
ONE-ACT OPERAS BY RICHARD STRAUSS AND THEIR SLOVAK INTERPRETATIVE TRADITION

MICHAELA MOJŽIŠOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava

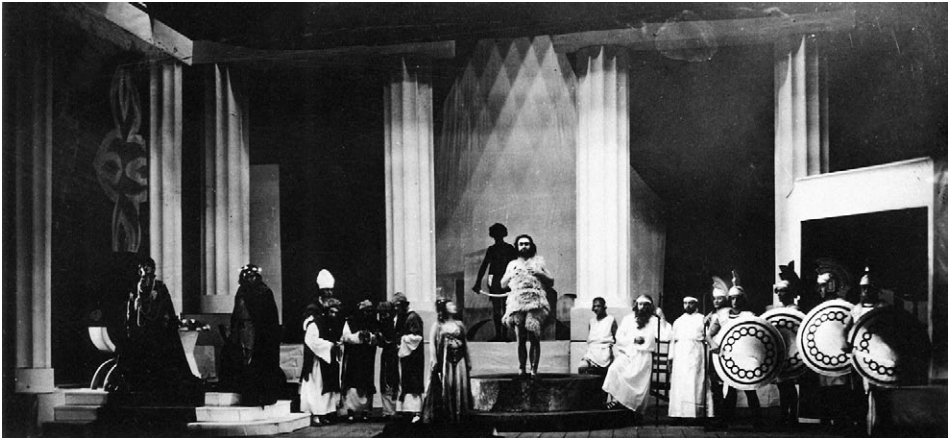
Abstract: The paper focuses on the interpretative tradition of *Salome* and *Elektra*, operas in one-act by Richard Strauss, in Slovak opera theatre. In the interwar period of the Slovak National Theatre the professional activity of conductor Karel Nedbal deserves particular attention. He is to be given credit for having the most profound impact on the shaping of Straussian interpretative style. On the verge of the 1970s and 1980s, expressive productions directed by Miroslav Fischer constituted a platform for the emergence of new tendencies in modern drama. The final part of the paper is dedicated to the most recent Bratislava production directed by the German guest director Hans-Joachim Ruckhäberle. The production is viewed in juxtaposition with the production performed in Prague which was staged only a little earlier than its Bratislava counterpart. The production in Prague is the outcome of the work of a Polish-Slovak creative team of theatre professionals, director Mariusz Treliński and stage designer Boris Kudlička.

Keywords: Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, *Salome*, Karel Nedbal, Miroslav Fischer, Hans-Joachim Ruckhäberle, Mariusz Treliński, Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, the National Theatre Opera in Prague

Building an interpretative style in the era of Karel Nedbal

In any historical period, the staging of contemporary drama production is believed to be among the basic criteria of cutting-edge and conversant dramaturgy. The 20th century operatic literature, from the quantitative point of view, played an important role in the Slovak National Theatre (Slovenské národné divadlo, abbr. SND) of the interwar period. A qualitative analysis has also surfaced a second fact, i.e. only certain works were listed in the core opera repertoire (while quite a number of them were premiered in the SND), which is referred to as the 20th century classics. The creation of Richard Strauss can be listed among the dramaturgical priorities of Karel Nedbal alongside the works of Leoš Janáček, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Bedřich Smetana. In his capacity of theatre director (1928–1938), Nedbal staged four out of fifteen opera opuses by Strauss: *Elektra* (12 October 1928), *Salome* (13 February 1930), *Ariadne on Naxos* (12 December 1931) and *Der Rosenkavalier* (19 December 1936). His dramaturgical preference has also been upheld by the history of international repertoire practice: the four operas mentioned above are among the most frequently staged works by Strauss, with *Salome* and *Elektra* being on the top of the list. They are viewed more favourably by theatre professionals for their concentrated musical and theatrical form (which is especially vital for contemporary opera theatre) and for the universality of themes which leaves space for diverse interpretation of staging.

Of the above opera opuses, the last two occupy a central position in Strauss' creation. *Salome* (1905), composed to the German translation of Oscar Wilde's play of



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Opera SND, premiered on 13 February 1930. Direction Bohuš Vilím, conducted by Karel Nedbal. Photo of Theatre Institute Archives.

identical name and *Elektra* (1909), to the libretto of Hugo von Hofmannsthal which was his own adaptation of Sofokles' *Elektra*, are among the pioneer examples of the literary opera genre (Literaturoper¹). In them, the composer made use of extreme composition means to musically express eruptive narration and to portray psychologically intricate characters: he moves on the edge of atonality and employs massive, sophisticated and provocatively colourful instrumentation and escalates the expression to a maximum dramatic intensity. They were a big success despite their unconventional nature at the time when they were composed, attacking the limits of the perception of the period audience operas. Before long, they were staged by tens of leading operatic scenes across Europe and in the USA and were synonymous with operatic modernism.

