

Five Great Prague Venues

First Neil Richardson, then Joan and Dave Bird give an account of their recent visit to Prague. All the photographs, except for the Aspects of Alice, were taken on our visit by Neil Richardson, Daphne Tams, Arthur Johnson and Helena Vosmekova.

Our Parish visit to the capital city of the Czech Republic in October, 2005, was a great success at various levels. For me, although we did lots of interesting things and went to many special places, the week was marked by five great venues at which I experienced some great public spectacles.

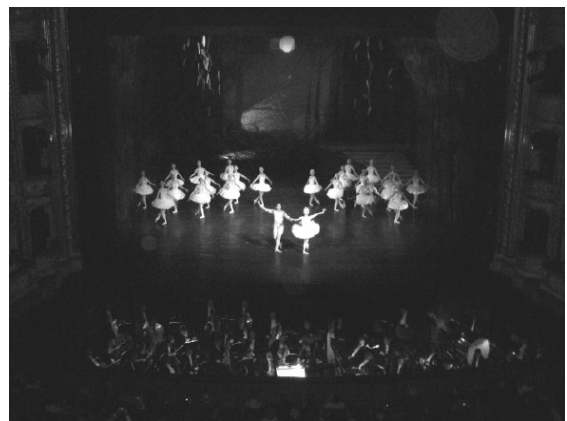
The first was in the afternoon of Sunday 23rd October, when I walked up the long hill to reach the stadium of SK Slavia Praha. It was a local Derby match with Sparta Praha. The match was fascinating enough, but almost as watchable was the crowd behaviour. All around, flares and fireworks erupted into flames in the two far ends of the stadium, with sparks and fire going everywhere. It all seemed very dangerous. The police were there in full riot gear and as each fire started, they waded into the crowd shielding a fireman who then put the incendiary device in a bucket of water and jogged out of the stadium to deal with it. This happened several times in the first half and I couldn't help wondering why the police and stewards hadn't prevented people bringing them into the ground in the first place?



In order to get to our second event that evening, we had to leave before the end of the match and rush down the hill by tram to the Church of St. Nicholas in the heart of Stare Mesto – the Old Town Square. This is one of Prague's most impressive churches, and we were captivated by the swirling forms, curves, columns and dome arrangements. The light and shapes were bewildering. One of the chief ornaments was a chandelier in the form of a Russian Tsarina's crown. The music was played by a quartet for Mozart's *Eine kleine nacht Musik*, and then an arrangement of Beethoven's 5th symphony for a string quintet. It was a well-attempted concert but for some reason, one of the violins was out of tune, despite several excruciating efforts at getting it in tune, and we left longing for some flutes and timpani!

Prague is "blessed" with many of these churchy concerts, often with a selection of lollipops rather than really challenging work, but the challenges are also there in the main auditoriums.

On the Monday evening, we went to the ballet. It was entrancing, as *Swan Lake* always is, set in the ornate splendour of the Prague State Opera House. The orchestra was really excellent and the performances of the dancers always riveting. Dance is such an attractive art form. No wonder children love their ballet classes back home in Greenford with Miss Natalie!



On Wednesday, we went to see something new to all of us, the Black Light Theatre of Prague in what was described as “Aspects of Alice” right in the centre of the tourist area, in sight of the Charles Bridge. “Black Light” describes lighting effects, which, combined with props and actors



dressed in black, are able to create illusions of flight and space. Its origins go back to the Victorian illusionists of the 19th century. The production showed the development of a child, Alice, roughly based on Lewis Carroll’s Alice, from an innocent girl to a young woman and then a mature woman. The group were stunned in the second half by unexpected but tasteful nudity, which changed our original view that this would be nice for the grandchildren to see one day!

On Thursday, we went to the Prague Rudolfinum, a large and decorated building along the banks of the river Vltava. We didn’t realise it, but we were in for an excellent world premiere of a new Bohemian Symphony by the composer Macha. He was there to hear his own five movement work performed, and at the end we all applauded him rapturously as the work was very fine indeed. Must get a c.d. of it when it comes out. He was very old, and barely able to climb on the stage. What a contrast between his physical restrictions and the agility of his musical mind! What a great privilege to be there for this wonderful occasion.



