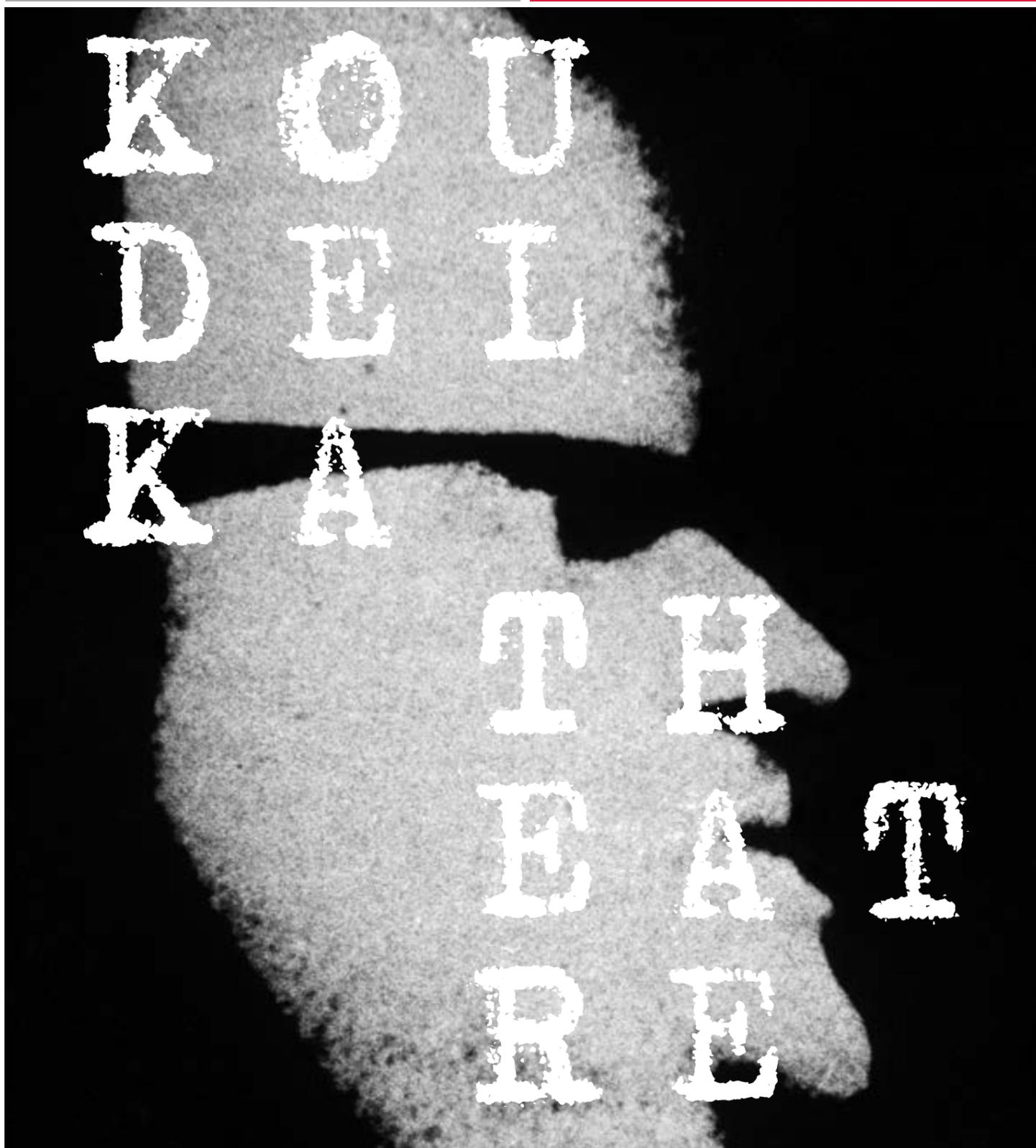


JOSEF KOUDELKA

THEATRE



IN BOOKSHOPS NOVEMBER 18

***Moving among the actors on set, I was able to take the same scene, multiple times, but differently. It taught me how to get the most out of a given situation, and I have continued to apply this method to my work.***

Josef Koudelka\*

Josef Koudelka acquired international fame with his work on the Gypsies in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, followed by his series *Invasion*, during the 10 days of the Prague Spring in 1968, and finally his monumental work on exile and its condition of statelessness following his move to the West in 1970. However his practice of theatre photography in the 1960s is little known and has never been presented in book form.

delpire & co is pleased to publish *Koudelka Theater*, a presentation of 58 newly edited photographs by the photographer, accompanied by a text by photography historian Tomáš Pospěch.