Both one-act operas, bordering on expressionism by their style, are symphonic operas: their particularly exacting and quantitatively augmented orchestral parts are the carriers of a music and drama idea. Therefore, it is no surprise that the operas were found attractive by Karel Nedbal, who was a professionally competent and knowledgeable conductor. His ambitions could not even be halted by the size of the orchestra of the SND, which had fewer musicians than prescribed by Richard Strauss scores. As for both Slovak premieres, critique placed Nedbal's music production and the performance of the orchestra above other elements of the performance. In *Elektra* "he fine-tuned the orchestra to the smallest detail possible; the individual musicians excelled in knotty passages"², in *Salome* "even with a limited range of musical instruments in his orchestra he was able to bring out all strengths of the master's concept

¹ The librettos of operas that belong to Literaturoper had been written before drama texts were used and the latter were only slightly modified. Alongside one-act operas by Strauss this genre, which is typical of the 20th century opera, includes *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy, *Jenůfa* by Leoš Janáček, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* by Alban Berg and others.

²-cht-. [Jindřich Květ]. Richard Strauss: „Elektra“. In *Robotnícké noviny*, Volume 25, No. 234, p. 4, 15 October 1928.

Richard Strauss: *Elektra*.
Ludovika Dubovská-Svobodová
as Elektra. Opera SND, premiered
on 16 May 1943. Direction Bohuš
Vilím, conducted by Josef
Vincourek. Photo
of Theatre Institute Archives.



(...) he demonstrated that the density of harmony and the vibrance of Straussian instrumentation can also be expressed with a limited number of musical instruments if a production is taken up by a professional of K. Nedbal's rank"³.

Nedbal's proficiency in such an exacting style was also highly rated by the composer Richard Strauss, who in Bratislava in January 1929 conducted the reruns of *Elektra* and of the older *Rosenkavalier* staged by Oskar Nedbal. The visit of an artist of international renown received great attention and rehearsals and performance critique were given an extensive media coverage. In his memoirs, Karel Nedbal dedicated an emotional part to Strauss as a guest conductor. He took pride in the master's words of praise that were addressed to the orchestra: "With the rehearsal in full swing, he turned to me in the auditorium, talking his German that smelled after Bavarian forests: 'How did you do it? I don't even have to rehearse!'"⁴

After *Elektra* was premiered, the production received an exceptionally positive feedback from the critique not only thanks to a breathtaking monumental work and Nedbal's elaborate and competent musical production and solo performances⁵, but

³ df. Richard Strauss: Salome. In *Národní denník*, Volume 9, No. 41, p. 3, 19 February 1930.

⁴ NEDBAL, Karel. *Půl století s českou operou*. Praha : Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění, 1959, p. 260.

⁵ Dobřena Šimánová (*Elektra*), Eva Hadrabová (*Chrysothemis*), Mária Peršlová (*Clytemnestra*), Gejza Fišer (*Orestes*), Janko Blaho (*Aegisthus*) a others.

also to a unique harmonisation of the individual performance elements. Judging by the statements on the quality of direction which are quite elaborate and engaged considering the time when they were made, *Elektra* was among the best direction accomplishments of Bohuš Vilím in Bratislava. In collaboration with the set designer Ján Ladvenica “they had their own way, very different from stereotyped practices: their scene had lightness, grandeur, tragic sternness (...) lights were used effectively and with a stunning success. Their scene was able to escalate thick atmosphere and enhance a tragic line. Vilím worked together with every individual and his or her body while being conscious of music.”⁶ The work of set designer and painter Ján Ladvenica is noted for its distinct colours and lavish staging. He designed a grandiose and airy ancient-style stage for *Elektra*. The use of colour-toned light to set the mood on the stage was a novel concept and judging by reviews, it played a crucial role in the creation of an evocative mood of the production. It was not common in period operatic productions to have the director work with elaborate and slightly stylized guidance of characters. It is obvious that the staging of *Elektra* was treated with utmost care.

