



**Obyčejní
lidi**  **Divadlo
Archa**

普通人
**Ordinary
people**

**Archa Theatre
Prague
Living Dance Studio
Beijing**

Quotations from reviews



Photo from the rehearsals for Ordinary People (Archa Theatre/Jakub Hrab)

“Pictures, people and stories, events from different eras and other remote locations begin to mingle with each other, revealing their contradictions and continuity. It’s about self-assertion, renunciation, fear, distress, shame and the things that make us happy. It’s authentic, not trite and yet everyone tells it in their own way.”

Gabriele Gorgas in Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten

“When at the end of the performance the 75-year-old Mr. Tůma, Archa’s accidentally discovered star, spontaneously and confidently dances with the young Chinese women, it is a magnificent celebration of ordinary lives that flies in the face of demagoguery.”

Martin C. Putna in Lidové noviny

“Everything in the performance has its counterpart and is carried through to absurdity when a tragic story is always followed by a complete change of scene and atmosphere. At one point, striking and painful events instantly turn funny. A lot is happening on stage. The viewer does not notice the time, the evening flows without cease. ... A drama charged with emotion ending in joy, passion and perhaps the promise of freedom.”

Monika Čižmáriková in Taneční aktuality











Photo from the rehearsals for Ordinary People (Archa Theatre/Jakub Hrab) |

Dancing with Chinese women

*Martin C. Putna in Lidové noviny,
January 31, 2017*

The phrase „ordinary people“ has become today a stick in the hands of demagogues. The phrase itself is not to blame. The interest in the masses of politicians and high culture dates at least from the age of romanticism and gave birth not only to universal and equal suffrage, but also to numerous works of art. But what kind? Soviet and Czechoslovak „proletarian novels“ may have praised „the hero of the factories“, but only to impart the legitimacy of nasty regimes, ruling supposedly in the name of „ordinary people“. But the novel *Ordinary Life* by Karel Čapek tells of one such anonymous, unprivileged man, whose life gradually reveals itself to be utterly extraordinary, profound and incomprehensible: the life of an individual, unique being.

At the **Archa Theatre** they have attempted to connect the phrase „ordinary people“ with another word that today evokes strong emotions: China! For some it evokes the thought of endless fields of business. Others grip their fists with the thought of Tibet, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, the treatment of Christians or the audacity of militant Chinese groups in Prague last spring (during the visit of Xi Jinping). Some even prefer to avert their gaze from today's steel and glass China and look to the China of old, an idealized China of ink paintings, tea pavilions and poems about the moon and pines, as Kuo S' (last year translated into Czech) calls the „noble values of forests and streams“. But Archa has shown a very different China: the China of today's ordinary people – now without the quotation marks. Those whose lives were utterly anonymous, mostly harshly coming up against the „great“

Chinese history of the 20th century. It is not only the history of those spectacular disasters but also quiet and unobtrusive slights. One woman tells what it was like to be born as an „illegal“ during the time of the strict one child policy. Other times she casually mentions an event a few years ago – „It was just when they banned Facebook and Google in China.“

On the stage the stories of several of these lives, the actors of the Beijing Living Dance Studio, also meet a tale of a Czech „ordinary life“. But this is not told by an actor, but by the bearer of the life himself, the old labourer Vladimír Tůma. A man who in his youth got into trouble with the communist regime, just because he danced the „decadent“ rock and roll.

On stage Mr. Tůma and young Chinese actresses exchange wonderful stories of the 20th century in China and Czechoslovakia – even though they do not understand each other. They understand, however, through theatrical means – through light and shadow and through movement, especially through dance. The play has no intellectual point. The point is just a dance – the silent expression of freedom and defiance. When at the end of the performance the 75-year-old Mr. Tůma, Archa's accidentally discovered star, spontaneously and confidently dances with the young Chinese women, it is a magnificent celebration of ordinary lives that flies in the face of demagoguery.

