
EUROPEAN THEATRE CONTEXT

Linking Bratislava to Moscow and the Urals

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Abstract: Every theatrical performance constitutes an unrepeatable, unique event. As opposed to a fixed audiovisual work, a concrete theatrical performance is affected by a variety of interferences in the communication channel. Therefore, one is bound to travel to see theatre, or, a theatre travels to reach its audiences. The paper maps out the merits of selected foreign productions presented within Eurokontext.sk international theatre festival organised by the Slovak National Theatre (SND), member of the European Theatre Convention, ETC. The young Slovak professional theatre (founded 95 years ago) is inspired by other theatre cultures, among them being diverse theatre forms in Russia. The authoress focuses on concrete productions of documentary theatre and classical drama, which have recently sparked keen interest in society, including the dropping of some productions from the repertoire.

Keywords: Slovak National Theatre, Eurokontext.sk, *Maidan Diaries*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Tannhäuser*, *Onegin*, *Three Sisters*

In November 2015, a new theatre with a seating capacity of 100 was opened in Bratislava. Its name indicates that it focuses on comic theatrical performances. On this occasion, a soap opera actress, also featuring in the productions of small private theatres, gave a radio interview in which she noted that private theatres received minimum funding support from the State. She was critical to the fact that significant public funds were used to subsidise theatres that were not profitable, such as, for instance, the opera. True, all three opera ensembles in Slovakia¹ are funded by the State, via the budget chapter of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic. However, opera houses in other European countries are not self-sufficient either, they are subsidised from public sources, by private donors and sponsors. Opera, just like the whole theatre arts, is a component part of the creative economy and it plays a role in the development of the population's cultural behaviour and perception. This simple example demonstrates that not only the general public which has little need for culture and the arts to be present in its life, but also the graduates of the schools of drama openly reject this type of "high" art.

There are actors who, in addition to being active in their home drama ensembles, give guest performances in other theatrical or art productions of greater or lesser significance and would frequent theatrical performances of their peers. They are keen to watch their colleagues at work. However, there are not too many of them. Still fewer actors or Slovak directors would be spotted in nearby Vienna, in Paris or at other important festivals held in Avignon, Edinburgh, Salzburg or elsewhere. And only

¹ The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre Bratislava, State Opera Banská Bystrica and the Opera of the Košice State Theatre.

a fraction of them would travel to Moscow, St. Petersburg or behind the Urals.² We have become used to connecting theatre with politics, which explains the rather frequent negative attitude to everything that comes from the Russian milieu regardless of what the German or French press writes of numerous progressive performances. It is no surprise, then, when the Secretary of The Maly Drama Theatre – Theatre de L'Europe, Saint Petersburg, associated with the name of the director Lev Dodin, advises a Slovak theatre maker to come to Paris, to see their next performance there. A bonus is a booked ticket for the performance. Typically, well-known Russian theatres would be on guest tours of European capitals for a month or two. For an EU citizen keen to learn more about the theatrical culture of more remote countries, Paris, Berlin and other cities are more accessible. Top-notch German, French, Polish or Russian theatres are high-priced, which explains why they are seen rarely, if ever, in Slovakia. An important factor is also the prospective number of audiences of a small country and the economic power of its inhabitants. Not everyone interested can afford to pay several hundred euros for a single ticket.

After 1989, a single-organisation monopoly ceased to exist.³ Through it, theatre ensembles were invited and financed to give performances in Bratislava, most of the time. Since 1992, foreign theatres have been regularly invited to the Divadelná Nitra International Theatre Festival (EFFE Label – Europe for Festivals, Festivals for Europe). After a quest for its own way and not simply rejecting the past, the event has been firmly established on the map of European theatre festivals. Fewer and smaller ensembles and theatres are hosted by the International Festival of Contemporary Puppet Theatre for Adults and Children in Banská Bystrica (EFFE Label) or Theatre Festival of V4 Countries in Nitra, New Drama Festival in Bratislava (EFFE Label) and by other international events of enthusiastic theatre professionals. The Bratislava Music Festival (Bratislavské hudobné slávnosti – BHS), which has been around since 1964, cannot be overlooked, as it is the first Slovak member of the European Festivals Association (EFA), Brussels. The BHS posters frequently promote operatic productions and concert performances of selected opera works. It is, indeed, a rare sight to see soap opera actors or actors of small theatre stages frequent these events. The most recent international theatre festival in Slovakia is Eurokontext.sk (EFFE Label), which is held in the premises of the Slovak National Theatre (SND). During the 2014 foundation year the theatres from V4 countries and selected partners of ETC⁴ were presented. The drama ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre is also its member. It was the drama ensemble, as the first member from Central and Eastern Europe, to have organised EuroThalia festival as early as 2002. In 2015, Eurokontext.sk was dedicated to drama theatre and in 2016, it will cover music and movement theatre.

² Let us recall the trip of two members of the drama ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre, Zuzana Fialová and Ľuboš Kostelný, who, in January 2011, flew to Moscow, to visit several theatrical performances. The actress Zuzana Fialová was injured during an explosion at Moscow Domodedovo airport.

³ It is SLOVKONCERT, Czechoslovak Art Agency, based in Bratislava (1969).

⁴ Currently, The European Theatre Convention (ETC) has over 40 members from 25 countries. For more visit <http://etc-cte.org/base.php?code=9>.

In contrast to other European theatre centres, the capital of Slovakia has just awakened thanks to its “first” theatre scene, and its ambition is to join the European theatre dialogue as an equal partner. It is yet another opportunity to make the first theatre scene known and to attract the audiences to its premises, even to opera.

