

## CHAPTER 2

# Drama/Theatre and Democratisation: What Two Revolutions Reveal

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**Abstract:** This paper will assert that drama/theatre has a role to play in the democratisation process by presenting research that reveals how various forms of drama/theatre practice coincide with democratisation or its opposite, de-democratisation. Correlation between the use of monologic and dialogic discourses within drama/theatre practice and the process of democratisation will be evidenced in two case studies: the early years of the French Revolution and the 1989 Velvet Revolution in (the former) Czechoslovakia. By analysing the conditions and patterns of theatre practice that coincided with the democratisation of these two countries (and in one case, away from it soon after), parallels emerge between monologic discourses within drama/theatre and de-democratisation, and dialogic discourses within drama/theatre and democratisation. The great experiment of liberal democracy is an ongoing process that can be buttressed by process-based theatre practices that exemplify theatre's ability to foster dialogue and create community amongst participants.

**Keywords:** drama, democracy, democratisation, dialogue, dialogic, French Revolution, Velvet Revolution

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## Introduction

*People today either don't believe in politics or  
don't believe in theatre – woe to those  
who would dare to combine the two.*

— Randy Martin<sup>1</sup>

Charles Tilley (2007) speaks of the state of democracy as being regularly in flux when he writes, “democratisation is a dynamic process that always remains incomplete and perpetually runs the risk of reversal – of de-democratisation” (p. xi). While the smaller nuances of the process of democratisation change subtly from day to day within any given democracy, looking to moments in history of radical shifts on the democratic spectrum can provide key insights for the deepening of democracy. This paper will focus on the relationship between democratisation and drama/theatre in two case studies: the French Revolution of 1789 and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. These events will be analysed to uncover how the form of drama in a nation relates to democratisation/de-democratisation. Evidence of how audiences during the French Revolution pushed to expand the limits of their power in the theatres to assert popular rule will be presented, as well as evidence of a struggle for control within theatres between the governors and the governed. In the former Czechoslovakia the organisational processes and language of drama emerge as valuable tools in the democratisation process, leading Olga F. Chtiguel (1990) to entitle her article on the subject: “Without Theatre, the Czechoslovak Revolution Could Not Have Been Won.”

To begin, I would like to frame how the terms “theatre” and “drama” will be employed in this paper in an effort to be as specific as possible. Because the characterisations of “drama” and “theatre” hinge on an understanding of “performance,” I will begin there. Notwithstanding the vast array of performance studies across multiple fields, in the interest of this research a “performance” will refer to a completed action that has a beginning and an end and that is aware of itself as having an audience

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<sup>1</sup> See Cohen-Cruz, J. & Schutzman, M. (Eds.). (2006). *A Boal companion: Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics*. Routledge, p. 23.

of some kind (Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 27–28). As for “drama” and “theatre,” the two terms are often used interchangeably or with one designated as the larger field within which the other resides. Geared toward this research, “theatre” will refer to performance that is crafted and intended for a specific audience who are separate from the creative process. There may also be mention of a theatre in reference to a physical structure, at which time it will be specified. The term “drama” is sometimes used to refer to the written text of a play as well as to delineate a genre of performance. However, given that the Greek root of the word drama is *dran*, which means “to act” (Lyman & Scott, 1975, p. 2; Nicholson, 2005, p. 4), in this paper the term will be aligned with the interpretation of Kathryn Dawson and Daniel Kelin, II (2014) who associate it “with the type of meaning-making and interaction that occurs between participants and/or audience and performer” (p. xiv). To refer to the entire field of the art practice, the term “drama/theatre” will be used.

Drama/theatre has been used throughout history in a variety of forms to educate, entertain, and communicate with audiences. The theatre has been a space used for the cultivating of passive, receptive audiences, as well as a type of public sphere for engaging public debate and dialogue. Borrowing from theories of monologic and dialogic discourse used within education as detailed by Gordon Wells (2007) in “Semiotic Mediation, Dialogue and the Construction of Knowledge,” the dramatic activity taking place during these revolutions will be classified in these terms. Wells posits:

one (monologic) mode makes the assumption that there is only one valid perspective, which is put forward with no expectation that there is more to be said, while the other (dialogic) mode embodies the assumption that there is frequently more than one perspective on a topic and that it is worthwhile to present and discuss them. (p. 261)

