

Abstract

Besieged by a Nation of Playwrights

Jan Lier Critic and Dramaturge of the National Theatre in Prague

The cultural endeavours of the second half of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century – from which we have inherited more than is immediately apparent – have for the most part already been described. Nevertheless, most of what we know about them comes to us only through selected figures from the realm of politics, literature, or theatre. At the same time, there existed many other individuals who had a significant influence on their time. They may not have been “pillars” of their era – many of which are retroactively constructed by subsequent eras and have often been uncritically conserved to this day. We have thus chosen to take a new look at this era in question through the figure of Jan Lier. Although Lier had been quite popular during his life and held several important positions in society, he was ignored by later historians.

This dissertation presents the full range of Lier’s activities, which we divide into three parts. The first section (*Ecce Homo Jan Lier*) describes the author’s life from his youth to his literary debut and popular novels, which brought him fame as an author of railway novels and stylistically refined (perhaps excessively so) salon prose that irritated contemporary critics with their alien gloss and frivolous dandy-like sensuality. The text also looks at the author’s sole attempt at drama – a field in which Lier remained an *auctor unius libri*. His only other contributions to drama would be translations (he did not translate any other works). We also look at the historical and geographical texts he wrote as part of several prestigious projects by the Otto printing house, and devote a special chapter to Lier’s remarkable series of “fake” news stories (*A Bizarre Song of Peace*), which contained the central themes of his social criticism. The first section concludes with a discussion of Lier’s daring and distinctive newspaper (or magazine) columns, which we present as the pinnacle of their genre at the time. These writings have been unfairly overlooked and in some regards remain applicable to this day. We also add a description of Lier’s groundbreaking work in the area of cultural heritage preservation, which involved his speaking out for preserving the heritage of historical Prague threatened by new construction projects.

The second section (*Jan Lier on Theatre and Style*) takes a look at the author’s theatre journalism. The introductory chapter provides context and background, and summarizes the history of Czech theatre criticism from its very beginnings. The subsequent chapter places

Lier's theatre criticism within the context of this relatively young discipline, and provides an outline of Lier's writings and their transformation over time. Lier's criticism is subsequently divided into individual chapters according to chronology and platform; the chapters *In Divadelní listy*, *In Lumír*, and *In Hlas národa* discuss his critical opinions published in these three periodicals. The chapter *On realism, naturalism, and modernism* considers his writings (not just on theatre) which reflected changes in contemporary stylistic trends.

The third section (*The Invisible Dramaturgy of the National Theatre*) is dedicated to exploring dramaturgical issues at Prague's National Theatre towards the end of the 19th century and, to a limited extent, the beginning of the 20th century. In the first chapter, we summarize the National Theatre's dramaturgy prior to Lier's appointment as dramaturge in 1896. We also attempt to illuminate the still unsatisfactorily interpreted dramaturgic period between Ladislav Stroupežnický and Jaroslav Kvapil (*Between Stroupežnický and Kvapil*), meaning that we also look at the era of Lier's predecessor Bedřich Frída. Our discussion of Lier's dramaturgic activities include an assessment of these activities. We also attempt to shed light on his interest in the plays of the poet Julius Zeyer, whose rehabilitation by the leading Czech theatre met with a general rediscovery of Zeyer in the second half of the 1890s. Nevertheless, Lier's affinity for Zeyer's plays have deeper roots (*With Zeyer During Good Times and Bad*). A typical feature of this era was the complicated nature of the art scene, characterized by the parallel demands of new and old artistic trends (*Vain, Aggrieved, and Misunderstood*). Although Lier's dramaturgic activities do not deny his earlier uncompromising stances as a columnist and journalist, he does show himself to be less forceful in this position. Possible causes, such as the unclear question of the dramaturge's authority and responsibilities, are explored in the chapter *Don't Bite the Hand that Feeds You*. The other difficulties faced by the dramaturge – such as being constantly harangued by authors – are presented in the chapter *Besieged by a Nation of Playwrights*. This is followed by a kind of case study – a study of one of the many unrelenting playwrights, through which we try to show that even this peripheral part of Czech theatre history may offer an interesting picture of the past (*Trump the Perfume and Sugar Candy*). We conclude this section with a chapter exploring Lier's activities as a lecturer of dramaturgy at the National Theatre – a position that he held for the rest of his life, even following the theatre's change in management (*A Dramaturgic Epilogue*).