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### **The Cunning Little Vixen – Nationalism and Eco-Politics**

Leoš Janáček's opera *Příhody lišky Bystroušky* (*The Cunning Little Vixen*, 1924) holds a special place in Czech culture. It is based on a book by Rudolf Těsnohlídek with illustrations by Stanislav Lolek, that is popular with children and for many Czech people *Liška Bystrouška* is their first encounter with opera. It holds a special place in the operatic repertoire too, being one of only a handful of operas in which some of the main characters are animals.

Acknowledging that the opera contains themes of nationalism and the environment we ask what insights might emerge from a consideration of historical and contemporary productions both in the Czech Republic and internationally. What might this do to help directors and dramaturgs sift through the interplay of nationhood and environment set in motion in the original opera? What conclusions might be drawn about the opera's potential to serve as a call for action in the current environmental crisis?

In *The Longborough Podcast* (2020), journalist Richard Bratby poses the question: "Why do grown adults want to sit in a theatre, and watch a bunch of opera singers pretending to be talking animals for two hours?" It is a playful provocation to which director Olivia Fuchs responds that it is, "an amazing ecological opera... and really important to do it at this moment." Bratby's question reveals the difficulty related to categorising this opera, one of its many ambiguities. With animal protagonists as well as human characters it might be interpreted as a fable for children or as an animal satire for adults, however, as Sheppard (2010) explores, it

sits comfortably in neither category – Janáček inconsistently applies the conventions of both forms. Fuchs' answer signals towards the adaptability of this opera to lean into important political issues of the day, a tendency that is also present in historic and contemporary Czech productions. While the Longborough production clearly foregrounds the ecological, the programme notes of the Welsh National Opera production by David Pountney (revived in 2019) signal a foregrounding of nationalist sentiment with the invocation in the programme notes of the Welsh word *hiraeth* (a longing for the land), pertaining to landscape as well as a place of a people. The WNO production does not play heavily into nationalist themes beyond the inclusion of the programme note however, and we have observed that, generally, non-Czech productions were more likely to lean thematically towards images of nature and denotations of ecological concerns. Pountney's production features a rolling wooded hillside that opens up to reveal the human world cut into the landscape.

Janáček's opera includes some playful political commentary, such as when the Vixen persuades chickens to rise up against the patriarchal domination of the Cockerel or when she redistributes wealth by evicting an aristocratic Badger from his den. There are also human characters in the opera, foremost the Forester who captures the Vixen as a cub and then after her escape fixates on her recapture. Other humans include a Schoolmaster, a Parson, the Forester's Wife, a Poacher, and Terynka, an unseen woman who is admired by the Schoolmaster but reportedly marries the Poacher. The Vixen has a love interest in the form of a Fox with whom she has cubs of her own. After the Vixen's death at the hands of the Poacher, the opera concludes with a scene in which the Forester appears to have a revelation about the cycles of nature and his place in it.

This superficial summary belies the deeper philosophical edge of the work, where we might find a pertinent and prescient ecological message. The journey of the Forester is often characterised in programme notes and commentaries as being from custodian of the forest and having ownership over the Vixen, to understanding himself in relation to the cycles of nature. The frog that he meets at the end of the opera is the grandson of the frog that he met at the beginning, and it seems as though in these last moments of the opera he finally comprehends not just his place in nature but also, bizarrely, the actual words of the froglet. The Forester's epiphany is often framed as a representation of Janáček's own views of his twilight years. The Forester sings: "I love it when the sun comes out in the evening" perhaps reflecting Janáček's late flowering of creativity and recognition of his own mortality. The Forester's experience in this moment, rather than simply signalling his understanding of the cycles of nature, might, in the light of Arne Naess' Deep Ecological notion of "ecological self-realisation" (1987) demonstrate Janáček's advanced thinking on matters of humanism and the natural world. A Deep Ecological reading would see the Forester understand his place "in, of and for nature" (Naess, 1987) a deeply empathetic state that re-situates self-realisation from an act of ego to an act of selflessness that understands a loss of our environment as a loss of the self. Deep Ecology does not advocate saving the planet in order that humans may survive longer, rather it places humans in nature and recognises that the planet's safety is not dependent upon human survival. The ecological self-realisation of the Forester also signals his readiness therefore to abdicate responsibility and die knowing that the ecology in which he lives will continue perfectly well without him, as it does, without the Vixen. Janáček was philosophically ahead of his time if this is what we witness in these last incandescent bars of the opera. Janáček has linked the

