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Article Summary: Murphy describes and interprets the distinctive theatre curtains created in Nebraska by Czech immigrants and their descendants. He relates Czech-language drama to contemporary developments in Anglo-American theatre and to the Old World Czech tradition of using popular theatre to advance national objectives.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius), Václav Havel, Frank J Sadílek, Josef Schuessler, Josef Šedivý, František Ludvík, Jack Ballard

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Photographs / Images: fig 42: page from Komenský's *Orbis Pictus Sensualium* illustrating drama; fig 43: triptych illustrating the cast of characters from the Josef Šedivý production, *Two Orphans*, in Verdigre, 1915; fig 44: program cover for a play by the Omaha troupe Ochotnický kroužek Mošna; fig 45: interior view of the Pospishil Opera House, Bloomfield, 1915; fig 46: National Theatre in Prague; fig 47: layout of Kollár Hall, DuBois; fig 48: interior view of the Clarkson Opera House; fig 49: Bohemian village scene at the Clarkson Opera House; fig 50: advertising curtain at the Ratolest Mladočechů Hall, Linwood; fig 51: "plain interior" drop curtain and wings at the Slavín Hall, Ord, depicting the main room of a peasant house; fig 52: symbolic proscenium curtain in Kollár Hall, DuBois; fig 53: proscenium curtain from the Slavín Hall, centering on a rendering of the Hradčany, Prague, painted by Frank Fryzek; fig 54: scenic view of the Hradčany and the Mála Strana on the proscenium curtain in the Bílá Hora Hall, Verdigre; fig 55: Karlštejn Castle backdrop in the Clarkson Opera House, painted by the Minneapolis Scenic Company; fig 56: Vyšehrad Castle, Prague, from the old Wilbur Opera House proscenium curtain, painted by Jack Ballard, 1923; fig 57: view of the Charles Bridge and the Hradčany, from the Vyšehrad Hall, Niobrara, painted by H Farský & company; fig 58: a stock set at the Crete Sokol Hall showing the view from a palace garden; fig 59: urban drop curtain at the Bílá Hora Hall; fig 60: urban drop at the Milligan Auditorium

DRAMATIC EXPRESSIONS:

Czech Theatre Curtains in Nebraska

By David Murphy

The popularity of dramatic performance among native-born Americans during the nineteenth century has been well documented, but there is less awareness of theatre's status among the foreign-born. Chroniclers of drama in the Midwest have relied on standard English-language sources, with the result that few immigrant theatres have been identified in broad-based studies.¹ Likewise, ethnic monographs have detailed the role of drama within particular groups, but have not related that development to the larger American context.² The opera house was so ubiquitous in American communities that casual observers might assume immigrant theatre merely mimicked the broader American pattern. But a closer look at one group—the Czechs—yields some preliminary observations and conclusions: Czech-American theatre was particularly unrelated to its English-American counterpart.

Czech-American drama was distinct from that staged by Anglo-Americans in its origins, production, rationale, and temporal persistence. It was produced locally, rather than imported, and was staged primarily to establish and maintain ethnic cultural identity rather than as a profitable business venture. Czech-American theatre in the nineteenth century, like that in Anglo-America, followed closely on the heels of settlement, but it remained an integral part of community life among Czechs two decades or more after its demise in English-speaking towns. In part these distinctions are reflected in extant Czech theatre curtains in Nebraska.

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From its inception, drama in Anglo-America was less an indigenous than a commercial affair.³ It grew from a desire for entertainment, which was met principally by the commercial market. Professional touring companies, following British models, provided most productions. With the nation's expansion beyond the Alleghenies after 1750, the establishment of hundreds of new towns created greater demand for the traveling troupe.⁴ This trend was accelerated by the settlement of the trans-Mississippi region and the completion of a national rail network in the later nineteenth century.⁵

A country starved for entertainment demanded variety, and during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the American public was treated to a range of home talent productions, Lyceum courses, minstrel shows, stock productions, specialty acts, touring plays, vaudeville, musicals, and burlesque.⁶ Legitimate theatre was essentially eclipsed by vaudeville and other forms of popular entertainment by 1910, at the same time that all forms of live production began to be superseded by the motion picture.⁷

The commercial nature of American theatre was manifest in building construction as well. Nineteenth-century theatre buildings, regardless of size or type, were principally located on the upper floors of business blocks, with commercial stores on the main level.⁸ Though the design and technical sophistication of the auditorium or "house" evolved over the years, depending on community size and amount invested in construction, upper-level business block locations dominated American theatre architecture in the Midwest through the turn of the

century.⁹ Although construction of theatres or opera houses was sometimes accomplished by popular subscription, or occasionally through donation from a wealthy entrepreneur, most were strictly business ventures.

In contrast with this commercial development, theatre among Czechs was more an indigenous and participatory phenomenon. Czech love of drama, as that of Europeans generally, was centuries old by the time of settlement in North America. It dated at least to the Middle Ages, when performances inspired by Christianity and folklore were popular. The oldest recorded Czech plays evolved around religious festivals, which were initiated by the clergy and performed in Latin. Later the lay public began to participate, and drama came to be more secular in content and performed in the vernacular.¹⁰

After suffering puritanical opposition and a short eclipse during the Hussite religious reform period of the fifteenth century, Czech drama was revived in the sixteenth century by Jesuits at Prague. Its status was elevated in the mid-seventeenth century by Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius, 1562-1670), who wrote plays for use in school curricula. One of his books, *Schola ludus* (School on the Stage), detailed the values of using dramatic forms to enhance instruction. Together with *Orbis sensualium pictus* (The World in Pictures), it solidified his reputation as the foremost educator of his time (fig. 42).¹¹ Few if any of Komenský's plays were performed in his native land, however, for the Counter-Reformation which followed the Thirty Years War (1618-48), and which led to his exile from the Czech lands, signalled the beginning of a long

period of suppression of Czech culture by German Habsburg authorities. Not until the late eighteenth century, with the beginning of the Czech *Národní obrození* (National Revival), did Czechs again publicly perform plays in their native tongue.

In the interim, Czech theatrical traditions and the language were preserved in the villages. These folk

The popular plays produced during the first half of the nineteenth century stimulated national consciousness and pride among the still largely illiterate peasantry. The extraordinarily close ties between language and drama as a means of maintaining national identity, and the use of drama to promote explicitly national cultural and political ends, date from this period.¹²

Federal Republic and current president of the newly formed Czech Republic.¹³

During the *Národní obrození* the amateur theatrical society was the principal vehicle for the remarkable resurgence of drama.¹⁴ Just as the Czech language had been saved from Habsburg/Austro-Hungarian suppression in the villages of Bohemia and Moravia, so too was the dramatic impulse preserved there away from the watchful eyes of the authorities. The resurgence of all forms of Czech culture in the nineteenth century came to be symbolized in drama because of its close ties to language and the immediacy of its communication. During the 1830s and 1840s, just prior to the mass Czech emigration to the United States, amateur groups played in at least 130 Bohemian and Moravian towns.¹⁵ This momentum was maintained with the arrival of immigrants on American soil.