The first staging of *Salome* in Bratislava in 1930 was not an overwhelming success which was largely attributable to a rather unfortunate casting of the guest soprano Božena Vaněčkova-Exnerová in the main role. Critics claimed that her subtle and non-assertive voice and almost no proficiency when it came to acting and movement had a significant impact on the effect of the opera which was dependent on the performance of the protagonist of *Salome*. This interpretative argument was used, among others, by the opera critic Jindřich Květ, to question the staging of the opera: “Staging *Salome* after *Elektra* and *Rosenkavalier* is a big luxury for a theatre which is given a unique role of the Slovak National Theatre [i.e. of a national scene, M. M]. The luxury becomes even greater when a theatre does not currently have a single female singer who could guarantee an acceptable performance of the lead role. It is unforgivable when a guest must be engaged who, as it turns out, is unable to meet the rudimentary requirements of such a strenuous role.”⁷ Květ who had been very enthusiastic about the staging of *Elektra* two years earlier, was the only critic questioning the appropriateness of the production on aesthetic grounds: “Strauss’ *Salome* reflects an irritating artificiality of a time from 25 years ago. (...) Irritating sensitisation seemed to have been the only way to new art. (...) Today, we view Wilde’s tragedy from a great distance, it is alien to us and we have a hard time to understand what made it so special that the world developed an infatuation for it.” Květ believes that the aesthetics and ideology dichotomy between a time of writing the tragedy and a time of its current staging in the SND is among the reasons of a lukewarm reception of *Salome* by the audiences: “It appears that the audiences of our days desire brighter, sunnier works that throw cheerful light on the challenges of everyday life. A work that exacerbates our senses and nerves in a sick way will be shunned with covert fear. Indeed, Strauss’ *Salome* is a child of the pre-war period of a deterrent nature!”⁸ Not much can be learnt from period reviews about Bohuš Vilím’s direction and Ján

⁶ -cht-. [Jindřich Květ]. Richard Strauss: „Elektra“. In *Robotnicke noviny*, Volume 25, No. 234, p. 4, 15 October 1928.

⁷ -cht-. [Jindřich Květ]. Richard Strauss: *Salome*. In *Robotnicke noviny*, Volume 27, No. 39, p. 4, 16 February 1930.

⁸ Ibid.



Richard Strauss: *Elektra*. Opera SND, premiered on 16 May 1943. Direction Bohuř Vilím, conducted by Josef Vincourek. Photo of Theatre Institute Archives.

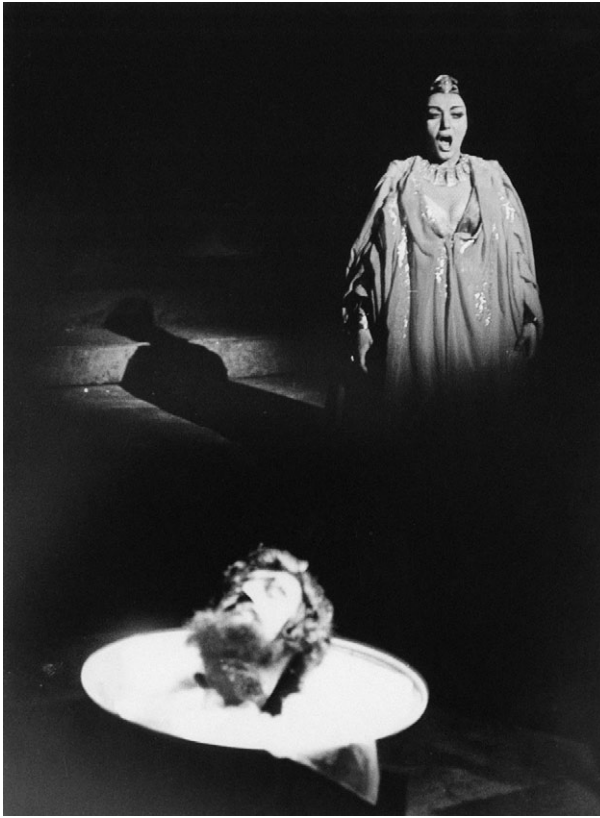
Ladvenica's scenery localising the plot on the terrace of a palace with four ancient columns. It appears that it was a less impressive production than that of *Elektra*: "As for direction and scenery, that did the job, but what about the production as a whole? Neither Karel Nedbal nor Bohuř Vilím managed to produce a performance anywhere close to *Elektra*. They are not at fault: their conscientious preparation was well visible. Apparently, the whole ensemble was nervous about the main protagonist, for whom we were very sorry."⁹