The strange and the common

Chinese-Czech collaboration on the German premiere
of *Ordinary People* in Hellerau

*Gabriele Gorgas in Dresdner Neueste
Nachrichten, January 30, 2017*

They see themselves as a kind of documentary theatre, and both forms – documentary and theatre – are taken very seriously. Despite the severity of documentary they never forget the sensory experiential moment of performance and the documentary aspect of theatrical events, as one almost „organically“ flows into another. In September 2015, Jana Svobodová, a remarkable director from the Archa Theatre, brought a peculiar production to the Festspielhaus in Hellerau with *Vadí – nevadí* [Stört es oder stört es nicht? in German] as part of the RomAmoR Festival. Even then the images, stories and characters remained strongly entrenched in my memory.

It was the same at the latest performances by this theatre over the weekend in Hellerau, when the production of *Ordinary People*, co-produced with the European Centre of Arts Hellerau, was premiered. The Prague theatre created this project together with well-known Beijing dance group the Living Dance Studio, which was founded in 1994 by a former dancer from Pina Bausch's group, Wen Hui, and documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang. A performance of a quite pecu-

liar kind was created. Under the joint direction of Jana Svobodová and Wen Hui, and the collaboration of live musicians, video artists and lighting designers, a delicate tangle of theatre with something profound at its core was created; a theatre where the viewer can decipher a mystery and marvel, and where he or she learns a thing or two about the strange and the special.

In productions that to some extent cross borders, e.g. by combining dance, theatre, video, live music and art, it is necessary to always count on a measure of uncertainty on the part of the audience. At best one succeeds in taking the audience along on a kind of reconnaissance trip and in arousing their interest. In this respect the performance is touching and in its way seems like a genuine and joyful piece of handicraft. Which does not at all mean that it is unprofessional. Just like the title *Ordinary People* it in no case says that ordinary people are simple-minded or boring. It's not about honed effects, overwhelming our senses, and the lighting staccato is sometimes manually „broken“. And even personal „puffs of smoke“ appear – a clear and understandable scene that still offers many surprises.

It has long been known that perfection is not necessarily always interesting. Much more exciting are the images in one's head that we associate with the action on stage. For example, when the performers' body language and words tell us of their experience and also about how they got into movement, dance, theatre. In moving scenes they recount what happened to them in their life back home in China or the Czech Republic, from what they derive joy and what continues to delight them, or how they and others behave in difficult and decisive moments.

Pictures, people and stories, events from different eras and other remote locations begin to mingle with each other, revealing their contradictions and continuity. It's about self-assertion, renunciation, fear, distress, shame and the things that make us happy. It's authentic, not trite and yet everyone tells it in their own way. For example, a tangle of numbers is intertwined with riot lines, mobile barriers become the movable pedestal of a protest, from giant boxes a rickety tower arises like a metaphor of danger and decay. You can almost physically experience how scared everyone is and how everyone hopes that it will turn out all right in the end. But ultimately everyone knows how fragile those hopes are.









Photo from the rehearsals for Ordinary People [Archa Theatre/Jakub Hrab]



Ordinary People or Archa charged with emotion

Monika Čizmaríková in *Taneční aktuality*, February 5, 2017

In the program description for the new project by the Archa Theatre and Living Dance Studio from Beijing we can read that: „At a time when the leaders of many countries show disdain for basic human rights in the interests of political business, we ask: Who are these ordinary people whom they claim to represent?“ That is also why the performance of **Ordinary People** is a mix of emotive human stories, physical expression, music and interesting visual design.

All the artists are on the stage, not only the performers, but also the light designer and the audio and video creators. Together they constantly remake the space, move the decorations, and the viewer immediately watches their transformations.

The stage is crowded. Handrails like at concerts, a small stage and chairs and mixers, the left corner occupied by a large box. **Philipp Schenker**, originally from Switzerland but living in Prague, stands up and begins to play the guitar and sing. His song is soft and melodic, catchy in the chorus. He is followed by **Wen Luyuan**, playing sharp, very loud tones on the bass guitar, almost as though we were at a rock concert. The performance begins.

Life stories

Creator Jana Svobodová and **Wen Hui** are looking for connections, similar elements in Chinese and Czech [Czechoslovak] history, especially as regards the political situation.

Why, for example, is 1989 the year when the communist regime fell in our country when it strengthened in China? The performance compares and reminds us of important dates, all through the eyes of „ordinary people“, their personal experiences, wounds and powerlessness. A strong element is therefore sincerity.

