
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SLOVAK PROFESSIONAL ACTING (The Marška experiment)

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In February 1921 Ján Borodáč, a student of conservatory of dramatic arts, approached Vavro Šrobár, who was a member of parliament, government minister and the chairman of the Slovak National Theatre Association, offering to contribute toward establishing a new drama company which he thought could “be founded as nomadic, solely dramatic, ‘promotional company’”.¹ He informed Šrobár that there were three Slovaks at the Prague Conservatory (“Hana Styková, Oľga Borodáčová and me”).² While he was to graduate that year, both women were willing to quit school and alongside him were prepared to “study and work in [their] given specialisation in the real world, and they want to ask for acting engagements and join a promotional company.”³ He also said that Karel Balák, Jaroslav Tumlíř and Mária Hámová, among others, were interested in being part of a new ensemble and that “they can and want to perform in Slovak because just last year I was rehearsing Slovak plays with them when we were rehearsing in Slovakia over the holidays.”⁴

Borodáč was not the only one wondering how to help the Slovak National Theatre overcome the problems resulting from the artificial implantation of Czech theatre into Slovak culture. Jiří Mahen was also convinced that “the Slovak National Theatre should perform among Slovaks and in Slovak towns, in other words, in the countryside,” and he further stated that a nomadic drama company should be established “whose members could perfectly master the Slovak language.”⁵ It is therefore quite remarkable that the formation of the Rural Drama Company of the Slovak National Theatre (Vidiecka činoherná spoločnosť SND), generally known as Marška, did not become a topic of discussion of the Slovak National Theatre Association, which as the holder of the professional theatre licence in Slovakia should probably have looked into such a substantial activity. The establishment of this “second drama company” was the individual (in contemporary language, the executive) decision of the theatre

¹ Ján Borodáč in a letter to Vavro Šrobár from 21 February 1921. In LAJCHA, Ladislav. *Zápas o zmysel a podobu SND I.-II.* Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2000, p. 211.

² Ibid, p. 211. It is interesting that Borodáč lists Oľga Országhová as “Borodáčová”, although, as he says on page 90 in *Spomienky (Memoirs)*, he proposed to her only after the end of the 1921/22 season and the dissolution of Marška. Their wedding took place on 4 October 1922 in Vrútky. Hypothetically, we can assume that the Borodács formally sealed their relationship in Prague with a civil ceremony and affirmed it with a religious ceremony in 1922. The explanation that Borodáč only “made a mistake” in such an important document as a letter to Šrobár is highly unlikely.

³ Ibid, p. 212.

⁴ Ibid, p. 212.

⁵ ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. *Galejnícke obrazy z hereckej galérie.* In ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. *Prví a prvoradi (herci SND).* Bratislava : Tália-press, 1993, p. 13.

company's manager Bedřich Jeřábek, who, however, as early as 26 September 1921 had stated in a report to the Slovak National Theatre Association that:

Our rural theatre company, which should start operating on 1 October in Prešov has nothing but its members. It does not have any furniture; it does not have any props, scenery or costumes. Just to make the performances of this ensemble possible, I have temporarily offered my own theatre inventory, which will suffer tremendously due to the constant relocations between Bratislava and the places of the theatre company's activity. In addition, local performances will be in jeopardy if our costumes are not delivered on time.⁶

The Rural Drama Company of the Slovak National Theatre – which was the official name of the ensemble, although on playbills only the Slovak National Theatre (as SND or SND II) was mentioned – was not formed as a Slovak ensemble or as an ensemble promoting the Slovak National Theatre. In the literary magazine *Slovenské pohľady*, J. Belnay voiced his serious reservations about the quality of the plays, and L. Čavojský observed that “unlike Mahen's and Borodáč's ideas, it did not start to work as a Slovak group, a group performing in Slovak, or even as a model, preparatory or promotional ensemble, but only as a delayed imitation of the nomadic companies of the past century.”⁷