In 2015, we marked the 95th anniversary of the Slovak National Theatre, which is headquartered in Bratislava. Unlike the history of other national theatres abroad, the history of the Slovak National Theatre is fairly recent (not only in contrast to the National Theatre Warsaw (1765)). The Slovaks had to wait until 1920, before visiting their very first professional theatre, which was 39 years after the first premiere at The National Theatre Prague (1881). In Czech Republic, similarly to neighbouring European countries, there had been several reputable theatre ensembles or houses, which was the name given to important buildings. This was at a time of a common state of the Czechs and the Slovaks, Czecho-Slovakia (1918). Ever since the state was founded until its split-up (in 1993)⁵, the state language in the territory of Czechia and Moravia was the Czech language, while Slovak was the state language in the territory of Slovakia. For the convenience of foreign readers it should be noted that both are Slavic languages, they are similar and mutually understandable.⁶

Not only professional theatre but also the Slovak language is much younger than the Czech language. Regardless of that, Slovaks have yearned for their national theatre and culture activists in Prague accommodated their wish. Ever since the 19th century, amateur theatre has been played in Slovak rural areas and in smaller towns. The most prominent was Slovenský spevokol⁷ in Martin. Martin was the only Slovak town to have a National House. It was built in just twenty months and The New Year theatre party on the last day of 1889 was held here. The multi-purpose building which housed a hotel, sale premises and offices of several culture and social institutions (a casino, an inn, a library and a museum) was formally commissioned in August 1890. The theatre hall occupied the greater part of the ground floor, and it had a capacity for as many as a thousand standing visitors.⁸

Despite an eventful history of Slovenský spevokol and of other amateur Slovak theatre ensembles, none of them was among the founders of a national theatre, although Bratislava had a historical building in eclectic style. Its authors were renowned Austrian theatre architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer. In 1918, the front of the present-day Slovak National Theatre Historical Building in Hviezdoslav Square contained an inscription in three languages: MESTSKÉ DIVADLO, STADT-THEATER, VÁROSI SZÍNHÁZ (City Theatre). The theatre belonged to the city. Well-known German, Austrian, and Hungarian theatres gave regular guest performances there, which was especially true of music theatres with acclaimed personalities. Oc-

⁵ The period between March 1939 and May 1945 must be excluded. After the German occupation, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and an independent Slovak State were established, the latter changing its name to the Slovak Republic in July 1939.

⁶ For instance, Switzerland has three distinct and unrelated official languages (German, French, Italian), therefore, at least two out of the three are taught.

⁷ Amateur singing and theatre society (1872–1951). Despite several phase-downs, it remained to be the only systematically working and focused theatre society in Slovakia with its own stock scenery.

⁸ Since 1944, the building has been housing the Slovak Chamber Theatre. In the meantime, it has been converted several times, however, the skeleton, the front and numerous architectural elements of the interior layout have been preserved.

asionally, Czech ensembles would also give guest performances there. Ironically, it was this building to which the theatre company of East Bohemian Theatre playing in Czech, under the label of the Slovak National Theatre, had moved in.

As opposed to other European countries, there had been no professional theatre in Slovakia until then. Bratislava, being the biggest town in Slovakia, had the biggest audience potential, with numerous Hungarian and German minorities, which accounted for two-thirds of the total population, thus outnumbering the Czechs and the Slovaks who had lived in the city. The Slovak National Theatre was founded on the cooperative concept by the Cooperative of the Slovak National Theatre. The theatre was subsidised by the Cooperative and by the Ministry of Education and National Edification in Prague. The East Bohemian Theatre had a well-staged repertory and a rich stock scenery, composed of furniture, props, costumes, and of other scenic elements. Although the agreement between the Cooperative and the director of the SND, businessman Bedřich Jeřábek, was to play as many performances in Slovak as possible, the implementation of this condition was very slow. The drama ensemble of the SND gave performances mostly in Czech (right from the very first season, i.e. from 1 March to 6 July 1920, it staged 30 titles), and some time lapsed, before performances were given in Slovak. Opera was no different. During the period in question, the opera ensemble staged 22 operas and 20 operettas, while ballet ensemble staged as few as three ballet titles. From the 1920s onwards, there was a frequent rotation of administrative directors and ensemble directors. The process of staging new plays by Slovak playwrights was slow and the same applied to foreign drama translated to Slovak. An important milestone was 1932, when the drama ensemble split into two drama ensembles: the Czech and the Slovak. At that time, the ensemble had been joined by a sufficient number of talented and known actors and directors.⁹ By an administrative decision, at 31 December 1938, the Czech drama ensemble was abolished.¹⁰

All three ensembles (drama, opera, ballet) gave performances in a single building, which was challenging for rehearsing and the day-to-day operation of the theatre. In 1955, the drama ensemble moved to the converted premises of the then National Bank of Slovakia, in present-day Laurinská Street (currently, the Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav City Theatre). In 1962, it acquired an extra intimate space in Dostojevský rad (currently, Small Stage Theatre STU). Another big moving took place in 2007, when all three ensembles were moved to a new building of the Slovak National Theatre, located on the bank of the Danube River. It took more than twenty years to build the huge edifice housing several halls. After 1989, the general public and theatre professionals had to virtually stand up and to fight for the unfinished building to serve the theatre, as before its completion, there had been plans to sell it for other than cultural purpose.

⁹ As early as 1926, Hana Meličková excelled in the lead role of Wilde's *Salome*. Drama actors were joined in by Štefan Figura, Martin Gregor (his real name was Guttman), Ján Jamnický, Ivan Lichard, Mária Bancíková, Ivan Turzo, and others.

¹⁰ This happened after the Munich Pact was signed and the Czechs had to leave Slovakia. Several actors applied for the possibility to stay and continue working with the SND.

The quest for a new path to Europe

Let us remind the reader that the building is shared by all three ensembles of the SND. The building contains several halls and extra premises which can potentially be converted to acting space within the theatre.¹¹ Today, a three-ensemble theatre model in a single building is a fairly unique arrangement. It is not our aim to comment on the pros and cons of such a co-existence; however, from our point of view and considering the ever-growing audience figures of SND performances, one should underscore its benefits and advantages. The premises accommodating opera, ballet and drama are not separated from each other. A common centrally-located theatre buffet for visitors,¹² the possibility of setting up exhibitions in the entire theatre premises, TV spots to the current repertoire of each ensemble, mingling with the audiences of other performances¹³ constitute a sound basis for the integration of the viewer community. A number of them are regular visitors of opera and drama performances.

