) he found a job in a private company, where he works today. In the Year of the Monkey that followed, he stopped actively playing ice hockey. He lives in Čelákovice, a small town near Prague, and enjoys walking in the mountains, gardening and painting. The first time he ever met someone from China was at the rehearsals for this performance.

## Wen Hui



At the time of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia Wen graduated from the Beijing Dance Academy. For the next 17 years she was a member of the National Dance Theatre. In 1994, when the Czech Republic started airing the first private television station, she founded together with Wu Wenguang the independent company Living Dance Studio. Ten years later, the Living Dance Studio was located in the centre of the CCD Work Station in Beijing's Caochangdi quarter, which was designed for it by Ai Weiwei. Their performances, which combine dance and documentary, are invited to festivals around the world. In 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimea, CCD Work Station ceased its activities. For Wen this was a new beginning, leading to the performance *Red* and the project *Ordinary People*.



**Jiang  
Fan**

In the year when Stanislav Gross replaced Jiří Paroubek as the head of the Czech government Jiang graduated from the Dance Conservatory in Shanghai. Four years later, in 2009, she went on to study choreography at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. For the next six years she danced in the ballet company of the Shanghai Opera. In 2014, she founded her own studio Qian Kong Fan. The following year she began working with Wen Hui and participated in the performance *Red*.



**Jana  
Svobodová**

When President Nixon visited China Jana was ten years old and attended the ballet school of the National Theatre. In 1987, when reformer Hu Yaobang was removed from his post as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, she graduated from the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. Her artistic direction was influenced by meetings with the creators of modern theatre and dance such as Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre or Japanese dancer Min Tanaka. Since the Year of the Ox (1997) she has been strongly committed to socio-specific theatre projects. She creates projects in the Czech Republic, but has also staged shows in South Africa and the United States. She is the artistic director of Archa.lab and the Akcent International Festival of Documentary Theatre.



## Jan Burian



Jan was born in the year when Mao Zedong died. He founded his first band at the age of eight with his brother. Six years later, in the Year of the Horse (1990), they began publicly touring under the name Jatka č.5 (Slaughterhouse 5). For the next six years he began working with the Archa Theatre. He creates music and sound design for theatre performances. For the last ten years he has been a member of Kyklos Galaktikos [together with Jaroslav Hrdlička and Michael Švédová]. In the Year of the Rabbit (2011) he began working with Jana Svobodová, with whom he has created four projects.

## Li Xinmin

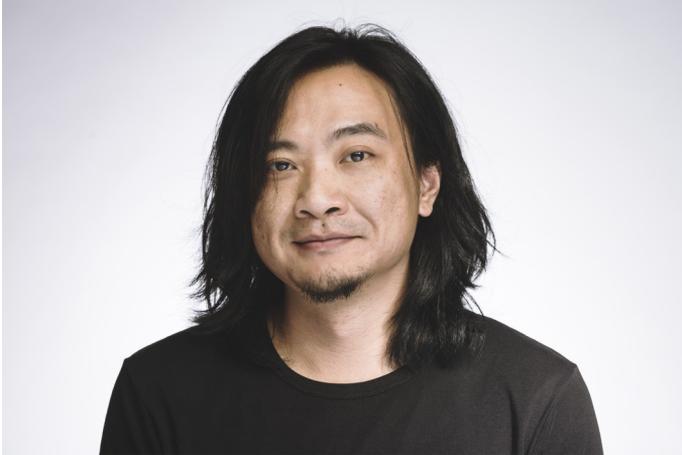


Li was born in the year when radio broadcasts from foreign stations were jammed in Czechoslovakia (1988), in a mountain village in Yunnan province. She finished school at the age of 11, because her parents did not have money to pay the school fees. In 2007 she entered the CCD Work Station in Beijing. In 2010 she stood on a theatre stage for the first time. The following year she began to make documentary films. So far she has appeared in nine performances by the Living Dance Studio and has made four documentaries.