Well, Prague is famous for its watering holes and the reasonable price of its beer and food. It is true! Every few steps produces yet another inviting café or bar or restaurant to tempt the thirsty holiday-maker, and here, just to prove it, is a picture of one such unburdened member of our group, sipping gently at one of the Czech Republic’s special liquid products.

Cheers, everyone!

Our Holiday in Prague by Joan and Dave Bird.

Saturday morning, arrived at Heathrow together with Johnny and Daphne. We had trouble finding the car park but after a tour of Heathrow managed to park it and catch the coach to Terminal 1. Very nervously made our way to the check in as we had booked our flights on line together with our seats and we were hoping we hadn’t made a mistake. It was absolute chaos with the crowds, it being half term. At the luggage check-in desk they checked in our luggage and with a sigh of relief we found our paperwork was okay. We even managed to get our dates for departure and return correct, but lo and behold the flight was delayed having got up at 5.00 a.m. for a 9.00 a.m. departure, still it was only three hours and we finally departed at noon.

When we arrived the weather was mild and sunny and much to our delight that is how it stayed for the whole week. The autumn colours of the trees were absolutely beautiful.

In the afternoon we all went to the Old Town Square where we saw the Jan Hus Statue, Tyn Church and Kinsky Palace. Unfortunately we were unable to see the Astronomical Clock as it was covered up for reconstruction work. We also saw the imposing St Nicholas Church where I went to a

concert on Sunday evening, Mozart's Eine Kleine Nacht Musik performed by a string quartet followed by Beethoven's fifth by a string quintet. However I did feel that this needs to be performed by a full orchestra to be properly appreciated.

Sunday morning and we went to the National Museum where we walked round the zoology section with a large collection of stuffed animals, fossils and an enormous whale skeleton, I am sure this collection would be very appealing for children. In front of this museum at the bottom of the steps is a cross in the pavement which marks the spot where the student Jan Palach made the ultimate sacrifice in protest against the Soviet invasion of his country. He set fire to himself and stumbled down the steps in flames.

In the afternoon we went to the Charles Bridge which is lined on either side with various statues. The bridge was originally called the Stone Bridge until it was bequeathed the name of its original commissioner, Charles IV in 1870. The bridge is a real tourist attraction with many vendors selling pictures of Prague and there was also entertainment in the form of puppets and musicians.



It was at this point that we lost the main party but we wandered around the narrow streets until we came to an Irish pub (is there anywhere in the world where there isn't an Irish pub) and had a really nice bowl of soup and crusty bread – delicious!



Another place that we visited was 70 kilometres distant from Prague called Kutna Hora where some members of the group went down a silver mine (13th century) while we went into the unique St Barbara Cathedral with its beautiful ceiling. Daphne and I went into the Italian Court but although we had a guided tour we had trouble understanding what our Czech guide was saying. The main room with its ornate ceilings and walls is used for meetings and also for Christenings and in an adjoining room there was a beautifully carved rocking cradle.

Wednesday evening the whole group went to the Black Light Theatre to see "Aspects of Alice". A few of the group were disappointed with this and left during the interval, Dave amongst them. At the end of the performance Malcolm could hardly wait to get out of the theatre to tell Dave what he had missed, the second half definitely being only suitable for adults.

Prague Castle was memorable, and we were lucky enough to watch the young soldiers practicing for a ceremony that was to take place the next day which was a national holiday. We also witnessed the changing of the guard which was accompanied by the band; the music was very reminiscent of the TV puppet show Thunderbirds.

Friday being a national holiday the Municipal House was open to the public. What a beautiful building this is inside. The biggest concert hall in town is in here – Smetana Hall – with frescoes, sculptures and natural light from the original skylights, it was all quite overwhelming.

We thoroughly enjoyed our week in Prague, although my feet were suffering due to walking on cobblestones all week.