Czech-language drama began almost immediately with settlement in Nebraska. By 1900 most of the larger Czech enclaves had experienced a long tradition of theatrical production. Subsequently the movement spread to smaller communities. Virtually every Czech settlement, regardless of size, participated in home talent drama at some time during the twentieth century.¹⁶

The first recorded Czech play in Nebraska was performed in the Big Blue settlement between Wilber and Crete in 1869. Staged under the auspices of the reading society formed by Josef Jindra, the play was entitled, *Rekrutýrka v Kocourkově* (Recruiting in Kocourkov). In the same year a Czech play was performed in Štěpánek's Hall at Thirteenth and William in Omaha. A handful of plays followed, but drama there remained sporadic until the arrival in 1874 of Frank J. Sadflek, who for a time revitalized interest.¹⁷ Czech theatre must have grown slowly, for Sadflek was lured to Wilber in 1877, primarily

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Divadlo. Ludus Scenicus. Das Schauspiel.

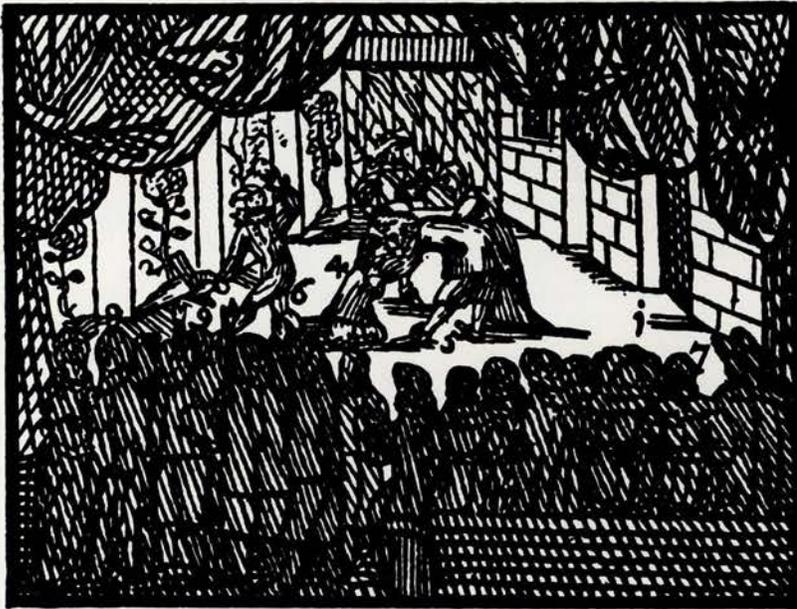


Fig.42. A reprint page from Komenský's didactic work, *Orbis Pictus Sensualium*, illustrating drama. (Courtesy Eve Chybová Bock, Crete, Nebraska; NSHS C998.1-583)

traditions informed a new generation of playwrights during the *Národní obrození*, including well-known dramatists Josef Kajetán Tyl and Václav Klicpera. Together with others they initiated a new flowering of Czech drama which focused on historical and folk themes.

Czech enthusiasm for drama, despite setbacks suffered during Nazi occupation and Communist rule, continues to the present time. Among the best known contemporary playwrights is former Chartist dissident Václav Havel, first president of the Czechoslovak



Fig.43. Triptych illustrating the cast of characters from the Josef Šedivý production, *Two Orphans, Verdigre, Nebraska, February 6, 1915*; Šedivý is second from right, back row, right-hand section. (Courtesy Verdigre (Nebraska) Heritage Museum; NSHS C998.1-625)

because of the strong interest in drama.¹⁸ Josef Schuessler arrived in Wilber from Chicago that same year, where he had been a prominent member of Alois Prokop's traveling theatre group. He directed Czech plays at Hokuf's Hall for twenty-seven years until his death in 1903.¹⁹ The 1870s also saw Czech drama emerge in the Tabor and Schuyler settlements of Colfax County, and at Niobrara in Knox County. Other Nebraska communities whose citizens sponsored Czech drama in the 1880s included Dodge, Verdigre, and Milligan.

Apparently there was limited expansion of Czech drama during the depression years of the 1890s, but the turn of the century saw renewed interest. Brainard, Burwell, Table Rock, and Weston contributed to the early twentieth century activity, while several smaller communities became active thereafter: Virginia and Swanton in the teens; Dwight, Hemingford, Loma, and Odell in the twenties; and Bee, Brush Creek, and Cedar Hill in the thirties.

The staging of Czech drama in Nebraska communities remained virtually continuous once it commenced. Performance ebbed and flowed accord-

ing to individual interest and leadership, but two peak periods are generally evident; the first during the early decades of the twentieth century, prior to the suppression by native-born Americans of foreign-language use during and after the First World War, and the second during the two interwar decades. Drama in several smaller communities was short-lived, primarily because of a late start, but older and larger settlements such as Brainard, Clarkson, Crete, Milligan, Omaha, Schuyler, Verdigre, and Wilber experienced several decades of virtually uninterrupted theatrical activity. Wilber's support of Czech-language theatre from 1877 to 1942 may be unsurpassed.

Czech drama in Nebraska essentially ended following the Second World War. Though an occasional Czech play was staged after that time, as in Dwight in 1962, the postwar period witnessed the demise of the locally-produced Czech play. Prolonged limitations on new immigration, and a changing national focus precipitated by the cold war, contributed to a decline of Czech-language acquisition in the home by the postwar generation. Nevertheless, the

survival of Czech drama some two to three decades after the demise of the English-speaking traveling troupe attests to the persistence of cultural awareness in Czech-America.²⁰

The principal institution of Czech drama in Nebraska, the dramatic society, also distinguishes it from other forms of American theatre. Although home talent productions were known for a time in many American communities, the American dramatic performance, whether legitimate theatre, opera, or vaudeville, was primarily "imported" through traveling troupes of professionals, who were the main institution of the English-language stage. By contrast, the locally produced play, directed or performed by a few professionals but primarily staged by amateurs, was the heart and soul of Czech theatre in Nebraska.

It is no surprise, given the popularity of similar groups in the Old Country prior to emigration, that local dramatic societies were among the first Czech-American organizations to be formed on the Nebraska prairies.²¹ Composed of individuals from all walks of life, and prominently including farmers, these societies contributed to a rich and

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diverse cultural life among Czechs. Josef Jindra's reading society of 1867 in Saline County was the first, followed by František Mareš's Reading and Benevolent Society of Omaha, 1873, and the dramatic society, Klicpera, founded in 1874 by prominent Omaha freethinker F. B. Zdrůbek. The Bohemian Reading Society, Hluchoněmý, at Tábor, Colfax County, was also formed that year.²²

The home talent club or society was formed virtually wherever plays were staged. Josef Šedivý's Český lev, formed in 1878 at Niobrara, was one of the earliest and longest-lived (fig. 43). Šedivý staged plays there for a quarter century. Wilber's first club, Tyl, was established in 1893, while in neighboring Milligan, Zbor zaboj was founded in 1899. Another long-lived club was at Milligan. Formed in 1926 as Ochotnické družstvo and reorganized the next year as Ochotnický kroužek, this club staged plays until 1938, and was one of the principal sponsors of the construction of the new Milligan Auditorium, or Národní sň, in 1929.