While the use of monologic and dialogic discourse theory does not capture all of the nuance within drama/theatre, it provides a clean and distinguishable way to speak about the practices of drama/theatre and how they relate to democratisation. According to Catherine O’Connor and Sarah Michaels (2007), monologic discourse is “less open to challenge, less open to change, [and] more ‘authoritative’” (p. 277). With an eye toward this

paper, it will include the use of censorship over what artists are allowed to create and perform, as well as propaganda used within theatres and by politicians adopting performance techniques in order to persuade an audience to conform to a point of view. Drama/theatre's ability to tap into human emotion through thoughtful storytelling makes it a potential tool for use within what Maria-Lucia Rusu and Roman Herman (2018) refer to as white, grey, or black propaganda (ranging from most harmless/transparent to most harmful/opaque.) Alternatively, "[d]ialogic discourse is prototypically realized as discussion" and implies "possibilities for critique and creative thought" (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007, p. 277). For the purposes of this paper, practices of drama/theatre in which there is multi-way communication fostered within the theatre space and/or within the dramatic activity taking place will be categorised as dialogic discourses.

## **Drama/theatre and the French Revolution (1789-1799)**

The period between 1789 and 1799 was a time of tremendous turmoil in France, during which the monarchy was overthrown, a form of democracy was established, and was subsequently replaced by a dictatorship. In a time of such political and social turmoil, the theatre flourished. Through the use of the theatre as a space for asserting popular rule, legislative control over theatres and artists by the government, playwrights' and actors' use of drama as a political tool, and the built-in theatricality of the Legislative Assembly and the National Convention, the relationship between theatre and politics was fraught with complications, contradictions, and parallels in their development during this time.<sup>2</sup> Janie Vanpee (1999) writes that "each of these areas of public discourse fused with the others so that theatre became politicized and, conversely, political and judicial practice, theatricalized" (p. 50). While many historians

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<sup>2</sup> The Legislative Assembly was the legislative body of France between October 1791 and September 1792. The National Convention was a single-chamber assembly and the first government of the French Revolution, lasting from September 1792 to October 1795. (For more see Davidson, 2016).

have placed great emphasis on written text (due to the printing press) as being singularly crucial to the social developments of this time, more recently scholars have begun to acknowledge the pivotal role of theatre.<sup>3</sup> The immediacy and collectiveness of drama/theatre, which aids in community-building, is central to its role in politics. Additionally, theatre was accessible to all social classes during this time, even those unable to read and write.

According to Marvin Carlson (1996), thousands of new theatres were created to respond to the times, signifying the value of theatre to the people (p. v). Three theatres enjoyed royal backing and dominated the theatre market in Paris before the start of the Revolution: the Académie Royale de Musique, the Comédie-Française, and the Comédie-Italienne. The Revolution encouraged the opening of smaller theatres, taking power away from the three national-sponsored companies. Within this context, individual theatre companies began to take pronounced political stands, with their views reflected in the plays selected for presentation. An instructive anecdote to set the tone for the way in which drama/theatre would be used in the Revolution is the case of *Charles IX, ou l'école des rois*, by Marie-Joseph Chénier.

Susan Maslan (1995) writes that *Charles IX* “was the focal point of what was perhaps the Revolution’s greatest debate over freedom of expression” (p. 30). The play presented the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre through a critical lens – critical towards the monarchy and the clergy. The royal censor banned the play in late 1788, but Chénier continued to advocate for it. After the events of July 1789 his “struggle attracted the attention of the popular leaders, who saw in his play’s references to St. Bartholomew’s Day a means for stimulating Revolutionary opinion” (Carlson, 1966, p. 22).<sup>4</sup> During a performance at the Comédie, Georges Jacques Danton, a revolutionary leader, led a demonstration calling for the production of *Charles IX*. Maslan (1995) writes, “[w]hen the actors refused to accede to the audience’s demand, citing lack of official permission, the audience responded with the shout ‘No more permissions’, asserting that no permission and

3 See Carlson (1966), Maslan (2005), and Friedland (2002) for more on the evolving view on theatre’s role.

4 The storming of the Bastille took place on 14 July 1789, a flashpoint of the revolution.

no command beyond its own were any longer relevant” (p. 34). Carlson (1966) asserts that:

this demonstration was particularly significant in that it was the first time within memory that a play had been demanded by a political rather than literary agenda. (p. 23)