Let us now briefly stop by the foundation year and the first year of Eurokontext.sk. In 2014, seventeen ensembles from ten countries made appearance on all SND stages. Together with domestic ensembles, they gave thirty seven performances. First, there came opera and ballet performances, which were followed by drama. The focus of our interest is drama and, therefore, let us mention two completely different ensembles that give performances on foreign stages, along with mounting productions on their home stages. One of them is the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London, the second one is the National Theatre, Warsaw. Part of the London ensemble gave the performance of *Hamlet* during a two-year globe-circling tour.¹⁴ It reanimated Elizabethan theatre in which one actor impersonated several characters and they played in an illuminated theatre hall to recreate the atmosphere of one-time afternoon performances in Shakespeare's time. After the performance, the ensemble members stated that Slovakia was the twenty-third country they visited on their globe-circling tour. In fact, the entire performance of *Hamlet* by this exceptional touring company noted for its uniqueness and humanity, was a replica of a performance of a troupe of touring actors of the medieval street theatre. For instance, the atmosphere was enhanced by the actors' coming on stage, by the information on what the performance was about, which was communicated to the audience under the accompaniment of simple musical instruments, and by the luggage that contained minimum props and parts of costumes, the setting up of an improvised scene, with coat hooks, such as those seen in pubs, in the background, and by a simple curtain on twine.¹⁵ Londoners staged a stylised and abridged story directed by Dominic Dromgoole and Bill Buckhurst. Its main protagonists were two black actors – Ladi Emeruwa performing *Hamlet*

¹¹ The opera ensemble also rehearses some of its productions in the SND Historical Building. It is the building of the city theatre mentioned above, in which opera and ballet ensembles had been housed until 2007.

¹² In the evening, the buffet is also open to the general public, as there is free entry into the building. The tickets will only be checked before entering the theatre hall.

¹³ Evening performances given by all ensembles have the same start time.

¹⁴ Currently, *Hamlet* is again performed on their home stage, The Globe, which was built anew in London, not far from the place where the original building was burnt down in the early 17th century. Visit <http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/theatre/whats-on/globe-theatre/hamlet-globe-to-globe>.

¹⁵ In the 1970s and the 1980s, marketplace theatre was played by Czech alternative theatres.

William Shakespeare:
Hamlet. Shakespeare's Globe
 Theatre. London, premiere
 2011. Amanda Wilkin as
 Ophelia. Photo Helena
 Miscioscia. The archives of
 the Slovak National Theatre.



and Amanda Wilkin as Ophelia, which moved the story of this play by Shakespeare from an “academic” theatrical space to street theatre.

A production of one of the oldest national theatres in the world, Teatr Narodowy, Warsaw, may serve as a good contrast to a playful theatre with deep philosophical themes.

The production of *Anonymné dielo (Bezimienne dzieło)*, translated into English as *The Anonymous Work: Four Acts of a Rather Nasty Nightmare*, by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz,¹⁶ ushered in a strong contemporary theme. In 1921, the play, by its vision of amorality, foreshadowed the atrocities which, a few years on, began to spread in Germany, originating from the power of the masses that were in quest of a leader and of a new religion. As a visionary, the author introduces the elite ranks of society who are ignorant of the ongoing changes and live in a world of their own. Gradually, the opinion of an individual no longer counts and an individual's personality vanishes. In this Witkiewicz's work the oppression of freedom through a controlled manipulation leads to the individual's blending in with the crowd in grey anonymity.

What is initially thought to be funny about the grotesque view of the director Jan Englert, will eventually give the chills. The aristocracy representatives dig their own graves, both figuratively and literally, by one of them placing an order for a grandiose grave. The intelligentsia is stripped of the freedom of expression. The production even contains parallels between the conversation of the gravediggers of this grave and the conversation of their counterparts in *Hamlet* and there are also overlaps with the monologue of Hamlet in which, by musing over the past, he contemplates the present and the future in general. In the festival programme, the dramaturge notes that “the grotesque crime story” on the theme of art and revolution is appallingly hilarious and well-known in our times. An impressive performance full of music, black humour and poignant scenic images is a message of the unteachability of mankind. But it may very well pose a question whether history cares about repeating

¹⁶ The author is commonly known as Witkacy. Therefore, the reader may come across this name on websites or in literature.

itself...¹⁷ The dangling hanged men at the rear of the stage by Andrzej Witkowski are an eloquent message to the future. The final scenes in an empty, looted and destroyed space at a time when free men (artists) are put to prison, are reminiscent of bygone times and of the threats of the representatives of the Islamic State and of their vision of destroying Europe. At the time when the play was written, the situation between the Christian and the Muslim worlds was not so tense. The mission of the production, in a generalising sense, without specifying the future, was pertinently named by a critic, when she referred to the set design in the finale as offering "an empty space composed of nothingness, cold light, smoke and of an anonymous crowd of people ghastly hailing appalling slogans about ironical unity in odour, disgust, filth and stickiness, whose quiet leader becomes a man writing his Anonymous Work. And, as was pointed out by one of the characters in the finale, 'the only place fit for living is either prison or a nuthouse'".¹⁸

Although we live in a post-globalised world, this production of Witkacy's play alerted to the danger of the suppression of an individual by the majority on the grounds of difference (for instance, the LGBT community, which (also) divides Slovak society) and to the need of a continuous reminder of the preservation of one's own identity while observing mutual acceptance.

Freedom and responsibility

It was Eurokontext.sk, this time focussing on drama¹⁹ that indirectly tied into the theme of inner freedom and individual and social responsibility for past and present acts. The central theme of the 2015 festival was The Wall. The discussions following the performance, with audience participation, showed the hurdles of coming to terms with the past, as political and economic transformations²⁰ entailed the building of more walls, not only inside states but also in broader international connections, or as a consequence of the misunderstanding among people and their incapacity or ignorance to listen to each other.

As was written by SND Drama Director Roman Polák in June 2015, it is not a matter of a specific wall or walls that divide society. Polák's words about the existence of invisible walls in Europe were visionary: "Even though the Berlin wall no longer stands, the walls of misunderstanding are still being built, not only in Slovakia, but all over Europe. An invisible wall between Eastern and Western Europe, even across the entire European Union, is still in existence."²¹ Everyday events show that the representatives of some states and of EU institutions, by their decisions, keep reminding us of the "über" notion, i.e. of the supremacy of one nation over the other, while hiding behind the anonymous mass of EU Member States. They prompt the

¹⁷ For more visit: <http://www.snd.sk/?cinohra&predstavenie=anonymne-dielo>. [cit. 10 December 2015].

¹⁸ BRATHOVÁ, Barbara. Témy, čo presahujú hranice – 7. časť. Published on 10 September 2014. <http://www.mojakultura.sk/sk/clanok/temy--co-presahuju-hranice---7.cast>. [cit. 10 December 2015].

¹⁹ In 2016, the festival will be dedicated to music and dance theatre.