In addition to independent societies, several dramatic clubs were adjuncts to fraternal benevolent societies. Prominent among sponsors during the peak periods were the Západní Česko-Bratrská Jednota (ZČBJ) and the Sokols, the Czech gymnastic society. Several Czech Catholic parishes also established clubs, such as the Čtenářský klub Jablonsky of St. Wenceslaus Parish in 1900 at Dodge. Chapters of Komenský educational clubs also sponsored plays at times during the first two decades of this century, as did many Czech-language free schools in the summers.

While local productions were the mainstay of Czech drama, professional and other touring troupes helped spark and maintain interest. In 1893 the famous Prague touring company of František Ludvík toured the United States, playing in prominent Czech towns and cities. The "Ludvíkovci"

performed in twenty-seven American locations that year, with a remarkable twelve of them in Nebraska. Ludvík so appreciated the response his troupe received that he and twelve of his actors decided to establish the Ludvík Theatre Company in Chicago. In 1917 he made another national tour, which performed in over forty Nebraska

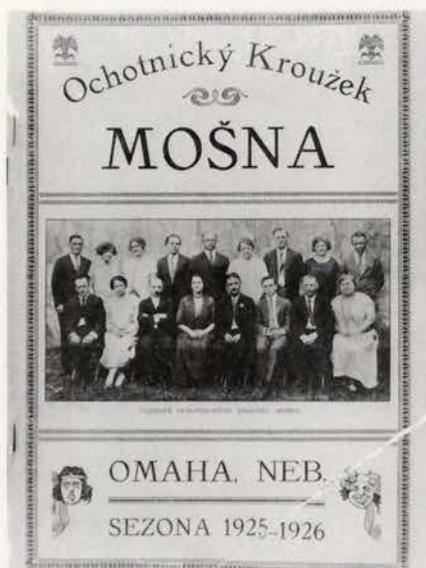


Fig.44. Cover from a program for a play by the Omaha troupe Ochotnický kroužek Mošna. (NSHS Archives; C998.1-559)

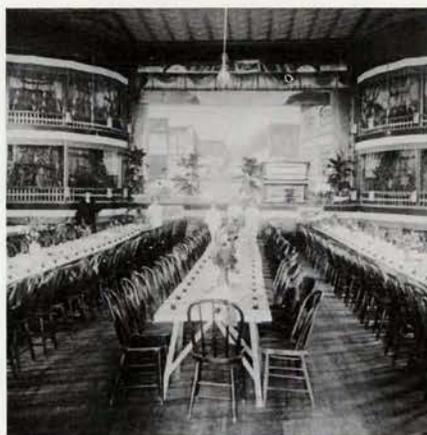


Fig.45. Interior view of the Pospishil Opera House, Bloomfield, Nebraska, 1915, showing the elaborate stage rigging. The house is being prepared for a banquet. (NSHS H673.5-4786)

Czech communities.²³ Locally, Omaha had its own professional troupe. The Ochotnický kroužek Mošna was most active during the 1920s (fig. 44).²⁴ Many local clubs "toured" occasionally to surrounding towns, especially in the twentieth century.

Architecturally the Czech-American theatre developed along distinctive lines as well. The first Czech play in Nebraska was held in the small log hall built by Jan Svoboda on his farm near Crete. The stage, measuring only six by fourteen feet, occupied one side of the hall and was made by placing heavy boards across two sawbucks. White calico cloth was used for the front drop.²⁵ The first play in Omaha (1869) was conducted on a stage only a little less crude. Described as roughly constructed, the stage in the Štěpánek Hall was in a building which had not been plastered inside, nor painted outside. Conditions improved noticeably in 1874 with construction of Kučera's Hall, also near Thirteenth and William Streets. Its stage was described as well-equipped.²⁶

The early performance of plays in private halls in Czech towns followed American patterns. Wealthier or entrepreneurial Czechs constructed general purpose halls above business establishments, which were used for all manner of public gatherings. Although the phenomenal growth of Czech-American communities and voluntary associations later resulted in the construction of public halls, some Czechs continued to operate private theatrical establishments in the American manner. Perhaps best known are Hokuf's Hall at Wilber, Janáček's Opera House in Schuyler, and Pospishil's Opera House in Bloomfield (fig. 45). Smaller ones included Kovanda's Opera House in Weston. Such private enterprises flourished principally where public facilities were not built, or where the private establishment was the larger or more elaborate facility.

By the 1880s some Czech-Nebraska communities and many chapters of voluntary associations created by Czechs—such as the Česko-Slovanský Podporující Spolek (ČSPS) and the Sokol—had become sufficiently established to begin construction of their own public meeting halls.²⁷ Some nineteenth-century public halls in the older Czech settlements of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Chicago are known to have included stages for drama, but available evidence is uncertain concerning the number of early Nebraska halls which incorporated stages. The commodious hall constructed about 1885 by the Tábora lodge of the ČSPS in Humboldt apparently did not include a stage among its many architectural provisions.²⁸ Of the two surviving early halls in Nebraska, only the one at Pishelville had a stage.²⁹

Virtually every Czech-American public hall built in Nebraska after 1900 included a bona fide stage for dramatic performance. Most were constructed by the ZČBJ, which had split from the older ČSPS in 1897 at a meeting in

Omaha. Many were also built by the Sokols, especially in Omaha and in the Saline County settlements, and some by the Katolický Jednota Sokol, the independent Sokol organization founded by Czech Catholics.

The construction of these public halls or theatres not only distinguishes them from the American pattern of commercial construction, but carries symbolic meaning as well. The Czech *Národní obrození*, that period of great cultural recovery, came to be materially symbolized in Bohemia by the construction of the Národní divadlo or National Theatre at Prague (figs. 46, 31).³⁰ Built entirely from funds collected by popular subscription, the building literally belonged to the Czech nation. Its opening in 1881 to Bedřich Smetana's *Libuše* marked the first time elite Czech drama had been staged publicly in Bohemia for decades.³¹ The resurgence of this most important art form, together with the circumstances of the building's construction, are heralded in the words "Národ sobě" (The Nation Unto Itself) above the



Fig.46. *The National Theatre in Prague.* (D. Murphy, NSHS)