The ensemble was formally established on 1 August 1921 and performed at the end of that month in Košice. However, it officially started its activities on 1 October in Prešov. On this occasion, Viliam Táborický prepared Palárik's play *Inkognito* (*Incognito*), which was adapted by Jaroslav Hanka. The Slovak cast included Oľga Országhová (Evička Sokolová), Ján Borodáč (Potomský), Jozef Kello (Spitzer the Taverner) and Andrej Bagar (Coachman and First Catchpole). K. Balák, who was brought into the company by Borodáč, played Ján Jelenský and J. Tumlíř was the Second Reaper. The play also featured members of the original Slovak National Theatre drama ensemble, including M. Pochmannová-Sýkorová, who successfully played Sokolová; Vilém Táborický as Ján Jelenfy; Oto Vrba as Starosvetský the Teacher; Ján Sýkora⁸ as the Clerk; and Helena Lauterbachová-Jelenská,⁹ Ella Petzová¹⁰ and Anna Kováříková as the Hay Rakers. Máňa Slámová played Bora and the stage manager František Divíšek¹¹ acted in the roles of the Notary of Kocúrkovo (*Kocúrkovo* meaning something like “Podunk” or “Hicksville”) and the Reaper. Vladimír Jelenský, then a member of the Slovak National Theatre operetta ensemble who became the director of the ensemble, played one of the Reapers. In addition to the abovementioned actors, M.

⁶ A report by the theatre company's general director, B. Jeřábek, to the Committee of the Slovak National Theatre Association. In LAJCHA, Ladislav. *Zápas o zmysel a podobu SND I.-II.*, p. 222.

⁷ ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. Galejnícke obrazy z hereckej galérie. In ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. *Prváci prvoradi (herci SND)*, p. 13.

⁸ On the playbill this was misquoted as “F. Sýkora”.

⁹ According to Borodáč's *Memoirs*, her name was Karla. Since she appears on the list of Slovak National Theatre operetta soloists under the name of “Helena”, we accept in this case the agreement of the playbill (H. Lauterbachová-Jelenská) with the documentary list by Elena Martišová-Blahová.

¹⁰ Ella Petzová was the sister of Helena Petzová-Paulíny-Tóthová, who was a member of the Bratislava “Czech” Drama Group of the Slovak National Theatre from 1920 to 1927.

¹¹ On the playbill his name was given as “A. Divíšek”. Borodáč called him “František” in *Memoirs*, yet there is no entry on him in the *Encyclopaedia of Performing Arts* or the *Theatre from A to Z*. Blahová probably obtained this information from the playbill in the Slovak National Theatre documents from 1920 to 1995.

Divíšková, R. Horská and Gašpar Arbet became members of Marška. Jelenský was the manager of the theatre company and Táborský¹² was the artistic director. Borodáč recalls:

There were nineteen of us. The ensemble did not have any technical staff, costume staff, make-up artists, property masters or lighting technicians; we were supposed to do everything on our own. In this respect, we were poorer than some community theatre clubs.¹³

Working in Marška was definitely a school of hard knocks for Slovak stage actors just starting out. According to Borodáč, the head of the theatre company did not even try to give the ensemble a programme or a concept: "He was one of those directors who told the actor where he enters the stage from, but the artistic presentation and psychological gestures were a big unknown for him."¹⁴ Táborský the artistic director said:

He was an actor, an artist and a good director, but he had no pedagogical talent, which was what we really needed. And besides, he suffered from a nasty disease: he liked to have a drink or two. He did not drink heavily, but he started to lose his memory after two glasses and was so distracted he could not tell his feet apart.¹⁵

Borodáč states that the most useful thing to do for the younger Slovak actors was to watch their older colleagues: "Jano Sýkora charmingly portrayed his characters, and so did his wife Mařka as well as, among others, Andula Kovaříková and Ella Petzová, who set a good example for our young actresses."¹⁶