²⁰ This transformation is oftentimes referred to as the regime change.

²¹ POLÁK, Roman. Welcome by the SND Drama Director. In *Programový bulletin: činohra – Medzinárodný divadelný festival Slovenského národného divadla – eurokontext.sk*. Bratislava, 2015. Unpaged.



Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: *The Anonymous Work*. National Theatre in Warsaw, premiere 2013. Shot from the production. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

building of tangible walls (such as those on state borders), and also of a new “Berlin” Wall between the countries that belong to the Western and Eastern blocs of the EU. The conscience and responsibility of a single human being disappear alongside such events and statements.

The production of *Celibát* (*Die Unverheiratete/The Celibate*) by the young Austrian author Ewald Palmeshofer, staged by Vienna Burgtheater,²² offers an interesting and powerful story of three generations of women. Narration is retrospective and goes seventy years back (from 2014 back to 1945). The woman, who is a grandmother now, after an unforeseen health complication, recalls an event, which affected all her life. When the World War II was drawing to its close, she, being a young woman then, denounced a German deserter and for her collaboration with the Nazi, who was sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment after the war. Her reminiscences and a hidden diary disclose an individual’s inner and family trauma and the after-effects of a single human failure or of an individual’s strong belief in acting the right way. By using two curtains in a space enclosed from three sides, the young German director Robert Borgmann separates time crossfading of events in the lives of grandmother, mother, and granddaughter and their self-questioning. The brightly illuminated stage and constant light in the faces of the audiences is assaulting. Four stylised char-

²² Guest performances of Burgtheater in Bratislava were given for the first time after 36 years, although Vienna is only about 70 km from Bratislava.



Ewald Palmethofer: *The Celibate*. Burgtheater in Vienna, premiere 2014. Shot from the production. Photo Georg Soulek. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

acters in various roles (of a nurse, an interrogator, a female prison guard, etc.) accompany three women through their present and past lives; they are the witnesses of their complex interpersonal relations. The almost 80-year-old Elisabeth Orth as Grandmother proved veritable, without a trace of stylisation, in her impersonation of an old woman, a Nazi collaborator, a fascist²³. In order to denude her inner self she need not take off her clothes and show the flaws of her body; she will make do with words, intonation, look or gestures. The scene of throwing the earth from graves all over the stage is a significant act of the rejection of the past, which is deeply hidden from the world. The scene is about claiming one's own action or the acts of our forefathers. There was a discussion following the performance in which Ms. Orth confessed she had not problems with her character and during rehearsals she answered questions which she had long been asking herself. Because "There was no such thing as "them", but rather "us all", capable of doing anything."²⁴

The Dresden State Theatre also contributed to the issue of the walls dividing families, by its adaptation of *Rozdelené nebo* (*Der geteilte Himmel/Divided Heaven*) by the Nobel prize candidate Christy Wolf. Against the backdrop of a story of two lovers living on both sides of the Berlin Wall, the captivating production directed by Tilmann

²³ In reality, the first lady of Vienna theatre is the President of the League against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia.

²⁴ ULÍČIANSKA, Zuzana. Burgtheater sľuboval poetický jazyk a výnimočné obrazy. Nebol to planý sľub. (Burgtheater promised a poetic language and outstanding images. It was not a false promise.) Visit <http://kultura.sme.sk/c/7858515/burgtheater-sluboval-poeticky-jazyk-a-vynimocne-obrazy-nebol-to-planysluby.html>. [cit. 10 December 2015].



Ewald Palmethofer: *The Celibate*. Burgtheater in Vienna, premiere 2014. On the left Elisabeth Ort as Old Woman. Photo Georg Soulek. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

Köhler with minimalist scenery, gives an account of the socio-political system in the German Democratic Republic. It shows how believing in socialism and its ideals can eventually end up in helplessness, ideological mobbing across all areas of social life. The goal of such a society is to keep the masses under control and to prevent an individual from setting himself/herself free, from getting over real or invisible walls, to move forward and to see other forms of life or social systems.

Christa Wolf used an artistic language to give an account of a time in which she lived. The well-known and successful Ukrainian playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt²⁵ with her peers wrote a document of the revolutionary days they had personally experienced. During several months of witnessing Maidan events, they kept taking notes, day by day, of all the experiences, emotions, mini stories that were eventually used to write a "New Drama" play. The documentary drama *Majdanské denníky* (*Shchodenniki Majdanu/Maidan Diaries*) was premiered at Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre in Kiev, November 2014.²⁶ Although the theatre had no prior experience with the verbatim theatre method, the director based himself on his personal experiences of Maidan events²⁷. Vorozhbyt was convinced that the producers would immerse into

²⁵ The plays by N. Vorozhbyt are staged in England, Latvia and in Russia.

²⁶ Incidentally, the big theatre started its operation in 1920, just like the SND.

²⁷ In November 2013, big spontaneous demonstrations were started on Kiev's Independence Square, which outgrew into several months of occupation of the square by citizens. Ever since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, The Independence Square has been called Maidan. In 2004, it became the centre of Orange Revolution. For more visit <http://www.reflex.cz/clanek/zpravy/54725/slovem-roku-je-majdan-zname-ho-z-kyjeva-co-to-vlastne-je.html>.



Christa Wolf: *Divided Heaven*. Dresden State Theatre, premiere 2013. Shot from the production. Photo David Baltzer. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

the material without any problem, because she “spotted a lot of them on the Maidan, so to actors, this is their personal experience rather than a play whose text they have to learn.”²⁸ In the script/docudrama, i.e. in the production directed by Andriy May, the actual statements of real-live persons are heard, the recordings of Maidan participants (students, parents, intellectuals, workers) who stood on both sides, of heroes and anti-heroes (defending the position of those who were negative to changes or of those afraid of reprisals).

The drama ensemble has toured several countries with the Maidan Diaries project. Following the performances, there are panel discussions held about Maidan, about the benefits and losses it has brought to citizens and what the path to democracy entails. According to the authoress, it was especially the audience at Royal Court Theatre London responding positively to the opportunity to learn more about the events on the Maidan that were not shown in TV news.²⁹ In a discussion with the audience following the performance (i.e. “the reading” of documentary drama, as the authoress would refer to the staging of her text) in SND Studio³⁰, theatre makers were critical of the audience’s lukewarm feedback and its poor engagement. They reproved the audiences that when the anthem of the European Union was played, they showed no respect for it by raising to their feet and singing it together

²⁸ For more visit <http://rbgroup.com.ua/v-kieve-proydet-premera-spektaklya-dnevniki-maydana/>. Devisers dedicated the production to their peer Andriy Movchan who was killed at Maidan Square.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ 18 June 2015.



