

HANGING IN A DOUBLE TRANSITION

Kateřina Rudčenkóv's Theater Heroines in 21st-Century Czechia

FRANCESCA LAZZARIN
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI UDINE

Abstract - This paper examines the dramatic oeuvre of Kateřina Rudčenkóv (b. 1976), a prominent author on the Czech literary scene of the twenty-first century. By contextualizing her plays against the backdrop of recent Czech history and the reception of North American and Western European feminism in Czechia during the post-1989 transition, we show how the playwright—drawing on a distinctly Central European cultural milieu as well as on autobiographical elements—illuminates the condition of contemporary Czech women. Her protagonists frequently function as alter egos who, on the one hand, find themselves entangled in dysfunctional relationships with men who are either possessive or emotionally absent, and, on the other, despite enjoying certain freedoms, struggle to emancipate themselves fully from the conventions of a middle class that retains a markedly conservative outlook. These theater heroines demonstrate that many women of Rudčenkóv's generation remain in a state of suspension, unable to keep pace with the latest global feminist developments.

Keywords: Kateřina Rudčenkóv; Czechia; 21st Century; Contemporary Drama; Gender Studies.

1. Introduction

The presence of female authors in Czech literature after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the transformations that swept through the literary field, as well as through the political and social spheres, is undeniable. For confirmation, one can consult the recent volumes prepared by the Institute of Czech Literature of the local Academy of Sciences and dedicated respectively to the literary process of the 1990s, the 2000s and the 2010s (Fialová 2014; Hruška *et al.* 2008; Šidková and Fialová 2024). Furthermore, a survey of a Czech bookshop is sufficient to observe the bestsellers by numerous female writers (from Bianca Bellov to Kateřina Tučková, from Petra Hůlov to Lucie Faulerov, to name but a few). The merits of Czech female authors have also been recognized in 2020 by the editors of “A2” magazine when formulating their “Canon of Czech Literature after 1989” to take stock, with the benefit of hindsight, of the thirty years following that watershed moment.¹

Among the names that have already entered the history of contemporary Czech literature is Kateřina Rudčenkóv, a multifaceted figure who made her debut in the late 1990s and whose work has often blurred the boundaries of traditional literary genres, in keeping with postmodernist trends of the late 20th century. Rudčenkóv is best known for her poetry, both in Czechia and abroad, and it was her 2013 collection of poems, *Chůze po dunch* (*Walking on Sand Dunes*), that won her the prestigious Magnesia Litera prize in 2014 and earned her a place in the aforementioned “A2” magazine canon. In addition to

¹ To consult the full list of “canonical” literary works, see the magazine’s website: <https://advojka.cz/a2-article/2020-21-cesky-literarni-kanon-po-roce-1989-podzimni-literarni-priloha-a2/> (20.3.2026).

her poetic endeavors, she has also experimented with prose, authoring both short stories and a novel. During the 2000s, she demonstrated particular productivity in the field of playwriting. Some of her plays have been translated and staged on foreign shores.²

Rudčénková's theatrical work is of considerable interest not only because of the compelling interplay between dramaturgical and poetic language evident in the structure and style of her plays, but also due to the manner in which themes commonly associated with women's writing—such as gender identity, the social status of women, and the configuration and function of couples and family life—are examined within a distinctly specific historical and geographical context. In a sense, it may be argued that Rudčénková and her autobiographically inspired female characters occupy a position of double transition: first, as citizens of post-socialist Czechia during the shift towards capitalism and full European integration; and second, as women who, having not directly experienced the so-called “second wave” of North American and Western European feminism, including the subsequent and fruitful critical reflection on women's writing, fully encountered feminist movements and gender studies only after 1989. As a result, they reacted to them differently from their Western counterparts. The aim of this essay is to analyze the plays written by Rudčénková between 2004 and 2024, with a view to highlighting the critical issues of this “double transition”, in which the author's generation seems to have crystallized despite the changes that have taken place in the 21st century.

2. Post-socialist and post-feminist Czechia

Born in 1976, during the period of so-called *normalizace* (“normalization”) following the military intervention in Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact countries—a period in which the hopes for progressive liberalization instilled by Czechoslovakia's “socialism with a human face” in the 1960s gave way to a renewed hardening of the communist leadership and its policy of control—Rudčénková belongs to the generation known as “Husák's children”, named after Gustáv Husák, the Moscow-loyal politician who ruled Prague at the time (as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1969 to 1987 and as president of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1975 to 1989). Consequently, she was a teenager during the Velvet Revolution and came of age in the turbulent 1990s, a period when, among the many materials that could finally arrive from abroad without going through the underground press of samizdat and tamizdat, the writings of European and American feminists also reached Czechia.

However, while the “Husák's children” peers in the West were formulating the theory of intersectionality of oppression that largely characterizes the so-called “third

² Her play *Niekur* (*Nowhere*, 2006) has been translated into German and performed in Berlin (2016); her play *Čas třeshového dýmu* (*A Time of Cherry Smoke*, 2007) has been translated into English, German and French, and has been performed in New York (2008), Berlin (2017), Paris (2019) and Fort-de-France (2020). Recently *A Time of Cherry Smoke* was also translated into Italian by a group of Bohemistics students and teachers at Sapienza University, and performed in Rome in 2024. For an overview of Rudčénková's life and works, including her stage productions in Czechia and abroad, visit the writer's official website: <http://rudcenkova.freehostia.com/> (12.1.2026). Apart from *Niekur*, published in Czech in a very limited edition (Rudčénková 2007b), and *A Time of Cherry Smoke*, published in English translation (Rudčénková 2011), Rudčénková's plays have not been printed in book form. The excerpts cited in this article are taken from Word files kindly provided by the Dilia agency, which is responsible for the copyright on the texts. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude once again to the agency and the playwright for supporting my research.

wave” of feminism, post-socialist Czechia viewed 20th-century feminist demands with a certain skepticism (see Heitlinger 1996). It is widely acknowledged that the emancipation of women in the Eastern Bloc countries was often perceived as a forced step imposed from above. This development, moreover, did not contribute to the dismantling of gender stereotypes, which remained largely unchanged.³ Women, compelled to work like all other citizens, were still primarily responsible for domestic duties and childcare. This was in accordance with the dictates that, in the Soviet Union as in East Germany, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, sought to instill a sense of obligation in women to be “superwomen”, dutiful to their work, their families and their country. Consequently, for a considerable number of Czech women, a form of dissent coincided with adherence to traditional and conservative models of femininity. Following 1989, this manifested in the image of the hypersexualized Slavic “Barbie”, the mythical object of desire for Western European men: the stereotype of feminists as unpleasant, masculine women who were unable to succeed in life and therefore angry towards society was widely accepted.⁴ In the groups of true dissidents, the focus was more on human rights in general than on women’s rights in particular, so as not to undermine the collaboration between men and women for a common cause. Furthermore, “essentialist (class) ideology of pseudo-Marxist state socialism made Czechs hostile and protective towards any forms of real or suspected essentialism, or absolute thought models” (Věšínová-Kalivodová 2005, p. 432).