Marška had a very strange relationship with the Slovak National Theatre. On the one hand, it was an ensemble established by the general director of the Slovak National Theatre and its task was to promote the ideas of the Slovak professional performing arts. This relationship was also amplified by the connection of personnel; after all, many artists who found employment in the ensemble had worked in Bratislava during the previous theatrical season. On the other hand, the Slovak National Theatre neither guaranteed the quality of the plays performed around Slovakia by this ensemble nor recognised its activities. This can clearly be seen in the fact that to this day the list of Marška's premieres has not been incorporated into the list of activities of the Slovak National Theatre. The repertoire of the Rural Drama Company is only known thanks to the fact that Borodáč performed in all the ensemble's plays, making the published list of his characters in *Spomienky (Memoirs)*¹⁷ actually the most complete and relevant source of information.

In 1922 the situation became considerably more complicated. The Slovak National Theatre came into the possession of an important theatre inventory when it purchased the general director Jeřábek's private property for 800 thousand Czecho-

¹² On playbills his name was given as "Villy Táborský".

¹³ BORODÁČ, Janko. *Spomienky*. Bratislava : Národné divadelné centrum, 1995, p. 78.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 81.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 311.

slovak crowns, and the Slovak National Theatre Association managed to raise funds for the construction of the Actors' House located on today's Klemensova Street. While this significantly saved on expenses paid out to theatre members for accommodation in Bratislava, generating income itself was a constant problem. Plays rarely sold out: drama premieres almost never had a full audience and the two or three repeat performances played to half-empty houses. This was a situation which was only all the more pleasing for Bratislava's city councillors, who constantly advocated for more space to be given to German and Hungarian plays. They justified these requests by claiming that Czech and Slovak plays were not popular among spectators anyway:

The financial management at the Slovak National Theatre kept deteriorating over the course of 1922. For one thing, the Committee of the Slovak National Theatre Association had to turn to the Ministry of Education and National Culture for the provision of subsidies. For another, it had to flexibly and without delay solve the necessary requirements of various guarantors. Although they had expected this, the Slovak National Theatre Association could not always get help from the minister of education Vavro Šrobár, who himself had to unwillingly remind the association and the Directorate of the Slovak National Theatre that their management of state and public funds was not in order, as was found out by those in charge of theatrical matters of the Ministry of Education and National Culture. The relationship of the Ministry of Education and National Culture to the Slovak National Theatre Association and the Slovak National Theatre worsened significantly after the change of government in the autumn of 1922, when Šrobár was replaced as minister of education by a member of the Social Democratic Party named Rudolf Bechyně, who did not show such a level of understanding or consideration for the management of the association and the theatre as his predecessor had.¹⁸

Economic problems affected Marška as well, and news began to spread about its dissolution. Noting a lack of interest among the ensemble's leading figures, Borodáč, Ján Sýkora and Anna Kováříková set out for Bratislava, where they learnt from Miloš Ruppeltdt and Alois Kolísek that the financial support for the ensemble had been used up and that "there is no money left for the next season as the government has refused any other aid for this ensemble."¹⁹

Although a portion of the press tried to win the public over so they would pressure government officials to preserve the touring ensemble, Borodáč himself points out that reactions varied. He recalled a newspaper article published in *Slovenský pondělník* and quoted from it:

'Is it supposed to perform for those few Slovaks in the theatre or for the Czech intelligentsia who are keeping the theatre materially and morally alive? Czech actors travel with 'šráfka' (as they call our Rural Drama Company) and they try to perform in Slovak. Here Slovak actors perform every half year or so and are not even trying to perform or learn anything. The theatre complains about financial problems, but on the other hand it pays people who

¹⁸ BOKES, František. *Družstvo Slovenského národného divadla*. Slovenské divadlo, 2008, Vol. 56, No. 2, p. 248.

¹⁹ BORODÁČ, Janko. *Spomienky*, p. 87.

still have to learn how to first of all speak and walk, and who have not done a thing for the theatre. There are community theatres, small stages and drama schools for educational purposes, not the Slovak National Theatre and its hard-earned money.'