Natalia Vorozhbyt: *Maidan Diares*. Ivan Franko National Academic drama Theatre in Kiev, premiere 2014. Shot from the production. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

with them, with their hand over their hearts. They argued it was also our (Slovak) anthem, while expressing a strong hope it would also become their anthem a few months on. That explained why they showed respect for it. With all due respect for the victims of Maidan, considering the politics of this country, it proved very difficult to explain a path of revolution without victims (Czechoslovakia of 1989 was an example of that), to talk about faith, the trust in our hearts, in the day-to-day political and economic life of the EU and also about doubts and increasingly, about scepticism. On their “theatrical” quest for freedom it would be inapt, in a theatre hall, to speak of the difference between a performance of verbatim theatre and a demonstrational performance defending the ideas of the revolution (with critical knowledge). Within Eurokontext.sk, the audience in the SND Studio approached the presentation of documentary drama by our peers as documentary theatre which is not an unknown concept in Slovakia. They understood it to be verbatim theatre, i.e. the performance was not perceived as presenting additional missing facts about Maidan, because ever since November 2013, there has been regular news broadcast, even from Kiev, via satellite TV.

The project of the theatre makers from Kiev ties into the activities of The Royal Court Theatre and the Moscow-based Teatr.doc.³¹ It was the latter one, where Maidan Diaries were premiered within the prestigious Golden Mask Festival, in March 2014. Three months on, in June 2014, the organisers of a foremost Moscow International

³¹ For more theatre projects of this theatre refer to PODMAKOVÁ, Dagmar. The Two Worlds of Documentary Theatre. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2013, Vol. 61, Special Issue, pp.70–84.

Book Fair deleted the dramatised reading of Vorozhbyt's text from the fair's programme.³²

In recent years, several incidents of similar nature have taken place in Russian territory. The contemporary theatre of "Rossiyskaya" Federation, translated into Slovak as Ruská federácia (Russian Federation), includes theatre activities of all the nations of this country, extending across the entirety of Northern Asia and much of Eastern Europe. Given the fact that it is a federalist state, the Russian language is the official language, whereby each of the twenty four republics³³ also uses its native language, which is considered state language in the respective territory. These languages are spoken by a significant part of the population in their respective territories. The languages of the regions recognised by the United Nations mirror their geographic and geopolitical history. They constitute its historical cultural tradition whose component part is also theatre, which is oftentimes very different from Russian theatre. Hence, it is important to grasp the difference between the concepts of Russian and "Rossiyskaya" cultures, the latter referring to the culture of the various nations of the Russian Federation (RF).³⁴ The majority of these regions also have theatres that perform in their respective national language. However, all of them are united by a single, i.e. Russian, language.

A similar situation, though smaller in scale, is true of Slovakia. There are four minority language theatres subsidised from the respective regional budget. Of the two ensembles playing in Hungarian, one operates in southern Slovakia, in Komárno, and the second one in eastern Slovakia, Košice. In this city, the Romany theatre has been active for two decades³⁵ and only a few kilometres away from Košice, in the town of Prešov, there is a theatre currently giving performances in Ruthenian.

The 1990s enhanced the process of the self-identification of cultures across diverse regions in Russia. It no longer holds, at least not in the recent decades of a new millennium, that the centre of novel theatre activity in Russia is bound to be Moscow. A number of (old)new direction personalities of the 21st century are active in other big cities, remote from St. Petersburg or Moscow, such as in Novosibirsk, Omsk,

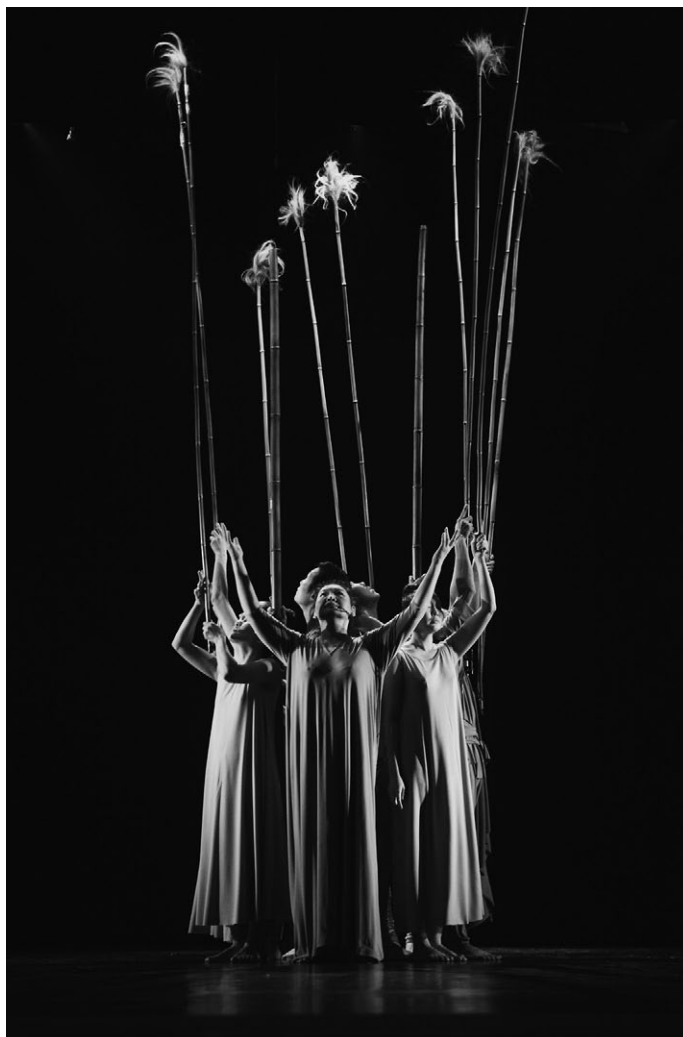
³² Together with two performances for children. For details visit http://culture.lb.ua/news/2014/06/11/269413_knizhnom_festivale_moskve.html.

