

Cross-cultural Negotiation: Building Stages of a Festival Program

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Before the stages are set at the Festival of American Folklife, there are pre-stage engagements which carry an element of performance in their own right. Sharing stories as well as analytical approaches, Smithsonian staff present the customs and traditions of the Festival to local scholars, who portray their own customs and traditions in return. As with any cross-cultural collaboration whose aim is joint representation, dialogue and negotiation map out the thematic landscape, social issues, and aesthetic priorities to form the basis of research for Festival programs. Such dialogue and negotiation were at the heart of the cooperation between Smithsonian and Czech folklorists as we jointly envisioned a Festival program on contemporary Czech traditions. This process, which spanned the last nine months, was enlightening for both sides.

The Czech Republic: Tradition and Transformation grew to include grassroots, popular, and "official" performance genres. Negotiation that produced this result was underscored by the diverse approaches to folklore and cultural studies that have developed in the Czech Republic and the United States in the past 50 years. In Communist Czechoslovakia, talented village tradition bearers, along with gifted urban compatriots, were sent to study folk repertoires in professional conservatories and then became part of state folkloric ensembles. These official troupes performed a pan-traditional repertoire, often reviving or reenacting rural music and dance no longer practiced in daily community life. Czech folklorists ensured that still-extant rural traditions were transmitted to the growing number of professionalized, official ensembles.

In the United States, it was the commercial music industry which often overshadowed or repackaged community-based artists. American folklorists maintained a strong focus on the living, grassroots (in Czech terms, "unregistered") performance context. They often gave priority to practitioners who had learned their craft at home rather than in professional establishments. At the same time, there was a growing awareness that hybrid genres marked by interpenetrations between rural and urban, diverse ethnic, and popular and folk elements were the norm rather than the exception in contemporary folklore.

Building a Festival program that reflected these diverse and sometimes contentious approaches required consideration of the social and historical contexts in which we were operating. Smithsonian staff soon grasped the lightning-speed series of social transformations that have faced Czech scholars and their compatriots in the course of five short years. In 1989, Czechoslovakia overcame decades of Communist rule in a "Velvet Revolution." Led by intellectuals, writers, theater workers, and rock, urban folk, and popular musicians, the "Resistance" had to immediately transform theories and artistic vision into practice. The transition involved more than exchanging political systems; it required reassessment of tradition, reformulation of identity, and assumption of responsibility. After years of struggling as the underground opposition, the architects of the Velvet Revolution were thrust into a new role as the nationally elected leadership of their democratic state.

Then, in 1993, the three regions that had formed Czechoslovakia (the western-oriented

Czech Lands of Bohemia, the eastern-leaning lands of Moravia and Silesia, and the eastern-most provinces of Slovakia) peacefully separated into two distinct nations, the Czech and Slovak Republics. For the Czech Republic, one reverberation of this separation involved the reformulation of a cultural identity distinct from its eastern lands. Many western and cosmopolitan Czech communities had relied on their eastern compatriots as the carriers and preservers of Czech language, costume, folk music and dance, and crafts, through hundreds of years of domination by Germanic culture, language, and law.

After only two years, the Czech Republic is still grappling with the repercussions of independence and changed borders. This Festival program provided Czech scholars with an opportunity to revisit and revalue folklore traditions such as Easter-egg decorating, puppetry, dulcimer bands, and bagpipe ensembles in light of the sociopolitical changes reshaping their society. At the same time they studied contemporary, urban grassroots traditions such as “Tramp” (Czech country and western) singers, Romany popular music, and pub songs, which may not have been previously considered folklore.

For Smithsonian staff, this program deepened our understanding of Central European folklore approaches. By reassessing state-appropriated community practices — often called “folklorism” and dismissed as “fakelore” in the United States (Harker 1986) — we discovered that, while these traditions hold a complex position in post-Communist Czech Lands and among Czech Americans, they nevertheless continue to carry currency as identity markers. In fact, it is possible that traditions such as national dance and regional costume functioned, at least initially, as state pageantry under Communism precisely because of their value for Czech citizens.