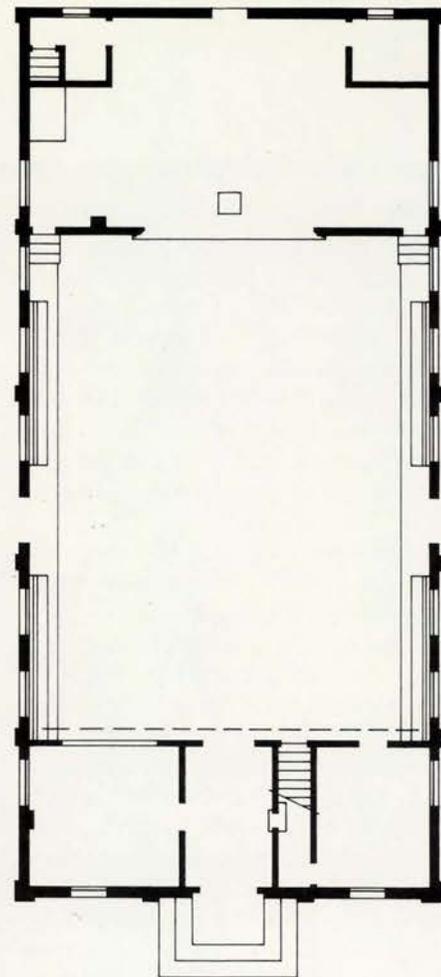


Fig.47. *The layout of Kollár Hall near DuBois, Nebraska, is typical of many Czech theatres. Proscenium doors on either side of the arch lead to the stage, with dressing rooms at the rear; a prompter's box is at center stage, and a balcony is at the rear of the hall, above the entrance and service spaces.* (D. Murphy, NSHS)

proscenium arch. Czech halls and theatres in the United States, many of which were known as the "National Hall" (*Národní síň*), might be considered small American versions of the National Theatre because of their importance to their communities.

Czech theatres were distinct from most of their American counterparts in the location of the "house" on the main level of the building, and in segregation from commercial establishments. As a result, their architectural character was more like that of a public building.³² Adoption of their own architectural designs, rather than utilizing American styles, outwardly symbolized a Czech



Fig.48. Interior view of the Clarkson (Nebraska) Opera House, showing the arrangement of the theatre. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-440)

public identity (figs. 2, 68). Czechs expressed this national character principally in one of two ways; the first in a vernacular neo-Renaissance style (*české novorenesance*), or the second, which perpetuated a popular provincial

baroque style (*venkovské barok*).³³ The meanings implicit in these styles became much more explicit on drop curtains inside the buildings.

The “house” of the Czech theatre was generally quite simple, like the

most common nineteenth-century American houses.³⁴ Its essential features followed the legacy of theatre design established in Renaissance Europe. In its most basic form, the house had a raised stage framed by a proscenium arch at one end of a large hall, or orchestra, and a gallery across the rear (fig. 47).³⁵ The popular version of this arrangement reflected economic and pragmatic concerns; the large level floor with movable seating allowed the space to be used for many kinds of events. The multiple functions for which Czech halls were built—including gymnastics, dance, concerts, speeches, funerals, and banquets in addition to drama—required a design which was accommodated by the general purpose hall model (figs. 7, 48).

Stage and scenery also followed developments that were first introduced during the Renaissance.³⁶ Stages varied in size and elaborateness, but generally Czech stage floors were flat, while front aprons, if they existed at



Fig.49. A Bohemian village scene at the Clarkson (Nebraska) Opera House. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-451)

all, were merely suggested, following continental rather than English practice.³⁷ Due to their typically smaller size, and to pragmatic considerations, Czech theatres retained the proscenium doors from the house to backstage on either side of the arch. These provided the only interior means of access to the stage.

Typical scenery rigging consisted of variations on the old wing-and-shutter system, which created a setting of depth enhanced by perspective painting. The system was composed of scenes painted on backdrops, with sets of wings on each side matched by narrow border curtains above. Shutters, or flats, had generally been replaced by backdrops by the later nineteenth century. Most of these were roll-drops while some of the larger Czech houses, such as the Crete and Omaha Sokol halls, had fly space above the stage which stored regular drop curtains.³⁸

Czech houses, like their Anglo-American counterparts, could accommodate any play if equipped with from three to six scenes. Theatres thus outfitted could support traveling troupes, who no longer had to transport their own scenery, as well as stage any locally-produced play. Imaginative combinations of drops, wings, and

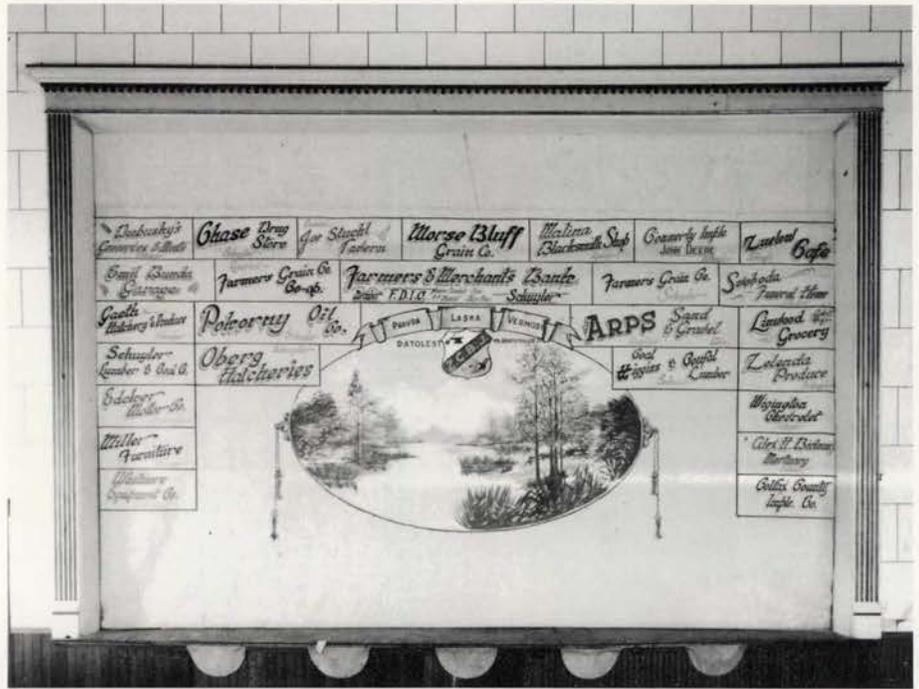


Fig.50. The advertising curtain at the *Ratolest Mladočechů Hall*, Linwood, Nebraska. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-546)

borders could give the illusion of more scenes than those suggested by the three to six matched sets. Common stock scenes included a plain interior, a fancy interior, an urban scene, a rustic or rural scene, a wood or forest scene, and a garden scene.³⁹ By the nineteenth century, commercial studios were providing most of these, using

standard designs to supply scenery of any size ordered by local managers. Mass-produced by technicians who were often considered unskilled, many stock scenes were criticized by artists and the managers of larger theatres alike.⁴⁰

Throughout much of the history of drama, scenes were changed in full view of the audience, often to their delight and entertainment. Front curtains, however, were used in elite theatres by the time drama was introduced to America. Green curtains were popular initially, but with the advent of rolled drops, and the proscenium, front, or act drop curtain in the early nineteenth century, new artistic expression was possible. Initially these curtains were operated only at the opening and closing of a play, but later they came to be used between acts to hide scene changes.⁴¹ During the nineteenth century romantic nature scenes were popular on front drops, and again, stock companies replicated the same scenes



Fig.51. "Plain interior" drop curtain and wings at the *Slavín Hall* near Ord, Nebraska, depicting the main room of a peasant house. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-429)