The most prolific era of the Czech feminist movement had occurred during the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), a period that witnessed significant advancements in women’s rights. In 1920, women secured the right to vote. Nevertheless, the struggle, predominantly spearheaded by members of the liberal urban bourgeoisie, was moderate and secondary to the issue of national identity in a recently formed country.⁵ Despite the flourishing of local gender studies scholarship,⁶ this would also be the case in post-1989 Czech society, especially since the aforementioned “intersectional” approach—according to which gender discrimination intersects with racial, religious, class-based and colonial discrimination—was difficult to apply to the current local situation. Czech society after 1989 can be considered fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and language, if, of course, by “Czechs” we mean the Slavic and white majority, to the detriment of the sizeable Roma and Vietnamese communities, which have remained somewhat on the margins of public debate, especially as regards their female members (see Fojtová 2016).

³ Furthermore, from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, the struggle for gender equality was considered secondary to the class struggle. Indeed, it was even viewed as a form of bourgeois cultural influence with the potential to undermine the solidarity between men and women, who were both oppressed, in carrying out the revolutionary process.

⁴ For a general overview of the gender issue in the Eastern Bloc countries, see, for instance, Kis 2003; Pascall and Kwak 2005, pp. 1-30; with referencing to the particular situation in Czechia, see, for instance, Ferber and Raabe 2003; Hůlová 2009.

⁵ In this context, we can mention at least Charlotte Garrigue Masaryková, who translated John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) into Czech and was married to the first Czechoslovak president, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, who, not coincidentally, added his wife’s surname to his official name. Their daughter, Alice Masaryková, also campaigned for women’s rights. Furthermore, the Women’s National Council (*Ženská národní rada*), the Czech branch of the International Women’s Council, was founded in 1923, with important contributions from famous Czech public figures such as the teacher, activist and politician Františka Plamínková and the lawyer and politician Milada Horáková (for more details, see, for instance, Burešová 2001, pp. 40-211).

⁶ It is worth mentioning the excellent work of academic centers (such as the Centrum genderových studií [Gender Studies Center], founded at the Charles University in Prague; for an overview of Czech gender studies, see Jusová and Šmídová 2022), and the new publishing houses focusing on feminist literature in the 90s (such as Nakladatelství M. Chřibkové, MOTTO, Petra, ROD and others).

A proudly secular country where different religions are practiced and respected, Czechia peacefully separated from Slovakia in 1993 and has become a relatively prosperous country that has integrated well into the European space. Although it does not play a predominant role in the European political context, it undoubtedly enjoys what is known as the “European dividend”, to a greater extent than other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (see Jusová 2016). In the last decades, very few Czechs have been forced to emigrate to richer countries for economic reasons, nor have they found themselves marginalized or victims of racism there.

Consequently, rather than intersectional feminism, a specific form of post-feminism has taken root, centred on female empowerment according to the unwritten laws of a capitalist, materialistic and individualistic system, which also apply to men (see Věšíňová-Kalivodová 2005). Emancipation and equal opportunities, which are considered to have been achieved, represent the possibility of pursuing a career and realizing, thanks to physical attractiveness, one’s dreams of love—usually heteronormative—in one’s personal life, rather than challenging traditional gender roles. This perspective has shaped the subject matter of mass literature written by female authors for female readers. Dubbed “chick lit”, this literary genre encountered a surge in popularity in Czechia during the 1990s and 2000s (see Kos 2010; Kos 2016). But even many authors of high-quality literature, aimed at readers of both sexes, have been unable to move beyond a relatively conservative view of women within couples, families and the workplace, a view that, as Bohuslav Blažek wrote, is probably also due to that mentality, quiet and comfortable in its own Lebensraum, which once shaped the flourishing First Czechoslovak Republic and, with the end of the “short century”, still shapes Czech society today: “Češi před všemi těmito vzruchy dávají přednost klidu k práci, čímž se rozumí nepřipouštět si nic, co nutí k uvědomění si a případně k revizi zamlčených předpokladů sebe sama, rodinu, státečku” (“Ahead of all this upheaval, Czechs prefer peace and quiet for work, which means not allowing themselves to acknowledge anything that forces them to realize and possibly revise their unspoken assumptions about themselves, their families, and their little country”) (Blažek 1999, p. 193).⁷

This often results in the removal of contradictions experienced by isolated individuals, particularly women. However, critical issues that have been removed are bound to resurface with renewed vigor at the most unexpected moment, and literature is the most effective means of addressing them.

3. Between Poetry, Prose and Drama at the Edge of Two Centuries

Rudčenková uses a blend of personal narrative and therapeutic writing to explore her experiences as a woman starting from the 1990s. Through her work, she aims to resolve ongoing psychological issues and process past experiences that continue to affect her present life. As previously mentioned, Rudčenková debuted as a poet and frequently blurred the boundaries between literary genres, writing extremely prosaic poems,

⁷ All the English translations are by the author of this article. In Blažek’s quote, we could discern an echo of an important element of Czech popular culture: the concept of *kondelíkovština*, inspired by the fictional character Mr Kondelík (*pan Kondelík*) from Ignát Herrmann’s humorous prose at the end of the 19th century. *Kondelíkovština* indicates the comfortable, albeit limited and sedentary, life-style of petty bourgeois families (for further details, see Mocná 1998).

theatrical monologues resembling lyrics complete with verse divisions, and tales written as theatrical scenes. She has always perceived drama as a kind of performative poetry, and also considered it to be “ještě vyšší a hmatatelnější forma pro zachycení skutečnosti” (“a even higher and more tangible form for capturing reality”) than poetry and prose (Rudčenkova 2013, p. 6). It is no coincidence that the title of Rudčenkova's first and highly acclaimed collection of poems, *Ludwig* (1999), is the name of the protagonist of Thomas Bernhard's familial psychodrama *Ritter, Dene, Voss* (1984), which she saw in 1996 in a chamber production at the renowned “Na Zábřadlích” theatre in Prague.

In her poems, the author puts herself in the shoes of Bernhard's outsider Ludwig, reproducing a male perspective and quoting passages from this and other plays by the Austrian writer. Rudčenkova sees Ludwig, a self-styled philosopher inspired by the Wittgenstein brothers and a member of a bourgeois family who suffers from depression, as a man stuck in a rut with no future or hope. Even at the end of his life, however, he never ceases to reflect and seek a horizon of meaning, striving to reclaim an existence that now appears evanescent and illusory, devoid of significance. Many female characters in Rudčenkova's dramatic production will also embody this theme. As the author herself stated, “mým cílem je zaznamenat třeba proměny duše v průběhu nějaké části života” (“my goal is to record the transformations of the soul during a certain period of life”) (Rudčenkova 2013, p. 7). Critic Vladimír Novotný has significantly compared her work (poetry and prose, but the same applies to her plays) to a series of artistic photographs that capture individual moments in a person's life or in the history of a romantic relationship (see Novotný 2004, online). It should be noted in this regard that Rudčenkova is an excellent amateur photographer who has pursued this passion for years.