In his writings, Chénier also championed freedom of the theatres to match the freedom granted to the press. Many champions of the free press opposed the same freedom in theatres, agreeing with Paris’s first revolutionary mayor, quoted as saying:

I believe that freedom of the press is the foundation of public freedom, but the same cannot be said for the theater in which many men assemble and mutually electrify each other, all of which may tend to corrupt morals or the spirit of government. (Maslan, 1995, p. 33)

*Charles IX* was finally approved for production in November 1789, but the political controversy surrounding the production exemplifies many of the ways in which theatre would challenge and change politics during the Revolution, including demonstrating artists’ will to act in the political sphere. Additionally, the theatre during this controversy provided a democratic space of representation in which the people demanded that the power of censorship should rest with them. This challenge to the royal authority is significant and led to the Freedom of Theatres legislation.

After the establishment of the French Republic in 1792, the concept of representation became an urgent and serious matter that played out in theatres and led to the elements of theatre practice to be layered within the National Convention. The new government grappled with issues of direct and representative democracy which created friction amongst representatives. Some, referencing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, felt they were rendered obsolete when large bodies of the population assembled now that sovereignty had reverted to the people. However, the majority of revolutionary representatives felt they were elected in order to represent, relegating the masses to passivity once elections were over. This dominant view of representation within the Convention contrasted sharply with what was playing out in the theatres:

because theatrical representation, unlike political representation, was thoroughly subject to direct popular control, the theater constituted, and was widely perceived as, an embodiment of direct democracy and, hence, an alternative to and potential rival of political institutions. (Maslan, 2005, p. 30)

Revolutionary citizens felt strongly that they should be a censor to the government, and they found a voice and the power to do this in the theatres.

Theatres provided a consistent space for public assembly at which citizens could express their views throughout the Revolution, rivalled only by the gatherings at festivals. Carlson (1966) details an incident during which the Jacobins:

went in great numbers to the Théâtre du Vaudeville; it was their intention to avenge their friends Palissot and Chénier, mercilessly ridiculed in the clever playlet entitled *L'Autuer d'un moment*, which was performed that day. But the Jacobin clique was powerless, for the great majority of decent citizens succeeded in reducing the Jacobins to impotent silence. (p. 121)

The audience wielded their power to assert new, democratic words within the space as well:

An actor wished to announce to the public that one of his company would not appear that evening and began, as was customary, with "Messieurs..." He was interrupted by the observation that there/were no longer any titles but "citizen." "Citizens" he began again, "Mlle. Jenny..." Again an angry interruption drowned his words. "So be it. Citizen Jenny..." (Carlson, 1966, pp. 163–164)

In addition to the heckling and shouting that occurred, the practice of note-throwing became popular for a time. The first occurrence is recorded to have been at the Opéra on 22 January 1795 when two poems were thrown on the stage, and the audience demanded that the actors read them aloud. Note-throwing was replaced for a short time by bust-throwing, which entailed members of the audience throwing down and destroying busts of Marat. The theatres were made into political spaces, less at the will of the artists and those in control of the government – whether Royal or Jacobin – than at the will of the citizens in attendance.

Awareness of the audiences' power within the theatres led to the new government's attempts to regulate and control these spaces once again. Prior to the Revolution, theatre was heavily regulated. With the energy created in the beginning of the Revolution, theatres were granted freedom from censorship by the state in January 1791; however, that freedom only lasted until February 1792. The Jacobins, witnessing the vast influence of the theatre during those thirteen months, decided to regulate the space again: "A new and select 'Commission for Public Instruction' had been appointed to address the dilemma which theatre posed for the Jacobin government, at once uncontrollable and a cornerstone of education" (Wiles, 2011, p. 169). In the summer of 1793, the Committee of Public Safety began making "suggestions" and imposing regulations on theatres, banning all but the most extremely patriotic plays. Following the execution of Danton in April 1794, "controls on the theatres now increased sharply" (Carlson, 1966, p. 192). In late 1798, the Council of the Five Hundred passed a decree placing all theatres under the supervision of the Directory and restricting the number of theatres to six.

