



ALEXANDER DUBČEK TWICE – AN (UN)KNOWN SIDE OF HIM Selected Facts and Connections in Drama and Film Fiction Package

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Abstract: The authoress, using two visual works, i.e. theatre production *#dubček* and film *Dubček* (both 2018), compares two different approaches to and forms of the work with the personality of Alexander Dubček against the backdrop of the reforms and political upheaval in Czecho-Slovakia¹, in 1968. Theatre production *#dubček* (Aréna Theatre, Bratislava, direction Michal Skočovský) has three levels. The first one is acting game having the form of a rehearsal of a new text about the politician Alexander Dubček; its component part is the projection of period archival film shots. The second level involves the actors' stepping out of characters and commenting on Dubček's attitude and on historical events. The third level entails monologue scenes, in which actors reveal their personal attitudes via narrated stories at the time of normalization² which had a negative impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. In the film *Dubček* (Slovak-Czech co-production, direction Ladislav Halama), through Dubček's reminiscing the past, political events interweave with the scenes from the life of Dubček's family. Although both the works employ period image documentary material and fiction, they fail to create a dramatic conflict and they are illustrative for the bigger part.

Key words: Alexander Dubček, the Prague Spring, 21 August 1968, normalization, Aréna Theatre, theatre production *#dubček*, film *Dubček*

The name of the politician Alexander Dubček resounds not only with several generations of the one-time common state but also with the young citizens of the

¹ The authoress is inclined to write the common state of the Czechs and the Slovaks with a hyphen, which complies with the modern dictionaries of the Slovak language. In titles, quotations and adjectives the spelling without a hyphen is observed.

² Between late August 1968 and November 1989, normalization and its socio-political consequences affected the socio-economic life of millions of citizens of Czecho-Slovakia. Political scientists and historians have divergent views on the definition of this concept and on its time delineation. Some would refer to "a process between 1968 – 1971, which was connected with the restoration of the status of the communist party in society and the return of power in the hands of the conservatives who endeavoured to eliminate the representatives of the reformists of 1968." For more refer to: http://is.muni.cz/th/79213/fss_b/Zahradnik_POL_79213_nova.txt, where the author quotes initial sources. Others would frame this time period between 1968 and November 1989. The Slovak historian Jozef Žatkuliak notes that the concept is to be "specifically understood as the removal of a democratisation line of the "Czecho-Slovak Spring," starting with the signing of the so-called The Moscow Protocol in August 1968, until the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Czecho-Slovakia, in May 1971", including the adoption of the document *Poučenie z krízového vývoja v strane a v spoločnosti po XIII. zjazde KSČ* [Lessons Drawn from the Crisis Development in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, November 1970]. In parallel, he is inclined to believe that "Slovak and Czech society began to... (...) free itself from normalization in the mid-1980s". Refer to ŽATKULIAK, Jozef. *Normalizácia, politika Moskvy a zlomenie slovenskej a českej spoločnosti (1968 – 1970)*. In http://www.history.sav.sk/zatkuliak/zatkuliak_normalizacia.pdf [cit. 5 July 2018].

sovereign Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The representative of the Prague Spring, or, as some historians would put it, of Czecho-Slovak Spring, experienced a gradual rise, international recognition and a political fall, secret service surveillance, only to re-appear on the grandstand next to the would-be politicians after November 1989. He died of an injury suffered in a car accident when travelling from Bratislava to Prague, in autumn 1992. At the time of his political comeback, a lot of citizens and the representatives of the two most influential political parties after 1989 (the Civic Forum and Public against Violence) held it against him that he had signed the Moscow Protocol further to the invasion of Czecho-Slovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968, as well as the so-called Truncheon Act a year later, or blamed him for his inaction and trust in the Soviet side in seeking a solution to the political crisis which was sparked by foreign troops entering the territory of another state.

The general public tends to simplistically associate an individual, usually, the most influential present or future politician,³ with breakthrough historical decisions and events (which oftentimes applies to dramatic and film pieces). However, history would not be all-inclusive without the back-up of the collaborators who supported the personalities in their high-ranking positions and political acts and without those who, using diverse tools of a political struggle, curbed the decisions of the most powerful. The memoir books of politicians are interesting by shedding light on numerous connections which can be cross-checked by experts who find new relevant connections there.

