**An exceptional research project presents Laterna magika, the first multimedia theatre in the world**

August 11, 2017, Prague

*The National Film Archive based in Prague, Czech Republic has launched the website laterna-research.com, the first result of the extensive research project Laterna magika\* looking to preserve, document and present this phenomenon of world significance to the international public.*

**Why research Laterna magika?**

Laterna magika is the first multimedia theatre in the world. Due to its experimental character, combination of film projection, movement of dancers and original scenography, interconnection of art and development of new technologies (primarily projection ones), and collaboration between numerous personalities, it has become an exceptional cultural phenomenon in the context of Czech and world art.

It was established as a representative cultural and promotional programme of Czechoslovakia for the international exhibition Expo 58 where it met with enormous interest of the audiences and won the Gold Medal along with other period art projects. The combination of a multi-genre theatre performance and film projection onto several screens placed on the stage garnered unprecedented acclaim: *“All the theatres presented in the individual pavilions at Expo were hit by a real bomb and blown to pieces. The bomb came flying from Prague. Last night, Czechoslovakia opened its cultural hall and introduced a theatre unique for its originality. We saw circoramas and other cineramas, Kinopanoramas, Kongoramas etc. We believed that we had reached the top, that the seventh art had revealed all its secrets; until we saw the non-stop-revue, or Laterna magika,”* wrote Brussels’ Drapeau Rouge journal on May 13, 1958.

Thanks to its great international acclaim, the unique project travelled to other countries in and outside of Europe, where it became popular both with audiences and period critics. The new artistic possibilities of communication between the film medium, the theatre stage and the dancers were most embodied in the invention of a new type of projection system called the *polyecran;* which, for the first time ever, presented a simultaneous projection controlled by a set of film projectors and slides, conducted on several projection surfaces and accompanied by multi-channel sound.

A period edition of Variety wrote about Laterna magika’s American tour: *“We had to travel behind the Iron Curtain to discover a completely new kind of scenic film design, practically unknown to Americans... Laterna magika is not only a technological innovation but also a form that gives the creative artist a new way of expression, a new language. In its idiom, statistics meet poetry, static images, live actors and reproduced music. The new poetic force of this expression is based on its ability to view reality from several perspectives, from several time levels, and to combine facts that are in fact unrelated. Laterna magika is able to show the modern world in all its dynamic force and in all mutually connected relations.”* (Howard Pearl, July 17, 1963)

When touring the North American continent, the theatre also met with great success in Canada; during the international cultural showcase Expo 67, exactly 50 years ago, it staged a performance where the unique polyecran projection system played the main role.

In the second half of the 20th century, the theatre gradually became an internationally acclaimed artistic brand whose quality and innovation were appreciated over decades of successful world tours by viewers in the United Kingdom, where British dramatist Wolf Mankowitz labelled it as “the most revolutionary technology in entertainment since the introduction of cinema,” in the Netherlands, USSR, France, Austria, Spain as well as Syria, Egypt and Israel. The very first programme, whose earliest performance *Wonderful Circus* is still staged today and has celebrated its 40th anniversary since its launch this year, was a joint collaboration of directors Emil and Alfréd Radoks and scenographer Josef Svoboda, who were later joined by directors Ján Roháč, Vladimír Svitáček, Ladislav Rychman, Miloš Forman as well as other distinguished film and music makers including Evald Schorm, Jan Švankmajer, Radúz Činčera, Jiří Šlitr and Zdeněk Liška.

**What are the components of the Laterna magika research project?**

The research project *Laterna Magika. Past and Present, Documentation, Preservation and Presentation* represents an interdisciplinary challenge combining historical research, preservation and digitization of film material, construction of a new archive infrastructure and creation of experimental multimedia data. In the field of historical research, it includes collecting archives from private and public collections and extensive interviews with more than 70 contemporaries of various professions. The special processing of film footage capturing the individual theatre performances as well as film screenings and technological tests includes primarily the preservation, description and digitization of those parts of the film heritage that were selected by curators after being handed over to the National Film Archive by the National Theatre in 2010.

The historical and cinematic research fields are supplemented with the creation of new multimedia data consisting primarily of experimental recording and animation of the movement of the dancers and 3D visualizations of the stage of Laterna magika performances. The multidisciplinary character of Laterna magika’s work is also reflected in the composition of the research team comprising experts in humanities as well as technical disciplines. Four academic and technological institutions collaborate on the successful execution of the research conducted between 2016 and 2019: the National Film Archive in Prague, the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague, Czech Technical University in Prague and CESNET association.

**What is the goal of the research project?**

The main goal of the project is to save and preserve historical and film data, supplemented with new multimedia data, in a safe online archive environment and take care of these on a long-term basis in terms of data preservation as well as by curating the collection that has thus arisen.

The first results of the project, consisting of interviews with contemporaries, a sample of archive materials and interviews with the members of the research team, are now available in English at [www.laterna-research.com](http://www.laterna-research.com).

The second key goal of the project consists in preparing an exhibition which will present the interpretation of Laterna magika as a multimedia audiovisual work to the general public and bring its digitized elements into lively communication with the language of contemporary visual artists. The exhibition, to be held in Brno in the spring of 2019 and in Prague in the fall of the same year, will be accompanied by a detailed monograph in the Czech and English language. We are also negotiating its international reruns.

Last but not least, the research team focuses on publishing expert studies in professional periodicals and establishing active collaboration with leading international partners and research institutions.

For more information, please, see the project’s website: <http://www.laterna-research.com>.

*The research is funded by the Programme for Support of Applied Research and Experimental Development for National and Cultural Identity 2016–2022 (NAKI II)*

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