For all the regulations placed on theatres, they remained a vital outlet for political expression throughout the Revolution. For this reason, it is no surprise that elements of theatre began to appear within the ruling bodies in different forms than had existed during the monarchy. The monarchy used theatrical elements of presentation to exhibit the divine right of monarchs in lavish displays. The revolutionaries, well aware of this use of spectacle, sought to rid themselves of all theatricality within the government. However, returning to the concept of representation and adding in a desire to rid the government of all theatricality through transparency, Maximilien Robespierre, a revolutionary leader and member of the Jacobin Club, relied heavily on the idea of surveillance by the people. Vanpee (1999) writes:

the vast locales necessary to accommodate the various assemblies of delegates of a government claiming to represent the people resembled the public space of theatres, with a stage-like podium facing the delegates and with reserved space on three sides of the hall for the public spectators. (p. 50)

The paradox of attempting to rid the government of theatricality while simultaneously inviting larger audiences for the purpose of surveillance was

something with which the Jacobins constantly struggled. They insisted that spectators observe decorum and remain silent within the assembly halls, which could be viewed as an attempt to create audiences that could be disciplined and repressed. This is also evidenced by the decision to use the guillotine as public spectacle for punishment by the new government (considered to be more terrifying than public hanging). During a session of the Assembly on 4 June 1791, a statement was made asserting that punishment should not be made in consideration of the guilty, but rather in consideration of the public watching. This aligns with Michel Foucault's (1977) assertion that "[t]he public execution did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power" (p. 49).

However, the behaviour audiences freely exhibited in the theatre (engaging directly with those on the stage) was mirrored in the assembly halls during legislative or judicial matters. Despite great efforts by the Jacobins and strict regulations placed on the public, aimed at making them silent observers, Maslan (2005) writes: "[t]hroughout the Revolution, as the Convention's records amply demonstrate, the encouragements, insults, and threats shouted daily from the galleries effectively ratified, amended, and vetoed the deputies' decisions" (p. 26). With the presence of an ever-watching populace, the legislators became actors of sorts. This dynamic is evidenced in the strained relationship between Robespierre and Fabre d'Églantine,<sup>5</sup> each distrustful of the other. Robespierre accused "Fabre not of being an actor himself but of making other representatives into actors" (Maslan, 2005, p. 123). Meanwhile, Fabre believed that Robespierre was operating behind a mask to gain power. Sandey Fitzgerald (2015) writes:

With everyone in the "play," opening up the legislative session led to such confusion over which citizens were authorized actors and which were acting as spectators engaged in scrutinizing those actors, that the government was forced to prescribe a costume to be worn by officials in order to differentiate between them. (pp. 146–147)

Thus far, the new government had incorporated from theatre practice the elements of audience, costuming, and "deceptive" actors (evidenced in

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5 Fabre d'Églantine was a French actor, playwright, revolutionary leader, and member of the Jacobin Club.

the accusations levied by Robespierre and Fabre against each other for behaving in a false manner). While “purging theatricality from politics was Robespierre’s central preoccupation,” the Convention nevertheless decided to make the trial of the king a public affair, further theatricalising the matter and, in some way, undermining the new Convention (Maslan, 2005, p. 132).

The changing ways in which drama was used leading up to and throughout the French Revolution can be mapped onto the transitions occurring in the state moving towards democracy and then back to authoritarian rule. Prior to the Revolution, the theatres were controlled by the monarchy and subject to censorship by the state and the church. Three nationally sponsored theatre companies dominated the market, and the narratives within them were tightly controlled. As new, private theatres began to open and the theatre spaces transformed into venues that demanded dialogue between those in the audience and those on stage, this happened simultaneously with the state beginning to move towards democratisation, with the formation of the National Assembly in 1789, one of whose tasks was to write a constitution. Maslan (2005) explains that “[w]ithin the theater, audiences developed a distinctly popular conception of the legitimate relationship between the representative and the represented” (p. 27). With more theatres operating and audiences demanding the production of taboo plays (such as *Charles IX*), the Freedom of Theatres legislation was passed in 1791, further democratising the theatre. This ran parallel with another shift towards greater democratisation in the state, as a Constitutional Monarchy was declared and the King was forced to share power with an elected legislative assembly. With theatres finally free to produce diverse and opposing narratives and audiences secure in their ability to demand dialogue and assert their desires in the theatre, it is fair to argue that the transformation of the theatre into a space comparable to the democratic public sphere was complete. Within a year of establishing a constitutional monarchy, the state progressed deeper into democratisation by abolishing the monarchy and establishing a constitutional republic. This would be the peak of democratisation in France during the Revolution. Theatres were engaging public spaces open for dialogue and free from censorship, and the state was a democratic