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hundreds of times. P.T. Barnum's influence was felt by the second half of the century with the introduction of the advertisement curtain as a front drop. Ad curtains usually still focused on a romantic scene, but it was often much smaller to maximize commercial space (fig. 50). Some artists and houses became quite sophisticated in their advertising skills, eventually using signs on urban street backdrops to advertise for local merchants.⁴² By the mid-nineteenth century the front draw curtain was popular again in elite theatres as an alternative to the front drop; it was usually of silk or velvet, and by the time of vaudeville was of a deep maroon or violet.⁴³

All of these influences and trends are evident, to varying degrees, in the scenery of Czech theatres in Nebraska.⁴⁴ Full complements of stock scenes are extant in halls at Crete, Clarkson, and near Ord, and possibly at Wilber and Brainard.⁴⁵ Crete's collection includes the proscenium drop, an ad curtain with space for advertisements, a rustic village scene, and two garden and two wood scenes (fig. 58), while Clarkson has preserved the proscenium, a castle backdrop, a rustic village scene, and an urban, a wood, and two garden scenes.⁴⁶ The curtains at the Slavín Hall near Ord are distinguished by complete sets of complementary wings (fig. 51). This collection includes the proscenium, as well as a rustic interior, a fancy interior, an urban scene, and a wood scene. Together, Czech theatre curtains in Nebraska form a notable collection, representative in general of American scene design at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But more important, many Czech curtains are symbols of a distinct cultural heritage, which was revived during the *Národní obrození* and recreated on American soil during the flowering of Czech-American culture in this century. These national or symbolic



Fig.52. Symbolic proscenium curtain in Kollár Hall, DuBois, Nebraska. (D. Murphy)

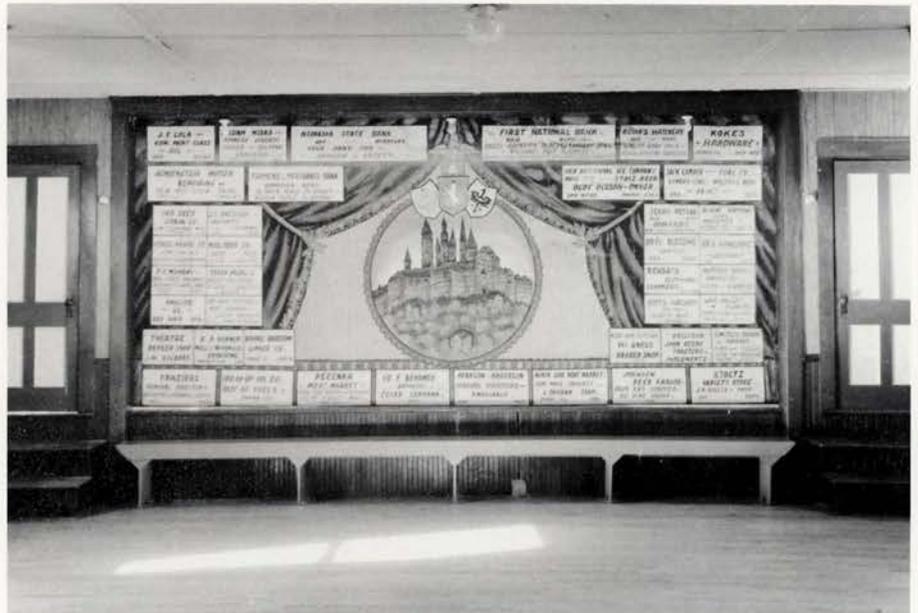


Fig.53. The proscenium curtain from the Slavín Hall near Ord, Nebraska, centering on a rendering of the Hradčany in Prague. (D. Murphy, NSHS)



Fig.54. *Scenic view of the Hradčany and the Mála Strana in Prague from the Seminárská zahrada, on the proscenium curtain in the Bílá Hora Hall, Verdigre, Nebraska. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-526)*

curtains are richly evocative, and lend an unmistakable aura to the theatre interior. Many were painted locally.⁴⁷ Two kinds of curtains are represented in this role: proscenium drops and backdrops. Proscenium curtains range from the strictly pictorial to the more Americanized ad curtain varieties, and from the allegorical to the symbolic in content.

The single allegorical curtain in Nebraska appears at the Clarkson Opera House, which was built in 1915 by ZČBJ lodge Západní svornost (figs. 23, 48). Painted in 1929 by Crete artist Jack Ballard, the scene, set within an elaborately painted oval frame, depicts the Great Moravian Prince Svatopluk on his death bed setting forth his final wisdom to his sons. According to the legend, Svatopluk asked each son to break a single stick, something they



Fig.55. *The Karlštejn Castle backdrop in the Clarkson (Nebraska) Opera House, painted by the Minneapolis Scenic Company. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-448)*

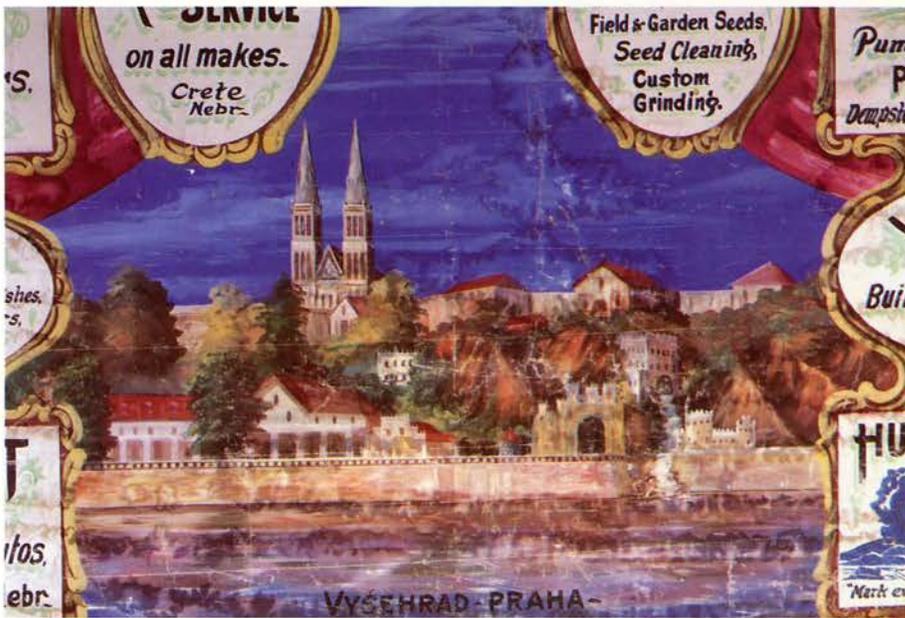


Fig.56. A rendition of the castle Vyšehrad in Prague by Crete, Nebraska, artist Jack Ballard, 1923, from the old Wilber (Nebraska) Opera House proscenium curtain. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-540)

were able to do easily. He then asked each to break a bundle of sticks, and no one could. The moral of the story, that there is strength in numbers, might be applied equally to the whole of Czech-American history as to the past several centuries of Czech history: the survival of Czech tradition here, and the successful entry of Czechs into American life, is due in large measure to the communal cultural life they led on American soil. The collective and mutually beneficial life fostered by voluntary organizations—whether they were freethinking, patriotic, or religious, or whether they focused on individual activities such as drama—became the American counterpart to the communal life of the Old Country village from where most emigrants departed.