Miroslav Fischer and his expressive directions

The production of *Elektra* on the stage of the SND (16 May 1943) during World War II was a great challenge for the emerging Slovak ensemble¹⁰ as it was partly beyond its interpretative potential. Josef Vincourek, director of the opera ensemble, received a favourable review for his dramaturgical courage and critique praised the good work of the orchestra. However, the casting of a young sopranoist Ludvika Dubovská-Svobodová in the exacting lead role was considered a risky play with a prospective young voice. Bohuř Vilím who stood behind the previous production of *Elektra* in 1928, was past his creative apex in the 1940s and director's treatment

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ After the disintegration of the first Czechoslovak Republic and a successive, largely involuntary, leave of the majority of Czech artists from the SND (including Karel Nedbal) in autumn 1938 and January 1939, the opera ensemble and all its artistic units had to be created anew.



Richard Strauss: *Salome*.
 Elena Kittnarová as Salome.
 Opera SND, premiered on 21 May
 1976. Direction Miroslav Fischer,
 conducted by Gerhard Auer.
 Photo by Jozef Vavro.
 Theatre Institute Archives.

of the production was superficial and unimaginative. The scenery by Jozef Vecsei was a more attractive component of the production: the dynamism of narration was enhanced by a diverse horizontal and vertical articulation of the scene and the vivid masks and costumes of Elektra and Chrysothemis accentuated the antagonism of the two characters.

Half a century lapsed before *Salome* and *Elektra* appeared on the stage again, on the verge of the 1970s and 1980s. Much like in Nedbal's era, they were staged in quick succession and with a similar direction and visual poetics. The productions by Bohuš Vilím and Ján Ladvenica mounted on the verge of the 1920s and 1930s were examples of embellished and visually spectacular theatre. Fifty years on, *Salome* and *Elektra* were staged under the direction of Miroslav Fischer, who had a propensity for a hearty and psychologically elaborate stage realism.

In *Salome* (21 May 1976), Fischer followed the logics of the story rather than its symbolism and enhanced the story and its atmosphere. The stage form was determined by the spectacular scene by Pavel M. Gábor. It created an impression of a grandiose space of Herodes' residence whose gigantic stone wall towered sky-high above the terrain. Ropes hung down the wall to open up a well (Iocanaan's prison), whereby the illusion of abysmal depth of the space was accentuated by a long rope ladder. The visual sensuality of the production was enhanced by elaborate light di-

Richard Strauss: *Salome*.
 Juraj Omiščenko as Iocanaan.
 Opera SND, premiered on 21 May
 1976. Direction Miroslav Fischer,
 conducted by Gerhard Auer.
 Photo by Jozef Vavro.
 Theatre Institute Archives.



rection: palpable change in the mood of the orchestra corresponded with the change in the combination of light tones. There were also several light sources mounted on the stage which was not a common procedure in the then Slovak opera production practice. This visually appealing solution was also facilitated by modern technology: during the refurbishment of the historical building of the SND (1969–1972), several improvements were made including a modern lighting system. In *Salome*, *Dance of the Seven Veils* was rendered in a highly innovative fashion: both alternating leading actresses danced without a stunt double¹¹ (until then, it had been common in the European stage practice to use a female stunt dancer). This solution enhanced the realistic power of Fischer's production and critic Igor Vajda called it "a unique symphony of light, forms, movement and music"¹².

Karel Nedbal's departure from the SND in 1938 discontinued the systematically cultivated Straussian tradition. Four decades on there was no clear vision of the staging ideal in Slovakia to be shared by theatre makers, performers, the audiences and critics who could not travel abroad freely to see opera productions. In case of *Salome* the hitch was more visible. The problematic points were the musical component

¹¹ Elena Kittnarová and Sidónia Haljáková alternated in the part of Salome.

¹² VAJDA, Igor. *Udalosť sezóny*. In *Film a divadlo*, Volume 20, 13 July 1976.