**Jaroslav  
Hrdlička**

A year after the People's Republic annexed Macau, Jaroslav won the World Cup in acrobatic rock and roll in the student category together with Jana Vránová. In the Year of the Horse (2014) he graduated in New Media I at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts. He is a member of music group Kyklos Galaktikos and the Paperash Studio in which he participated in the creation of the successful video game *Dark Train*. He was worked with the Archa Theatre since the Year of the Dragon (2012).



**Wen  
Luyuan**

At the time when Czechoslovakia broke up Wen was nine years old and began learning to play the guitar. In 1997 he left Yunnan province for Beijing and two years later was admitted to the Beijing Conservatory (composition). In 2004 he founded his first band. Nine years later he became a member of the rock band of famous singer Zheng Jun. In 2015 he founded a group of new music Xian (Celestial Being). Prior to the start of rehearsals for *Ordinary People* Wen Luyuan had never been in Europe.



## Philipp Schenker



In the year when Mao Zedong declared the Cultural Revolution, Philipp was born in the Swiss canton of Zurich. After studying at the School of Graphic Design he left Switzerland for good. He worked in Berlin and Amsterdam, where he collaborated on two performances by the Dogtroep group. In 1997 he settled in Prague, where together with Daniela Voráčková he founded the art group Stage Code. He began to collaborate with the Archa Theatre in the Year of the Rat [2008]. He has collaborated on seven projects at home and abroad with director Jana Svobodová. He is the leader of the Allstar Refugee Band.

## Pavel Kotlík



When in 1979 the Chinese leadership announced the one-child policy, Pavel was six years old, and was an only child living in Prague. When he was 15, five months after the massacre at Tiananmen Square, he was among the demonstrators in Prague's Národní třída. He worked as a technician at the Mozart Opera, and since the Year of the Dragon [2000] he has focused on lighting technology. In the years 2002 – 2016 he was a member of the dance group VerTeDance, for which he created designs for more than 15 performances. He won the Light Design Award of the Czech Dance Platform in 2012. He has worked with the Archa Theatre since the Year of the Ox [2009]. In 2014 and 2016 he created lighting design at Archa for the performance by Japanese dancer Min Tanaka. This is his fourth project with Jana Svobodová.



**Valida  
Babayeva**

In the same year as Li Xinmin and Jiang Fan were born in China, Valida was born in Azerbaijan. In the Year of the Tiger [2010] she received a bachelor's degree at the State University of Economics in Baku. The following two years she worked as an assistant in the international charity Oxfam. In the Year of the Snake [2013] she went on a one-semester photography course at FAMU. She is currently studying at the Anglo-American University in Prague. She is a trainee at the Archa Theatre. This is her second project with Jana Svobodová as an assistant director.



**Ondřej  
Hrab**

Born in the Year of the Dragon, Ondřej grew up in Olomouc during the Hundred Flowers Campaign in China. At the time of the Beijing trials of Mao Zedong's closest associates, known as the "Gang of Four", he organized a secret performance of international artists in Prague. After the revolution he founded the Archa Theatre. In the Year of the Snake [2013] he talked about this experience at an informal seminar in the rehearsal room of the Living Dance Studio in Beijing.



# We Are All Ordinary People





# An interview with Wen Hui and Jana Svobodová

**You collect material in the field, inquiring about the experiences of ordinary people. Who in your view is an ordinary person?**

**WH** In my opinion I am an ordinary person. Everyone is an ordinary person. Nobody is special, not even people in high-ranking positions. Everyone is an ordinary person; we are all the same, we are equal.