Dubček's memoirs *Hope Dies Last*⁴, published in 1993, is intriguing, among others, by its brief portrayal of the life of his parents in America, their return to homeland and their faith in a new life in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, where they moved with a firm belief in a promised land as members of Interhelpeo in the mid-1920s. It was the destiny of this industrial and manufacturing co-operative of Czech and Slovak workers and peasants (the persons to be resettled had deposited all their assets with the co-operative before leaving their homeland; their property was gradually "sovietised" by Soviet citizens from different union republics who infiltrated the co-operative structure, only to eventually nationalise it) that might have affected Dubček's overcautious thinking and action with respect to Soviet leaders. As a secondary school student in Bishkek (former Pishpek), Kyrgyzstan, he was very sensitive to Stalin's reprisals that had a negative impact on Interhelpeo members or on the families of his classmates.

³ This is, for instance, the first Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945), which was a period connected with president Jozef Tiso (theatre production *Tiso*, 2005), the twists and turns in the life of Gustáv Husák, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (1969 – 1987, he replaced Alexander Dubček in this position) and the country's president (1975 – 1989), adapted to a television production (*Balada o doktorovi Gustávovi Husákovi*, 1996), [The Ballad about Doctor Gustáv Husák], or to a theatre production (*Dr. Gustáv Husák: väzeň prezidentov, prezident väzňov*, 2006), [Doctor Gustáv Husák: the Prisoner of Presidents, the President of Prisoners]. In 2018, the documentary film *Válek* was premiered, dedicated to a controversial personality of the minister of culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic during the normalization period (1969 – 1988) and an acclaimed poet.

⁴ Alexander Dubček. *Nádej zomiera posledná: z pamäti*. Editor Jiří Hochman. Bratislava: Národná obroda, a. s.; Práca, spol. s r. o., 1993. ISBN 80-7094-279-7. Translated from American original *Hope Dies Last: The Autobiography of Alexander Dubcek* (first issue, New York 1993). The book was written on the basis of Dubček's narration and collaboration between historians and living contemporaries. The book contains thirty chapters. Dubček had managed to proof-read twenty before his death (up to *Invázia a únos* [Invasion and Abduction], i.e. up until 20 August 1968). Later on, these events were verified and particularised on the basis of short-hand records of Moscow talks and others.

This also explains why, when he returned to his homeland later on, he insisted on a full exoneration of the unfairly sentenced Slovaks who were branded as bourgeois nationalists (Gustáv Husák, Vladimír Clementis and others), by setting up the so-called Barnabites Committee.⁵ He was engaged in politics for almost twenty years. He was spontaneous, good at explaining things and persuasive. He, too, had a sense of congruity and knew when it was prudent to give way, in order to allow time to mature. But he was also overly credulous. He was raised in a family that, upon return from the Soviet Union, continued to believe in the ideas of the communist party, in the honesty of the people inside the party's core, despite the things they had seen and experienced. Clearly, all this must have shaped Dubček's personality.

What would be the best artistic portrayal of a politician with a likable face, who was an attentive listener, keen to meet ordinary people, which was so different from the image of politicians of the old generation? What would be the most veritable portrayal of a politician who was perceived very differently by Czech and Slovak societies after 1968, despite the fact that all the books about Dubček published to date have been advocating, more or less, his actions during the weeks preceding August 1968 and afterwards? This may probably be explained by the fact that the authors of these books looked at him from the perspective of the then era, of the then domestic and international situation, rather than from the present-day perspective. After all, the most recent survey on the opinions of the general public regarding the events, periods and the personalities of the 20th and 21st centuries Czech and Slovak history has shown that in Slovakia, Alexander Dubček has been placed second among the most respected personalities⁶ and in Czechia, he has been placed sixth⁷.

