

Pilsen Puppet Play Legends – Josef Skupa and Jiří Trnka

Josef Skupa

(1892-1957)

Czech puppet actor, director, stage setter and playwright. He was born in Strakonice. From 1917 he worked with the puppet theatre of a so-called “feriální drama” community in Pilsen. He continued in the tradition of Czech puppet drama, which he connected with a modern interpretation of scenography. He created the original puppet duo ***Spejbl and Hurvínek*** in order to express with grotesque hyperbole his personal view of reality. Between the years 1922 and 1924 he was the director of the “Městské divadlo” (municipal theatre) in Pilsen, and in 1930, he established his own puppet theater in Pilsen. As a drawing teacher at the so-called second Pilsen reálka (today, a Grammar school on Pilsen’s Mikulášské náměstí - square) he discovered the talent of Jiří Trnka, who would go on to become an important Czech designer, puppeteer and creator of original cartoons. It was in Pilsen that he introduced Trnka to puppet theater. Later, he also supported him financially during his studies at the school of applied arts.

For performing his allegoric comedies (Kolotoč o třech poschodích, Voničky and others), through which he tried to encourage theatre-goers in occupied Pilsen during the Second World War, he was arrested by the Nazis in 1944. Fortunately, he survived the war and in 1945 established the 'Theatre of Spejbl and Hurvínek' in Prague. This was the beginning of the well-known history of the two most famous Czech puppets, daddy Spejbl and his mischievous son Hurvínek. Between the years 1933 and 1957 he was a chairman of an international puppet organization 'UNIMA'. He significantly contributed to the development of both Czech and international puppet theater development. He died in Prague.

Jiří Trnka

(1912-1969)

Czech designer, illustrator, screenwriter and director of cartoons. One of the pioneers of Czech cartoons, also founder of the studio 'Bratři v triku' (Brothers in a Shirt - 1945). He was born at Houškova 27 in Pilsen (the house is about a 5-minute walk from Mikulášské náměstí).

While studying at the so-called second Pilsen reálka, he met Josef Skupa, a mathematics and drawing professor, who brought him to a work for a puppet theatre. In the beginning, he designed and created scenery for the Theatre of J. Skupa in Pilsen, and after finishing his studies in Pilsen, he began to attend a school of applied art in Prague. His first cartoons ('Zvířátka and Petrovští', 'Pérák and SS') came to cinemas after the Second World

War. He captivated viewers' interest with lyric descriptions and a poetic concept of art. ('Špalíček', 'Císařův slavík' – *The Emperor's Nightingale*, 'Árie prémie', 'Staré pověsti české' – *Old Czech Legends*, three volumes of 'Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka' - *The Fate of the Good Soldier Švejk*, 'Sen noci Svatojanské' – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* , 'Ruka').

Skupa was an excellent artist and went on to become an illustrator of children's books (J. Karafiát 'Broučci' - Beetles, J. Werich 'Fimfárum'). In 1967, he was named professor at 'The University of Applied Art', but illness kept him from being able to continue with his artwork. He died in Prague and was buried in Pilsen's Central Cemetery.