After the publication of this text in *Slovenský pondělník*, members of Bratislava's drama company – Křážská, Kozlíková and Letz (all Slovaks) gave notice. The management of the Slovak National Theatre accepted this without any comment, and they never came back.²⁰

The fact that the economic management of the Slovak National Theatre was less than favourable is documented in a letter by the theatre to the Prague-based offices of the Ministry of Education and National Culture dated 17 September 1922, in which the theatre makes a desperate appeal to be paid subsidies. The letter stated:

In the future, the Slovak National Theatre would only need an annual subsidy of 2.5 million crowns for the running of the theatre in Bratislava and 500 thousand crowns for the touring drama company: this sum has since been reduced by transferring operations to Novák,²¹ the theatre's manager, to 20 thousand crowns [*sic*], thus making a total of 2.7 million crowns altogether.²²

The appeal was not answered, and so the Slovak National Theatre Association was forced to make significant cost-saving measures before the start of the new theatrical season. Besides the dissolution of Marška, the Slovak National Theatre Association withdrew from the contract with Milan Zuna as the opera director (they reproached him for the opera not working intensively enough and for the excessively long interval between premieres, which was anything between 23 to 44 days compared to just 20 days in Olomouc). However, the most significant measure was the decision of the Slovak National Theatre Association to make a contract with Oskar Nedbal, not only as an "equal artistic substitute" but also as the opera director. The intense correspondence between the Bratislava office and the Prague-based headquarters of the Ministry of Education and National Culture in the first months of 1923 suggests that minister Bechyně did not revise his decision to change the status of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava (not even under the threat of the Slovak National Theatre Association closing it down), whereby it was possible through the Slovak National Theatre Association as the licence holder and a relatively authoritative representative

²⁰ Ibid, p. 89.

²¹ Otakar Novák (1880–1929) was initially an actor. He later founded a theatre company in Moravia, which had been active in Slovakia since 1919. In June 1922, he was contracted to take on a subsidised role from the Slovak National Theatre to perform in the Slovak countryside as the Rural Ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre. Since he did not get the subsidy he sought in 1923, he then returned to using the name "Novák Theatre Company". The ensemble primarily performed in Czech and only produced a few plays in Slovak (*Hana* by Martin Rázus, *Matka* and *Statky-zmätky* by Jozef Gregor Tajovský and *Komasácia* by Martin Kukučín) in 1922, when he was provided with a subsidy of 200 thousand crowns. Following the dissolution of Marška, Gašpar Arbet and Jozef Kello were employed in Novák's company. In 1928 Novák became the director of the East Slovak National Theatre in Košice, but incessant financial problems drove him to suicide a year later. His widow, M. Nováková-Rosenkrantzová, then became the head of the theatre company. In the 1930s, the company operated as the Central Slovak Theatre.

²² LAJCHA, Ladislav. *Zápas o zmysel a podobu SND I.-II.*, p. 232. Apparently, there was a typing error and the sum of 20 thousand crowns is given instead of 200 thousand crowns. This is also confirmed by other information. See *Encyklopédia dramatických umení Slovenska M – Ž*. Bratislava: VEDA, 1990, p. 115. By way of illustration, the price of the best seats in a Bratislava theatre cost 15 crowns at the time.

of the Slovak public to put pressure on the management of the theatre to not become completely commercial and thus fulfil its core representative and educational functions. Bechyně's idea that the Slovak National Theatre should be the same business entity as the rural Czech theatre companies became a reality in May 1923 when the association was forced to lease the Slovak National Theatre to Nedbal as an entrepreneur. The passionate instigating speech by Kolísek was of no help either. At the Slovak National Theatre Association meeting on 17 April 1923, Kolísek declared:

I consider the Slovak National Theatre to be a matter completely different from all the theatres in the country, and due to its educational and ideological role I put it on the same footing as a library, hospital or clinic. If such institutions cannot live on their own incomes, it would be a very unfortunate idea of the government to entrust them to a private entrepreneur. Due to this, I also refuse to negotiate with the ministry from the political point of view because of its unconstitutional approach towards the Slovak National Theatre. I suggest the committee refuse to further negotiate on this matter with the ministry.²³