In fact, historians have an unlimited space when it comes to publishing their research findings. However, the creators of a visual documentary work or of a work of art dedicated to a selected personality that unfolds against the backdrop of historical events (the theatre, film), are limited by the interest and attention of the prospective viewer, which also dictates the length of a completed work (its duration). And, last but not least, the final cinematographic work will also be affected by the funds raised. An important factor is the approach of authors to source material and to its dramaturgic adaptation. For instance, it is important whether only verbatim method is applied (i.e. interviews with living contemporaries) in the preparatory process of a documentary work, or, whether only photographic and film archival materials are

⁵ Dubček's call for drawing consequences from the conclusions of the so-called Barnabites Committee investigation (1963) deepened the negative relationship between Antonín Novotný (First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and President of the republic) and his proponents who assumed high-level party and state positions after 1969. Quoting historian Stanislav Sikora, the exoneration issue was "particularly delicate as it concerned their struggle for an equal footing of Slovakia in a new post-war Czechoslovakia." Refer to SIKORA, Stanislav. *Predjarie 1963 – 1967 ako genéza reformného procesu v ČSSR*. In *Historické štúdie*, Vol. 47. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV; VEDA, 2013, p. 263. ISBN 978-80-224-1324-4. Available at http://forumhistoriae.sk/documents/630541/662349/18_sikora.pdf.

⁶ Placed first was Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880 – 1919), Slovak astronomer, military pilot, general of the French armed forces, diplomat and politician.

⁷ The research has been run by the Sociology Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with the Institute for Public Affairs and with the Public Opinion Research Centre of the Sociology Institute of the Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic, public research institution. Data collection was carried out in March 2018. For more visit http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/cms/uploaded/2916_attach_Osudove_osmicky_tlacova_sprava.pdf [cit. 5. 7. 2018].

used, or whether the two methods are combined. Oftentimes, creative professionals would supplement or extend the two methods by authorial fiction (with respect to events, characters, etc.). The outcome is a work of art with documentary elements and it is oftentimes referred to as an art documentary. Another factor that may affect the final portrayal of a personality or of an era is the actor's (in parallel, direction) interpretation. Viewed from this perspective, let us consider now two works dedicated to Alexander Dubček, of which one is dramatic and the other one cinematographic. Both of them were premiered in the former half of 2018 and they have about the same duration of an hour and a half.

About Man and Era

This is the subtitle to theatre production *#dubček* staged by Aréna Theatre in Bratislava. From the outset until the very end, young producers give prominence to a generational narrative (their narrative) about Dubček who was regarded as a symbol by millions of people yearning for a better life in freedom. The production core⁸ is a text written by Viliam Klimáček on demand of Aréna Theatre within the framework of the so-called Civic Cycle. Unlike the previous three plays which he had written for the cycle, he opted for a different method this time. In order to have the reader appreciate the difference in approaches, let us detail Klimáček's earlier methods in dealing with the themes in question. The first play with a political theme written for Aréna Theatre was an artistic adaptation of the selected fragments from Gustáv Husák's biography. The twists and turns in the life of this politician provided an interesting material which was transposed into a metaphoric title *Dr. Gustáv Husák: väzeň prezidentov, prezident väzňov* [Dr. Gustáv Husák: The Prisoner of Presidents, the President of Prisoners], (2006, direction Martin Čičvák). Husák was portrayed during three life stages: at the time of the first Czecho-Slovak Republic and of his involvement in the Slovak National Uprising as a political prisoner and a normalization functionary. The script was written as fiction on the basis of several facts and documents, with three actors rendering the title role. The author had them engaged in a discourse, creating a kind of Husák's alter egos. None of them is deprecated, their actions are not questioned, the viewer is not asked moral questions following from the complexities of our history. Two years later, Klimáček wrote a family play *Komunizmus* [Communism], (2008, direction Martin Čičvák), on the impact of the collaboration with secret service police upon family relations and life. The next play *Holokaust* [The Holocaust], (2012, direction Rastislav Ballek), just like *Komunizmus*, was not a documentary play, although Klimáček had been inspired by a memoir book of a Jewish girl Hilda Hrabovecká, née Friedmannová. He created a work-fiction capturing the period atmosphere of the Slovak Republic (which had existed under the name of the Slovak State for four months), the confiscation (Aryanisation) of Jewish property, concentration camps and eventually the application for the restitution of this property after the turnaround in 1989. Authentic songs and quotes from period press were incorporated

⁸ Viliam Klimáček. *#dubček. O človeku a dobe*. Dramaturge Martin Kubran, Saša Sarvašová, set design Dorota Volfova, costumes Martina Širáňová, direction Michal Skočovský. Premiered 18 March 2018, Aréna Theatre Bratislava.

into the text.⁹ An appended motive of the preparation of a colour epic film about Svätopluk, the greatest ruler of Great Moravia (the Great Moravian Empire in the 9th century), winds through the play satirising the national sentiment of Slovaks, or as a delayed reaction to a debate on the creation and placement of the statute of Svätopluk at the entry to Bratislava Castle.