environment to the self (the Forester and Janáček) disrupting anthropocentrism. Such a portrayal of human frailty against the continuity of nature seems to gesture toward a de-centring of human experience that anticipates Donna J. Harraway's concept of "multispecies storytelling" (2016, 10), or Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notion of multispecies "assemblage" (2015, 22). We are left with a forest in which humans and animals coexist, their life cycles and various incursions - or, to borrow language from Tsing - "disturbances" (2016, 160) ceaselessly acting upon one another.

Janáček embeds an idea of nationhood within these ecological frames. *The Cunning Little Vixen* employs Czech character tropes and Moravian folk melody, to evoke nationalist sentiment. If we consider the use of Moravian dialect and Janáček's musical innovation of notating 'speech melodies' for humans, alongside his notations of birdsong and the sounds of the natural world around him, we start to see that humans and animals are, in a musical sense, treated similarly, as one, belonging to or with one another – Janáček's ecological self-realisation informing the creative process. Janáček, was described by Botstein (2003, 34) as, "an original philosophical humanist psychologist rooted in an authentic connection to national culture." While Max Brod (in Botstein, 2003, 31) commented that in Janáček's music "the national and the universal-aesthetic are not merely tied together, but both streams rush forward in the same blood vessel and are rendered actual as sharing a unified and common impulse." Nationhood, the natural world, people and animals are indivisible and interdependent in this opera.

Derek Katz locates another ambiguity in Janáček's work the way it uses the tropes of the comic Czech village opera. In the context of the Czech National Revival, operas written in the Czech language became important demonstrations of cultural and linguistic parity with Germanic culture and National Revivalists actively

sought to support and cultivate them, as evidenced by Count Jan Harrach's 1861 call for new Czech operas in two categories: "historical operas, with plots drawn from 'the history of the Czech crownlands,' and comic operas, set in the midst of Czech folk life" (Katz 2009, 55). As Katz observes, these categories - the history opera and comic village opera - "provide a useful template for Czech opera subjects for the rest of the nineteenth century" (Katz 2009, 55). This is true of Janáček's work, despite the fact that his greatest success occurred after the First Republic of Czechoslovakia was established in 1918. Still, it is impossible to bracket off Janacek's post-1918 work from the musical and socio-political environment in which he came of age. Indeed, Katz argues, "*The Cunning Little Vixen* provides a fascinating example of Janáček's manipulation of nineteenth-century nationalist symbols in service of very different aesthetic ends" (2009, 73). Like prototypical village operas, such as Bedřich Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, *Vixen* contains choral singing and group dancing, though, strikingly, here it's the preserve of the animal characters, while the humans sing individually and do not dance (2009, 75). When the Forester, School Master, Parson and Poacher engage in beer drinking - another comic village opera trope - this leads not to jollity but "a painfully nostalgic litany of losses and limitations" in the final scene at U Pásků (2009, 75). Katz argues that Janáček "gently transforms the generic markers of the village opera in order to represent [...] the eternal regeneration of nature" (2009, 75).

Viewed from the vantage point of 2021, *The Cunning Little Vixen* seems ripe for a deep ecological staging, one that would embrace the opera's ambiguities to de-centre human experience in favour of a multispecies approach to storytelling, perhaps even going so far as to consider foregrounding the forest as the central character, rather than the Forester or the Vixen. At the same time, the potential for

national readings suggests the work might even offer an on-ramp for people whose ecological consciousness is more likely to be raised by "our beautiful nature" arguments. These dual lenses of eco-politics and nationalism, two key political flashpoints in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, form the framework for our research and analysis. If concerns about ecology and the environment are aligned to left leaning politics and populist-nationalism to right leaning politics, then these opposite political positions might be able to co-exist in benign ways in productions of the opera.