Rudčenkova started writing plays in 2004, collaborating with small theatres and companies such as Divadlo Letí and the Puchmajer ensemble. In 2006, she won a prize at the prestigious Czech drama competition Alfréd Radok and had therefore the opportunity to spend a period training at the Royal Court Theatre in London.⁸ Undoubtedly, thanks to the Royal Court Theatre's successful projects aimed at playwrights from around the globe, such as the International Playwrights Programme, which promotes “new writing” and enhances the role of the playwright, British theatre—particularly female theatre—has been a crucial source of inspiration for European authors since the 1990s (see Aston and O'Thomas 2015). In the Czech context, too, there is an observable presence of programmatic theatre performances intended to disturb a “post-emotional society”, exploring the intersection of “post-memory” trauma and the alienation stemming from individuals' inability to communicate, particularly among men and women, against the backdrop of an insatiable desire for genuine human connection (see Aston 2013, pp. 22-23). Distinctive elements of this new drama include the violation and mockery of taboos, and the reworking of canonical plays from a female perspective.

If the Royal Court Theatre's international programmes aim to “help writers tell stories about events in their own countries to their own audiences” (Ferris 2021, p. 286), it should be noted that Czech female authors also draw heavily on their country's heritage. This includes the absurdism and lyrical-existential style, often based on autobiographical elements, of the underground theatre associated with the “second culture” of socialist Czechoslovakia. The main exponent of this theatre was obviously Václav Havel, whose famous character Ferdinand Vaněk was an alter ego of the dissident and future first president of “free” Czechoslovakia and subsequently of the newly formed Czech Republic. Havel's early experiences as a playwright were connected with the

⁸ For a reportage about this experience, see Rudčenkova 2007a.

aforementioned “Na Zábřadlí” independent theatre, that until today is a renowned venue for chamber plays, where the action on stage is replaced by the inner tension of the characters, which becomes the driving force of the plot.

The Czech female playwrights active after 1989 stage their own experiences in plays where the action is lacking and the subject matter is fragmented. In such works, they give voice to their emotions, highlighting the irrational mechanisms of their psyche in interaction with their surroundings, which in most cases coincide with a middle class with a traditionally moralistic mindset. While social commitment and explicit denunciation of the condition of women are less prevalent than in British theatre—for the aforementioned historical and cultural reasons—, they are nevertheless present. As asserted by Lenka Jungmannová, *feministické drama* (“feminist drama”) can also be spoken of in Czechia, with issues of discrimination and women’s emancipation being focused on (see Jungmannová 2014, pp. 631-634). One of the most significant exponents of this is Iva Klestilová (b. 1964), who has adopted the approach of a leading figure in contemporary British theatre: Sarah Kane. Initially perceived as alien to the Czech cultural space, Kane’s work is, in reality, much closer to it than it seems, as Klestilová pointed out (Ljubková 2006, online). This distinctly feminist trend in Czech theatre was inaugurated by Klestilová’s plays, such as *Stísněná 22* (*Confined 22*, 2003) and the Chekhovian reinterpretation *3sestry2005.cz* (2005), and continued with the works of Radmila Adamová (b. 1975) such as *Holky Elky* (*Elle’s Girls*, 2006), a ruthless exposé of the objectification of the female body in the fashion industry in a capitalist, “post-feminist” world. The pinnacle of this development is arguably the drama *Vitka* (2018) by Kateřina Tučková (b. 1980), drawing inspiration from the biography of Brno conductor and composer Vítězslava Kaprálová and her challenges in navigating a traditionally male-dominated field. The play follows the trajectory set by other dramas that have focused on numerous female figures from the past who have been unjustly overshadowed by male contemporaries, thus contributing to a broader discourse on gender and historical memory.⁹

According to Jungmannová’s classification, an additional category of contemporary Czech theatre is identified as *genderové drama* (“gender drama”). This category explores the differences between male and female genders as socio-cultural constructs, examining these differences in specific situations in the lives of the characters. An illustration of this can be observed in Rudčenkova’s plays. Finally, the remaining “subgenre” is *ženské drama* (“female drama”), which focuses on a female experience told from the inside, but without extensive and targeted reflections on gender differences. Examples of this approach can be found in the works of another important figure in contemporary Czech theatre, Lenka Lagronová (b. 1963).

The common thread that runs through all these forms of theatre, whether it is feminist, female or gender drama, is the attempt to embody that well-known *écriture féminine* theorized in the 1970s by Hélène Cixous as a radical alternative to the male discourse that had been hegemonic for centuries, especially in literature. This theatrical mode of writing is marked by pronounced lyricism, seeking to give voice to “confessions” grounded in imaginative metaphors and mental associations that at times verge on the surreal. Moreover, it is constructed to articulate openly subjects often deemed taboo—such as the body and its ageing, sexuality, and instinct—inasmuch as the woman appears to

⁹ For a more in-depth analysis of additional forms of radical feminist and queer expression in Czech contemporary performance art, encompassing not only drama but also dance and physical theatre, see also Turzíkova 2022.

surrender herself to the act of writing, shedding all inhibitions and rejecting externally imposed preconceptions (see Jungmannová 2009).

As previously stated, the main characters are often inspired by the playwright's own life experiences: they share the same age as the playwright at different stages of their lives, facing the various crises that accompany them. Throughout their lives, the female characters find themselves caught up in a web of conventions and expectations imposed by others, primarily from a masculine perspective. These are very difficult to break free from and sometimes lead the characters to live a double life: "ten správný, aktivní, naplněný podle představ společnosti, a ten svůj, skrytý, vnitřní, ten, který se odehrává jen v jejích myšlenkách" ("the correct one, active and fulfilled according to society's expectations and their own hidden inner life, which unfolds only in their thoughts") (Ljubková 2006, online). Their relationships with an estranged and hostile mother figure and an absent father figure are particularly problematic. They desperately seek a father figure who can provide security in a life without any solid points of reference, but this makes forming healthy relationships with potential partners very difficult. Lagronová's plays as, for instance, *Antilopa* (*Antelope*, 1993) or *Nikdy* (*Never*, 2003), particularly incisively depict such female characters at the center of the stage (see Jungmannová 2008): Kateřina Rudčénková will build on this, drawing on a distinctly Central European cultural background.