As Hermann Bausinger points out in his “critique of folklorism critique”:

Labeling items with the concept of folklorism — especially when this concept is used in a derogatory sense...generally thwart[s] inquiry concerning the nature



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Photo courtesy Wallachian Museum

and the functions of folkloristic manifestation (Bausinger 1979:116).

Under circumstances of foreign occupation which have prevailed for most of Czech history, regional folklore traditions — whether the preservation of language through folk song and oral narrative, or the continuance of village identity through distinctly embroidered patterns on Easter eggs and clothes — became bulwarks against the penetration of foreign culture. While these communal folk customs may have been reappropriated by the Austro-Hungarians, the Nazis, or the

Above: The 1895 Czechoslovak Ethnographical Exhibition in Prague inspired a widespread folklore revival. Many traditional buildings such as this restaurant and inn located on Radhošť Mountain in the Beskydy range were reconstructed during this period.

Left: The small fields in the Beskydy Mountains need extra fertilizer to produce even a meager harvest of potatoes and other essential crops. Women from the villages would carry manure on their back up the slopes. To relax they turned their wooden buckets over, creating drums, and sang together. Members of the Moravian singing group Polajka demonstrate this tradition as part of the ongoing folklore revival in the Wallachian region.

David Pavlíček from the Kunovjan song and dance ensemble in the southeastern Moravian town of Uherské Hradiště demonstrates the "Verbuňk" tradition. In Verbuňk men try to show who is the best singer and dancer. This tradition was often performed when teams of military recruiters visited the village trying to enlist young men. Today, the Kunovjan ensemble incorporates this local practice into their choreographed performance.

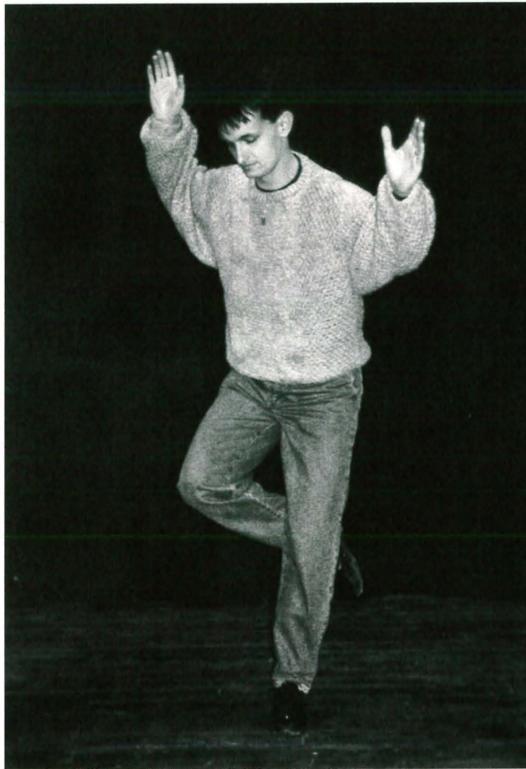


Photo by Amy Horowitz

Communists to forward their own particular goals, the fact was that they had simultaneously served as mechanisms of cultural resistance. Now these traditions themselves are undergoing a profound shift in meaning and function. For example, some Czech musicians, dancers, and craftspeople maintain costumes that are no longer worn in daily life as a symbol of their heritage; others have rejected them as a symbol used by the previous Communist government.

Today Czechs are experiencing transitions in every sphere of communal life. In the process of framing a joint Festival program, Czech and U.S. scholars shared an opportunity to witness cultural tradition and transformation at a unique historical moment. The issues we grappled with enhanced the scope of our immediate Festival goal, resulting in a presentation that covers the full range of grassroots, popular, and official folkloric expression. Our discussion formed a rich theater of operation which will bear fruit for future projects here and in the Czech Republic as well.

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