The events concerning the status and financing of the Slovak National Theatre attracted the attention of the media. The Hungarian- and German-language newspapers in Bratislava attacked the city council and demanded it ask for the speedy payment of all debts to the Slovak National Theatre. Government officials tended not to solve problems publicly but rather in the circles of MPs and government representatives. After Nedbal took over the theatre, Bechyně showed his flexibility and provided the theatre entrepreneur with a subsidy of 900 thousand crowns to pay off their old liabilities. Despite all this, Oto Šimák, a member of the Slovak National Theatre Association, reported to the Ministry of Education and National Culture in November 1923 that, among other things:

The association, relying on the contract which gives it the right to control the quality of the theatre, is observing a decline in dramatic and musical production. The public is said to be dissatisfied. [...] The decline of the repertoire's quality can be observed in drama, which is a Cinderella not only when it comes to attendance but also with regards to the care and interest of the management.²⁴

After the dissolution of Marška, the group of Slovak professional actors parted ways. Oľga Országhová and Ján Borodáč went to Sabinov in Eastern Slovakia to teach. Jozef Kello and Gašpar Arbet found employment in Novák's theatre company and Andrej Bagar left for the Prague Conservatory. The Sýkoras, K. Balák and J. Tumlíř found engagements in Czech theatre companies. As for Slovak actors, at the beginning of 1924 the Slovak National Theatre was right back where it started in 1920: in other words, it was without actors. On New Year's Day in 1924, Metod Bella, the

²³ A letter from the department of the Ministry of Education and National Culture, whose author could only be Dr Václav Maule, to the head of the section of the ministry in Prague from 17 April 1923. Kolísek's speech is probably captured accurately, for: "I have stenographed Kolísek's speeches and therefore I quote them word by word." In LAJCHA, Ladislav: *Zápas o zmysel a podobu SND I.-II.*, p. 262.

²⁴ A letter by O. Šimák to the Ministry of Education and National Culture about the meeting of the Slovak National Theatre Association on 8 November 1923. In LAJCHA, Ladislav: *Zápas o zmysel a podobu SND I.-II.*, p. 279.

district governor, issued a notice in which he invited rich Slovaks to contribute to the fund because “we are missing spiritual freedom: one of the elements that is very close to spiritual freedom is a proper theatre. We still do not have such a theatre because of the lack of Slovak actors.”²⁵ Štefan Letz, a Slovak actor and an ex-member of the drama company, responded:

I left voluntarily and I’m not planning to come back to the current theatre regime. All four of us Slovak actors were employed with a monthly salary of 900 crowns. After various deductions all we got was 650 crowns. We were supposed to live off this sum, buy costumes and work with enthusiasm. [...] The drama director is a prototype of a bad rural company director working with a circus discipline, who has scared off many good forces from the theatre.²⁶