4. Art and Life, Women and Men

Not only does Rudčénková combine different literary genres in her work, but she also shows the same characters and settings recurring in poems, prose stories and plays. There is a constant interplay between art and life, reality and fiction, which alternate seamlessly until they become almost indistinguishable. Autobiographical elements are blended with references to her previous works, as well as overt reworkings of other writers' themes and motifs, with a marked tendency towards quotation and self-quotation, which once again brings the Czech author closer to the postmodernist climate of the end of the last century.

Rudčénková's plays are characterized by their fragmented, rarefied narratives and lack of real on-stage action. In fact, the author's staging instructions are minimal. Together with the poetic nature of the texts, this makes the plays particularly suited to readings, a format that has been adopted for Rudčénková's works in various venues in Czechia and abroad. The *rozhlasová hra* ("radio drama") format, which is particularly popular in Czechia, has also proven to be very successful.¹⁰ This is demonstrated by the playwright's fruitful collaboration with Czech Radio Vltava, which in 2007-2008 promoted the significant project "Plays and Documentaries of the New Generation", aimed at a young audience and curated by Antonín Přidal, a well-known figure from the golden age of Czech radio drama in the 1960s. The radio plays were clearly intimate, focusing on family or romantic relationships. Even when the horizon was broadened to include grotesque or dystopian narratives, the core theme remained a dysfunctional world in which the protagonist, often an artist, felt uncomfortable, alone and unable to communicate with others (see Vojtová 2012).

¹⁰ However, it is worth pointing out that Rudčénková has never experimented with the verbatim technique, which is usually very popular in radio dramas. Although her plays are inspired by autobiographical experiences, she always reworks them and never uses raw documentary material.

Such are also Rudčenkova's characters, especially the female ones, who express themselves through monologue-like dialogues and monologues that often seem like a dialogue between the character and herself, including the canonical breaking of the fourth wall. The psychological element on stage also implies a dreamlike quality, with emotions, dreams, memories, fantasies and ghosts being materialized. This is achieved with the help of dolls and other disturbing objects on stage, creating a surreal and alienating effect. The renowned concept of theatre formulated by the aforementioned Cixous, who was a playwright in addition to her feminist activism, fit very well with Rudčenkova's artistic vision: "For me the Theatre is by definition the stage where the living meet and confront the dead, the forgotten and the forgetters, the buried and the ghosts, the present, the passing, the present past and the passed past" (Cixous 1999, p. 306).

In Rudčenkova's case, the memory to be brought back to the surface and reworked in a chronotope that combines the past, present and future in a non-linear way is essentially individual and familial rather than collective and national. The reminiscences in Rudčenkova's plays that transcend the individual dimension are more closely linked to a broader cultural substratum that the author perceives as intimately her own, namely the Central European legacy radiating from Vienna and its surroundings, which, for obvious historical and geographical reasons, cannot be overlooked when discussing Czech literature in general. Rudčenkova draws on the various manifestations of modernism in the late Habsburg Empire, as seen in her debut play *Frau in Blau* (*Woman in Blue*, 2004), which focuses on Alma Schindler. The interest in the fin-de-siècle Viennese milieu is likely also attributable to its role as the context in which psychoanalysis first took root. In the Czech playwright's work, one frequently detects underlying Freudian reminiscences that posit women as susceptible to hysteria, alongside Jung's Electra complex and the conception of the feminine as an arcane archetype of the collective unconscious. Both frameworks—whether consciously or not—were subsequently absorbed by European women in the decades that followed.

As we have already seen, the restless Austrian literature of the second half of the twentieth century is of no less importance to Rudčenkova. This includes the work of the aforementioned Bernhard (1931-1989) as well as other compatriots such as Ernst Jandl (1925-2000) and Elfriede Jelinek (b. 1946). All of these writers were deeply attached to their country of origin and its historical and cultural heritage. Yet at the same time, they were ruthless critics of the monsters lurking behind the neat and tidy facades of Viennese villas and acting openly in periods such as that following the Nazi Anschluss. Bernhard and Jandl also began their careers as poets and frequently engaged in hybridizing life and art. This tendency is especially evident in light of a key assumption articulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein—an idea upon which Bernhard drew—namely, that the subject's relationship with the external world is indirect, mediated by the images that the subject constructs of reality. In this context, such images arise from artistic works, whether enjoyed or created from scratch. Bernhard and Jandl thus create meta-artistic texts centered on writers reflecting on their own work, exposing the illusory nature of theatre without any pretense of naturalistic mimesis. Furthermore, Bernhard, Jandl and Jelinek all have a tendency to depict borderline characters and situations, subverting the constraints imposed by the respectability of their environment of origin, in tones that oscillate between tragedy and black humor, at times verging on the grotesque. Jelinek's polemically feminist approach is well known.

Rudčenkova absorbs all of this, paying particular attention to female figures who clash with the strict, albeit unwritten, rules that govern their behavior and socialization. These women are full of artistic aspirations, as creative activity seems to be the only way to maintain a fruitful connection with oneself and the world in an era of the end of

ideologies and the seemingly total relativism of values. Rudčenkova's alter egos on stage may be writers or painters, but they all struggle with insecurity about their talent, due to the fear of not being taken seriously as artists because they are women, as one of the protagonists of *Čas třešňového dýmu* (*A Time of Cherry Smoke*, 2007) ironically points out with a reference to the highly gendered nature of the Czech language: "Já jsem génius, babi, ale svět to nedokáže akceptovat, protože zatím neexistuje slovo génius v ženském rodě" ("I am a genius, granny, but the world cannot accept it because there is yet no word for genius in the feminine gender") (Rudčenkova 2007c, p. 9). We may therefore discern what—reformulating Harold Bloom's well-known concept of the "anxiety of influence" afflicting male authors paralyzed by a reverential fear of their classical predecessors—has been recast by feminist literary criticism as the equally problematic absence of female influence. This condition, as Virginia Woolf already observed, intensifies the sense of disorientation experienced by women writers trying to establish a reasonably long and solid legacy to support themselves.

In some of her latest plays, Rudčenkova mentions the so-called "Bechdel test" in relation to the distinctive features of art produced by women. According to this semi-serious practice devised by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in 1985, a work of art truly does justice to the agency of female characters if it features at least two named women who discuss topics unrelated to men or romantic relationships with them. This means that they are no longer seen through male eyes or considered solely in relation to the male sex. Rudčenkova jokes about this with evident self-irony, since very few scenes in her plays would pass the Bechdel test: in addition to their creative ambitions, the protagonists in her plays are also tormented by their relationships with men, whether partners or fathers. This is because, and this is a common theme in Czech contemporary female dramaturgy and prose,¹¹ the family plays always the key role in the formation of one's personality, both as a woman and as an artist. When unhealthy patterns are triggered among family members from childhood onwards, it can lead to a compulsion to repeat dysfunctional and co-dependent relationships in the future. Given how difficult it is to break such cycles and stop suffering, sometimes the only option is to accept one's loneliness and seek balance and inner calm without external support.