In his own words, Josef Koudelka was not particularly interested in theatre in his youth. When he arrived in Prague from his Moravian village in the late 1950s, his focus was on his studies. His interests were airplanes, folk music, and photography, which he practiced as an amateur. A classmate recommended that he meet his uncle, who worked in the editorial staff of the magazine *Divadlo* (Theatre), then looking for a photographer. It was in this context that Josef Koudelka, soon to become an aeronautical engineer by profession, became a theatre photographer.

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\* Interview given, Bryn Cambell, *World Photography*, London, 1981.

Quote taken from *Josef Koudelka, L'Épreuve Totalitaire*, by Jean-Pierre Montier, Delpire Éditeur, Paris, 2004.

In the 1960s, Prague theatres were one of the rare places in Soviet Czechoslovakia where relative freedom of expression continued. The playwright and essayist Vaclav Havel, future President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (1989–1992) was particularly active there, notably at the Theatre on the Balustrade (*Divadlo na zábradlí*). Known for its presentation of the Theatre of the Absurd, where directors such as Jan Grossman interpreted *Ubu Roi*, by Alfred Jarry (1964), *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, and *Intermezzo* by Jean Giraudoux. Following the Prague Spring (1968), these stages were forced to close, and their animators dissented or left the country.

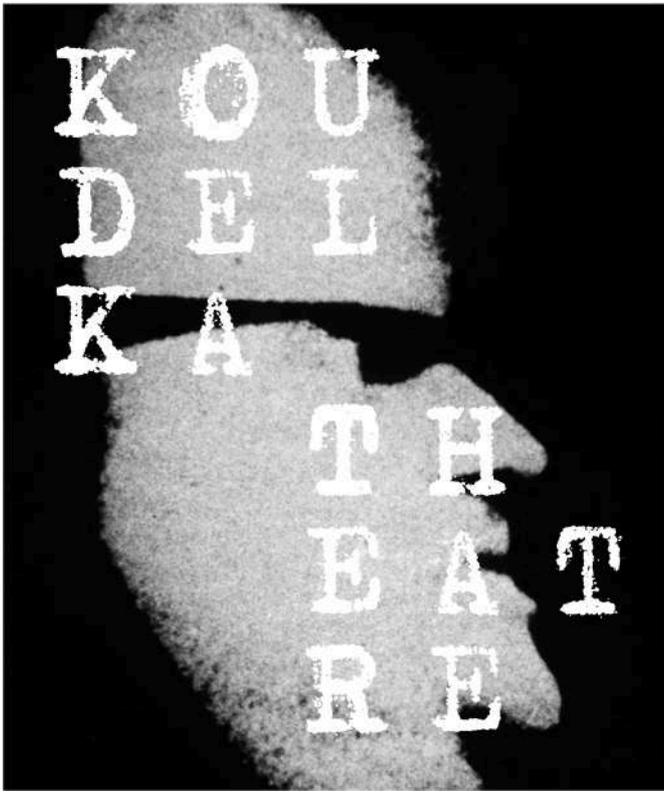
There is a rich correlation of levels between Koudelka's theatrical photography and his later way of conceiving his images as a reflection on the theatre of the world.

Everything that we know of his practice of the image can be found from his beginnings in the work he did in Prague in the 1960s: his attention to graphic composition, his ease of working in tight spaces among people in movement and in difficult lighting situations, his obsession with returning again and again to the same motif, the same gestures and rituals. It was during the 1960s that he also documented the lives of the gypsies. These two series, created in parallel and over the long term, have many links.

*With the Gypsies, it was theatre too. The difference was that the play had not been written and there was no director - there were only actors. It was reality, it was life. It was a different kind of theatre - it was the theatre of life. I didn't need to do anything with it. Everything was there. All I had to know was how to react.*

Josef Koudelka

Quote taken from Otomar Krejča, 'Divadlo, Zkušenost z představení', in Josef Koudelka, Prague: Torst, 2006.



## THE BOOK

96 pages, 210 x 250 mm

58 black and white photographs

Softcover with flaps

Text by Tomáš Pospěch

Design concept by Aleš Najbrt and Josef Koudelka

Design : Studio Najbrt, Prague.

Language : French and English

Publication date : 18 Nov. 2021

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ISBN 9791095821403

*Koudelka Theatre* includes photographs of important productions in two major theaters, the *Theatre on the Balustrade* and the *Theatre Behind the Gate*, as well as images made for the covers of *Divadlo* (Theatre).

The design of the book is inspired by the work of the leading graphic designer and scenographer in the theatrical community in Prague at the time, Libor Fára (1925–1988), husband of Anna Fárová, curator and historian of photography who helped Koudelka at the start of his career.