The situation in the Bratislava theatre was not going the way Nedbal had imagined. He came into conflict with Josef Hurt who, according to Borodáč, had the unjust reputation of being a skilful administrator. He travelled to Spain with the opera ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre, although not under their auspices. That tour ended with a financial deficit, and the theatre was attacked by the Slovak press since it only produced two Slovak plays in the 1923/24 season, *Záveje* (*Snowdrifts*) by Vladimír Hurban Vladimírov and *Poklesky* (*Lapses*) by Kvetoslav Florián Urbanovič (both under Hurt’s direction). Journalists and the intelligentsia understood the importance of the development of Slovak theatrical production and the change of the Slovak National Theatre into a national institution not only in name but also in spirit and meaning; they were referred to as “members of the Slovak People’s Party” and “nationalists” by official sources, and these terms were also used by some theatre sources in the later decades. However, Kolísek, who was enforcing these tendencies in the Slovak National Theatre Association, influenced Nedbal to take the essential steps for the support of the Slovakisation of the Slovak National Theatre drama. In April 1924, Kolísek and Ruppeldt, the director of the Music School for Slovakia, invited Ján Borodáč and Oľga Borodáčová to a performance at a soiree of the Slovak Writers’ Society, which was only a pretext for a serious conversation. “They started to urge us to come back to the theatre because someone had to start seriously and persistently.”²⁷ This decision making was not easy for the Borodáčs because in the two years of their activity in Sabinov they had managed to gain a high status in the local society. They had produced seventeen plays, which they rehearsed with the newly-formed amateur ensemble of Ján Palárik, and it seemed that their work was a bigger success in Sabinov than the work of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava. They had performed about 80 plays in all (which meant four repeat performances, something that the Slovak National Theatre had not achieved until then). If they agreed to come back to the theatre after their conversation with Nedbal in Košice, it would show their deep interest in theatrical production, the understanding of the importance of national cultural development and the ability to risk their own social status and secured career advancement.

²⁵ Quoted from BORODÁČ, Janko. *Spomienky*, p. 95.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ BORODÁČ, Janko. *Spomienky*, p. 96.

We should also mention the strong influence of the Moscow Art Theatre on Borodáč's later development and artistic tendencies. He saw their performances during his studies at the Prague Conservatory in the spring of 1921 and then repeatedly during their performances in Bratislava from 14 to 18 October 1921:

We kept talking about these performances all season long and we tried to do a lot of things the way they did. We absolutely loved it; unlike us, it was as if they did not care at all about the audience. The actor only focused on his partner; there was life and constant suspense on stage and everyone demanded something. Their partners surprised them often and even though they expected it, they could not be sure until the partner said it out loud. There was no prompt box and they didn't bow to the audience after the acts, even though we really wanted to see them on the forestage. There were so many things they did on stage in a different way than us. By watching their actions and technique on stage we could pick something up, we could often see into the soul thanks to their verbal and facial expression, but none of us thought about stage direction (e.g. *mise en scene*). What particularly caught our attention were the relationship of the character to the subject and the mutual relationship between the characters on stage.²⁸

From these words, it is evident that Borodáč genuinely admired psychological realism – the type of theatrical production the Moscow Art Theatre represented. This suggests that Borodáč did not choose expressionism, which was the modern movement then dominant in Europe, as his aesthetic ideal even though he had to know from his studies in Prague at least some of the plays by K. H. Hilar. He did not choose the impressionistic remnants of Jaroslav Kvapil's production in the Kráľovské Vinohrady Theatre (from 1921 when Hilar transferred to the National Theatre in Prague) either, and was not interested in the modern movement in European art, represented by Marinetti, Jarry and Mejerchoľd in the theatrical sphere.

I assume that three deciding factors played an important part in his choice:

1. Borodáč, a teacher by profession, did not see the theatre as an expression of his individual creative ambitions but rather as a means of education of the audience to perceive noble ideas. He realised that through the stage portrayal of the stories and behaviour patterns, the theatre was able to connect with a broader public than the literature, music or fine arts. This is why Borodáč accepted this level of theatre as a craft: this was something he knew from standard Czech practice. As an actor, he tried to comprehensibly pass the playwright's message on to the audience. He did not think about if and how it would be possible to interpret the text in terms of meaning; he concentrated on its understandable portrayal. He did not look for any authentic means of expression for the character; instead, he used obvious gestures and distinct make-up with dominant features for the character and lines he considered to be important. He did not recite to the partner – in conformity with the custom of that time – but to the audience.
2. As someone who knew Slovak reality not from the ministerial offices but from daily contact with students and their parents, Borodáč realised that the level of national cultural consciousness was pitifully low. He had felt the tragic conse-

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 83–84.

quences of several decades of Slovak cultural decimation by the touring performances of Magyarising theatre companies which performed “distorted operettas, burlesques and heroic nationalistic dramas. After seeing such a performance, every wretch who finished school, whether he be a clerk, shopkeeper or craftsman, wanted to be one of those ‘dearly loved’ or ‘heroically admired’ by the audience.”²⁹ He realised that the audience was somehow “set” to perceive theatre performances in a certain way, be that as something primarily considered fun, which enlivens the stereotypes of daily and social life, or as something limited to religious events and evening get-togethers in pubs or games of chess in cafes. He rightly assumed that the audience would change its aesthetic preferences only gradually and that the theatre had to purposefully educate its audience and not scare them away, put them off or discourage them from their next visit.