³³ The Russian Federation comprises 85 republics (entities), including Autonomous Republic Krym and the town Sevastopol in Ukrainian territory, which enjoys a special status of federation.

³⁴ The difference between the two concepts was referred to by the former culture minister of the Russian Federation, theatre scientist Mikhail Shvydkoy, candidate of sciences, when back in 2000, in an interview about Russian theatre, he made a statement that in the past "regional and national identity and the perception of the specificities of a national culture or peculiar types of Russian culture were very strongly manifested". This was also true of nationality republics (for instance, Bashkiria, Tartaria) and of regions (for instance, southern Russia, Krasnodar Krai, the Far East). The Soviet era gave rise to a totalitarian vertical system and a uniform concept of "Soviet" culture and of "Soviet" art. It should be noted that following this generalising concept, the concept of "Rossiyskoe" arts was gradually and persistently enforced throughout the 1990s, whereby it was created through its multinational and regional dimensions. (...) however, one would be inclined to use the term Russian or Bashkir culture rather than "Rossiyskaya" culture. The translation of this concept to English poses big problems. "Russian culture" refers to Slovak "ruská kultúra". However, this is not an equivalent of "rossiyskaya" culture, i.e. the culture of Russia." More PODMAKOVÁ, Dagmar – SHVYDKOY, Mikhail: Spoločný slovanský údel existuje. In *Pravda*, 2000, Annual issue 10, No. 121 (27 May 2000), p. 1., 6.

³⁵ In the 1990s, theatre professionals of different European countries believed there was only one Romany theatre, Teatr Romen, in Moscow.

Nikolai Abramov:
Udagankas. Olonkho
 Theatre, Yakutsk, premiere
 2013. Shot from the
 production. The archives
 of the Golden Mask
 Festival.



Perm, and elsewhere. In Russian theatre, the changing of the generations of theatre makers takes place. A need to respond to what is currently happening and the quest for a new synthetic theatre expression, or, conversely, the comeback of the poor theatre with minimum props, is in the centre of their attention. We are the witnesses of a boom of renowned festivals, such as Baltiyskiy Dom in St. Petersburg, Realny Teatr (Real Theatre) in Yekaterinburg, Prostranstvo Rezhissuri (Space of Directing) in Perm and others. However, among theatre festivals of international renown is The Golden Mask Festival held in Moscow. It is an all-Russian theatre festival/competition³⁶. Its

³⁶ The festival is held annually; typically, the prize awarding ceremony is held in the second or third week of April.

programme is scheduled for three months, from February to April, and includes drama, puppet and music theatrical performances. For instance, the co-called main competition programme of the 21st edition was composed of fifty four productions. The non-competition programme entitled Maska Plus with a brief characteristics "New names – small towns, ethnic theatre, here and now" numbered thirty productions. An art group by the name of Med a prach (Honey and Dust) from Bratislava was included among "ethnic theatre" productions, with its production *Domov Eros Viera* (*Home Eros Faith*).

Component parts of Golden Mask are also projects Children's Weekend and CONTEXT – current foreign productions. For example, the contemporary production of *Tartuffe* directed by Michael Thalheimer at Berlin's Schaubühne theatre was staged with NET festival (Novyi evropejski teatr – New European Theatre) in November 2014. The majority of foreign ensembles from advanced theatrical cultures come to Moscow on the invitation of organisers, following a selection by a committee of experts. The committee is composed of acclaimed Russian critics and theatre scientists.³⁷ The costs associated with the guest performances of the ensembles outside the Russian Federation which participate in the Golden Mask Festival are covered from the budgets under concrete cultural agreements, such as, for instance, from the budget for the Year of Italian or Polish culture.³⁸

In addition, Golden Mask runs a special programme, the so-called Russian Case. It is a selection of the most interesting productions from all over the Russian Federation, with special focus on foreign participants from literally all over the world (typically, there would be around 70 foreign guests invited). The Russian organisers will directly approach picked theatre critics, festival directors, on the basis of reciprocity, translators from and to Russian, experts on Russian theatre. Morning panel discussions on future tendencies, various theatre forms, the role of politics in theatre, the intervention of politics in theatre, the latest trends in individual national theatrical cultures are especially engaging.³⁹

To give an example, in 2014, the curator and the members of the selection committee discussed the problems with *Карамазовы. Фантазии режиссера К. Богомолова на тему романа Ф. Достоевского*/*The Karamazovs (Imaginations of Director Konstantin Bogomolov, based on the novel by F. Dostoyevsky)*, staged by Konstantin Bogomolov at

³⁷ In 2014, SND Drama was to present the production *Rechnitz – Anjel skazy* (*The Exterminating Angel*). The Russian press stated that the theatre cancelled the guest performance due to a sudden illness of the actress Emília Vášáryová. In 20 years of the existence of the festival, this was the first invitation extended to a Slovak theatre to appear at the Golden Mask.

³⁸ Golden Mask organisers, on the motion of Slovak theatre professionals, have declared interest in several productions of Slovak theatres, which were to be included in the 22nd edition of The Golden Mask Festival in 2016. On the basis of reciprocity, the ensembles from the Russian Federation were expected to perform in Slovakia, within the framework of Focus Rusko – Nová dráma 2016 (Focus Russia – New Drama, 2016). However, it turned out that on both sides the major problem was shortage of public funding. The audience in Slovakia, unlike the audiences in Western Europe or in big US cities (Boston, L.A.) will not be able to see theatre projects of the progressive trends in Russian theatre. Conversely, Slovak theatre will remain unknown to the majority of mature Moscow audiences.

³⁹ Working languages are Russian and English. Russian Case is keen to provide translation into English using subtitle editor. The service cannot be always provided, as there is an overlap of theatre performances and the participants have to choose performances they wish to see two months ahead of time. It, too, is a matter of affordability. Therefore, foreign guests who understand Russian have an advantage.



The Karamazovs (Imaginations of Director Konstantin Bogomolov). Moscow Art Theatre, premiere 2013. Shot from the production. The archives of the Golden Mask Festival.

the Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre.⁴⁰ They said that two days before the premiere, the director had informed on Facebook about withdrawing from collaboration on the performance on the grounds of an excessive number of modifications requested by the theatre management. In parallel, he informed of leaving the Moscow Art Theatre altogether. The few lines caused an uproar not only among the theatre makers but also in the media. The information provoked numerous contradictory comments and gave rise to “reliable” information.⁴¹ Eventually, the production of *The Karamazovs* was premiered.