**JS** Yes, I agree, we are all ordinary. That was the starting point when we decided to create a performance together. Beside the fact that we like each other, the decisive moment was President Zeman's visit to China, where he spoke in the name of "ordinary people", or as he calls them "normal people", Czechs who he claims don't care about the human rights of others. But presidents and politicians in other countries also justify their actions with reference to "ordinary people". When saying "ordinary people", they mean average. But we wanted to know what it really means to be ordinary. Ordinary does not mean uninteresting. In our performance we focus on the theme of ordinary desires, ordinary fears, ordinary disappointments. One of the most ordinary is the desire to be free, to live in a free world. Not to be punished by the system.

**Did the presidential visit trigger your collaboration?**

**WH** We had already planned it before. We met and discovered that we have a lot of interests that unite us. We started to think about what we could and wanted to accomplish together.

**JS** We found each other quickly. In 2013 we performed my production Solo for Lu in China, a year after we first met. There we understood that even though I'm not a dancer or a choreographer and Wen is not trained in Western theatre, the reasons why we do theatre and how we want to develop it are the same. For both of us respect for the people we work with is critical. We don't only work with artists. We share respect for people, for their

personalities, regardless of whether he or she is an artist. Artistic contribution, human capabilities and talents are very important, but the most important thing is who the person is and what he or she wants to say. We very quickly agreed about that.

**Both of you have long employed a documentary method, with stories of real people as your starting point. Did you discover some kind of Czech-Chinese chemistry?**

**WH** Neither of us does art for art's sake or theatre for theatre's sake. We see our collaborators as personalities, who also have a reason to participate in the creation of the show. None of them creates a character; they are not playing a role. They are still themselves on the stage.

**JS** We created a group, which when you look at it makes you ask how it is possible that its members can work together on the stage. We have, for example, a 75-year-old Czech worker next to a 27-year-old professional dancer and choreographer from Shanghai.

**WH** And we also have a girl who is from a village in the mountains, without training and education. Physically, of course, it is very simple, but the scene is very natural. She is very impressive on the stage, because we do not treat any of the performers like actors.

**JS** They have all established a close relationship; they like each other and like to work with each other, like being together on stage. In our work something unusual and unique has probably happened. I'm excited. I say to myself: it's a miracle!!

**What role does each of you have in your collaboration?**

**JS** It is a great adventure for me to work together with Wen. I am always surprised when I want to say something and she interrupts me and says the same thing. We are sensitive to the same things and like the same things. We like when people act naturally



# We Are All Ordinary People

on the stage. When they don't play, don't pretend. We work on the basis of seemingly simple tasks. For example, we ask the performers "look at the stage and follow what draws your attention".

**WH** We listen to each other. We do not always agree with each other, but we always strive to. We give space to everyone on our team. In the Living Dance Studio we all share a common space and grow together.

**JS** All our performers have a desire to explore. In the first phase we improvise, we try different things, experimenting with space. This resulted in the idea of a stage where everything is in motion. We make no distinction between technical work and a work of art. Ten people move on the stage, besides their artistic input, operating equipment and technologies. Technical cooperation creates a new level of communication based on mutual accountability.

**WH** I like the fact that young people, members of the Living Dance Studio, are independent and long for self-knowledge. For our mutual cooperation in this performance it is also an important learning moment. I began to get acquainted with the history of the Czech Republic, to observe and study the lives of "ordinary people", like Vladimír. I observed and still observe how history is linked with our personal history. This was exciting to debate.

**JS** We spent some time creating a timeline that tracks important milestones in the history of both countries. A global history of intersecting stories of individuals, sometimes very painful sometimes amazing or funny. The year 1989 was important for both countries, each in a different way. Personal stories that bind each year, creating a whole new dimension, depth, revealing secrets that would otherwise remain hidden.

**You present a contrast between global history and personal stories and another quite exciting contrast between Asia and Europe. Another contrast is the elegance and flexibility of the Chinese dancers and the rigid European men. Do you play with these differences?**

**WH** Physically yes.

**JS** None of the men on stage is a professional dancer, but Vladimír danced rock'n'roll when he was young. This gave rise to a scene where he dances with young Chinese dancer Jiang Fan. The difference is, I think, very inspirational. Contrasts are visible. We constructed the scene so that the differences can be seen in the maximum possible extent.