In this regard, Rudčenkova's dramatic works can be divided into two thematic blocks: plays that focus on family and couple relationships, and those in which a female character independently takes stock of her existence, using the art she creates as a powerful tool for psychological introspection.

4.1. Scenes from Central European Relationships

Although Alma Schindler and the painter Oskar Kokoschka never married, in the aforementioned *Woman in Blue*, the play marking Rudčenkova's theatre debut, we seem to witness "scenes from a marriage" reminiscent of Bergman. *Woman in Blue* is undoubtedly a very apt example of how relationships are explored by the playwright from a distinctly female perspective, with a particular focus always being placed on the role of art in the lives of characters who have made creative activity the center of their existence, so much so that some of Kokoschka's paintings are also crucial in defining the movements and positions of the protagonists on stage.

¹¹ For instance, the successful novels and stories of Viktorie Hanisová (b. 1980), Petra Soukupová (b. 1982) or Lucie Faulerová (b. 1988) also largely problematize these themes.

The play was written on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Kokoschka's death, but the heart of the non-action on stage is Alma, in open controversy with the androcentric narratives of the past and present. Much of the narration is entrusted to the voice of Virginia, the unborn daughter of the couple. Like the ghost of Gustav Mahler, Virginia is a supernatural presence on stage, effectively projecting the haunting memories and subconscious impulses of the two protagonists, particularly with regard to Mahler's ongoing psychological dominance over Alma. Drawing inspiration from various ego-documents by Alma and Oskar, Rudčenkova highlights Alma's talents, not only as an attractive muse to artists who have entered the world canon, such as Mahler, Kokoschka, Walter Gropius and Franz Werfel, but as an artist in her own right, primarily a composer, who was unjustly relegated to the background in relation to her partners. Oskar, on the other hand, is portrayed with a focus on his darker traits. He is an inept man who is somewhat intimidated by the charisma of the women he idolizes. Consequently, he is extremely obsessive in his attempts to dominate them, displaying an "emotional vampire"-like possessiveness that is also fully expressed in his art. Thus, Virginia describes the famous 1914 painting *Die Windsbraut (The Bride of the Wind)* as follows: "Namaloval se na něm spolu s ní plující na voru v rozbouřeném moři. Důvěřivě k němu přitulenou. Vidíte, on sám je oba střeží s úzkostným výrazem v tváři" ("He painted himself on it, drifting with her on a raft in a turbulent sea. She snuggled up to him trustingly. You see, he himself is watching over them both, his face betraying an anxious expression") (Rudčenkova 2004, p. 19). Oskar's possessiveness is also evident in his obsession with Alma's body: "On si myslí, že když se zmocní jejího těla, zmocní se celé její bytosti. Ten věčný omyl..." ("He believes that by taking possession of her body, he will also take possession of her entire being. That eternal mistake...") (Rudčenkova 2004, p. 15), remarks Virginia, and it must be noted that the sexual act resulting in the conception of the unborn child is depicted in a manner that is both vivid and anatomical in its detail.

Later—and this is a true biographical detail—Oskar had a puppet modelled on Alma to keep with him after their separation. It was only with the help of this inanimate object—precisely the "Woman in Blue" from Kokoschka's eponymous painting—that Oskar could compensate for the emotional distance that could never be bridged with the real Alma: Virginia comments on an Oskar's self-portrait with Alma arguing that "na obraze jsou intimně blízko, nazí, a přitom ta faktická vzdálenost mezi nimi – vůbec se na sebe nedívají" ("in the painting, they are intimately close, naked, and yet the actual distance between them is clear—they are not looking at each other at all") (Rudčenkova 2004, p. 41). This is because Oskar has always belittled Alma and her autonomy as an individual. It is no coincidence that Oskar offers an alternative interpretation of the Orpheus myth in a fever delirium, in which Orpheus turns around because he believes that Eurydice cannot manage on her own. This is clearly reminiscent of the libretto written by Kokoschka for Ernst Krenek's 1926 opera, in which the profoundly misogynistic Orpheus kills Eurydice out of jealousy upon returning from the underworld.

Similar unequal relationships also reappear in Rudčenkova's second play, *Blue Horses* (2005), which the author herself has ironically described as a *divadelní telenovela* ("theatrical soap opera") (see Rudčenkova 2005, p. 1). Freely adapted from the varied stories in the 1995 book *Alles Ehe oder was? (Is this all a marriage or what?)*, by German essayist Karin Jäckel, which is dedicated to the institution of marriage in Europe in the mid-1990s, *Blue Horses* does indeed resemble a soap opera, but one in which sexist clichés are highlighted. The subject also echoes some scenes of Arthur Schnitzler's 1900 play *Reigen (La Ronde)*, remaining in the vein of the Austrian fin de siècle. Furthermore, the title recalls Franz Marc's painting *Die großen blauen Pferde (The Big Blue Horses)* (1911)—once again returning to German-speaking modernism—and in one scene of the

play, Cézanne's masterpiece *Bathers* is discussed, whose, as in the case of Kokoschka, normally taken for granted, sexist approach to the representation of the female body is laid bare:

JINDŘICH: Co je vám na něm tak hrozně nesympatického?

MARIE: Bezohlednost, s jakou si přivlastňuje ženské tělo.

JINDŘICH: Z toho byste mohla stejně dobře nařknout celé výtvarné umění.

MARIE: Ano, přesně to mám na mysli.

JINDŘICH: Já bych v tom ale viděl spíš poctu ženskému tělu.

MARIE: Protože jste muž, to je logické. Díváte se na ty zotročené subjekty z pozice ovládajícího a líbí se vám to, ovšem.

JINDŘICH: What is it about him that you find so repulsive?

MARIE: The ruthlessness with which he appropriates the female body.

JINDŘICH: You could just as easily accuse the entire visual arts of that.

MARIE: Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

JINDŘICH: But I would see it more as a tribute to the female body.

MARIE: Because you're a man, that's logical. You look at these enslaved subjects from a position of power, so of course you like it (Rudčenkova 2005, p. 6).

Therefore, as in *Woman in Blue*, the leitmotifs of figurative art and the color blue both recur. In Marc's view, the blue horse represents a yearning for freedom. Blue is also the color of water, a key element in Rudčenkova's poetry, especially in the 2004 collection *Popel a slast* (*Ashes and Delight*), where it symbolizes total abandonment and trust in the world. The couple relationships that intersect in *Blue Horses*, however, are the antithesis of freedom, abandonment and trust, being as they are two middle-class marriages, with a consequent and predictable merry-go-round of couples that are reminiscent of Schnitzler's aforementioned play, especially in the two parallel scenes in which couples talk in their bedrooms after intercourse. As we can clearly see from the dialogues, which sound almost like theses, these marriages are based on power sadomasochistic relations in favor of men, hypocrisy and double standards regarding fidelity and self-sacrifice on the part of men and women. Furthermore, the discrepancy between authentic sexual desires and what actually happens in married life is exposed in a sort of symbolic "collective interview" with the two married couples.