Ballard is also responsible for the elegant proscenium curtain at the Crete Sokol Hall. Utilizing a gilt oval frame set within the illusion of a front frame of drawn curtains, this symbolic scene focuses on the Vyšehrad, the original

Bohemian castle (fig. 7). It was the first seat of power of the Přemyslid princes in the tenth century, and is connected with the legend of Libuše,

the princess who took the peasant Přemysl for a husband. Together they started the Přemyslid dynasty which lasted until 1306. Another rendition of the Vyšehrad was also painted by Ballard in 1932; it is the centerpiece for an ad curtain which formerly hung in the old Opera House in Wilber (fig. 56).

By far the most popular symbolic scene depicts the Hradčany in Prague, commonly known as the Prague Castle. Occupied from the tenth century, in the fourteenth the Emperor-King Charles IV made the castle the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, from where he fostered the Golden Age of Czech culture. Many ambitious projects were begun under his reign, including the construction of St. Vitus Cathedral (*katedrála sv. Vít*) in the castle compound, and the Charles Bridge (*Karlův most*) over the river Vltava, connecting the Old Town to the Malá Strana or Lesser Town below the castle. The proscenium curtain from the Vyšehrad Hall at Niobrara depicts one of the classic views of the castle, with the Charles Bridge in the foreground and the Hradčany atop the hill (fig. 57).⁴⁸



Fig.57. View of the Charles Bridge and the Hradčany in Prague, by Chicago scenic artists H. Farský & Company, from the Vyšehrad Hall in Niobrara, Nebraska. (NSHS Museum 10146-28, C998.1-575)



Fig.58. One of the stock sets at the Crete Sokol Hall. The view of the palace garden from the patio is complete with frontal cutout drop. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-472)

The magnificent proscenium curtain in Verdigre's Bílá Hora Hall features the Hradčany in full view from the Seminářská zahrada, the park overlooking the city of Prague (fig. 54). Set within a painted frame that matches the gilt proscenium arch, the scene is depicted in springtime with the trees in full bloom. All is rendered in minute detail. St. Nicholas Cathedral (*chram sv. Mikuláše*) is clearly visible in the Malá Strana below, as is the St. Vitus Cathedral in the castle, with its prominent transept tower. None of the Nebraska views of the castle show the cathedral in its present form because its completion during this century, long after the emigration, culminated nearly 500 years of construction.

Two other views are more simply rendered, yet in overall composition

they are more iconic. The proscenium curtain in the Slavín Hall near Ord, painted in 1923, centers the Hradčany view within an elaborate tondo, above which are shields carrying the Czech coats of arms (cover and fig. 53).⁴⁹ Above these is an American eagle. The whole is set within a red "velveteen" tab curtain, which is surrounded by advertisements. The stylized view of the castle is from the Malá Strana below, looking upward at the Hradčany.

At the Kollár Hall near DuBois the castle is depicted from the north, or "back" side, framed by opening draw curtains and a rising border (fig. 52). The border includes a banner with the lodge name at the top—Jan Kollár čís. 101—while a shield of the United States and a banner with the motto of

the ZČBJ occur along the lower edge. The motto, "pravda, láska a věrnost," translates as "truth, love, and loyalty." Prominently featured on the border above the castle are three portraits of Czech national heroes, set within tondii (see figs. 1, 26, 86). At left is Jan Hus, the Czech religious reformer whose martyrdom in 1415 precipitated armed defense of the reforms he had inspired. The central portrait is of Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius), a bishop of the Protestant Czech Brethren, and an internationally-known philosopher and educator. On the right is Karel Havlíček-Borovský, a *Národní obrození* journalist and a leading proponent of political self-determination for the Czechs. His efforts, not fully realized until the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia after World War I, are of

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particular note here since the curtain was painted in 1922.⁵⁰

Two other curtains depict prominent Czech landmarks. The proscenium curtain in the old Čecho-Moravan Hall at Brainard provides a romantic view of the Národní divadlo or National Theatre at Prague, shown from the Vltava River. The other is a backdrop depicting Karlštejn, the rural castle of King Charles IV (fig. 55). Painted by the Twin City Scenic Company of Minne-

the Slavín Hall near Ord portrays distinctly Czech versions of interior scenes. The more simple of the two represents a plain interior, and is clearly a rendition of the peasant *světnice*, the principal room of the village house (fig. 51). Geraniums set within casement windows are still a common sight today throughout rural Bohemia and Moravia. The other, a fancy interior decorated with pilasters, may represent a castle interior.

can, including the church at the end of the street. Other elements, however, are more Old than New World. The fourth curtain, at DuBois, is essentially American, save for the two towers, which have an Old World feel. Czech-American assimilation is suggested in the backdrop in the Mladočechů Hall at Linwood, which is an urban scene focusing on the United States Capitol.

Finally, two scene curtains are symbolic drops that recreate the Old Coun-



Fig.59. The urban drop curtain at the Bílá Hora Hall, Verdigre, Nebraska. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-527)

apolis, the historical importance of the castle was reinforced by the famous Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický in his most popular play, *Noc na Karlštejně* (A Night at Karlstein). Because of his associations with Czech drama, and with the Národní divadlo, the curtain may have commemorated Vrchlický equally with King Charles IV.⁵¹ The castle is shown here as it was at the time of emigration in the nineteenth century, prior to its restoration during this century.

The other curtains of cultural significance are scenic backdrops that represent symbolic renditions of stock settings. One group of two stage sets at

Another group of five drops is comprised of urban scenes, though rather than stock American designs, they are Old Country urban settings. Perhaps the most exquisite appears in the Národní sň or Milligan Auditorium (fig. 60). The scene depicts an unidentified town square complete with baroque towers, a fountain, and exotic street lamps. Another at Clarkson shows a square with buildings converging to a narrow street, undoubtedly a view from the town of Kutná Hora in Bohemia. The urban drop in the Bílá Hora Hall at Verdigre appears to be hybrid in character (fig. 59). Many details of architectural style are Ameri-

try agricultural village, an indigenous Czech-American version of the stock "rustic" scene. Most charming is the one at the Clarkson Opera House, which has a very romantic quality and the feel of a typical Bohemian village in its farmstead gables facing the village street (fig. 49). The other, at the Crete Sokol Hall, is more Moravian in architectural character (fig. 6). One distinguishing feature is the appearance, in the distant background, of the Old World farm pattern of small fields. One need only imagine Czech-American children in costume before one of these village scenes, staging their annual free-school summer play, to anticipate



Fig.60. *Urban drop at the Milligan (Nebraska) Auditorium.* (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-512)

the feelings of nostalgia the symbolic recreation of the festive village atmosphere must have created in the audience.