The simplistic left/right alignment of political concerns is problematised by the rise of so-called Eco-Fascism (Bove 2021) which opens the possibility of issues of the environment becoming enmeshed with Alt-right racial purism, anti-immigration sentiment and population controls reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Eugenics movement. It evokes mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century European nationalism that drew on Eugenics alongside ideas of the 'folk' and 'motherland' as ways to mobilise mechanisms of State against minorities with devastating consequences. Though there is no suggestion that Janáček was thinking in this way, drawing together ecological and national themes in 21<sup>st</sup> Century productions may not be without risk of igniting these sentiments.

In the next sections, we will consider historical and contemporary Czech and international productions to examine how the opera is being inflected by ecological and national concerns. We will also consider how productions within and beyond its nation of origin impacts these choices and ask what insights might emerge regarding ecologically-informed stagings.

## Czech Productions of the 1950s

Programme notes offer insight into how creative teams understood their productions and wished to frame them for their audiences in light of political events. This is particularly evident in productions from the 1950s, staged at the height of Stalinism in a period characterised as one of “fright and terror” by Ota Ornest, head of the Prague Municipal Theatres from 1950-1973 (Burian 2000, 67). From 1948 to 1958, theatres were subject to strict party oversight, with staff subjected to screenings for their political suitability and programming expected to follow Soviet politburo chief A. A. Zhdanov’s doctrine of Socialist Realism dating from the 1930s. The period of 1950-52, in particular, saw a rash of show trials and executions.

Unsurprisingly, a 1952 production of *The Cunning Little Vixen* at the State Theatre Brno directed by Oskar Linhart, emphasised the opera’s socialist credibility. Bystrouška urges the hens to “revolt against the established order” and later “expropriates” the badger’s lair (State Theatre Brno, 1952). A 1954 production at the National Theatre in Prague directed by Jaroslav Vogel, in contrast, de-emphasises politics and positions the forest and the natural world as a driver of the action. “The humidity of a steamy afternoon” wears out the Forester in Scene 1, while, in Scene 2, the captive Vixen feels her imprisonment twice as strongly because she has “succumb[ed] to the lure of the forest and the deceptive magic of the spring night” (National Theatre Prague, 1954). In Scene 6, the Vixen and Zlatohříbek are “carried away by the magic of the bewitching summer night,” while, in Scene 9, the Forester is driven to reminisce by “the mournfulness of autumn” (Ibid). Josef Ceremuga’s review of the production notes the presence of nature in this staging, “All around us, nature abounds. It quivers. Everything is fragrant and alive with the full spice of life” (*Mladá Fronta Praha*, 1954). Taking the socio-political context into account, it’s

possible to read this production's emphasis on the natural world as a retreat from the overt political affiliation of the earlier Brno production, as well as an affirmation of Czech identity as expressed in the beauty and enchantment (even power or agency?) of the natural world.

A 1957 production directed by Emil F. Vokálek at the Regional Theatre in Olomouc, Moravia's second city, at first glance appears to lean hard into a fairytale reading. The programme notes are sprinkled with the diminutive forms of nouns (*maminka*, *zvířatka*, *lištička*, etc.) and Bystrouška cries in vain for "Mommy Fox" when grabbed by the Forester's "big human hand" (Regional Theatre Olomouc, 1957). The same production paints the human characters in a particularly poor light, emphasising throughout the unfair treatment of Bystrouška, "who can't imagine what hardships await her" at the Forester's lodge. "To capture a creature born for freedom and give them a courtyard instead of the whole wide world is cruel," the notes editorialise (Regional Theatre Olomouc, 1957). The target of Bystrouška's politicking with the hens is less about deposing the rooster than overthrowing "human tyranny," while her escape is a return "her native forest" (Regional Theatre Olomouc, 1957). Even her expulsion of the badger from his lair is attributed to witnessing human behaviour: "The little Vixen saw everything during her short stay with humans, even stubbornness and malice. She manages to evict an old, grumpy badger from his nice, dry sett [...] Now she is her own mistress and can pursue a life of happiness" (Regional Theatre Olomouc, 1957). Despite the folksy, childish tone of the writing, it's hard - given the political context and the timing of the production, towards the end of the Stalinist period - not to read Bystrouška as a stand-in for the Czech nation here: drawn into a system whose horrors could not be predicted at the outset and anxious for self-determination.