The theatrical performance that ran for almost five hours divided the audience into two camps: one, excited over the image of contemporary world in Bogomolov’s interpretation, while the other group rejected such a world. It is imperative for the viewer to be familiar with the original, otherwise deconstructed text is extremely difficult to follow. The text is re-written, new lines and texts from other works by Dostoyevsky are added. Some male characters are rendered by female actors, while some characters are played only by a single actor. The first and the second acts give an impression of a long exposition. In a great number of scenes the characters would be quietly standing or sitting. Or they would be gossiping away, or, they would be engrossed in a monologue, strictly in the spirit of meditative psychoanalysis. Nikolai

⁴⁰ The possibility to see a production one day before Russian Case was offered by organisers at a time when the majority of participants had already purchased their air tickets. After all, participants that fly to Moscow more frequently could visit the performance on a different occasion.

⁴¹ Only three years earlier, after several re-runs, *Turandot* had been withdrawn from the repertoire of A.S. Pushkin Theatre, following a big scandal.



The Karamazovs (Imaginations of Director Konstantin Bogomolov). Moscow Art Theatre, premiere 2013. Shot from the production. The archives of the Golden Mask Festival.

Berman wrote that through them, “the director offers a model analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov*, he develops perfect narrative lines and fine-tunes psychological subtleties, while working with the actors’ intonation so as to give a natural and yet, deeply emotional, impression.”⁴²

Карамазовы (*The Karamazovs*) by Bogomolov is a satirical narration not just about the Russian way of life but about life per se. It is a mocking image of modern times, through which the director poses indirect questions about the purpose of life, hypocrisy, ethics, cheating, homicide and many others. Indirectly, he parodies Dostoyevsky, as the production is neither about Church nor the State. It mocks playing the good, sincerity, as the world is overwhelmed by violence, hatred and all kind of nonsensical sacrifice. Faith, Jesus and the gospel of love are not points of departure for Bogomolov. He admitted that in this production “he was not interested in philosophical and religious quest”. He underscored that “if you make theatre, you cannot not talk about the present times”.⁴³ The basis of the scenery is a room in a crematorium, in which additional space is gradually set up. A component part of the plot is also the shooting the TV episode Faith, Hope and Love by a Scottish TV channel. Throughout the performance, these shots and the close-ups of actors’ faces are projected on three large screens, together with the director’s comments on the meaning of the text and character impersonation. The graves of the characters in *The Kara-*

⁴²BERMAN, Nikolai. Isniliastashnyi son Alyoshe. In http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2013/11/29/a_5775849.shtml. [cit. 10 November 2015].

⁴³ Visit <http://www.mxat.ru/performance/main-stage/karamazovy/>. [cit. 3 November 2015].



A Life for the Tsar. Teatro Di Capua, premiere 2014. Shot from the production. The archives of the Golden Mask Festival.

mazovs are flush bowls as a memento of filth in which mankind is submerged. One can get rid of it but it leaves behind lingering bad odour.

The Karamazovs are still listed in the repertoire of Moscow Art Theatre. Several months after its premiere, Konstantin Bogomolov left the theatre and joined Lenkom Theatre.

An inspirational theatre beyond the Urals

Considering the response in the media, it might appear that new trends in Russian theatre divide both critics and the audience. This, however, is not so. The audience and professional public are very much interested in documentary drama projects. A good example of that would be the projects that relate to past historical events (script *Жизнь за царя/A Life for the Tsar*, Teatro Di Capua, St. Petersburg) based on the documents of the Russian revolutionary organisation Народная воля/Narodnaya Volya); to the recent past (*Вятлаз/Vyatlag*, Kirov Drama Laboratory and Teatr.doc), reading from a gulag labour camp diary). The best known Teatr.doc also addresses other themes that relate to political issues, such as the public discourse on prison reforms in November 2015. Indirectly, theatre makers picked up on an older project implemented nationally and abroad, on the imprisonment and death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky (*Час восемнадцать/One Hour Eighteen*, based on letters and official documents). Teatr.doc is a multiple Golden Mask laureate. Regardless of that, the theatre is not spared problems due to staging documentary-style plays with politically sensitive themes.



Onegin. Krasny Fakel Theatre, Novosibirsk, premiere 2012. Shot from the production. Photo Igor Ignatov. The archives of the Golden Mask Festival.

Unlike other theatres, a small independent scene has the potential to financially survive and to enjoy freedom of creation. However, the producers of Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* experienced (no)freedom of creation in The Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre. The opera was staged by Timofei Kulyabin, one of the most talented Russian theatre and opera directors. Only two performances were given, shortly after that, the theatre manager was demoted. In early 2015, the Russian Church sued the manager and the director for defaming the image of Jesus Christ. Theatre critics who attended the premiere stood up for the producers and the leading personalities of cultural life followed suite. It was not merely about dropping the production from the repertoire, as was the case in Düsseldorf⁴⁴; at stake was the bringing to court of creative professionals for a product of art, not on the grounds of a financial loss, but rather for affronting Christian symbols through the production of Wagner's opera.

How could this happen? Timofei Kulyabin replaced knight Tannhäuser by the director who worked on a film about Jesus Christ and a song contest held on Wartburg Castle was switched to a film festival. In one scene, a poster containing an advertisement of the awaited film with a naked woman and man resembling Jesus Christ was dropped over the stage. The court adjudicated – much as absurd (for the time being) it may sound in the Central European context – that the production did not contain the image of Jesus Christ from the gospel, which contains a true image of Jesus Christ,

⁴⁴ In 2013, the production of *Tannhäuser* was also removed from the repertoire in Düsseldorf. The director located the plot in Nazi Germany, along with the scenes of the murder of the Jews.



Onegin. Krasny Fakel Theatre, Novosibirsk, premiere 2012. Shot from the production. Photo Igor Ignatov. The archives of the Golden Mask Festival.

while the image in the production was thought up, by which this part of the lawsuit was concluded.⁴⁵

On web portals, a great part of the general public is critical to the intervention of the Church to theatre. They argue that it does not hold conversely, and they call for mutual acceptance. Increasingly, there have been performances, which believers see as affronting the Church. This may be so because the differences between reality and artistic image are effaced. Man is constantly controlled by new media. Increasingly, ugliness, grotesqueness, evil, as images of the past and the future, wrapped in a grand metaphor, have been appearing on stage, mirroring contemporary life. This is a possible interpretation of Kulyabin's production of *Onegin* staged by Krasny Fakel Theatre in Novosibirsk.