A relationship outside the bonds of marriage, and the different ways in which men and women experience it, is at the heart of *Niekur* (a Lithuanian term meaning "Nowhere"), a *Dramatická báseň o česko-litevském přátelství (na věčné časy)* ("Theatrical poem about a Czech-Lithuanian friendship (forever and ever)",¹² that Rudčenkova wrote in 2006 and intertwined, with a dense network of references, with the aforementioned poetry collection *Ashes and Delight*. Once again, autobiographical material features (Rudčenkova's residency in Germany, where she actually met a Lithuanian colleague); once again, reflection on art and life occurs (the protagonist and author's alter ego is writing a play); and once again, Central European literature is a source of inspiration (in

¹² The final part of the play's subtitle probably alludes to the Czechoslovak communist motto *Se Sovětským svazem na věčné časy a nikdy jinak* ("With the Soviet Union forever and ever and never otherwise"). This pompous motto was sometimes reworked sarcastically in popular folklore, for example as *Na věčné časy, ale ani na minutu navíc* ("Forever and ever, but not a minute more"). Considering the common "Soviet" background of both protagonists' childhood and the common European path of contemporary Lithuania and Czechia, which are overtly discussed in the play, this ironical reference seems not coincidental. At the same time, *na věčné časy* can also be associated with the potential eternity of memory, including through literature, despite the temporary and ephemeral nature of the protagonists' concrete relationship (see Augustová 2023, p. 57).

this case, Jandl's 1980 radio play *Aus der Fremde* [*From Abroad*], which is about a stylized couple of writers in the midst of creative and midlife crises amid envy and petty conflicts in their prosaic daily rituals).¹³ In *Niekur*, two writers from the same post-Soviet space, now oriented entirely towards the European Union, are juxtaposed. Agnes from Czechia and Kornelijus from Lithuania convene in Germany, far from home and the phantoms of their past, in the suspended and unnatural dimension of a residency—currently one of the main ways of working for those who earn a living from literature—destined to end, as, consequently, is the relationship between the two, especially since Kornelijus is already blissfully married. Moreover, perhaps Agnes is unconsciously seeking an impossible relationship that takes place in a “nowhere” (and ends nowhere), because, as the quote from Simone de Beauvoir at the beginning of the play states, “dívka nalézá v takové lásce alibi, které jí umožňuje vyhnout se konkrétním zkušenostem” (“the girl finds in such love an alibi that allows her to avoid specific experiences”) (Rudčenková 2006, p. 3).

For reasons of expressive effectiveness, Rudčenková draws inspiration from Jandl's *From Abroad* also on a formal level. Like the *Er* (“He”) and *Sie* (“She”) in the Austrian author's *Sprechoper* (“Spoken Opera”), Agnes and Kornelijus often speak of themselves in the third person in a prose-like manner to accentuate the alienating nature of their situation, but above all to reproduce the peculiar gaze of an artist scrutinizing themselves deeply yet from the right distance, as if scrutinizing one of their own characters. In this sense, as with Jandl, the narration does not simply recount something that happened; rather, it is a “narration of something that is being narrated” by the two writers (see Jandl 1981, p. 69). This constant ambivalence also implies the contrast between what the two actually say and what only unfolds in their inner world, as the playwright said (Rudčenková 2009a, p. 48). Agnes' process of translating emotions and memories into theatrical form is humorously deconstructed in the surreal scenes that punctuate the story of the two writers and materialize a sort of draft in progress of the play Agnes is writing during the residency. The tragicomic story of two Siamese twins with joined heads but opposite characters is told—one uninhibited and vulgar, the other shy and God-fearing—but united by a visceral and unhealthy bond, a sort of dreamlike projection of the relationship between Agnes and Kornelijus and, above all, of the unconscious instincts of Agnes, who is younger, more impulsive, romantic and irrational than the more mature and composed Kornelijus. The twins' absurd and almost grotesquely brutal dialogue provides a counterpoint to the highly intellectual and erotic dynamics between the two writers.

The play *Šťvanice* (2015) is also about a dialogue between a man and a woman in a transitional moment in their lives, and this time they are not a couple or even potential partners; they are merely the protagonists of a chance encounter on an island in the middle of the Vltava River in Prague,¹⁴ which gives the play its title. Like *Niekur*'s Germany, the island serves as an isolated dimension, suspended in space and time. Disappointed by their life experiences, the two individuals are unable to overcome their loneliness and sense of emptiness due to their contrasting approaches to human contact. The long-awaited miracle on the island, a picturesque natural oasis in the heart of a now-stifled civilization, does not occur.

¹³ For an in-depth comparative analysis of this Rudčenková's play and Jandl's work, see Augustová 2023.

¹⁴ The island is also home to Divadlo Letí, a theatre company with which Rudčenková has collaborated.

4.2. The dilemmas of contemporary Czech femininity

A contemporary Czech woman and artist who is not married is the usual protagonist of the plays that we could ascribe to a second thematic block in Rudčenkova's work, whose most programmatic text is probably *A Time of Cherry Smoke*, written during the playwright's training period at the Royal Court Theatre. The play has the subtitle *Hra v polosnu* ("A play in a semi-somnolence"), and here too we find the elements already reviewed, such as the presence of ghosts on stage and dreamlike interludes, here even fairy-tale-like, and the setting of a non-action in a symbolic space suspended in time: in this case, an old family apartment full of memories, with a Chekhovian flavor like the title of the play itself. An orchard of felled cherry trees returns as a memory of a grandmother who grew up in the countryside, and Chekhov's famous play is also quoted directly by the protagonists. However, the focus here is not on a couple, but on three women from the same family spanning three generations.