This survey of productions from the 1950s shows how creative teams have used programme notes to offer different takes on the opera and that specific dramaturgical slants can be understood as more or less overt negotiations with the political climate in which a given production was staged. This is unsurprising given the historical entanglement of Czech performing arts with national politics. As noted above, this relationship was fostered by the National Revival; it continued through the 1960s, when the small theatre movement associated with writers including future president Václav Havel helped to create the atmosphere of freedom and self-determination that led to the Prague Spring of 1968. In the period of Normalisation that followed the Warsaw Pact invasion, theatre adopted alternative dramaturgical strategies that allowed it to comment on the political situation without risking total shut-down. In 1989, theatre artists were famously at the forefront of the Velvet Revolution that toppled the communist regime. Havel's presidency served to further solidify the link between theatre and national politics. More recently, in 2019, when an anti-corruption and pro-democracy demonstration organised by A Million Moments for Democracy coincided with Czech Theatre Night (a day-long celebration when theatres offer special free or low-cost programming), many theatres altered their schedules so that their staff and audiences could attend both events, often citing Czech theatre's legacy of political engagement while doing so.

### **International Productions**

Productions outside the Czech Republic have not had to navigate such extreme political contexts, nor have they needed to engage with Czech national symbols and the legacy of theatre's involvement in social movements in the same way, rather universalising the folk tale with animals that are native across Europe. They have

however been faced with the opera's other idiosyncrasies and inherent ambiguities. Beyond the question of whether or not the opera is fable or animal satire, a work for children or a work of deep philosophical meaning (or both) the work also experiments with form and genre. The opera was described by Janáček as, "a merry thing with a sad end" (Tyrrell 1992, 288). It is both comedy and tragedy; folk tale, fairy tale, village opera; the sad end may be no more than an operatic equivalent of a short-lived pet hamster that teaches children about mortality or a prescient understanding of Deep Ecology. Janáček is working with realism and stylisation both musically (with his rich mix of notate natural sounds and speech patterns, but also with impressionistic renderings of the forest) as well as dramatically. The Forester's final monologue begins with the question "Is this fantasy or reality?" A question that could be read as directed to the audience – not the first time in the opera that the fourth wall is cracked – the Fox tells the Vixen that they will write operas about her. In opera we expect that meaning making will be shared between text and music, but the extensive use of pantomimes and dances also convey meaning and can radically alter the focus of the work, most importantly in its portrayal of nature. Nicholas Hytner's production for Théâtre Musical de Paris, Châtelet (1995) casts nature as cruel, erotic and amoral – Vixen Sharp-ear's cubs play with her corpse and an inter-species orgy leaps out of the otherwise fantastical, colourful, stylised fairy-tale setting. Bill Bryden's Royal Opera House production (1993) leans heavily into the cycle of nature theme with a literal moving circle that occupies the whole height of the stage complemented by trapeze artists as dragonflies. The costuming and animal action reminiscent of Beatrix Potter, there is plenty of awe and beauty, but nothing to offend or to jolt us into environmental action. John Tyrrell's accompanying essay in the programme (1993) re-emphasises the cycles present in the opera, in

particular the indication of approaching old age towards the end. It is a charming but safe reading, unencumbered with sticky politics and obscure philosophy. It presents the natural world but does not recognise any threat to it.