Richard Strauss: *Elektra*. Juraj Hrubant as Orestes and Elena Kittnarová as Elektra. Opera SND, premiered on 4 October 1980. Direction Miroslav Fischer, conducted by Tibor Frešo. Photo by Jozef Vavro. Theatre Institute Archives.

which did not adequately meet the criteria of Straussian musical style and partly inappropriate casting in demanding lead roles. Elena Kittnarová, the lead character, is to be given credit for the production eventually receiving positive reviews from critics. Four years on, this versatile actress and stunning singer with cultivated movements asserted herself as an artist predestined for Straussian repertoire in the lead role of *Elektra* (4 October 1980). In *Elektra* the ensemble built on its prior experience with performance styles it had gained while working on the exacting production of *Salome*. This was reflected in a symphonically compact and soundwise highly expressive musical production by Tibor Frešo which was based on a chamber version of Strauss' score (initially, *Elektra* was composed for an orchestra with 120 musical instruments). Musical production was given particular attention (it took more than a year to prepare it) and it had cast of singers who met international quality standards¹³.

The Slovak National Theatre, the foremost national scene, included two works in its repertoire in quick succession which "are, no doubt, an evidence of the decadent world of Art Nouveau"¹⁴ as stated by an acclaimed music critic Marián Jurík. The fact raised questions about the motives of dramaturgy. Apparently, such a dispute was

¹³ Elena Kittnarová (*Elektra*), Anna Starostová (*Chrysothemis*), Oľga Hanáková (*Clytemnestra*), Juraj Hrubant (*Orestes*), Gustáv Papp (*Aigisthos*).

¹⁴ JURÍK, Marián. Festival *Elektra*. In *Večerník*, 3 November 1980.

expected and the programme booklet to *Elektra* quoted the paper by East German musicologist Ernst Krause entitled *Amazing Antiquity*, which granted legitimacy to the dramaturgic choice that was compatible with the left-wing ideology of the State: "Was this ghastly charming of antiquity not just a gown of an artist of our century to cover up grim reflections on the palpable real world? In *Elektra* and *Salome* Strauss opted for a sophisticated use of the means of expression of decadence on the operatic scene to bring out the negative societal phenomena of our time. Although he could not fully grasp man's plight in bourgeois society, he was able to see the eroding roots of an era marked by empty pathos, sensationalism and the conflicting spirit of Art Nouveau. That which holds true and reigns today, that which commits evil, will at some point cease to exist – that is the meaning of a sombre, fiendish and bloody one-act tragedy by Hugo von Hofmannstahl and his soul mate Richard Strauss."¹⁵

Strauss' score is not so much about writing music to the ancient tragedy by Sophocles as it is about setting to music Hofmannstahl's psychologising text. Director Miroslav Fischer put up his production in identical spirit. His coarse and expressive concept was based on pertinent typology and accurate acting guidance and it dynamised what was happening on stage while leaving no room for blind spots. The stage form of *Elektra* followed up on an earlier production of *Salome*: the spectacular stage by the guest creative artist Bernd Leistner from East Germany made use of the entire space of the stage, of its height, width and depth and also illumination played a central role. The stage and costumes were a pertinent reflection of the grimness of *Elektra*'s inner world: grey and black humid-looking dark walls and dull and murky setting were enhanced by a natural glow of torches which, to a large extent, replaced theatrical illumination. Leistner's theatre costumes were used as an element of characterisation, *Elektra*'s black leather and tattered garment educed a dark side of her character and desire for revenge; a light garment in pastel colours accentuated the feminine softness of Chrysothemis, while the gown of sinful and mentally and physically deteriorating Clytemnestra was notoriously predominated by red colour. Three women of singular innate characters were distinctive not only by the characteristic colours and styles of their costumes but also by a peculiar colour and expressive contrast of their voices: expressive and dramatic soprano and harrowing acting technique of Elena Kittnarová (*Elektra*), the beaming soprano and cultivated classical singing of Anna Starostová (*Chrysothemis*) and the vocal characterisation mastery of Oľga Hanáková (*Clytemnestra*).

Direction concept was based on conviction that adapted historical and mythological theme entails plot progression along with a deep insight in man's inner world, in the appalling depth of human passions, their fatality and aberrance. "The sick inner world of Man is not a beautiful sight and yet, a look deep inside indicates a need to return to a healthy world. As seen throughout the entire tragic poem about *Elektra*, parts of a healthy world eventually find their way to the surface even when entrapped in the darkness of human desires and passions."¹⁶ In Fischer's approach the requirement of Krause "to place negative social phenomena in the angle of view of

¹⁵ KRAUSE, Ernst. *Amazing Antiquity*. In STRAUSS, Richard. *Elektra*. Bratislava : SND, 1980. Programme booklet.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*



Richard Strauss: *Elektra*. Anna Starostová as Chrysothemis. Opera SND, premiered on 4 October 1980. Direction Miroslav Fischer, conducted by Tibor Frešo. Photo by Jozef Vavro. Theatre Institute Archives.

modern operatic stage¹⁷ was reflected in a theatrically sanctified way.