When it comes to the play about Dubček (adapted and abridged version entitled *Café Dubček*), the author did not use such a body of fiction. Judging by the flow of information and of events he was inspired by Dubček's memoir book mentioned above.¹⁰ It was neither a classical play about a politician and man nor documentary drama. In the introductory part, Viliam Klimáček taps into basic biographical facts about Alexander Dubček that are sequenced in a linear manner. He does not transgress their semantic layer (interconnections and links to Dubček's experience from youth, his family ties), the explanation of the concept of socialism with a human face is not given, which would especially be useful for younger viewers (who are the target audience). Save for the talks of the political leaders of socialist countries held in Dresden, in 1968, the text does not allude to a pressure exerted on Dubček, initially by six Member States of the Warsaw Pact (reduced to five later on). What started as an indirect appeal, was soon to be replaced with a forthright claim to put an end to fundamental programme changes in the socio-political system and in the economy which digressed from an undemocratic management of the state.¹¹ The political leaderships of these countries were more concerned about the prospect of meeting the Action Programme which, inter alia, referred to new relations between the East and the West, the abolition of the principle of nomenclature cadres or to the scenario of a federal arrangement of the common state (which would be more difficult to "control") than about the photographs placed on the title pages of newspapers and magazines showing the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia plunging in a swimming pool from a diving board, or the picture of him, dressed in a swimming suit, signing photographs for the visitors of Santovka swimming pool¹² (it goes without saying that these situations were inserted in the play). In personal encounters with Dubček, Leonid Brezhnev, supreme party and government functionary of the Soviet Union, along with the political leaders of other countries (János Kádár, Władysław Gomułka, Walter Ulbricht)¹³ put pressure on Dubček and the

⁹ Version of the play *Tiso*, staged by Aréna Theatre in 2005, author and director Rastislav Ballek.

¹⁰ **Luboš Jurík was also inspired by several events and Dubček's statements in writing his book/documentary novel *Rok dlhší ako storočie* [A Year Longer than a Century] (2015), which could have been used by Klimáček as a supporting document.**

¹¹ An extensive Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia adopted at the April session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia stipulated the party goals for the two forthcoming years. These goals were widely endorsed by the general public, which could have raised the concerns of political allies about losing a crucial partner in Central Europe. Although the document did not digress from the ideas of socialism, in its introductory part, it stipulated programme goals as a Czechoslovak way to socialism (by proposing concrete measures, it signalled digression from socialism, as practiced by the Soviet Union).

¹² Brezhnev understood Dubček's conduct to be detrimental to the status of the communist party as the only ruling power in the State. Dubček made mention of this reproach and noted that he had learnt to jump from a diving platform during his studies in Moscow.

¹³ During Dresden talks, Walter Ulbricht commented on the situation in Czecho-Slovakia, which ran counter to the declared agenda of the talks. However, the harshest address delivered was that of Władysław Gomułka.



Alexander Dubček is jumping from the diving board at a thermal swimming pool at Santovka, Slovakia, Sunday, 17 June 1968. Photo by Ludovít Füle. © TASR.

content of their talks was promptly communicated to Moscow (which Dubček only found out after 1989). The armed forces of these countries took part in the invasion of August 1968. The photographs of Polish, Hungarian or Bulgarian soldiers and tanks are shown seldom.¹⁴ Aréna Theatre did not show them either and there is no mention made of the cruelty of the soldiers in our territory. Their countries had an option not to join in the dictate of Moscow, and this decision was opted for by Romania (Brezhnev no longer considered them a trustworthy ally). Had the countries taken a different decision, the political map of Europe would have probably looked different in autumn 1968.

¹⁴ The tanks and military troops of The German Democratic Republic did not cross Czecho-Slovak borders. According to historian Michal Štefanský, this was upon Leonid Brezhnev's order, so as to avoid any reference to the country's invasion by the German military after the Munich Agreement in 1938. Therefore, only a small command and intelligence squadron crossed the Czecho-Slovak border. For a more detailed and synoptic portrayal of 1968 events refer to BYSTRICKÝ, Valerián a kol. *Rok 1968 na Slovensku a v Československu*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV; Prodama, s.r.o., 2008, pp. 43 – 246. ISBN 978-80-969782-3-6. Available at http://forumhistoriae.sk/documents/10180/20867/1968_chronologia.pdf.