This enables Rudčenkova to highlight the undeniable changes in the value system of Czech society and their impact on the status of women, particularly with regard to marriage, the topic she had addressed in previous plays. A grandmother born at the beginning of the 20th century, who reappears here as a benevolent ghost, and a mother born after World War II, who lived most of her life in socialist Czechoslovakia, are conversed with by the thirty-year-old protagonist Anna, once again a painter and alter ego of the playwright. The play was performed on the radio in 2009, winning the Prix Bohemia Radio award that year. On that occasion, the possibility of using the same actress to voice the three generations was discussed to emphasize the deep matrilineal bond despite their different upbringings.¹⁵

While Anna's grandmother was raised in a patriarchal society and never questioned the lack of equal opportunities, Anna's mother was a typical "superwoman" of socialist Czechoslovakia. Anna is theoretically free to forge her own personal and professional path, but she still feels constrained by stubborn conventions regarding the pressure to have a stable, well-paid job and, primarily, to marry and have children. During the interludes, the three women unexpectedly but aptly take on the roles of three heroines from traditional European fairy tales, such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. This lends itself to a sort of resistant reading—to use Judith Fetterley's term (see Jarkovská 2004)—of the fairy tales in question, whose gendered clichés, internalized by women for centuries, are stigmatized as implausible and contradictory nowadays. The three fairy-tale heroines yearn for the arrival of an unknown prince who seems more akin to Godot from the Theatre of the Absurd. Even if he were to arrive, he would likely bring nothing good, as one of the dialogues suggests: "ANNA: Tobě snad nikdy nedošlo, proč všechny pohádky končej ve chvíli, kdy se ti dva vezmou? VALÉRIE: Ne, proč? ANNA: Protože od té chvíle už by to byla knížka hororů" ("ANNA: Have you ever thought about why all fairy tales end when the two get married? VALÉRIE: No, why? ANNA: Because from that point on, it would be a total horror story") (Rudčenkova 2007c, p. 14). The effect of estrangement is further enhanced in the final scene of the play, where the fairy-tale heroines, having tried to demonstrate their agency by verbalizing personal desires not connected with marriage, become three unpleasant "princes charming" devoid of romantic aplomb, who take on despite themselves the "static" role traditionally reserved for women.

¹⁵ Not coincidentally, the testimonies of three generations of women with very similar experiences are included in the appendix to an article on the transformation of marriage and family institutions in a collective volume on gender issues in Czechia (Maříková 2003, pp. 112-116).

The last line presents a further and emblematic reversal of perspectives that are normally taken for granted: “Bere si mne žena. Žena, již jsem byl vyjmut z žebra. Nebo z lůna? Už si nevzpomínám” (“A woman is going to marry me. The woman from whose rib I was taken? Or from whose womb? I can’t remember anymore”) (Rudčenkova 2007c, p. 24).¹⁶

Like her Czech peers, Anna theoretically has more choices: in Czechia, as in the rest of the European Union, there is at least equal opportunity on paper. As previously mentioned, unlike other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, post-1989 Czechia has not experienced any particularly traumatic upheavals, such as wars or serious internal crises. Despite the difficulties of the initial transition to a market economy, both men and women have achieved a certain degree of prosperity. However, on the one hand, greater freedom is a double-edged sword. Redefining one’s identity outside of gender-based patterns is complicated and can lead to dissonance between one’s dreams, the expectations of others, and social conventions that are difficult to break down. The issue of motherhood is a prime example of this, as it is still widely perceived as a necessary step for a woman to define herself as such (see Maříková 2004). In addition to this, there is a deep-seated fear of solitude that results in an eagerness to avoid the state of being uncoupled at any cost, even if this leads to becoming enmeshed in relationships that are either unfulfilling or detrimental. On the other hand, especially after the global economic crisis of 2008, the unwritten laws of a certain post-feminism are faltering, because professional careers and success within a capitalist system, more precarious than they might seem, are no longer seen as a panacea for all ills: it is not enough to follow the advice of motivational coaches and “really want it” to achieve one’s ambitions, not to mention the fact that ambition, rather than emancipating, wears one down.

Like other characters in the theatre and prose of Czech women writers, Anna and the protagonists of Rudčenkova’s subsequent plays share a great sensitivity and explore and search for themselves in an attempt, perhaps futile, to define their unique identity and their place in a society that, although still wealthy, is deeply disoriented and atomized. The playwright herself (Rudčenkova 2013, pp. 6-7) said that she was struck by Zygmunt Bauman’s book *The Individualized Society* (2001), the echoes of which can be heard in a play such as *Zpacifikovaná* (*Pacified*, 2004-2009), subtitled *Hra o prázdnotě* (“A play about emptiness”). The protagonist once again functions as the author’s alter ego: an artist who, through highly poetic monologues arranged in verse, draws attention to the difficulties faced by her counterparts throughout history. She invokes Alma from *Woman in Blue*, as well as women who remained in the shadow of their husbands or female artists who took their own lives, and she dreams of finally erecting a great monument in their honor, in order at last to render them visible. This ambition may recall Gayatri Spivak’s well-known essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), which mentions the Indian ritual of sati, also referred to by the protagonist of *Pacified* in her compelling monologue.

Extremely stylized (she is simply called *Ona*, “She”, just as her male partner is merely *Muž*, “Man”), the protagonist has discovered her own dimension precisely by “emptying” herself of all feeling, observing her existence from without as it unfolds, and thereby freeing herself from the dilemmas and distress, together with the interactions with others and the cultural superstructures that govern them. The presence on stage of a sort of specter of Jean-Paul Sartre, while recalling de Beauvoir’s *Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second*

¹⁶ In addition to proposing this more natural alternative to the biblical myth of Eve being born from Adam’s rib, the original also plays on the two distinct Czech gendered verbs that mean “to marry”: *brát* (literally “to take”) if a man marries a woman, and *vdát se* (etymologically close to the verb “to give oneself”) if a woman marries a man. In this case, although the subject of the sentence is a woman, the more “agentive” verb *brát* is used.

Sex), whose importance the protagonist naturally underscores, also indirectly evokes existentialism and the well-known adage “L'enfer, c'est les autres” (“Hell is other people”) from one of Sartre's plays. “She” therefore chooses solitude, akin to the lyrical self in Rudčenkova's 2001 collection *Není nutné, abyste mě navštěvoval* (*You Don't Need to Visit Me*), who ultimately renounces her desperate thirst for emotional closeness. However, the downside to this “pacification” is that it can make a woman feel even more powerless, invisible and insecure. The protagonist is reluctant to entrust herself even to God because, speaking about conventions that are difficult to break down, “každý bůh je muž. A taky všichni církevní hodnostáři jsou muži... Jak bych se s nimi mohla identifikovat?” (“Every god is male. And all church officials are men too... How could I possibly identify with them?”) (Rudčenkova 2009b, p. 32).

Similar to the protagonist of *Pacified* is the heroine of the play *Nehoda – kóma – bezčasí* (*Accident – Coma – Timelessness*, 2008). Anežka, in hospital after a skiing accident and the breakdown of a relationship—and it is worth recalling that in contemporary women's theatre the depiction of the sick body often symbolizes shame and emotions that resist rational expression (see Diamond 2013)—finds herself in a borderline state in which she has lost the fragile control she once exercised over her life. She is thus prompted to take stock and approach a kind of nirvana through a series of dialogues: at times with a doctor, at times with her own inner voice, and at times with Buddha himself. A curious hybrid between a psychoanalytic session and a court trial culminates in a sort of phantasmagorical sabbath. In this, Anežka conducts a choir composed of all the men in her life... and in her works, since the male characters from Rudčenkova's literary texts also appear, including Kornelíus from *Niekur*. An absent father emotionally deprived Anežka, who suffers from what her doctor calls “duševní nymfomanie” (“nymphomania of the soul”) (Rudčenkova 2008, p. 27), a desperate need for affection combined with a deep mistrust of others and a victim mentality that condemns her to inaction and to artificially creating problems in order to attract attention. A text projected onto the backdrop at the end of the play suggests that the only solution is to make peace with one's own fragility and finitude, and to stop believing that providential intervention by others can make our dreams come true:

Je naivní očekávat, že jednoho krásného dne do sebe všechno v našem životě konečně zapadne. Hledat trvalé bezpečí je marné. Je třeba dojít k úplnému znechucení nad způsobem myšlení, které nás přesvědčuje o existenci pevného a samostatného já, o tom, že lze nalézt trvalé štěstí a definitivně se zbavit utrpení a že za naši bolest může někdo jiný.

