

The Phenomena of Slovak Theatre

In recent years the performing arts in Slovakia have been formed by several phenomena and changes. Dramatic production by the so-called resident theatres has been altering under the influence of the change in the structure of independent theatre. Some of the important independent companies ceased to exist (Stoka Theatre); others do not make productions on a regular basis. Also important for Slovak theatrical culture is the formation of new cultural houses inspired by the phenomenon to transform industrial buildings and areas designed for different functions, into contemporary art centres (e.g. the A4 - Zero Space in Bratislava, Stanica-Záriečie in Žilina, Kulturpark Barracks in Košice).

The dominant trend on stage in the 1990s were light comedies and commercial repertoire, including musicals, in order to keep the interest of the audience. As for drama today, we can observe perhaps a gradual but surely an apparent retreat by particular theatres from commercialization and popularization of their repertoires as they try to create their artistic profiles.

Compared to the 1990s, there is an important occurrence today in repertoires of drama theatres – an increasing number of contemporary world and Slovak dramas. The projects developed by the Theatre Institute in Bratislava (Drama Contest from 2000, Nová dráma/New Drama Festival from 2004) were based on the contemporary drama boom in Europe and positively motivated Slovak theatres to present contemporary drama. Some of these productions were highly evaluated by professional critics as well as audiences (Patrick Marber: *Closer*, Košice State Theatre, 2002; Roland Schimmelpfennig: *Arabian Night*, Slovak National Theatre, 2004; Iveta Horváthová: *The Women Fetishists*, Slovak National Theatre, 2008). The trend of presenting contemporary drama also brought a high number of innovative adaptations and dramatizations of Slovak classical literature (Peter Pavlac – Božena Slančíková-Timrava: *Great Happiness*, Slovak National Theatre, 2003; Roman Polák: *Piargy*, Andrej Bagar Theatre, Nitra, 2008).

This fact is reflected in the productions of the Bratislava Meeting programme: among Chekhov's *Ivanov*, Büchner's *Leonce and Lena*, Bernhard's *Before Retirement* or *Kubo* by Ján Hollý, there are also contemporary drama productions (*Kebab*, *Dr. Gustáv Husák - Prisoner of Presidents - President of Prisoners*, *The Platform*), authorial works (*Stories from Petržalka*, *Terra Granus*, *Cells*, *Second Turn*) and adaptations of literary writings (*America*, *Everything for the Nation*).

In today's theatre development, an acute need for a generational exchange of directors has appeared. In recent seasons a few directors of the middle and younger generations have successfully established themselves by their artistic contributions (Martin Čičvák, Rastislav Ballek, Marián Amsler, Ján Štrbák, Michal Vajdička, Soňa Ferancová, Ján Šimko, Viktor Kollár, Eduard Kudláč, Kamil Žiška, Vladislava Fekete, Maja Hriešik, Roman Olekšák).

Many of them are included in the IETM Bratislava artistic programme; the working profile of some of them is represented even twice (*Dr. Gustáv Husák* and *Leonce and Lena* by Martin Čičvák, *Kebab* and *Stories from Petržalka* by Ján Šimko).

The ensembles which are considered as leaders in contemporary drama theatre are the Slovak National Theatre, Aréna Theatre in Bratislava and Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra. The artistic quality and interest of the audience maintain theatres such as the Astorka Korzo '90 Theatre, State Theatre in Košice – Drama Ensemble, Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin or Ján Palárik Theatre in Trnava.

There are two theatres whose selection of plays may be considered key and exceptional contributions: in previous seasons the Aréna Theatre in Bratislava attracted attention through a cycle of productions reflecting events and personalities of the Slovak history (*Tiso*, 2005; *Dr. Gustáv Husák – Prisoner of Presidents, President of Prisoners*, 2006; *Communism*, 2008). For the IETM Bratislava Meeting, the selection committee chose the play by Viliam Klimáček - *Dr. Gustáv Husák – Prisoner of Presidents, President of Prisoners* for its specific theme and universal theatrical language. The Andrej Bagar Theatre from Nitra contributed to the reflection of Slovak history and Slovak identity in the season 2007/2008 by its dramaturgical cycle entitled *The Family Silver*. The most recent play of this cycle, *Everything for the Nation*, has already attracted attention of international audiences within the Slovak section of the programme at the Divadelná Nitra International Festival 2008.

The selection, of course, aimed to accentuate marginal and minor theatres as well as theatrical types and genres. *Kubo*, a production of the On the Crossroad Puppet Theatre, is an excellent example of the transformation of puppet theatre which has had a strong custom as traditional puppet art in Slovakia (until recently, there were only a few families keeping a hundred-years-old tradition of the art of puppetry).

Community theatres or theatres of minorities are represented by two unique theatres – the Theatre from the Passage which works with mentally challenged actors and the Alexander Dukhnovitch Theatre which is the only professional theatre of the Ruthenian minority in the world. It is this theatre which comes to Bratislava from the easternmost town of Prešov. The programme presents productions from all corners of Slovakia (western Slovakia is represented by Bratislava, Nitra and Bátorce, central Slovakia by Banská Bystrica, Prievidza and Martin, eastern Slovakia by Košice and Prešov); in dance projects there are even companies with international members (Greece, Belgium, Spain, Czech Republic).

It was natural that when selecting productions for the IETM artistic programme, focusing on the themes of the productions and their connections was more important than captivating factual and formal issues. Reflection on the history of “painful moments” in the Slovak past is quite important not only for the artistic but also for the socio-cultural context of Slovakia. There have always been polemics amongst historians concerning the period of the so-called Slovak State (1939 - 1945). This can be connected with the theme of Bernhard’s play *Before Retirement*. The Slovak society is still confronted and has to deal with its fascist as well as its communist past. It is interesting to see that the young generation of theatre producers are “Husák’s children”, women and men born in the period of normalization (when Gustáv Husák was the president of Czechoslovakia). One of them is Martin Čičvák, the director of the production about Gustáv Husák - the last president of socialist Czechoslovakia.

Contemporary Slovak theatre does not search for answers to questions only from recent or distant history. In the past two years the documentary theatre style has been quite strongly represented. Works, usually produced by collective creation methods, reflect the present directly or through the past; they look for unembellished truth, discover roughness as well as surprising beauties of an ordinary day (*Stories from Petržalka, Dead Souls, Kebab, Terra Granus*).

The rest of the productions from the selection will give you yet more new information about Slovakia – from almost a local context and existentialism in Slovak style to puzzled central-European feelings (*Everything for the Nation, Kubo, The Platform, America According to Kafka*).

It is difficult not to notice the efforts of the younger generation of creators – a mosaic of contemporary Slovak theatre consists also of formal experiments with an intellectual basis (*Cells, Second Turn*).

Despite the boom of contemporary drama and prevalence of authorial projects, the core of Slovak theatres' repertoires will always be created from classical works. As a matter of fact, the most important productions, which pushed Slovak theatre into the European theatre scene, were stagings of works of classical and modern literature (famous productions of English, French, German and mainly Russian classics at the Slovak National Theatre in the 1930s and 1940s or productions of the On the Korzo Theatre in the late 1960s, SNP Theatre in Martin, Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra in the 1960s and 1980s or Astorka Korzo '90 Theatre in the 1990s). *Ivanov* is an original production of director and Russian drama specialist Roman Polák. *Leonce and Lena* is another title which presents the clear theatrical style of Martin Čičvák.

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