Czech-American theatre curtains explicitly represent symbolic and enduring aspects of the Czech cultural contribution to American history. From allegorical and symbolic to representational depictions, and the dramatic performances of which these paintings were part, Czech curtains reveal a theatrical presence that was both traditional and indigenous. The character of Czech contributions to this art was distinct from American forms in its prominent local origins, its focus on cultural identity, and in its longevity. These contributions are reflected materially in distinct theatre buildings, as well as in elegant front and backdrop curtains. Wherever they remain today,

Czech theatre curtains are a legacy of the Czech-American experience, and enduring dramatic expressions of a sophisticated rural culture.

Notes

¹ The standard from which most Nebraska compilations are drawn is Alan Nelson, "An Historical Survey of Opera Houses and Legitimate Theatres Built in the State of Nebraska between 1865 and 1917" (Lincoln: [Center for Great Plains Studies], 1978). Nelson used the *Nebraska State Gazetteer* and *Julius Cahn's Theatrical Guide* as his principal sources. See also D. Layne Ehlers, "The Historical Context of Opera House Buildings in Nebraska: The OHBIN Study" (Masters thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1987), 25; and Judith Zivanovic, *Opera Houses of the Midwest* (Manhattan, Kan.: Mid-America Theatre Conference, 1988).

² For Czech theatre see Vladimír Kučera, *Czech Dramas in NebraskalČeská Divadla v Nebrasce* ([Lincoln, Nebr]: n.p., 1979).

³ In this regard it followed British lineage; see Ned A. Bowman, "American Theatre Architecture: The Concrete Mirror Held Up to Yankee Nature," in *The American Theatre: A Sum of Its Parts* (New York: Samuel French, 1971), 200, 201; and Francis Hodge, "European Influences on American Theatre: 1700-1969," also in *The American Theatre*, 4-5, 6, 8.

⁴ Arnold S. Gillette, "American Scenography, 1716-1969," in *The American Theatre*, 185; Warren C. Lounsbury, *Theatre Backstage From A to Z* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), ix.

⁵ Reynolds Keith Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures in Iowa and Nebraska, 1857-1900: A Classification of Selected General Utility Halls, Opera Halls, and Opera Houses as Described in Local Newspapers and Histories" (Masters thesis: Florida State University, 1981), 5.

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⁶ Ehlers, "The Historical Context," 245 ff.

⁷ Ibid., 246, 308; and Gillette, "American Scenography," 191-92.

⁸ A detailed discussion of either Czech- or Anglo-American opera house architecture is beyond the scope of this study. For popular Anglo forms in Iowa and Nebraska see Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures," and for another approach to Nebraska theatres see Ehlers, "The Historical Context," 99-244.

⁹ For large theatres in major cities, beginning in the 1870s, a few "Grand Opera Houses" were constructed as ground-level facilities devoted exclusively to dramatic performance (i.e. no other commercial activity was housed in the building); see Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures," 26, 235-97. Though a trend toward ground-level theatres in the early twentieth century may be evident in Anglo-Nebraska, as suggested by Ehlers, upper-level business block theatres were built equally with ground-level facilities during this period; see Ehlers, "The Historical Context," 129-30, cf. tables 8 and 9, 133-38, 139-42.

¹⁰ Jarmila F. Veltruský, *A Sacred Farce from Medieval Bohemia: Mstičkár* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Horace H. Rackman School of Graduate Studies, 1985), 34; and Kučera, *Czech Dramas*, 1-6.

¹¹ Jaroslav Pánek, *Comenius: Teacher of Nations*. trans. Ivo Dvořák (Košice: Východoslovenské vydavateľstvo; Prague: Orbis, 1991), 45, 83-84.

¹² For the Czech National Revival see Bruce M. Garver, *The Young Czech Party, 1874-1901, and the Emergence of a Multi-Party System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 6-11, and John F.N. Bradley, *Czech Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, no. 157, 1984), 1-20. For the cultural aspects of the revival, see Stanley B. Kimball, *Czech Nationalism: A Study of the National Theatre Movement, 1845-83* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), v-ix; Míla Součková, *The Czech Romantics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958); Míla Součková, *The Parnassian: Jaroslav Vrchlický* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), 9-15; and Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Dějiny opery Národního divadla*. 2 vols. (Prague: Práce, 1949). See also the forthcoming book on the "Czech National Renaissance" by Prof. Hugh Agnew of George Washington University.

¹³ See e.g. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre: Czech Playwrights Without a Space* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979). For Havel's non-dramatic writings, see e.g. Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Selected

and edited by Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1991).

¹⁴ See Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, 6-7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ While many of the larger theatres were located in towns that had become predominantly Czech, drama throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was staged equally at Czech crossroads locations remote from towns.

¹⁷ Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 349-50, 77-78. No analysis of plays is attempted here; such a study could prove valuable vis-à-vis the Czech-American relationship to *Národní obrození* drama, and the process of assimilation in the United States. The nature of material culture evidence would suggest a strong relationship here with Old Country drama, which was romantic and didactic in nature, and had political, historical, and cultural overtones. An extensive collection of Czech plays is preserved at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives and Special Collections (UNL-SC); a large number of these are by famous *Národní obrození* dramatists. A few are also in the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS).

¹⁸ Frank J. Sadilek, "My Reminiscences," typescript at NSHS, translated by Olga Stepanek from F. J. Sadílek, *Z mých upomínek* (Omaha: Tiskem Národní tiskárny, 1914), 14.

¹⁹ Kučera, *Czech Dramas*, 141-42. Names and dates in the remainder of this section are drawn from Kučera without further citation; his work is organized alphabetically by town.

²⁰ Míla Šašková-Pierce deals with language maintenance in detail in this issue; for drama, see Orin Stepanek, "Czech Drama," *American Czech Magazine* 1:5 (1940): 7.

²¹ Dramatic and reading societies were formed almost immediately by Czechs throughout the Midwest; see Ernest Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions*. (n.p., n.d. [Chicago?: 1942?]), 105-7.

²² Rosicky, *A History of Czechs*, 348-49, 76; again names and dates in this section are drawn from Kučera, *Czech Dramas*, unless otherwise noted.

²³ Alfréd Nováček, "Ludvík Theatre Company," in Kučera, *Czech Dramas*, 194-95.

²⁴ Charles C. Charvát, "Amateur Drama of Czech People in Omaha," in Kučera, *Czech Dramas*, 89.

²⁵ F. J. Sadílek, "První česká divadelní místnost v Nebrasce" (The first Czech theatrical hall in Nebraska), *Květy Americké* 3:2 (1887): 417; Rosicky, *A History of Czechs*, 77-78.

²⁶ Charvát, "Amateur Drama," 88.

²⁷ For the advent and growth of some voluntary associations see Bruce M. Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914" in Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 147-69.

²⁸ Chicago boasts the first Czech society building in America, while Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin, both built early theatres; see *Květy Americké* 3:2 (1886):33, and 3:12 (1887):192-93; 3:10 (1887):159-60; and 3:14 (1887):135 respectively. For Humboldt, Nebraska, see *Květy Americké* 3:8 (1887):128.