This outstanding production of *Elektra* was characterised by the critic Zuzana Marczellová as a “corporeal interpretation of the score”¹⁸. Marián Jurík predicted that “it is bound to play a crucial role in the history of the opera of the SND and it will be among its extraordinary artistic initiatives”¹⁹. History corroborated his words: today, *Elektra* is among the foremost SND productions of the last third of the 20th century.

Salome today: two case studies of pathological family relationships

On the verge of the 1970s and 1980s, after the two outstanding productions, there followed a longer pause in the staging of Straussian repertoire in the SND. Another work by Richard Strauss, the filigree *Ariadne on Naxos*, was premiered on 27 April 2007. Seven years later, on 14 November 2014, *Salome* was put back in the repertoire. This happened at a time when the musical and theatre world marked the 150th an-

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ MARCZELLOVÁ, Zuzana. *Elektra*. In *Hudobný život*, 1980, Volume 12, No. 20, p. 4.

¹⁹ JURÍK, Marián. *Festival Elektra*. In *Večerník*, 3 November 1980.

niversary of the composer's birth and his creation was more frequently staged on international operatic scenes. The Prague National Theatre staged *Salome* a little earlier than the SND in Bratislava (23 October 2014).²⁰ Synchronised timing of dramaturgy and the fact that the Prague production was created by director Mariusz Treliński and set designer Boris Kudlička who only a few years earlier had staged Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (2009), one of the most significant productions of the post-November history of the SND, is an inspiration for comparing both staging concepts.²¹

Slavomír Jakubek, dramaturge of the SND, posed a provocative question in the programme booklet to Bratislava *Salome*: Is there anything we have in common with the magical fin de siècle period from more than a century back? With that very period in which there is "no more to say, all is eaten and drunk, with barbaric hoards on the horizon who cannot be stopped by a sick society. Nothing can be done (as Huysmans would put it), but to succumb to the sensuous lust of hypersensitised and exacerbatable fantasy and to make a list of the treasures of art and to rummage with tired hands through the gems amassed by the generations before us."²² The guest German director Hans-Joachim Ruckhäberle believed that during the time that separated the world premiere in Dresden (1905) from the present-day first night in Bratislava, decadence and the neuroses of society progressed to a higher stage: "Man is trapped in a vicious circle of his individuality, with no compassion for others, with a need to constantly and in every situation to draw attention upon himself."²³ Ruckhäberle's *Salome* is portrayed along these lines: she is self-centred, spoilt and cruel. Mariusz Treliński who put on Prague production was more lenient toward the main character. By a concept motivated by intimacy he ventured to go deep in her sore soul: "I understand the story as an account of a psychological trauma and anxieties of a woman who was deeply hurt in her childhood."²⁴ Despite apparent differences, the eccentric egotist in Bratislava and the meek introvert in Prague had more in common than would appear, at first glance. Both of them were emotionally unbalanced products of a sick partner relationship and a pathological parental upbringing was reflected in the behaviour of both of them.

Bratislava production is mounted on a neutral and allusive scene (set designers Helmut Staubach and Uwe Kuckertz) without a clear geographic or period definition. The scene is dominated by the sculpture of the moon (the original play by Wilde is pervaded by its symbolism, much like Strauss' score) and by a yellow wall, the metaphor of a golden cage, from which *Salome* tries to escape. The ghetto was built by her stepfather Herod, a distraught rich man, with body guards and bootlickers keeping him company. *Salome*'s mother is not much of a support to her, as Herodias uses her daughter to control and humiliate her spouse. *Salome* is a spoilt girl expecting

²⁰ While in Bratislava this was only a third staging of the opera, in Prague it was the twelfth mounting of the production since its Prague première in Neues Deutsches Theater (1906), which was also the first appearance of *Salome* in the territory of Austria-Hungary.

²¹ Both productions are included in their current repertoire.

²² The idea from Paul Verlaine's poem *Lassitude* (1883) is quoted by Umberto Eco in *Dejiny ošklivosti (On Ugliness)*. In STRAUSS, Richard. *Salome*, Bratislava: SND, 2014, p. 41. Programme booklet.

