

## **A Very Brief Outline of the History of Slovak Theatre**

Slovak stagecraft is quite young. What is more, it is even possible to pinpoint the date when the permanent Slovak theatrical activity started – it was on 22 August 1830 when, in the central-Slovak town of Liptovský Svätý Mikuláš, a play by Ján Chalupka called *Kocúrko* was presented. Of course, there were numerous theatrical activities taking place before this day in the region inhabited by the Slovaks, but they were presented in Latin or in German (until 1918, Slovakia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). It was as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, under the influence of the Enlightenment, a national awareness was awakened, Slovak amateur theatre being its part. Nevertheless, there were no preconditions for the development of professional theatre in the Slovak language – mostly after 1867 when the “Magyarization” oppression strengthened.

The history of Slovak professional theatre-making is connected with the date of the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918). In 1920, in Bratislava, the fresh capital of Slovakia, the Eastern-Bohemia Theatre Company started to work under the name The Slovak National Theatre. There were only five actors of Slovak nationality in the ensemble, it was in principle a Czech theatre. Also, the majority of productions were presented in Czech. Gradually, Slovak actors, mainly graduates, entered the theatre. They were graduates of the Academy of Music and Drama (established in 1925) but also amateurs (amateur theatre had been broadly represented by that time and there were a number of high-class companies, and this has not changed since). In 1924, a theatre in the capital of eastern Slovakia, Košice, was established, again as a kind of association.

After the occupation of Bohemia by Nazi Germany and after the creation of the Slovak Republic (14 March 1939), almost every one of the Czech theatre creators had to leave Slovakia. Only the Slovak National Theatre stayed here, together with the touring Slovak Folk Theatre from Nitra (other professional theatres were established as late as January 1944 in Martin and Prešov). Except for traditionalist Janko Borodáč, there were other directors who started to work at the Slovak National Theatre – Ferdinand Hoffmann, with experience from modern Prague theatre-making and Dr. Ján Jamnický, who was influenced by the European Avant-garde. In 1945, all of the theatres existing in Slovakia were nationalized and a few years later (1949),

The Academy of Performing Arts, with the Faculty of Drama and Faculty of Music, was established in Bratislava.

An important break in the history of theatre (and not only theatre) was the take-over of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in February 1948. According to the Soviet model, the Stanislavski's method was obligatory on stages, the repertoire was restricted, everything of the western origin was prohibited, Party's bodies administered theatres with an iron fist. The restrictions also involved the staging methods; a battle against the bourgeois formalism was announced. Ján Jamnický stayed outside the stage, the follower of expressionist director Viktor Šulc (a pupil of Max Reinhardt), actor and director Jozef Budský, had to bring a self-critic. A part of the ideology was to bring theatre closer to the crowds – in order to achieve this, a broad network of repertory theatres was built evenly in the capitals of each region. Despite the fact that the period of rough schematism lasted for quite a short time (1948 - 1956), it caused the young theatrical culture great harm. After the fall of the cult of Stalin, a slight political melting-down occurred and theatres gradually returned to their high-standard repertoires and developed various creative methods.

The dominating directors of this period were those who had already started their artistic career in the 1940s (Jozef Budský, Karol L. Zachar, Tibor Rakovský) but there were also the young who quite quickly entered the Czechoslovak context. Nevertheless, plays by authors such as Sartre, Camus, Dürrenmatt, Beckett or Ionesco were still forbidden to be staged – it lasted until the early 1960s, the period when a certain liberalization process was taking place. It was then that Slovak theatre-making opened itself towards the world's modern drama and directors tried to cope with what was, for them, a new type of drama and apply also other views on reality.

At the same time, the building of the network of theatres, or more precisely – its re-organisation, carried on, bringing in the next decades the end as well as birth of professional theatre companies (and so in the late 1980s the network consisted of 15 theatres with 26 ensembles, including 3 operatic, 5 puppet and 4 national minorities ensembles. This scheme of the network has existed in Slovakia practically until today).

In the 1960s, the new generation, graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts, ardently entered the theatrical doings. In 1962, Pavol Haspra, who had already been

established at the regional Nitra Theatre, started to work for the Slovak National Theatre and immediately attracted attention by the whole series of productions, mostly of plays from the West (the play *After the Fall* by Arthur Miller, firstly directed by him in 1964, had its European premiere). Miloš Pietor, the director from the remarkable regional Theatre of the Slovak National Uprising in Martin, came with the so-called emphasized realism, when within the frame of realistic theatre he came to forms of slapstick comedy or tragic farce. He achieved fame with his production of Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (1967) which was staged like absurd drama, worthy of Beckett.

In 1968, the first generation theatre came into its being – On the Korzo Theatre. It was founded by young theatre professionals, all with identical life feeling, unique styles of authentic acting and perceptions of the world as a tragic farce. Apart from guest directors Miloš Pietor and Peter Mikulík, the main director was Vladimír Strnisko. It was an apolitical theatre which wanted to reflect the inner life of its contemporaries. Despite this fact, bodies of political power closed it in 1971. This was in the period when the lives of the people of Czechoslovakia had already been affected by the so-called normalization process – the power was taken over by those who approved the Warsaw Pact troops occupation in 1968.