republic with universal male suffrage. From this point the shift toward de-democratisation began as the Assembly placed restrictions on the involvement of the public who came to view the legal proceedings. Theatres began being censored by the state again only thirteen months later, as the Committee of Public Safety started to censor the theatres as well as other modes of communication and behaviour, moving forward into the Reign of Terror. The state also took back control the narratives allowed in the theatres (as the monarchy had done) and to attempt to end audience disruption within theatres (removing any trace of the theatre's dialogic discourse); meanwhile, the new government continued the trend toward de-democratisation, distinctly marked by the dissolution of the National Convention in October 1795 and its replacement by the five-member committee of the National Directory, which suspended elections in 1795. All of this eventually led to Napoleon's rise to power and the last push back into authoritarian rule.

The dramatic fluctuation of the state of democracy during the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799 matched the changing function and form of the theatres of the time. The Assembly's (and then the Convention's) ability to reassert a restrictive form within the theatres, in which information flowed unchallenged in one direction after a year of a more dialogic discourse that encouraged freedom of expression and thought, provided a powerful lesson for revolutionaries and theatre-makers to come. Almost two hundred years later, the people of Czechoslovakia would successfully manage a revolution, and the move towards greater democratisation succeeded partly thanks to their creative and innovative methods for maintaining a dialogic and subversive theatre movement championing democracy, despite the Soviet Union's attempts to control them through intimidation and censorship.

## **Drama/theatre and the Velvet Revolution (1989)**

Czechoslovakia's journey toward liberal democracy ebbed and flowed in the twentieth century. It was the only Eastern European country to maintain a democracy between the World Wars and was then able to

re-establish democracy following the German occupation during World War II. However, in 1948 the Czechoslovak Communist Party took over, and “political democracy was suspended” (Brook, 2005, p. 40) until 1989. The events that occurred in November and December of 1989 (commonly known as the Velvet Revolution) transformed the state into a liberal democracy. Theatre artist and activist Petr Oslzlý (1990) asserts that “[w]hat happened in Czechoslovakia on 17 November 1989 is, according to historians, the most momentous fusion of theatre and society in the entire history of world theatre” (p. 97). Dennis C. Beck (2003) backs up this claim when he writes, “Establishing through empirical data the significant influence of Czech theatre artists on historical events during the performance of revolution itself is comparatively simple due to well-kept records” (p. 202). This section will refer to much of this documented evidence with an eye toward understanding what forms of drama/theatre were being employed to achieve greater democratisation.

Immediately following the devastating assaults made by the police on a group of student demonstrators on 17 November 1989, while “[o]n the pavement near the National Theatre great pools of blood remained,” (Oslzlý, 1990, p. 104) a theatre student from the Faculty of Arts at Brno University interrupted a performance of *Rozrazil 1/88* to relay to the audience and staff what had just happened. Janet Savin (1999) writes that on the next day “six hundred Theatre artists and technical staff from the Czech Lands and Moravia gathered in the Realistic Theatre in Prague to react to the attack of the previous day and to the student initiative against it” (p. 138). It was decided that the theatres would go on strike immediately, to accompany the general strike planned to begin on 27 November 1989. The *Obcunské Forum* (Civic Forum), commonly referred to as the O.F., was created the next day, 19 November 1989, in the Drama Club theatre in Prague, with Václav Havel as its leader. Drama practice went on to inform and aid in the success and peaceful nature of the Velvet Revolution through the use of theatres as sites for civic dialogue, the use of theatrical working methodologies in organising and planning, and the use of effective communication techniques honed by theatre artists. What follows in this section is a review of the events and the state of theatre in Czechoslovakia leading up to November 1989, followed by an analysis

of the ways in which dramatic practices were used as tools during the revolution.