André Engel's (2008) production for Opéra National de Paris, Opéra Bastille comes closest to a reading concerned with ecological issues. In the first scene, the animals loiter around a train track at the edge of a field of cultivated sunflowers. Where Pountney's Welsh production shows the human world carved into the natural world, the natural world still has moments devoid of human presence; here the human world has encroached irredeemably. A snail moves slowly on the track, setting up a tense sense of impending doom. The train track forms part of the scenography in all subsequent scenes. The Forester's home is the end of the line, a metaphor for the Vixen's imprisonment, but is also the setting for the love duet with the Fox as they meet while both robbing the Forester's home; these are urban foxes, adaptable and fleetfooted. The bar where the cast of humans gather is at a station, to which no train ever arrives, reinforcing the sense of hopelessness that the human characters express. The Forester's final scene, in which he wears a crown of spring flowers indicating a touch of madness, plays out in a wintry, featureless landscape before the sunflowers re-emerge and he wanders off, with the animals, into the foliage. This reading, of those surveyed, comes closest to a portrayal of ecological self-realisation and plays throughout with the tensions between these intermingled worlds of humans and animals, where the human encroachment includes images of pipelines and oil barrels, evoking a subtle sense of pollution.

## Contemporary Czech Productions

Given the rich heritage of political engagement in Czech theatre, one might expect contemporary Czech performing arts to address the environmental crisis. Such practice is evident in the independent theatre, contemporary dance and performance art scenes, where a number of productions and projects have dealt with environmental content or staged the landscape itself. Examples include *Cesty energie* (The Energy Pathways Project, 2010) by Miroslav Bambušek and Ewan McLaren, which transported audiences to landscapes impacted by the Czech Republic's major energy sources for performances that addressed the impact of energy production (ČTK, 2010). More recently, in 2020 and 2021, the Tanec Praha Festival has staged outdoor, site-responsive works in Prague's Žižkov neighbourhood. In part a response to the pandemic, each series has included works that de-centre human experience, explicitly reference the environmental crisis and foreground the environment itself.<sup>1</sup> Other recent examples of ecological content include Darja Lukjanenko's *How to Make Rockets Disappear* (2021), an exhibition and durational performance at Prague's Studio ALTA; Bazaar Festival's 2021 programme, subtitled *WE THE LANDSCAPE*, and the work of Hande-Gote Research+Development, whose creative recycling of outdated, analogue technology is an example of an aesthetic informed by "the historic development of the relationship between humans and nature" (Rýgrová 2014, 35).

If environmental concerns are reflected in individual performances, they are also a topic of discourse in the field. Since September 2020, the Arts and Theatre Institute has hosted Green Thursdays, a monthly discussion series on the topic of

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<sup>1</sup> See *Treatment of Remembering* (2020) by contemporary dance collective PocketArt (Bazaar Festival, 2021) and Ran Jiao's *Urban Birds* (Tanec Praha, 2021).

sustainability in theatre. In 2014, Michaela Rýgrová's *Udržitelné divadlo* (Sustainable Theatre) was published. The first Czech-language study devoted to the topic, Rýgrová's text primarily addresses greener modes of production, but also acknowledges the importance of works with overt ecological content, which can "open an imaginary door, ask questions, wait for a reaction [and] want to shift participant behaviour" (2014, 31). Rýgrová goes on to observe that ecological themes may be found in many classic works, such as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (it's worth noting here that Czech critics have framed *The Cunning Little Vixen* as a "Czech *Midsummer Night's Dream*"), Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and even Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It is striking that no classic Czech works make this list.

In her essay "Greening Theatre," which has informed Rýgrová's list of classics, Theresa J. May notes a fundamental problem for ecological interpretations of classics. Following Una Chaudhuri, she references an "anti-ecological" predisposition emerging from theatre's humanist origins. "Contemporary theatre artists working with ecological themes," May argues, "have been hamstrung by a theatre tradition that defines drama as conflict between and about human beings" (2014, 84). This tradition can lead to ecological themes going unnoticed by spectators, even where theatre makers intentionally emphasise them. This need not be the case and, as May notes, obscures the fact that theatre is "always an immediate communicable and material encounter among embodied performers, audience and place" (2014, 86). If the contemporary performances mentioned above are succeeding in foregrounding this encounter and grappling with explicitly environmental content, can the same be said for contemporary Czech productions of *Vixen*?