It is naive to expect that one fine day everything in our lives will finally fall into place. Seeking permanent security is futile. We need to come up with a sense of total disgust towards the mentality that asserts that there is a solid, independent self; that lasting happiness and an end to suffering are possible; and that someone else is to blame for our pain (Rudčenkova 2008, pp. 27-28).

Another metaphor for a moment of transition and instability, linked to the end of a relationship, is the bizarre 2009 play *Petrolejka* (*Oil Lamp Girl*), in which a trio of eccentric characters find themselves on a ship in the middle of the sea, discussing their mysterious pasts, obsessions, and doubts. The female protagonist is overwhelmed with questions: “Už mnoho let se mi v hlavě ozývá hlas. A ten hlas se mě několikrát za den zeptá: Co by sis přála? Co by sis přála? A já musím ustavičně odpovídat. Je tak dotěrný” (“For many years, I have heard a voice echoing in my head. That voice asks me several times a day: What do you want? What do you want? I have to answer constantly. It's so intrusive!”) (Rudčenkova 2009c, p. 28). She expresses a desire to be free from all

responsibility, even if it means spending her whole life on a drifting boat, or in the cosmic space, since she used to be an astronaut.

5. Conclusion

The protagonists of the analyzed plays resemble those in Rudčenkova's subsequent prose works, such as her debut novel *Amáliina nehybnost* (*Amalie's Immobility*, 2021) and the short story collection *Tchyně nemá jazyk* (*The Mother-in-Law Has No Tongue*, 2023). They are middle-class women with more or less pronounced artistic ambitions who, like their creator, first pass the age of 30 and then 40 and engage in a sort of self-ironical review of their lives so far, becoming aware of the fact that they find themselves, willingly or not, in a permanent limbo. They are sometimes apathetic, sometimes eager to live, sometimes inept and sometimes intent on learning lessons from the empirical experience that unfolds without clear direction, often leading to the repetition of mistakes. They feel that the circle is now closing and that, as the years go by, they have less and less chance of realizing certain life projects or of recovering lost opportunities linked to memories that are gradually fading away. Putting it paradoxically, they are now too old to grow up, at least in terms of embracing the obligatory stages of a conservative mentality that is still present. At the same time, they don't feel like they have achieved their goal, which seems to keep changing and is hard to define.

Failure to conform to unwritten rules causes discomfort, and there is no sense of "sisterhood" with peers in the same situation, nor is there any collective struggle to dismantle those rules. While indirectly acknowledging the failure of post-feminism, Rudčenkova's heroines have difficulty fully embracing even the achievements of the "second wave" of feminism. In this sense, one can agree with the provocative statement made by literary critic Eva Klíčová, who in 2019 denounced the fact that certain phenomena linked to global feminist movements have gone largely unnoticed in Czechia, arguing that "česká situace je v jednom základním ohledu příznačné postkomunističní konzervativní: máme ženskou literaturu, ale nemáme feminismus v literatuře" ("in one fundamental respect, the Czech situation is typically post-communist conservative: we have women's literature, but we do not have feminism in literature") (Klíčová 2019, online). Moreover, the aforementioned intersectionality and the boundaries of cisgender and heteronormative perspectives were rarely challenged by Czech female authors, and the issues raised by the "fourth wave" of feminism (see Cochrane 2013) were not particularly concerned about.

A way out, or at least a liberating outlet, which seems to have been found by Rudčenkova in theatre, by the way, playing as an actress on stage, is a form of black humor that is cathartic in its own manner, as is clearly demonstrated by her latest works: *Příběhy z pohřbu aneb povídej mi něco hezkého* (*Adventures from a Funeral, or Tell Me Something Nice*, 2019) and *Norská žena. En familieoperette* (*The Norwegian Woman: a Family Operetta*, 2024). Thanks to her collaboration with the Puchmajer theatre company, Rudčenkova has devoted herself to cabaret-style productions enriched with entertaining musical numbers that could recall the tradition of comic and irreverent theatre exemplified, for instance, by the legendary Czechoslovak "Semafor".¹⁷ It matters little that

¹⁷ Founded in Prague in 1959, the "Semafor" theatre acquired its unique profile thanks to two artists: Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr. They staged shows featuring a blend of cabaret, satire, puppet theatre, and jazz-style

the situations are borderline (in *Adventures*, the protagonist is already dead and reflects on her life once more, even from beyond the grave): the humorous filter, which is now far more evident than before, and the lively musical accompaniment help us to view both ourselves and our dead ends with a wry smile. In any case, the middle-class European woman on stage remains ultimately suspended, endeavoring to close her own Gestalt and awaiting a resolution that never materializes. We shall see in the near future whether this new phase in Rudčénková's dramatic output, which already appears to constitute a third coherent "block" in terms of theme and style—thus joining those analyzed previously in this article—will offer developments that, amongst other things, challenge the recent upsurge of so-called "anti-gender" discourse, which, with its anti-feminist rhetoric, has found fertile ground also within the conservative and populist parties of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁸ But this will, if at all, be the subject of a separate research.

Bionote: Francesca Lazzarin earned her PhD in Slavic Studies from the University of Padua (Italy) in 2013. From 2012 to 2020, she lived in Moscow (Russian Federation), where she worked at the Higher School of Economics and the Gorky Literature Institute. She is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Udine (Italy), focusing on a project exploring contemporary female drama in Czech, Ukrainian, and Russian theatre. She translates from Russian, Czech, and Ukrainian.

Author's address: francesca.lazzarin@uniud.it

improvisation, with music and songs playing a pivotal role. For a brief overview of the history of "Semafor", see Suchý, Berný 2019.

¹⁸ On the increasingly evident emergence of "anti-gender" sentiments among populist and sovereignist movements in Central and Eastern Europe over the past decade, and on how these undermine (trans)feminist activism and even gender studies – which are often viewed as an alien element imposed by the "wokism" of the major Western powers – see, for example, Jusová, Šmídová 2022; Wilson-McDonald 2023.

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