The typography was created by Studio Najbrt in 2020, from an old typewriter of the time evoking *Samizdats*, clandestine works banned by Soviet censorship.

### Press Contacts

Catherine & Prune Philippot

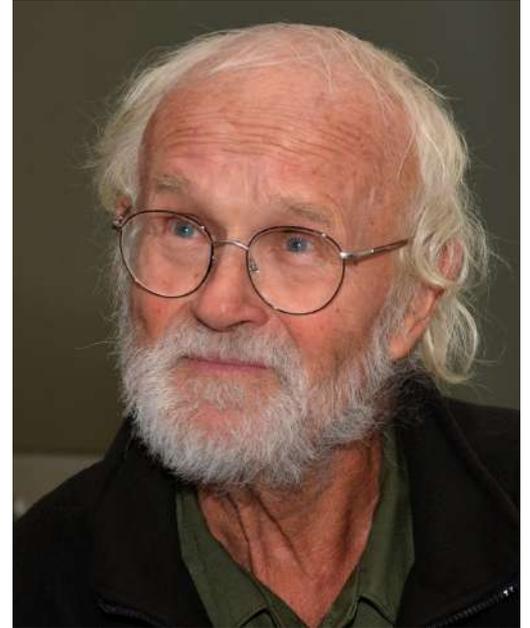
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## THE AUTHORS:

### JOSEF KOUDELKA

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1938. He began a career as an aeronautical engineer before devoting himself to photography fulltime in the late 1960s. In 1968, he photographed the Soviet invasion of Prague, which earned him the Robert Capa Gold Medal in 1969. Koudelka left his country in 1970 becoming stateless, and soon after joined the Magnum agency. His first book *Gypsies* was published by Robert Delpire with Aperture in 1975. Delpire organized several exhibitions of Koudelka's work beginning with his own gallery on the rue de l'Abbaye and subsequently published several more books including *Exiles* and *Chaos*. The photographer's work has been crowned with numerous prizes, such as the Nadar Prize (1978) for *Gitans : La fin du voyage* (finally published in French by Delpire in 1977), the National Grand Prize for Photography (1989), the Cartier-Bresson Grand Prize (1991), Hasselblad (1992), and the International Center of Photography Infinity Award. His work has been exhibited around the world.



### TOMAS POSPĚCH

Art historian and curator of photography at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, he mainly focuses on contemporary photography and fine art in Central Europe. He has authored more than twenty books, and has curated exhibitions of 20th century Czech photography.

Josef Koudelka in 2014  
© Jindřich Nosek / Wikimedia commons

## DETAILED BIOGRAPHY OF HIS « YEARS OF THEATRE PHOTOGRAPHY »

**1938.** Josef Koudelka is born January 10 in Moravia, Czechoslovakia.

**c.1952.** Introduced to photography by a friend of his father, he begins to take pictures of family and friends using a Bakelite camera.

**1956–1961.** Studies engineering at the Czech Technical University, Prague. Acquires an old Rolleiflex. Meets the photographer and critic Jiří Jeníček, who encourages him to exhibit his work at the Semafor Theatre in Prague.

**1961.** At the opening of the Semafor exhibition, he meets art critic Anna Fárová, a major figure in Czechoslovak photography, with whom he collaborates until he leaves the country in 1970. Travels abroad for the first time, to Italy, as a musician in a folk music and dance group. Begins to photograph the Roma of Czechoslovakia.

**1961–1967.** Works as an aeronautical engineer in Prague and Bratislava. Contributes to the magazine *Divadlo* (Theatre) as a freelance photographer.

**1964.** Begins to photograph performances at *Divadlo Na zábradlí* (Theatre on the Balustrade).

**1965.** At the invitation of Otomar Krejča, director of the *Divadlo za branou* (Theatre beyond the gate), Prague, he begins to photograph performances there. Becomes a member of the Union of Czechoslovak Artists.

**1966.** Publishes a book titled *Král Ubu: Rozbor inscenace Divadla Na zábradlí v Praze*, on the production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* at the *Divadlo Na zábradlí* (Theatre on the Balustrade).

**1967.** Leaves his engineering job and devotes himself full-time to photography. Receives the Union of Czechoslovak Artists' annual award for the innovative quality of his theatrical photographs. His photographs of Roma are shown for the first time in the exhibition *Cikáni [Gypsies]*, 1961–1966, at *Divadlo za branou*, Prague.

**1968.** Travels to Romania with sociologist Milena Hübschmannová to photograph Roma. Returns to Prague the day before Warsaw Pact troops invade the city, ending the short-lived political freedom in Czechoslovakia that came to be known as the Prague Spring. Throughout this tumultuous period, Koudelka photographs the confrontations between Czechoslovaks and Soviets wherever they occur, as well as daily life in the streets.