**Surrealism and magic versus a documentary style focusing on authenticity – how do you create a story together with these aims? In what colours, sounds and shapes do you see your new performance?**

**WH** We do not call ourselves documentary makers, but other people do and talk about us as creators of documentary theatre. I did not know what it means. We do not care about making beautiful theatre with graceful movements; we focus on society, history, social issues and phenomena.

**JS** It's only recently that my job has started to be called documentary theatre. The source of the work of our group is the world around us. Vladimír brought a poem that he wrote in his youth. We care about our anchoring in real events and social phenomena. On that basis, we develop an imaginary scenic image. We all work at the same time, we let ourselves be inspired. It's like breathing together.

**What motivates you?**

**WH** For me, the main reason was not only the collaboration with my friend, or another new project. It was a sense of responsibility for both our countries. We have something to say, I have to speak the truth, to open the memory. Express the horrible things we have done and what nobody really cares about. We have to present it to young people and the audience.

**JS** It's definitely responsibility for the place where you were born and where your friends live. We were lucky and got rid of totalitarianism. We must



# An interview with Wen Hui and Jana Svobodová

protect our freedom. One of the ways to protect it is by not being indifferent to the oppression of others. My language is the language of theatre. Through theatre work I can say something I'd never be able to say in my daily life. That motivates me.

## **Are there taboos that you explore? Is your project political?**

**WH** Not everyone is necessarily responsible for changing society, but they are responsible for contributing to it. This is what we are looking for. We are from China and we are always asked whether what we're doing is political. We do not know what context is political for us – the one-child policy is not political for us; but for everyone else, especially in the West, it's very political. So it is very difficult to say whether it is political or not.

**JS** The theatre is always political, and our production is such, but that does not mean it is not poetic theatre. Specifically, this project contains a lot of poetry; not so much the writing, but stage poetry. It's a language that in contrast to serious information creates a way to touch not only minds but also hearts. It's also a way to be free.

## **Jana, what fascinates you about traditional Chinese theatre?**

**JS** In my youth I spent some time in Japan, where I trained in the mountains with Min Tanaka. There I had the opportunity to closely study the roots of theatre and the blending of various traditional forms. Chinese theatre harks back to the oldest forms of Asian theatre. I recognized what they describe in theoretical studies that deal with the influence of Eastern art on our Western acting technique, and this knowledge influenced me for my whole life.

## **Wen Hui, what do you like about European performance? Did the rehearsals here give you some creative stimulus?**

**WH** Many things. The history of the Czech Republic and the personal stories that Jana told me were

very similar to my own. We usually do not practice technique so much, as we have a history within ourselves. I believe that traditional Chinese dance is largely a part of my body. When working with Jana, I learned a lot from the group.

**JS** Technique is important and we use it, but the body's memory is also important. Wen said that she does not have technique, but it is present there nevertheless, because the body remembers. Life under the Communist regime is in our bodies as well. It relates to what we do, how we move, is still present in the invisible communication between us.

## **What is the source of your inspiration, what fascinates you in art, literature? Can you name someone you admire?**

**WH** For me it's obviously still Pina Bausch, who I adore. On my first visit to Europe, I went to Wuppertal to see her rehearse and also had the opportunity to work briefly with her team. We met during their travels to China. She was a master. But then there are also a number of other artists.

**JS** I have my masters, who formed me at the right age. For me it was certainly Peter Schumann and Min Tanaka. I consider them as my teachers who gave me a new view and opened up the theatre, its essence. And then there's Anne Bogart. I think of them often, but do not equate myself with them.