In 1968 a brief gasp of democratic spirit, referred to as the Prague Spring, occurred in Czechoslovakia. Many of the leaders of this movement “were writers, literary critics, and almost all were intellectuals” (Shepherd, 2000, p. 31), with playwright and director Václav Havel as a prominent member. The Soviet Union reacted swiftly, invading the country in August 1968 and replacing First Secretary of the Communist Party, Alexander Dubcek, in April 1969, effectively extinguishing the movement. Daniel Brook (2005) critiques why the Prague Spring was not successful, especially compared to the Velvet Revolution almost two decades later:

The Prague Spring, further, was in essence an undemocratic approach to democratic change. The Prague Spring entailed a top-down change in policy, albeit one which acquired some autonomy against civil society. In contrast, the Velvet Revolution, twenty-one years later, was more radical and more democratic not only in its demands and tactics, but also in its nature and demographic composition. (p. 52)

What followed was a regime focused on “normalisation”, “which entailed a two-pronged attempt to repress public dissent and buy off the population with material benefits without modifying the party’s monopoly over power” (Glenn, 1999, p. 193). Denisa Hejlová and David Klimeš (2019) write that “[n]ormalisation was a time when social communication was merely staged theatre, in which everyone knew his or her role” (p. 218). The backlash against the intellectuals was harsh, and “censorship of the media and arts was re-established the following September” (Brook, 2005, p. 46). Many plays, books, journals, and movies were banned (Chtiguel, 1990, p. 91). The regime’s use of force to stifle intellectual and creative voices sets the backdrop for how theatre-makers would adapt and respond in an attempt to sustain the spirit of freedom and democracy.

Mainstream, state-funded theatres in Czechoslovakia were referred to as “stone theatres” and “were largely administered by the Party’s members who were installed into controlling positions. Frequently the actors

themselves joined the Party in order to advance their careers” (Chtiguel, 1990, p. 89). However, Oslzlý (1990) describes how theatres in the country resisted the Party’s control:

While the attention of the forces of totalitarianism was concentrated on the leading actors of the 1968 Prague Spring ... at the periphery of their sphere of vision, where their destructive activities scarcely reached, there arose experimental, open, alternative, fringe theatres. (p. 99)

These were termed “authorial theatres” and operated in what was commonly referred to as the “grey zone”, “a steadily growing, strong, intellectually dynamic and active sphere between official culture and the forbidden culture of the dissidents and the underground” (Oslzlý, 1990, pp. 101–102). The theories and techniques of the authorial theatres were “designed to evade the authorities’ control of authorial processes” (Beck, 2009, p. 90). The experimenting of authorial theatres led to the creation of many metaphorical, non-verbal performances focused on movement, gesture, and improvisation. Oslzlý (1990) writes about the predicament he and other theatre artists were experiencing, stating: “we had to seek a language of symbols, similes, metaphors, and models” (p. 99). Authorial theatres maintained a close relationship with their audiences and found ways of getting feedback through direct dialogue with the audience from the stage, as well as “mini-interviews by coat check personnel” (Beck, 2009, p. 95). Setting the stage for the role drama/theatre would play in the Velvet Revolution, Beck (2003) writes:

Media and government controlled by a one-party regime could not act as public forums for engendering wider historical or social awareness. Neither could independent assembly, since a “normalization”-era law prohibited twelve or more persons to gather without a permit. The theatre, as the most articulate of venues in which the public could gather lawfully, thus became the prime arena of public self-reflection. (p. 210)

These small theatres formed a dense network throughout Czechoslovakia and “became the primary gathering place for makers and members of parallel culture” (Beck, 2003, p. 215), which would prove to be invaluable in the revolution to come.

Several key events took place in the year leading up to the start of the Velvet Revolution. Throughout 1988 a petition “demanding democratic freedom for society and the release of various writers and artists held as political prisoners” (Oszlzy, 1990, p. 102) was circulated and gained popularity among theatre artists and audiences. In October, Theatre on a String and HaDivadlo premiered *Rozrazil 1/88* (On Democracy 1/88), referred to as a “stage magazine,” amidst large demonstrations in Prague which were broken up by police force. The production was “dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic” (Oszlzy, 1990, p. 102) and, without mentioning Havel (who was imprisoned at the time) by name, included his play, *Tomorrow We’ll Trigger it Off*. By December the production was banned. In January 1989 “a huge demonstration was held to commemorate the suicide of Jan Palach, the student who committed suicide in 1969 in Wenceslas Square” (De Candole, 1991, p. 9), and Havel was arrested again. In February, after support from the public, Theatre on a String and HaDivadlo’s “stage magazine” was given permission to resume performances, and in March a petition for the release of Havel was circulated. By mid-May Havel was released from jail, and “[i]n mid-June a proclamation for freedom entitled ‘A Few Sentences’ was issued. A great many theatre people and other writers and artists were among its original signers” (Oszlzy, 1990, p. 103). In July the secret police failed to prevent an international theatre festival in which the participants openly expressed solidarity with the artists and people of Czechoslovakia. Each of these precipitating actions added fuel to the desire for democracy and also exhibited the power of drama/theatre to act within the political sphere.