The performers acquaint us with their life stories, talking about them out loud, sometimes about really difficult topics. They cite the revolution and the enormous famine caused by political events in China, the Great Leap Forward between 1958–1962, when tens of millions of people lost their lives. They talk about the massacre at Tiananmen Square, where on the night of 3 to 4 June 1989 the army began shooting into the protesting crowds and hundreds died.

One of the performers, Li Xinmin, also talks about his father's death in a traffic accident. In addition, **Vladimír Tůma**, the oldest member of the team, a toolmaker and the least artistically educated, constantly returns to his appearance long ago at the National Theatre as a walk on in the opera *Dalibor* and the time when he made a mistake when all he had to do was stand there. Young guitar player **Wen Luyuan** complains that because of the ban on YouTube and social media sites in China he cannot understand what is happening in music in other parts of the world.

Light is shed on censorship and the desire for freedom. Reciprocal presidential visits are recalled, and as the program states: „... the controversial visit of the President of

the Czech Republic in China was a decisive moment for the creation of the production.“ Everything in the performance has its counterpart and is carried through to absurdity when a tragic story is always followed by a complete change of scene and atmosphere. At one point, striking and painful events instantly turn funny. A lot is happening on stage. The viewer does not notice the time, the evening flows without cease.

Promise of freedom...

A large number of characters move about on the stage. What about the person, the individual? Each different, but fitting perfectly together. The play works with their differences, their strengths, their own way of expression. On the one hand there are the young female dancers, full of energy, running around across the stage, gushing with emotions; and on the other hand, there is a very charming, but older man, whose movement is now restricted to a certain extent. Each performer has their role and spoken text that accompanies his speech, revealing a bit of his or her „soul“. Spoken word is intertwined with the physical performance and the musical accompaniment is often provided by the performers themselves, by hitting the railing, tapping on boxes, squeezing a bag and so on.

Also interesting are the visuals. One of the eye-catching moments is a projection of when one of the dancers films the earliest events on the stage from a box, and then her own face. The performers speak Czech and Chinese, subtitles run behind their backs, so that comprehension is not a problem. This authentic language expression gives the show

great strength. [If everyone spoke English only, as is usually the case, the production would lose its originality, authenticity and intensity.]

Dance gets very little attention, even though one of the performers, Jiang Fan, graduated from the dance conservatory in Shanghai, danced for six years in the ballet company of the Shanghai Opera and clearly has a perfectly controlled body. Even the main creator of the performance, Wen Hui, is a dancer. Nevertheless dancing does not dominate. It is secondary and indeed almost forgotten. Ordinary People is rather about the physical manifestation and expression of different feelings, and expression through the body.

At the end of the show **Jan Burian** (music and sound design) and **Jaroslav Hrdlička** (video art) make a tower of cardboard boxes with which everyone has constantly been working. This creates a kind of totem around which to dance. An older gentleman eventually hits it and the boxes fall. The stage is suddenly busy and a hilarious dance is unleashed when the toolmaker Tůma, accompanied by the young female dancers, performs his rock'n'roll dance. He dances with enthusiasm, passion and a sincere smile, although his movements are economical and match his age. Gradually all the dancers join him, while behind him the other performers fiercely play their instruments. A drama charged with emotion ending in joy, passion and perhaps the promise of freedom.

Written after the premiere on 22 January 2017, Archa Theatre.

Dance in documentary theatre: Ordinary people

Zuzana Smugalová in *Blog o tanci*,
January 25, 2017

„...Director Jana Svobodová has been focusing on projects that overlap with socially specific themes for more than 20 years. The work of this founder and artistic director of the Akcent Festival of Documentary Theatre has a firm place in the repertoire of the Archa Theatre, and it is perhaps unnecessary to remind you that it directly corresponds with the philosophical vision and dramaturgical orientation and support of engagement and political [socially critical] expression in theatrical productions. The appeal to the audience and inspiration in Svobodová's work are symptomatic as are the typical calmness and composure with which she presents human stories. It's as if she has uncovered a secret hidden under a desiccated little onion peel. There is no reason to cry; the eyes are only irritated by the pungent scent of their own awareness...“

Ordinary People seeks parallels between Czech and Chinese totalitarianism

Alex Švamberg, *Novinky*, January 19, 2017

A work on the borders of dance performance and documentary theatre presents the stories of people who lived under totalitarianism and shows how they dealt with the restrictions imposed by the regime.