The past decade has seen three significant productions of the opera, in Prague, Brno and Liberec. Premiering in 2014 as part of the Year of Czech Music, Ondřej Havelka's production at the National Theatre in Prague offers an eroticised take on the opera. Writing in the programme notes that the Forester lacks "a complete dramatic trajectory," he introduces a romantic subplot involving Terynka (National Theatre, 2014). Usually only referred to, but not seen, Terynka appears as bar staff at U Pásků and the target of the Forester's advances, along with the School Master's and Harašta's. It is desire for a tryst with Terynka, not the call of nature, that drives the Forester into the woods at the start of the opera. Writing in the *Právo*, Radmila Hrdinová dislikes Havelka's interpretation of the Forester as a "cynical show-off and perpetual womaniser," arguing that it dilutes the opera's philosophical dimension, particularly in the final scene, where the Forester goes through a rapid and rather clunky ageing process (2014).

Writing in industry weekly *Divadelní noviny*, Jan Dehner finds a connection between Havelka's take and Max Brod's German translation, which, in contrast to the Czech staging tradition that tends to present the opera as an afternoon matinee for children, "recognised a dramatic arc in the story, the main theme of which is sexuality" (2014). Following Brod's addition of Terynka to the plot, "Havelka has borrowed and fleshed out this character" (Ibid). Also writing in *Divadelní noviny*, Josef Herman is less sanguine, framing Havelka's interpretation as an affront to Janáček as a librettist and composer; the production contains "no love, only crude sex" (2014). At the level of design, the production actively references its period of origin, with costumes by Kateřina Štefková that reference Josef Čapek's designs for the original production. Hrdinová finds that the resulting atmosphere is "not just beautiful, appealing and fun, but it is also contextual" (*Pravo*, 2014). If Havelka's

production, then, is a rather sexualised embrace of First Republic nostalgia, one thing markedly absent from the production is the forest itself – though not mentioned by the critics. Set designer Martin Černý's forest is a collection of dark, twig-like tree trunks.

Directed by Jiří Heřman, a 2018 production at the National Theatre in Brno celebrated the reopening of the renovated Janáček Theatre, the launch of the 2018 Janáček Brno Festival and the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the First Republic. Like Havelka's, Heřman's interpretation harkens back to the opera's origins, this time focusing on the life of Těsnohlídek, author of the original Vixen stories. In addition to his journalistic activities, Těsnohlídek helped found the Dagmar Home for Abandoned Children and Heřman uses the home to frame his production. The Forester is recast as a care worker. The fox he captures is not a living fox, but a child's toy; the rest of the opera then unfolds as the story of a toy fox come to life. Critic Helena Havlíková notes that, while strong concepts are typical of Heřman's work, this melancholy device has "sacrificed Janáček's message about the endless renewal of nature" (*Lidové noviny*, 2018). Lukáš Pavlica describes the opera's atmosphere as "something between a memory and a fairytale" (*Město hudby*, 2018).

As in the Prague production, the natural world is surprisingly contained in Dragan Stojčevski's set design, where it is glimpsed through an upstage window. "The opera's fundamental connection with nature is thus limited to the view through the window and the opening of a crack in the wall" (*Město hudby*, 2018). Pavlica is complementary of the scenography, arguing that the window and cracked wall design is "a fresh and modern element that soon [...] changes into an impressive backdrop of mountains and trees" with "insects swarming, hens climbing out of

chicken coops and old wooden toys from the early years of the Czechoslovak Republic” (*Město hudby*, 2018).

While the concepts for the Prague and Brno productions look back to the opera’s origins, Linda Keprtová’s 2019 *Vixen* at the F. X. Šalda Theatre in Liberec sets the opera in an indeterminate period and most directly confronts the opera’s received staging conventions in the Czech Republic. In contrast with Heřman’s and Havelka’s approaches, the animal characters are stripped of their ears and tails; this is a human world. In a further break with tradition, the press materials state that the production is not suitable for children under the age of twelve. “*The Cunning Little Vixen* can sometimes be perceived as a fairytale, [but] this is simply a convention that’s built up over decades,” Keprtová explains. Unsurprisingly, this approach meets with some critical pushback, with Olga Janáčková noting that “children are an essential part of the circle of life” and highlighting the centrality of the Vixen character to Czech childhood (*Harmonie*, 2019).