3. As a teacher, Borodáč had a nose for a generally comprehensible message. He preferred clearly formulated “rules” to ambiguous hints, and he looked at theatrical production from the same point of view. He did not accept abstract symbols, ambiguous signs or lines which would have to be deciphered by the spectator. He preferred clearly articulated opinions and attitudes, transparent relationships and clearly defined features in the characters. He was also very systematic and able to work patiently even if he did not achieve immediate astonishing results. This quality really set him apart from other Slovak stage actors just starting out and – together with the age difference (he had decided to work in the theatre as a mature man and was already thirty years old in 1922), which guaranteed him a certain respect – moved him without much personal effort to the position of the potential leader of the efforts to Slovakise dramatic productions at the Slovak National Theatre.

The effects of the first stage of attempts at a Slovak professional theatre (1919 – 1924)

The first stage of the development of Slovak professional drama only represented an institutional and partially dramaturgical form of progress for the Slovak dramatic arts. It included the establishment of the Slovak National Theatre Association (1919), the founding of the Slovak National Theatre (1920), the placement of the theatre under the control of the private entrepreneur Oskar Nedbal (1923) and the reinvasion of Ján Borodáč and Oľga Borodáčová back to the Slovak National Theatre’s drama section (1924). What is positive is the fact that the first professional theatre was established in Slovakia which at least declared itself as a national cultural institution.

Another positive aspect was that many aspirants to the dramatic arts got the chance to test their abilities in its ranks, whether they were chosen from among mature amateur actors or were at least partially trained at the Prague Conservatory. Finally, it is also necessary to acknowledge that a dozen Slovak plays, by older or contemporary authors, were put on stage, including the one-act plays by Jozef Gregor Tajovský *Hriech (Sin)* and *V službe (On Duty)*, performed on 21 May 1920; *Hana* by Martin Rázus (1 November 1920); *Z otroctva vekov (From the Slavery of Ages)*

²⁹ Ibid, p.83.

by Vavro Šrobár under the pen name Ján Dvorský (18 December 1920); *Sedliacka nevesta* (*The Peasant Bride*) by Pavol Sochán (19 April 1921); *Inkognito* (*Incognito*) by Ján Palárik (25 September 1921); *Chudobná rodina* (*The Poor Family*) by Božena Slančíková-Timrava (14 December 1921); the comedy *Honorár* (*The Fee*) by Pavol Sochán and Anton Chekhov's *A Marriage Proposal*, which had been translated by Hana Ruppeldtová (20 February 1922); *Matka* (*Mother*) by Jozef Gregor Tajovský, performed alongside a Czech rendition of Molière's *Scapin's Deceits* (3 November 1922); *Záveje* (*Snowdrifts*) by Vladimír Hurban Vladimírov (10 September 1923); and *Poklesky* (*Lapses*) by Kvetoslav Florián Urbanovič (15 December 1923). However, what must be acknowledged is the fact that the first years of the existence of the Slovak National Theatre were also a wasted opportunity to establish it as a truly national cultural institution.