The normalization officials restricted repertoires. Plays supporting Socialism were required again and plays by existentialists and absurd drama authors were banned once more. Generally, local plays were supported, with only a few plays crossing the border of political servility. After the opening of his play *Absolute Prohibition* (*Absolútny zákaz*) at the Slovak National Theatre in 1969, renowned playwright Peter Karvaš was absolutely banned from publishing and theatres were forbidden to stage his plays (similar bans took also place in other spheres of art and intellectual life for the next 20 years). The majority of Slovak theatres between the years 1968 – 1969 presented a few productions protesting against the occupation, but the disciplinary actions were strict. Many of theatre professionals had to leave their positions. Despite the fact that the regime wanted to level the Slovak theatrical culture, in principle it was not successful. It was chiefly the generation studying and starting their career in the 1960s who did not want to unconditionally give in. Despite the fact that sometimes they had to stage something from the required repertoire (plays of Soviet or other socialist country origin, plays by Slovak playwrights – mostly communist functionaries), they often turned to world and local classics. In them, they

were searching for analogies, instances, symbols, showing the moral decay of the period. The audience accepted such rules remarkably quickly and read well the messages uttered from the stages.

The actors from the closed On the Korzo Theatre moved to the Nová scéna Theatre where, together with directors Pietor and Strnisko, they created a broad range of outstanding productions. In the theatre in Martin, the leading post after Pietor was replaced by Ľubomír Vajdička, who gained fame by his extraordinary productions of Chekhov and Slovak classics. At the Andrej Bagar Theatre, director Jozef Bednárík attracted attention by having the courage to mix genres, periods and music. His productions were almost baroquely rich and full of invention. In the 1990s, he became an accomplished director of the opera and musicals.

In the 1980s, the Theatre for Children and Youth in Trnava became a remarkable source of movement, created by two young graduates of the Academy of Performing Arts and generation counterparts, directors Blahoslav Uhlár and Juraj Nvota. Uhlár worked with the so-called method of collective improvisation – the resulting fixed shape was a semantic gesture of the whole producing team. After the socio-political change in 1989, he and Miloš Karásek together founded the non-state Stoka Theatre in Bratislava, where he carried on in the method of collective creation until 2006. The Stoka became the hatchery of a number of fringe theatres which today create the integral parts of theatrical life. After the period of playful theatricality in Trnava, Juraj Nvota became a director at the Astorka Korzo '90 Theatre in Bratislava, which tried, under changed circumstances, to carry on in the tradition of the banned On the Korzo Theatre. He and director Roman Polák shaped the profile of the theatre until the late 1990s by creating a dialogue of two different directing styles.

The work of director Roman Polák had already attracted attention in the 1980s. He started his career at the State Theatre in Košice but his most important productions were created at the Martin Theatre and theatres in Bratislava. His productions of Brecht's *Baal* and Marivaux's play *La Dispute* (adapted as *Touches and Reunions*) won rave reviews at international festivals (e.g. BITEF in Belgrade, Edinburgh etc.).

The export link of the Slovak stagecraft is the stage design. Its doyen, Professor Ladislav Vychodil, though his work for the Slovak National Theatre, co-operated with leading world stages, and received a number of awards at many international stage design exhibitions. He was a tutor of many stage designers at the Academy of

Performing Arts – Jozef Ciller, Ján Zavarský, Tomáš Berka and prematurely passed away Aleš Votava.

After 1989 the socialist regime fell and a clear and new movement appeared in theatre-making. New theatres, such as the Astorka Korzo '90 Theatre, were founded. In this period it was mainly young artists who founded companies focusing on the so-called alternative theatre, mostly in the form of civic associations (the boom of civic activities in the 1990s was fascinating). All of the restrictions and bans were dropped, but the quality of theatrical life did not increase significantly. The performing arts, which had devoted a great part of their potential to the fight with the communist regime and its morals, suddenly lost the enemy. The companies were left in quite a helpless state, now, when it was most crucial not to lose their audiences who were not adapted to new European drama. Problems of an organizational and financial nature occurred – there was not political willingness to reform the network of theatres, and at the same time, there were not finances to cover a quality operation and development of independent as well as state-administered theatres. The public budget, including the grant system of the Ministry of Culture, remained the only relevant source of finances for culture, but nevertheless, an inappropriate one. The sponsors preferred giving money to such events which raised the advertising profit for them – until today, the diversity of sources for culture has been rather a wishful thinking than reality.

In theatres, a financial crisis occurred. The new regime based on market economy was not able to finance so many theatres with large ensembles. In 1995 – 2002, an extensive decentralization took place focusing on the network of cultural institutions. This resulted in the major part of theatres being placed under the administration of counties (regional self-governments). The efforts needed to provide financial direction of any theatre leads many theatres to a drop of quality demands in their repertoires. Except for sporadic serious works, commercial titles are often presented, which prefer only the entertaining side of theatre. Some theatres, once serious and respected ones, stuck to presenting only commercial works of questionable artistic as well as moral value. It is not that there are not noteworthy productions staged, but it is only a minimum compared to the number which would be necessary for the healthy life of theatrical culture. The marginal status of culture in Slovak society also has an effect, as does the lack of respect and attention towards culture from the side of the

public and political representations. The proof of this is the insufficient financing of art and cultural heritage in comparison with other countries in Europe.

Nevertheless, there is one certain thing – the terrain of contemporary Slovak stagecraft is vast, there are plenty of movements and orientations in it. There is only a lack of more concentrated and intellectually rich works. There is a lot of zeal to create, but less thought about creativity.

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*(Abridged and modified by the editor)*