One of the most powerful stories is that of 73-year-old turner and toolmaker Vladimír, who likes dancing rock'n'roll, which, however, was banned in the late 50s and 60s as corrupt capitalist art. Every Saturday he was therefore detained on Wenceslas Square by the police. At the same time, a famine broke out in China due to the reckless policies of the Great Leap Forward, under which industrialization was carried out at any cost. Then Wen was born.

„You cannot of course compare famine and the banning of rock'n'roll, but these moments are important for us in creating tensions and questioning what it means when something is forbidden, what you do, how it moves you forward,“ said one of the directors, Jana Svobodová. „We were looking for parallels and before the premiere I see how the pieces of these personal stories fit together, because everyone has his own story.“

Svobodová also says that she was aware of how some dates were important in the lives of both. „We had a lot of discussions, we agreed on the principles of building theatre, but we also touched on our and their communist past. We found certain moments in life that were interesting to talk about, and we mention them on the stage. Of course, the

most important is the year 1989 [when Eastern European communism collapsed, and the China government suppressed the protest on Tiananmen Square]. We also discovered that when Vladimír was dancing his famous rock'n'roll, somewhere in China Wen was born.“

Wen Hui, who in the 1990s established one of the first Chinese independent dance troupes the Living Dance Studio, experienced a cultural revolution and student protests. He remembers it well on stage, even if it is not mentioned in the program, because it might cause unwanted attention from the authorities if Ordinary People were to be performed in China.





Photo from the rehearsals for Ordinary People [Archa Theatre/Jakub Hrab]



Before the premiere Wen Hui answered several questions from Novinky

Will you perform the play in China?

I hope so.

Will it change anything for China?

We'll see. It has to be seen by people in theatre circles, not the censors, and say what it is possible and what isn't. (Jana Svobodová added: „We don't know how to judge what is and what isn't allowed in China today.“)

Is freedom important for you?

Yes, it's definitely important, for me, for the next generation, for everyone.

In my experience, however, when there isn't complete freedom art is more interesting.

It's true. We have the same experience in China. Especially in the visual arts in the 1980s and early 90s independent artists started working in China. And they were very powerful. As the

economy grew and people from the West arrived, painters became richer and lost their quality and energy. But we want a better society, and this is the most important. And if we have freedom, society will be better.

What is the position of independent artists in China today?

Now in China there are two artistic worlds: one official and one independent. Independent artists can do what they want. But if you want to perform, you need a permit. Some independent artists don't care about permission, but then they can't sell tickets. Now it is more economic than political pressure; the politicians use economic power. When you cannot sell tickets, no one will see the performance. No one will even know about it. Last year we launched one performance for which did not have a permit. It took place, but it wasn't big. But still there are people who can write an article. One Beijing



Photo from the rehearsals for Ordinary People (Archa Theatre/Jakub Hrab)

newspaper called my performance Red [which openly talked about the Cultural Revolution] the best performance, even though it was only performed in the Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai and at the Goethe Institute in Beijing. It's not like 50 years ago or at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Now there are more opportunities. After 1978 the economy began to grow and many new opportunities opened up, but they opened and closed, opened and closed. It was always thus.

Is the position of independent artists changing?

When we started in 1994, there were many independent artists, but only a few actors and dancers. But now a lot of young people are becoming independent artists and there are many groups. It's not like before. But not everyone gets an audience. And for independent artists it is still hard to survive.



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.

The program for the performance of *Ordinary People* was prepared by Ondřej Hrab and Pavlína Svatoňová
Graphic design Mikuláš Macháček ZZZ
Photography Jakub Hrab
Translation Andre Swoboda

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Archa Theatre, Na Poříčí 26, 110 00 Prague 1
tel. +420 221 716 111
archa@divadloarcha.cz
www.archatheatre.cz