

Rehearsals underway in New York City for the Texas tour of the Czech play “The Stand-In”

The American Czech Theatre will present “Zaskok” or “The Stand-In”, a comedy by Ladislav Smoljak and Zdenek Sverak, for three performances in Texas in May. Executive Producer: Sarah Wilhelm. Associate Producer: Conner Skinner. Artistic Director: Sarah Reynolds.

Three Czech-Texas organizations have joined to bring the beloved Czech fictional character, Jara Cimrman, to Texas in May. Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center in La Grange, the Czech Heritage Museum & Genealogy Center in Temple and Sokol Dallas are sponsoring three performances of “The Stand-In,” a comedy by Ladislav Smoljak and Zdenek Sverak, presented by The American Czech Theatre. The executive producer is Sarah Wilhelm and it is directed by Sarah Reynolds. Performances will be held May 18, 7 p.m. at The Beltonian Theatre, [219 E. Central Ave., Belton](#); May 19, 7 p.m. at the Sanford Schmid Amphitheater, 250 West Fairgrounds Road, La Grange; and May 20, 1 p.m. at Sokol Dallas, [7448 Greenville Ave., Dallas](#). For information, contact: Sarah Wilhelm, info@tactheatre.org or Susan Chandler, 817-919-9095.

“The Stand-In” features the fictional character Jara Cimrman and is one of a unique genre of Czech plays which began as a radio show in the 1960s. Sverak began making references to Cimrman while working at the government radio station. He placed Cimrman at a time in history when the Czechs were under Austria-Hungary, but used the character as a device to comment on current events. Sverak won an Oscar for 1997 Best Foreign Language Film for *Kolya*. He wrote and starred in the film, which was directed by his son.

“Sverak’s *Kolya* was one of the first Czech films available here in Texas after communism,” said Retta Chandler, president of the Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center in La Grange. “We are thrilled to participate in this Texas tour of “The Stand-In.”

Rehearsals are underway now in New York. “We auditioned in New York in February and these are all professional actors,” Wilhelm said. “The cast loves the script. It’s been really fun. We’ve made it a very physical show,” she said.

“My hope is that we can make Czech theater more universally known; that people will hear Czech words,” she said.

“Many people know Vaclav Havel’s work, but there are a number of great contemporary Czech plays and they are brilliant pieces of art. I searched for Czech comedies. It’s not that there aren’t many comedies, it’s just that they are not translated. Many people think of Czech theater as dark. It’s not that it’s all dark, but that those works that were politically or historically significant are the ones that have been translated,” Wilhelm said. “

“The cast is a diverse group, so this has been a good learning opportunity for them about Czech culture,” she said. “They are learning to speak and pronounce Czech. They can take what they learned into their own world, and open a conversation of cultural exchange.”

“The Czech heritage in Texas is very strong, but in my experience, outside of those groups, people are still calling it Czechoslovakia or asking where it is or not even knowing what Czech is,” she said.

Although the Cimrman plays have been performed for 50 years in Prague, the shows are still sell-outs, with hundreds of people queuing up for tickets when they go on sale.

Cimrman is so popular among Czechs, that they voted him “The Greatest Czech of All Time” in 2005. As a fictional character, he was disqualified, but 40,000 people signed petitions in protest, so a new category was created for him. Cimrman fans or “Cimrmanologists” often compare the character to Britain’s Monty Python, but Americans will more likely see a similarity with the Forest Gump character, with one exception. While Gump is successful at everything he attempts, Cimrman just misses the mark, usually by showing up five minutes late. But, Cimrman does contribute to much of history, showing up for breakthroughs around the world in science, the arts, economics, and politics, earning him the title, “The Master.”

“This genre of plays represents the Czech people and culture on many levels,” said Susan Chandler of the Czech Heritage Museum in Temple. “On one hand, there is the plight of the geographically small

country always at risk of being overshadowed by its powerful neighbors. On the other, the indomitable spirit of the Czech people ever prevails. The Czech's love and skillful use of the written word has endured since Cyril brought it in the 900s and, I think, has been key to the culture's survival."

For information, contact: Sarah Wilhelm, info@tactheatre.org; or TCHCC, La Grange, TX info@czechtexas.org 888-785-4500; or Susan Chandler, Temple, TX 817-919-9095.

Texas Tour Performances

May 18, 7 p.m.

The Beltonian Theatre

[219 E. Central Ave., Belton, Texas](#)

May 19, 7 p.m.

Sanford Schmid Amphitheater

250 West Fairgrounds Road, La Grange, Texas

May 20, 1 p.m.

Sokol [Dallas](#)

[7448 Greenville Ave.](#), Dallas, Texas



SARAH WILHELM