The period when the Slovak National Theatre had a strong social and political support was mainly marked by the fight for the nature of Slovakia within the republic. The artificially created "Czechoslovak" national unity, enforced by Prague as the centre of power, came into daily conflict with the demand for the national emancipation of Slovaks. These disputes were reflected in the activities of the Slovak National Theatre Association, which included representatives of Prague's unitary politics as well as the supporters of the concept of autonomy. The Czech theatre actors who came to Bratislava with Jeřábek's theatre company showed little understanding for the necessity of national cultural structures in the Slovak part of the republic and were not willing to help with the establishment of a Slovak cultural institution. They saw the Bratislava theatre only as another opportunity for Czech rural ensembles. According to them, performing certain plays in Slovak was a generous and helpful gesture towards less mature spectators who, for some reason, could not understand Czech perfectly. There is not a single relevant document from this period that would prove the interest of the management of the Slovak National Theatre in systematically working on creating conditions for the gradual Slovakisation of the activities of the Slovak National Theatre. In the Slovak National Theatre Association, attempts to start a discussion about this topic (primarily by Kolísek) were seen only as a way to obtain higher subsidies and as nationalistic attacks on the ministry based in Prague.

Apart from the auditioning of amateurs, the management of the Slovak National Theatre did not take any further actions which could have led to the recruitment of Slovak actors. The Slovak National Theatre Association only partially saved the day when they created a scholarship fund for this purpose. On the contrary, the Slovak National Theatre, which was in much financial difficulty, recklessly released even those actors who had already proved some of their abilities in practice. Even though the Slovak National Theatre as an institution was established on the platform of the Slovak National Theatre Association as a representative nationwide organisation for the supporters of the cultural development of Slovaks, the arrival of the East Bohemian Theatre Company meant that the institution itself acquired the character of a rural theatrical entrepreneurial entity operating on state subsidies. Jeřábek and Hurt shifted the duty of providing enough resources to the Slovak National Theatre Association. They artistically oriented the theatre towards the kind of repertoire which was supposed to be a mixture of attractive new releases taken from Czech stages and old proven plays which had been in the actors' repertoire for a long time. Therefore, it was possible to announce premieres in quick succession. Combining Jozef Gregor

Tajovský's one-act play *Matka* (*Mother*) and Molière's *Scapin's Deceits* into one performance without regard to the genre and language in which they were performed was probably the best example of the undervaluing of any aesthetic criteria.

The first Czech directors of the Slovak National Theatre did not give any priority to gradually attracting a new audience for the theatre even though all of them realised that it was exactly the small spectator base in Bratislava (originally a German-, Slovak- and Hungarian-speaking city) that caused operating problems and exerted pressure to introduce new premieres in quick succession, which was negatively reflected in the quality of the plays since there was no space for their better preparation. They settled for the theatre being frequented primarily by Czech clerks, teachers and officers, and less so by the autochthonous Slovak population. They were looking for the path of least resistance, which appeared to be the massive support of opera, ballet and above all operetta plays, which were visited by German- and Hungarian-speaking inhabitants. When it came to drama, they preferred "their own" ensembles giving regular guest performances at the theatre.

An undisputable contribution of the first stage of the Slovak National Theatre is its integration into the system of public institutions in Bratislava as well as in Slovakia. While there was a dispute in 1920 about whether the Slovak choir in Martin should get a professional statute or whether a Czech theatre company should play under the name of the Slovak National Theatre, in 1923 information that the Slovak National Theatre Association was considering having the Slovak National Theatre shut down because of a lack of finances provoked a strong reaction in defence of this institution even though satisfaction with the quality of its plays was not high. The Slovak intelligentsia was gradually growing; every year there were new graduates from universities in Brno, Prague and other cities who brought with them not only a higher education but also the habits of going to the theatre or reading magazines about culture. For them, the Slovak National Theatre was not merely a cultural "totem", an institution which documented the existence of the state and its affiliation with Bratislava, once the coronation town of Hungarian kings. They looked to the reasons why they started going to the theatre in the first place – entertainment, food for thought and visual pleasure as well as professionalism and quality. And if the theatre lacked these attributes, they were not afraid to call for change. But this does not change the fact that in the summer of 1924 Nedbal had to basically repeat the steps of his predecessors and try to do what was essential – recruit at least some Slovak actors into the Slovak National Theatre.

Translated by Petra Antalíková