## **How is a person formed by the place where he or she is born?**

**WH** WH: I am always on the move; I don't like staying in my hometown.

**JS** I was born in Prague. I feel in myself its spirit, its strange heavy atmosphere.

Interview by Pavlína Svatoňová  
Translation David Kumermann





# Facts and Contexts

**Our production follows parallels in the lives of people in the Czech Republic and China and was created on the basis of discussions between Jana Svobodová and choreographer Wen Hui. When they compared their life stories they found a lot in common. The timelines of several historical events in China and the Czech Republic are similar. Is that really the case?**

A lot depends on the generation and the environment in which a particular individual lives. Comparing all of China and the Czech Republic would be misleading, but when it comes to a specific person, surely many parallels can be found. Of course not everyone here was ordered to smelt steel, but we all know the slogan to “command the wind and the rain” from the past, just like the utopian goal to beat the USA and the West. The Communist regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed in 1989, but not in

China, and yet both societies have experienced an economic transformation from a centrally planned state economy to a more or less free market economy, and the advent of commercialism and consumerism. The internet changed the methods and possibilities of communication, the shape of discourse in our country and in China. I see parallels in certain details, trends, contemporary fashions, though not in the whole. I am not in the least surprised that a Czech and Chinese artist understand each other, that they have found a common language and have similar experiences.

**In recent years, the Chinese ideological language has changed. Does this cause some misunderstanding?**

The ruling Communist Party of China is struggling to keep up with the times and to find a vocabulary





# An interview with leading Czech sinologist and Chinese translator Zuzana Li

that the Chinese will accept [about 50 years ago we would say the “Chinese people”]. This ability to adapt is its strength. Misunderstanding may be caused only if the recipient ceases to perceive that it is a controlled, well-thought-out ideological lexicon. The former president Hu Jintao came up with the term “harmonious society”, which is obviously in direct contradiction to the concept of Mao’s unending revolution and constant class struggle. People who live together in harmony do not fight with each other, do not build barricades, do not seek reactionaries in their midst, do not denounce one another. But when the word harmony is used as a verb, as in “to harmonize society”, then we feel that the term implies some sort of control from above, which includes “to be harmonized.” Today the Communist Party talks about sustainable development, a healthy prosperous society, which is not a lexicon that we automatically associate with the Communist Party.

## **What is the current situation of independent art in China compared to ten or fifteen years ago?**

Judging from my own fragmentary experience, I would say that the independent art scene has been thriving for years. Theatrical and musical festivals are organized, readings, meetings of poets, various club performances have been successfully implemented by a number of artists. The art scene has a vast base, wealthy buyers at home and abroad.

## **How do the Chinese perceive their recent history?**

Fatefully. Artists, mainly the elderly and middle-aged generation, are trying to the extent possible not to forget, mainly to ensure that the bloody armed conflicts between civilians during the Cultural Revolution, the sending of insufficiently loyal to re-education camps or the dispersal of demonstrating students by tanks on Tiananmen Square on the night of 3 to 4 June 1989 are never repeated. But the

young generation live in a very different world, and rather consider that what’s done is done, now it is a different time.

## **Which issues are still taboo? What can be spoken about? When is it necessary to read between the lines?**

I think that the degree of freedom of speech in China is greater than we generally imagine. But boundaries are not clearly defined. Everything that would threaten the stability of the country (or rather the Party) and society is prohibited by law, divulging state secrets, etc. Open criticism or denigration of the highest leadership of the country is certainly taboo. The issues of ethnic minorities, particularly the Tibetans and Uighurs, are sensitive and monitored. Then there is the checking of whether this or that will be considered as an offence against the interests of the homeland. In the novel *Four Books* (translated into Czech in 2013) there is a great metaphor: During the tough times of the Great Leap Forward there is a contest for the best steel product; the protagonists submit a fine five-pointed star, smelted by the sweat of their brows, and expect a deserved victory, but the eventual winner is the Chinese character for loyalty rendered in steel. The traditional concept of loyalty to the ruler prevails over the ideological symbol of communism.

Zuzana Li was interviewed by Ondřej Hrab



The program for the performance of *Ordinary People*  
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