The story has not changed, but there are no dance balls or poetic verses. Characters enter the premises of a film studio, to attend an unspecified event. They while away the time indulging in fun activities, which gradually lead to building a plot and the characters of individual protagonists begin to show. Much of Pushkin's text is reproduced and rendered by a professional reciter, it sounds as an echo from which the characters try to escape. The text was significantly abridged by Kulyabin. The main character is a dandy of today. He is rich, spoilt and uses all possible means to demonstrate his haughtiness but also his own image (by reading *Snob* magazine). He is scornful and

⁴⁵ Part of the testimonies of three experts, of the theatre critic Roman Dolzhansky being one of them, has been published in newspapers. Refer to Sud nad „Tangejzerom” [Tannhäuser]. In *Novosibirsk OKOLOteatralny zhurnal* (Новосибирский ОКОЛОтеатральный журнал), 2015, Vol. 15, No. 5, pp. 119–132.



Anton P. Chekhov: *Three Sisters*. Krasny Fakel Theatre, premiere 2014. Shot from the production. Photo Frol Podlesny. The archives of the Real Theatre Festival.

insolent towards his peers in the group, which he shows directly or through blogs on the Internet. The director shows no respect for morality (scenes of making love cuddled under blankets), he lays bare falseness, pretence, naturalness (Tatiana is smoking while writing a letter). All in all, Kulyabin sees young people and their game of life in a positive light, despite the fact that the production underscores the belittling of our belief system and effaces the differences between the will to live and dying of boredom. In the finale, Tatiana does not utter the words of love of Onegin, she receives him coldly, dressed up in an elegant black tailcoat. In vain Onegin keeps asking himself "What have I done wrong?" It is more "theatrical pretence" than sincere interest. The final scene of Onegin's symbolic suicide is not only a multiplication of the nihilism of a young person but also a cry for help. Onegin turns the fan on. A mannikin seated in front of his computer, wrapped in small pieces of burnt paper, is being scattered in the space until there is nothing left of it but a naked skeleton. Such an interpretation and vision of contemporary world is bright despite the bleak prospect. That explains why this version of *Onegin* is featured on the 2014 Golden Mask poster.

Gentle and shy rather than craving for socialising, Timofei Kulyabin turned from a high-spirited *Onegin* to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in Krasny Fakel Theatre.⁴⁶ This time, it was a production without words and sound. The space in the theatre studio facilitates simultaneous watching of what is happening in all the rooms of the Pro-

⁴⁶ The play was premiered in September 2015. A few days on, they gave guest performances at Realny Teatr in Yekaterinburg.



Osvald Zahradnik: *A Solo for the Striking Clock (Sólo pre bicie (hodiny))*. Sverdlovsk State Academic Drama Theatre, Yekaterinburg, premiere 2015. Shot from the production. Theatre archives.

zorov house. Joy, grief, unfulfilled and unrequited love, the dreariness of life – all these emotions are expressed through gestures, facial expressions and sign language. A compact scenic image is created, composed of several atomised images of what is happening in the rooms inside the Prozorov house. In this manner, the author's notes to what is simultaneously happening in other rooms, which the viewer does not see, can be played. Parallel to what is happening on stage the original of Chekhov's text is projected on the screen, in exactly the same form as it was played one hundred years ago in the Moscow Art Theatre.

However, this is not Stanislavski style of acting. The performance of *Three Sisters* in Novosibirsk theatre is a replica of our time. A performance that runs for four hours and a half with a break after each act is a modern mirror image of the time we live now. When lights go flat, after a fire in the third act, the light from cell phones helps the characters find their way around the house. During breaks, they would remain in their acting space, boiling tea, surfing on their cell phones, or just keeping silent. In the 21st century, detached forms of communication have replaced personal interaction (text, photo). Their demonstration of silence is a theatre manifesto⁴⁷, a memento with an unspoken appeal to mankind to regain its self-control...

Although Timofei Kulyabin is only 31 years old, he has worked on several projects that were positively received by both the audience and critique. One of them is the production *Kill*, based on Schiller's play/*Kabale und Liebe*/*Intrigue and Love* (Golden

⁴⁷ The viewer enters and exits via an aisle, passing by actors and props.

Mask 2015). The text was abridged and partly re-written and it contained the fragments of the works of other authors (Dostoyevsky, Nabokov and others). Several scenes with video performance are reminiscent of the images of Romeo Castellucci's self-sacrifice.⁴⁸ Kulyabin, "philosopher" from Novosibirsk, creates his own world of theatre magic. He is especially appealing to young audience, he asks questions and calls upon the audience to react.

A chance for bridging

Contemporary Russian theatre boasts a sufficient number of older and younger resourceful, creative professionals and it would be worthwhile to bring their projects to Slovakia or to the Wiener Festwochen Festival in nearby Vienna. Russian theatre entails a number of conventional theatre performances. Among them is also a new staging of *Sólo pre bicie (hodiny)/A Solo for the Striking Clock* by Osvald Zahradník. In terms of its form and interpretation, the performance of *Solo* on the stage of Sverdlovsk State Academic Drama Theatre, Yekaterinburg, is believed to be traditional. At the Real Theatre Festival, September 2015, even young Russian critics listed it in a group of performances intended for less discriminating viewers.⁴⁹

Ever since 1973, *Sólo pre bicie (hodiny)/A Solo for the Striking Clock* has been a connecting bridge between Russian and Slovak cultures. The play has become known across Russia thanks to a TV recording of the staging by Moscow Art Theatre (1973), featuring prominent Russian actors. Time has come for the Slovak side to leave all bias aside and to extend invitations to first-rate Russian ensembles to come to Slovak festivals and, conversely, to boost the interest of reputable European festivals in the production of Slovak theatres so that Slovak professional theatre is more known in Europe, 95 years after it was established.

The paper was developed within the framework of the grant project VEGA 2/0070/13.

Translated by Mária Švecová

⁴⁸ For more refer to programme of Golden Mask Festival. Moscow, 2015, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Premiered in June 2015. The organisers featured *Solo* on the poster to Real Theatre Festival 2015, Yekaterinburg.