From the start of the revolution, theatre spaces served as public forums. It was in the National Theatre that a student demonstrator communicated to the public the severe police brutality committed on 17 November 1989. The next day theatre artists gathered at the Realistic Theatre and decided to begin an immediate strike affecting all theatres and cancelling the performance of plays. However, it was agreed that:

the theatres would not be closed, but would remain open. Performances would be replaced by public discussions. Theatres would make rooms available for political meetings. (Oszlzy, 1990, p. 104)

It was within and through theatres around the country that news of the strike was communicated to the masses. Martina Klicperová-Baker (2015) writes about the significance of theatres in communicating what was happening:

In 1989, electronic information technology was only developing and mass media were under communist control. The information campaign had to be led via personal communication: theaters canceled performances yet stayed open for free political debates—the first free public spheres since the democratization attempt during the Prague Spring of 1968. (p. S92)

Theatre spaces served as venues for public dialogue around important social and political matters, operating much like the democratic “public sphere”. Theatres became the heart of O.F. activities, with *Laterna Magica* serving as the headquarters for Havel during the crucial early stages of the revolution. In his article “Competing Challengers and Contested Outcomes to State Breakdown: The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia”, John K. Glenn (1999) analyses why O.F. was successful in their effort to democratise the country, emphasising the role of the theatres and explaining that:

the democratic outcome was not given by the breakdown of the Leninist state; rather, it was the result of successful mobilization by the civic movement that linked their demands with striking theater networks, which enabled them to overcome their organizational deficiencies. (p. 187)

Glenn’s focus on the theatre networks’ aid in the administration and facilitation of political affairs supports and demonstrates drama’s capacity to be instructive within political frameworks.

The long tradition of dialogue and collaboration within theatre spaces provided the framework for this peaceful and successful revolution towards democracy. At a public rally on 22 November, Havel said, “The dialogue between the power and the public has begun. From now on, we all participate in managing this country” (Schermer, 1990, p. 20). Each night during the revolution, theatres across the country “assembled a broad spectrum of social classes and age groups under relatively safe conditions, and provided them with two elements essential to co-ordinated mass action” (Savin, 1999, p. 141). Savin continues, describing the two elements:

The first was current, uncensored information about rapidly changing developments. Initially theatres were the only regular source of such information because television and radio remained under Communist control... The second important element was leadership in discussion and organisation. (1999, p. 141)

The programmes for these nightly meetings were organised much like the productions of the authorial theatres, with a great deal of collaboration, music, symbolic metaphor, improvisation, gesture, and movement. Much like an improvisational performance, these programmes were designed to be responsive to everyone who was in attendance. Additionally, personal testimony, daily news, and informational sessions on the current state of education, the economy etc. were incorporated into the evening. At Theatre on a String, where Oszlly (1990) was an organiser, he writes, “the evenings always began with the whole audience watching the news on a TV screen” (p. 106). The content and focus of dialogue for the evening would often flow from that.

Outside the theatre spaces, public demonstrations conducted by O.F. were organised just as in the theatre:

Theatre people in Civic Forum drafted each demonstration, with Havel, the playwright, preparing a “scenario,” to which others proposed additions and developed details. Structurally they reflected the strike evenings’ montage dramaturgy, with songs and readings providing an entertaining and emotionally cathartic complement to the speeches by various dignitaries, dissidents, and visiting émigrés. (Beck, 2003, p. 204)

Oszlly (1990) writes, “If we needed to come to quick agreement, we used theatre jargon” (p. 107). Dramatic language and structure informed not only the planning, but the “in-the-moment” operations of each demonstration. Theatrical symbolism can also be found in the demonstrators’ actions. Schermer (1990) writes, “Bells rang, sirens wailed, cars hooted, demonstrators rattled their bunches of keys. The meaning is: for them the bells toll – in other words, they have had it (literally, “maji odzvonino” = the bells have tolled their end)” (p. 22).