Age aside, Keprtová makes a number of interesting choices that contextualise the opera in the past and present of Czech and wider socio-cultural history. The Vixen is portrayed as intelligent and political, calling the hens to rebellion with a copy of Orwell’s *Animal Farm* in hand. When she usurps the badger in his home, she installs a bust of Janáček to replace his bust of Zdeněk Nejedlý, an influential musicologist, critic and Janáček detractor. Harašta first appears waving a red Marxist-Communist flag, later replaced by Czech(oslovak) tricolour, which is placed over the Vixen when she dies. The Parson pours alcohol over himself and nearly sets himself alight, an image that evoked Jan Palach’s 1968 self-immolation for at least one critic (*Harmonie*, 2019). Michal Syrový’s set design, like that of the Prague and Brno productions, is devoid of lush greenery; the forest consists of dead trees



and stumps and the dancing forest creatures are replaced with a chorus of grey-clad mayflies, whose first act dance ends with their death. Because Keprtová has dispensed with the human characters, the final image of her production, which sees the Forester and the bereaved Zlatohříbek seated together as the rest of the cast looks on, is one of human reconciliation (Herman, 2019). While the dead trees suggest environmental destruction, the opportunity for multispecies storytelling falls away with the elimination of the animal characters and the human experience is foregrounded.

Looking at these three productions, it is clear that contemporary Czech directors continue to apply strong dramaturgical concepts to the opera. While Havelka's and Heřman's productions are far more explicitly nostalgic with their period settings, Keprtová's intentionally "timeless" production harkens back to details of Janáček's life via its reference to Nejedlý and contains other references to twentieth-century Czech history. All three productions are deeply engaged with national issues, whether recalling the First Republic, drawing on the authors' biographies or taking direct aim at the work's staging conventions. Fascinatingly, all three productions sideline the natural world, which, one might reasonably expect to come to the fore, given the severity of the environmental crisis and the demonstrable presence of environmental themes in the Czech scene at both the level of individual productions and industry discourse over the last decade. This is to say nothing of the opera itself, which, as noted previously, feels highly prescient in its co-mingling of human and non-human characters.

This state of affairs seems to suggest that, in the Czech context, the opera has become so burdened with associations and so embroiled in decades' long debates over staging conventions that its ecological message has been side-lined.

This is reflected in critics' frustrations that the opera's final message, however ambiguous and open to interpretation it may be, is not helped by Havelka's erotic reading, Heřman's children's home or Keprtová's cast of humans. The Czech productions cannot see the forest for the trees. In contrast, the international productions, particularly Engel's seem to more successfully bring ecological themes to the fore but rarely capture any sense of nationhood. While directors are under no obligation to stage works in some form of historical original, perhaps a return to Janáček's vision of people and the land operating as one entity could help Czech directors escape the inward looking Czech historical visions that circulate back to the First Republic and the opera's origins – breaking a cycle of self referentiality. The specificity of the Moravian setting poses challenges for international directors looking to establish a connection to their own sense of nationhood and yet they seem not fully invested in the ecological potential of the work, though they frequently gesture towards it. Perhaps a consideration of the Deep Ecological potential that seems inherent in Janáček's vision could enable the work to engage at a deeper level with the current ecological crisis.

During the next phase of this research, ecofeminism has emerged as a critical frame that could offer new perspectives on the opera. While a feminist reading of the opera might throw up some negatives (the women are absent or without agency, the Vixen dies at the hands of a man) Janáček does centralise a female animal as the vehicle for the Forester's enlightenment echoing Patsy Hallen's (1987) call for feminism in ecological science: "Ecology as a life science needs feminism to reveal how patriarchal thinking contributes to environmental destruction," a tool that she posits will draw us closer to an understanding of Deep Ecology.

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