²³ Hans-Joachim Ruckhäberle: "The secret of love is greater than the secret of death". Keywords to the production. In STRAUSS, Richard. *Salome*, Bratislava : SND, 2014, p. 30. Programme booklet.

²⁴ Bez vteřiny oddechu (Without a second of rest). On *Salome* with Mariusz Treliński, interview by Piotr Gruszczyński. In STRAUSS, Richard. *Salome*, Praha : ND, 2014, p. 30. Programme booklet.



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Jan Vacík as Herodes and Jolana Fogašová as Salome. Opera SND, premiered on 14 November 2014. Direction Hans Joachim Ruckhäberle, conducted by Friedrich Haider. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

to get anything she can think of. Why, then, not get a kiss from the prophet of God? Thanks to her singing and acting capabilities, this concept of the lead character was best rendered by Jolana Fogašová, a worthy successor to Straussian performer Elena Kittnarová.

Dance (or, rather, movement pantomime), by which Salome asks for the prophet's head from her stepfather, evokes a narcissistic game of a pubescent, styling herself as a self-assured beauty with the looks of Amy Winehouse. Bratislava choreography of the *Dance of the Seven Veils* is in full concord with the composer's interpretation of the scene. Strauss in his memoirs refers to sophisticated simplicity and movement rudimentariness – after all, the dancer is a virgin of royal descent. There are no lascivious gestures or rousing movements, it is more walk than dance, Salome puts on rather than takes off her garment (veils). Her stepfather looks like a person craving a bite of his stepdaughter rather than someone who wants to have sex with her. After a short dance together the viewer almost feels sorry for this blissful madman. When a glass of champagne that Salome offers for toast ends up in his face, Herod puts on an ecstatic smile of a satiated gourmet.

After Salome gets Iocanaan's head from Herod, the parents, seated at the table, observe their daughter caressing the prophet's torso. The scene is evocative of a picturesque horror telenovela: disgusted stepfather cups his head and her mother slowly realizes that her daughter is completely out of her control. What happened was not motivated by the loyalty of Salome helping Herodias to fight her hated husband. Her daughter is driven by her own desire to flee and to reach out for something new and liberating. The final monologue, when Salome sings over the head of dead Iocanaan,



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Jolana Fogašová as Salome and Pavol Remenár as Iocanaan. Opera SND, premiered on 14 November 2014. Direction Hans Joachim Ruckhäberle, conducted by Friedrich Haider. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The archives of the Slovak National Theatre.

blends the tones of victory, realised loved and broken soul. The director's message is clear: Once we get something we have craved for we often remain empty inside. In contemporary (and not only Slovak) opera theatre are not many productions that would communicate the main idea in a legible way, while observing exacting production ambitions and without outrunning the taste of the audience.

Aside from quality production and outstanding acting and singing the dramaturgic choice was legitimised by the music production of the chief conductor of the SND Friedrich Haider. Although inexperienced in expressive style, the SND orchestra successfully coped with the technical and expression criteria of Straussian score full of sophisticated and rich chromaticism which perceives an instrumental body as an autonomous multi-colour vehicle that captures the inner world of characters and at the same time "visualises" the story. This staging of *Salome* at the SND was a production worth exporting in all its artistic merits.

The musical component of Prague production did not reach the level of its Bratislava counterpart. As is often the case of productions which are directed by theatre professionals applying the theatre and acting criteria of Mariusz Treliński, the scene concept caught more attention than music production. The cast in Prague was determined by the type and acting authenticity of protagonists (Gun-Brit Barkmin as Salome, Jacek Laszczkowski as Herod and others), which superseded the natural vocal predisposition of performers. Their voices lacked adequate dramatic potential to be heard over a robust sound of the orchestra. It was conducted by Heiko Mathias Förster and the orchestra gave dense sound which lacked greater differentiation and subtly modelled chromaticism.



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Gun-Brit Barkmin (Salome). Prague National Theatre, premiered on 23 October 2014. Direction Mariusz Trelieński, conducted by Heiko Mathias Förster. Photo by Ilona Sochorová. The archives of the National Theatre Prague.