**1969.** Makes his first visit to England in April when the *Divadlo za branou* theatre group asks Koudelka to accompany them to London and exhibit his theatre photographs in the foyer of the Aldwych Theatre. In mid-July, he begins his second visit to the UK, where he remains for at least three months. His photographs of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia the previous year are secreted over the border and sent to the United States. The photographers' cooperative Magnum Photos distributes the photographs while Koudelka is still in the UK, attributing them to 'P. P.' (Prague Photographer) to avoid reprisals against Koudelka and his family; a photo essay 'by an anonymous Czech photographer' is published in major international magazines. The images won him the Robert Capa Gold Medal from the *Overseas Press Club*. Elliott Erwitt, then President of Magnum Photos, makes a short film of animated stills with these images for CBS News, maintaining Koudelka's anonymity.

**1970.** Leaves Czechoslovakia on a three-month exit visa to photograph Roma in the West. Does not return after expiration of the visa; becomes stateless. The UK grants him asylum and he lives there through 1979. Begins traveling and photographing Roma, religious and popular festivals, and daily life in various European countries.

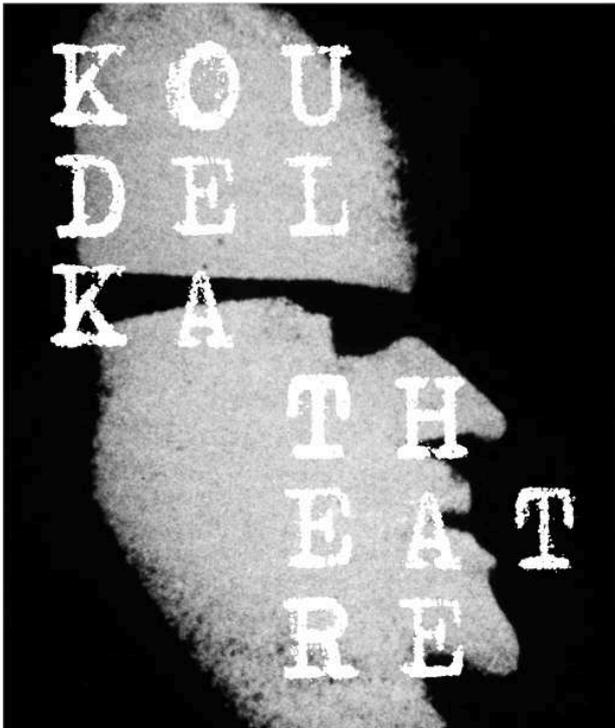
**1971.** Elliott Erwitt proposes that Koudelka join Magnum Photos; he becomes an associate member. Meets Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Delpire, who become his close friends.

## Images available for publication

Conditions of use of the visuals:

Only two (2) of these photographs (excluding the book cover) may be published at the same time by a single medium in a single issue. For any other extensive use of these photographs, the rights will be negotiated directly by the medium with Magnum Photos.

Photographs : © 2021 Josef Koudelka / Magnum Photos



Book cover :  
*Ubu Roi* (Kráľ Ubu), by Alfred Jarry, directed by Jan Grossman, *Divadlo Na zábradlí* (Theatre on the Balustrade), Prague, 1964.  
Design : Studio Najbrt, Prague



*Ubu Roi* (Kráľ Ubu), by Alfred Jarry, directed by Jan Grossman, *Divadlo Na zábradlí* (Theatre on the Balustrade), Prague, 1964.



*Intermezzo, by Jean Giraudoux, directed by Otomar Krejča, Divadlo za branou (Theatre Behind the Gate), Prague, 1967.*



*Waiting for Godot – En attendant Godot (Čekání na Godota), by Samuel Beckett, directed by Václav Hudeček, Divadlo Na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade), Prague, 1964.*



*An Hour of Love (Hodina lásky), by Josef Topol. Directed by Otomar Krejča, Divadlo za branou (Theatre Behind the Gate), Prague, 1968.*



*Masks from Ostend (Maškary z Ostende), by Michel de Ghelderode, directed by Otomar Krejča, Divadlo za branou (Theatre Behind the Gate), Prague, 1965.*

## About delpire & co

delpire & co opens a new chapter, in continuity with the spirit and approach of Robert Delpire's "showman of images."

Located at 13, rue de l'Abbaye in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, it is at once a publishing house, bookstore, gallery, and a lively place for encounters and events, delpire & co wishes to initiate demanding photographic projects, singular photographic writings, encounters of text and image, curatorial research, the discovery of new talents as well as forgotten works, political points of view and sensitive expressions.

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