²⁹ Dramatic activity there started to wane in the late 1880s; the early stage arrangement at the Sladkovský Hall was removed and stored to make more room for dances in 1889; see the Minute Books of Řád Sladkovský, Feb. 3, 1889, at UNL-SC (selected translations on file at Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey [NeHBS], NSHS, KX09-1). The building currently houses a small stage with proscenium arch to one side of the front interior. There is no stage at the Brush Creek Sokol Hall in Saline County, but members performed in neighboring communities in the 1930s, primarily at the Wilber Sokol Auditorium; see NeHBS, SA00-10, and Kučera, *Czech Dramas*, 31-37.

³⁰ Kimball, *Czech Nationalism*, ix.

³¹ The importance of the building to the Czech nation was evident much earlier, beginning in 1868 when planning began. Czechs raised funds twice for this building; the first construction was damaged by fire shortly after opening in 1881, and it was quickly rebuilt with new funds raised by Czechs, opening again in 1883; see Oldřich Starý, *Československá architektura* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československých výtvarných umělců, 1962), 192-93; and Kimball, *Czech Nationalism*, ix.

³² While beyond this study, compare the architectural character of most nineteenth and early twentieth-century halls built by other immigrant organizations as well as those built by Anglo-American fraternal associations.

³³ The former does not appear directly related to elite National Romantic architecture of the *Národní obrození*, which, like in many other European countries, was expressed in a Renaissance Revival style; see Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture:*

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), Chap. 24. Characteristic Prague examples include the Národní divadlo and the Národní muzeum. Though Czech-American versions of both styles express romantic tendencies, it would be inaccurate to suggest that either are revivals per se; cf. David Murphy, "Czechs," in Dell Upton ed., *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America* (Washington: Preservation Press, 1986), 116. For the provincial baroque in the Czech lands see Václav Mencl, *Lidová architektura v Československu* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1980), 523-26; and in Nebraska e.g. David Murphy, "Gathering the World in Local History: The Kollár Hall," *Nebraska Humanities* 2:4 (1992), 21-23.

³⁴ See Allen, *Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures*, 45-111. Allen dubs the type, "general utility halls," because their design allowed for many functions.

³⁵ A brief history of the elite American playhouse is given in Donald C. Mullin, *The Development of the Playhouse: A Survey of Theatre Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), Chap. 7. See also Douglas A. Russell, *Period Style for the Theatre* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987), 169-70; and Mary C. Henderson, *Theatre in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions* (New York: Abrams, 1986), 193.

³⁶ Sybil Rosenfeld, *A Short History of Scene Design in Great Britain* (Totowa, N.Y.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 19, 22-23, 37.

³⁷ Hodge, "European Influences," 8-9; Rosenfeld, *A Short History*, 41.

³⁸ The most complete history of stage and scenery is in Wesley Swanson, "Wings and Backdrops: The Story of American Stage Scenery From the Beginning to 1875," *The Drama* 18:1-4 (1927-1928): 5-7, 30, 41-42, 63-64, 78-80, 107-10; see also Rosenfeld, *A Short History*, 37-51, 80-83, and Henderson, *Theatre in America*, 192-93.

³⁹ Gillette, "American Scenography," 186; Lounsbury, *Theatre Backstage*, x-xi; Clifford E. Hamar, "Scenery of the Early American Stage," *Theatre Annual* 7 (1948-49): 86. These stock scenes are all variations on the three "comic, tragic, and satiric" types outlined by Vitruvius in 1486; see Rosenfeld, *A Short History*, 11.

⁴⁰ Few American theatres had resident designers; see Richard Marston, "Art in the Theatre: The Decline of Scenic Art," *Magazine of Art* 17 (1894): 163-68; and Henderson, *Theatre in America*, 192-93, 198-200.

⁴¹ Swanson, "Wings and Backdrops," 79-80; Rosenfeld, *A Short History*, 82-84, 98, 107; Gillette, "American Scenography," 187; Henderson, *Theatre in America*, 192.

⁴² F.J. Pipal's furniture store sign appears in the urban drop at the Kollár Hall near DuBois, while several signs appear on an urban scene from Pospishil's Opera House in Bloomfield (see NSHS Photographic Collections, H673.5-4788). Advertisements on street scenes first appeared late in the century at San Francisco; see Henderson, *Theatre in America*, 200. Hodge, "European Influences," 8, also recognizes Barnum's influence.

⁴³ See Swanson, "Wings and Backdrops," 79. Front draw curtains are extant at both the Wilber and Omaha Sokol auditoria; both are twentieth-century curtains, and both are maroon velvet.

⁴⁴ Most of the Czech theatre curtain photographs reproduced here were made with the assistance of a grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and administered by the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office. I wish to acknowledge the generous assistance of the curtain and theatre owners and managers who made the photographic documentation possible: Mary and Norman Barker at DuBois, Richard Bilka at Geranium (near Ord), Ernest Egr at Linwood, Russ and Jill Karpisek at Wilber, Leonard Kassik at Milligan, John Pavlik at Verdigre, Lambert J. Perina at Clarkson, Elmer Pomejzl at Crete, and Oly Raskey at Brainard.

⁴⁵ The curtains at the Wilber Sokol Auditorium, which are extant, could not be viewed due to structural changes and additions to the stage floor. Several curtains are also extant at Brainard, but these were inaccessible due to the current uses of the stage. Not mentioned elsewhere is a single wood scene in the Plzeň Hall at Morse Bluff, Nebraska.

⁴⁶ One of the garden scenes at Clarkson is "exotic," representing an oriental garden. One backdrop is also extant which has been covered in white paint for use as a motion picture screen.

⁴⁷ The artistic aspects of curtain design, and the relationship of the artists to their training and community, are not pursued here. Many curtains are unsigned, and the minute books of the organizations that owned the halls are either silent or exceptionally brief in elaborating details of building construction or stage rigging. Curtains may also have been purchased at any time after construction of the theatre, requiring tedious review of many years of minutes. I am indebted to Joseph Svoboda for scanning the

minutes of some of the organizations, and for translating the brief references found.

⁴⁸ Painted by H. Farský & Company, Chicago, n.d. The curtain is now in the collections of NSHS.

⁴⁹ The artist is known to us only as Frízek; see Minute Books of Řád Slavín číslo 112 ZČBJ, Feb. 18, 1923, at UNL-SC (excerpts translated by Joseph Svoboda, 1990, on file at NeHBS VY00-017). There is a nearly identical curtain, which appears to have been painted by the same artist, in the ZČBJ Hall at rural Meadowlands, St. Louis County, Minnesota; see C. Winston Chrislock, "The Czechs," in June Drenning Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 347.

⁵⁰ The curtain and other stage scenes were painted by a Mr. Ford of Humboldt, probably in 1922 since the vote to arrange for his work was made on Dec. 11, 1921; see Minute Books of Řád Kollár číslo 101 ZČBJ, at UNL-SC (excerpts translated by Joseph Svoboda, 1990, on file at NeHBS PW00-050).

⁵¹ See Součková, *The Parnassian*, 55-64.