In addition to informing the structure and aesthetics of events, drama practice provided enhanced communication skills. Janet Savin (1999)

attributes the “remarkable freedom and richness of exchange between speakers and crowds” (p. 145) to the actors’ capacity for meaningful dialogue with the public. Beck (2003) notes, “Without such dialogue and the sense of good will and tolerance it fostered, Savin concludes, ‘dismantling the economic and political structures of Czechoslovak socialism would have been a longer and more difficult process’” (p. 205). It is critical to note that although the formalised study of applied drama did not begin until the 1990s (Nicholson, 2005), this use of the tools of drama/theatre within a social and political setting to foster community and dialogue by Czechoslovakian artists resonates strongly with the practice of the burgeoning field.

The success of the Velvet Revolution and the democratisation of Czechoslovakia are notably linked to the theatres and the drama methodologies and practices that supported it. John K. Glenn (1999) details how the theatre-led movement’s success was not inevitable, as it had competing challengers (reform Communists, the Democratic Initiative, and Slovak nationalists) who were unable to organise and connect with the public as Civic Forum had (p. 195). Glenn (1999) notes:

While the removal of the Soviet threat was a necessary condition for the movements to occur, it is far from a sufficient condition for explaining the form of reconstruction of Leninist states. By analogy, to say that the French monarchy had been fatally weakened in 1789 is not to explain the outcome of the French Revolution. (pp. 192–193)

The ability of Civic Forum’s leadership to incorporate drama processes into the structure of their organisation, and the effectiveness of that choice in the creation of a democratic state, have implications and potential solutions for deepening and strengthening democracy today.

## Conclusion

Through this exploration, what becomes evident is the influence drama/theatre has on democratisation and de-democratisation when used in monologic and dialogic modes. Points of decreased democracy correspond with times when the state tightly controls drama/theatre for use

in state-driven propaganda, as well as the adoption of performative techniques by politicians to manipulate and control audiences. Periods when the tools of drama are employed for use in a monologic discourse, not open to critique or questioning, correlate with periods of a weakening of democracy. Through these case studies, a connection between increased democratisation and moments when drama/theatre is used as a site for collective assembly, participation, and as a means to create constructive dialogue is also evidenced.

Drama/theatre that cultivated dialogic discourses aided in the democratisation of France in 1789 and in the following years, and of Czechoslovakia in 1989. These case studies indicate that models of drama/theatre that promote dialogical discourse could have a role to play in democratisation in the future, with the Czechoslovakian example having strong ties to the emergence of the field of study of applied drama. In his 2018 article “(Re)Constructing Democracy in Crisis”, K. Sabeel Rahman posits that the solution for fighting de-democratisation lies not in attempting to return to old approaches that in practice failed many people, but rather to “develop radically new democratic institutions, organizations, and practices” (p. 1555). This challenge encourages going beyond standard political practices, calling for innovations from all fields.

Drama/theatre’s history of participating in the democratisation process through dialogical discourses places it in a prime position to take up Rahman’s call. What might that look like in a twenty-first century context? Could a drama-based digital humanities approach that incorporates social media offer solutions for democracies currently defined by deeply polarised electorates? How might that approach navigate the online information silos created through algorithms that filter what knowledge users are exposed to? Might drama/theatre respond to Rahman’s call using a more interpersonal approach through the use of applied drama, the now-established practice in the field of drama/theatre that even more fully embodies and advances the dialogic qualities that were effective for democratisation in the revolutionary spaces outlined above?<sup>6</sup> What effects might

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6 Applied Drama is a process-centred practice that uses dramatic activity and exercises to engage with communities, individuals, and societies in meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and creation.

the use of applied drama practice within liberal democratic governance have on civic engagement and attitudes toward politics and policymaking? While further research is needed to unequivocally determine cause and effect between drama/theatre and democratisation, what is demonstrated as happening in the French and Velvet Revolutions indicates the use of drama/theatre for dialogic discourse as a potent democratising influence. These case studies provide a base for the further innovation of democratic practice combined with a dialogically-focused dramatic form.

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