The remarkability of Trelieński's directing and dramaturgical concept lies in the bringing out of new moments that are inherently contained in the story. The director exposed Strauss' mentally torn main character to a meticulous psychoanalysis. The score allows for such an approach: expressive musical means in their own right create a plastic psychogram of opera characters. Trelieński refuses to look at Salome with the eyes of men who wrote the work "as a story of a woman who threatens them, who ascertains misogynistic theories that woman is the embodiment of evil". In his view, "the woman carries suffering on her, a thorn she tries to heal, however, her action runs counter to the world and to herself"²⁵.

While Ruckhäberle's production in Bratislava has no localised temporal span, as if outside any fixed time, the producers of *Salome* in Prague situated her in the comfort of a modern apartment. Herod is a repulsive tyrannizer who mistreats his bulimic wife Herodias and sexually abuses his stepdaughter Salome. Iocanaan never makes it onto the stage. The prophet is a product of the girl's oversensitised fantasy materialised in the figure of a naked man and the performer sings his part in the orchestra pit. The unravelment of a family drama comes with the *Dance of the Seven Veils*. A grained black-and-white picture forebodes retrospective narration and sharp light cuts produce an effect of film clips. The director and the choreographer worked with number symbolism: Salome's hurt soul gets rid of pain in seven short scenes. Even with the absence of naturalistic details they give a shattering account of Herod's incestuous violence against his stepdaughter.

²⁵ Ibid.

In the final scenic image, in which Salome is smoking and talking to the prophet's head, her parents enter the room. They wear the same garments as they did in the introductory banquet. The time loop closes up. "Kill the woman", says the stepfather, but nothing happens. Nothing has to happen: the soul of his stepdaughter has long been dead through fault of his own.

Among the substantial innovative principles contributing to an intensive portrayal of the psychology of characters in the one-act operas by Richard Strauss was the consistency of Aristotelian unity of narration and time. Such compression is enormous in *Salome*. Treliński's Prague production suppresses the above feature upfront: narration in the *Dance of the Seven Veils* goes back in time, the vision of the hero's own death in the finale anticipates the future and the closing up of the time loop in the last scenic image effaces any boundaries left between fiction and reality. On the other hand, derangement, pain a psychical lability of Salome are present "here and now", although they stem from the past and their consequences have future implications. Treliński's production aroused controversial reactions (Czech and Slovak critique oscillated between "definitely yes" and "definitely no"), however, given a bold and theatrically well-founded view of a theatrical work, it may be included among reference authors' interpretations.

Conclusion

Ever since they were composed up until now, the works by Richard Strauss have been a solid part of the repertoire of international operatic scenes. However, the so-called 20th century classics has never enjoyed a strong position in the Slovak National Theatre. The Bratislava audiences have always been noted for their conservatism and a natural propensity for romantic Romanesque opera. Although the dramaturgic span has not gone outside four most popular Strauss' works in almost one hundred years of the existence of the SND, the uniqueness of individual productions gives us the right to conclude that there have been signs of Straussian interpretative tradition present in the SND.

This is especially true of the pre-war era of the SND under Karel Nedbal's management (1928–1938) who, by systematically staging Richard Strauss' operas (*Salome*, *Elektra*, *Ariadne on Naxos*, *Der Rosenkavalier*), tied into the tradition started by his predecessor Oskar Nedbal, conductor and composer of international renown. The stagings by Karel Nedbal were characterised by an exceptional sense of the exacting Straussian musical style and the capacity to motivate the Bratislava orchestra to more than average performance, which was even appreciated by the composer Richard Strauss who performed there as a guest conductor in January 1929. The post-war period ushered in the tabooisation of German opera, including the works by Richard Strauss. A more marked effort to tie into the discontinued tradition is linked to the verge of the 1970s and the 1980s, specifically to evocative realistic productions of *Salome* and *Elektra* directed by Miroslav Fischer. Just as Karel Nedbal relied on a technically skilled orchestra and its great style of playing, Miroslav Fischer, among other things, benefited from the presence of an outstanding Straussian performer, the dramatic soprano Elena Kittnarová. Fischer's productions were staged one after the other (*Elektra* was premiered right after dernière *Salome*) and together, they have had 46 reruns, i.e. the SND ensemble and the audiences were exposed to Strauss' creation for

eight consecutive years (1976–1984). The most recent production of Strauss' operas is *Salome* staged by the SND in 2014, in which an outstanding music production by the Principal Conductor and Opera Director Friedrich Haider and a convincing performance of the lead character Jolana Fogašová were combined and enhanced by a deep production narrative by the guest German director Hans-Joachim Ruckhäberle.

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

Translated by Mária Švecová