Alexander Dubček after jumping from the diving board, amidst the visitors of Santovka swimming pool, 17 June 19868. Photograph by Ľudovít Füle. © TASR.

The above facts shed light on the events underlying the invasion by the troops of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968. The theatre made a statement that the play was written “on demand, on the occasion of marking the 50th anniversary of the military invasion of Czechoslovakia, on 21 August 1968”. Viliam Klimáček focused on generally known facts (Dubček versus Novotný, Brezhnev versus Dubček, Husák in Machiavelli’s position), as well as on facts less frequently debated (the talks in Kremlin, where Dubček and other party and government leaders were forcibly flown in on 21 August 1968). In Klimáček’s interpretation, it was Gustáv Husák taking over the leader’s role when Dubček was hesitant, and he continued to put pressure on his Czech and Slovak colleagues to sign the Moscow Protocol.

Aréna Theatre devised a type of documentary theatre that connects selected facts from the life of Alexander Dubček with Klimáček’s licence to interpret the utterances of some period characters. An important part of the production, of the image of Dubček and of his era, is the final part which follows on the playwright’s text by putting a rhetoric question, i.e. what is Alexander Dubček like, or, what may he be like, as seen through the eyes of today’s young generation? The actors’ own personal monologues commenting on the time prior to and during normalization, narrating events and family experiences, or based on hearsay, introduce an even more convoluted perspective in the complex story of Dubček, its past and the present. During rehearsing, young theatre makers introduced a new finale, an image-metaphor of their civic attitude towards current socio-political issues in Slovakia.

In short, the production by Aréna Theatre is a get-together of young people who call themselves the children of Husák’s children and they are going to talk about a man

A shot from a reception after the leaders of brother communist parties held talks in Bratislava, 3 August 1968. Second left Walter Ulbricht, First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, engaged in a conversation with Alexander Dubček (first right). Photo by Štefan Petráš. © TASR.



(Dubček) and his era. They admit that their thinking and a certain body of knowledge of their generation is affected by the memory of their parents and grandparents. The final narratives of young actors/performers (which is not Klimáček's text) do not allow us to work out social factors or the social ranking of their family members, their education background or engagement in the socio-political events of the 1960s and their consequences upon family life (these factors did not – and do not – apply invariably to every individual). There is no dramatic conflict ensuing from the play's text or from its production. It is not built from a linear sequencing of the selected events of 1968 that are transposed into monologues/dialogues of actors; it is not even present in final utterances. Theatre production *#dubček* may be understood as a non-conflicting discourse of young people who have studied basic literature, talked to their relatives and to friends about the time prior to and after August 1968 and by way of conclusion, expressed their opinion of Alexander Dubček as man, not as a politician.

Hashtag as a Sign and Metaphor of Time

#dubček is a brilliant and apt title conveying the purpose of the play and the producers' reference to a personality, concept and to an era. The hashtag placed in front of the production's name with a small letter may be read as an accelerated communication or a searched term/description of a key word. A hashtag in the name of the production put on by Aréna Theatre also indicates its focus on a younger generation of viewers or on anyone interested in the theme. Partly, this is a cautious move, so as to avoid the viewer seeking digressions from facts and their interpretation.

In the media, the author and actors confessed that they researched the documents about Dubček and “his era,” to retrieve relevant facts. Going through thousands of pages of documents, scientific studies, newspaper articles, interviews, photographs is very painstaking, and the exercise took them more than three months to accomplish (which was the preparatory time claimed by actors). This effort deserves appreciation. For an outsider, information selection from an unmanageable body of supporting documents is difficult, especially if one asks the question, whether Dubček belongs to “purgatory, heaven or hell”, which is the name given by the author to one of the scenic images. Young performers are to be given credit for researching on information/facts at their own initiative. However, the present time is packed with information from various sources and we oftentimes are confronted with a quantitative and qualitative information overload. When searching for a meaning of a word or a phrase, the Internet offers an unmanageable body of information, of which it is increasingly difficult to pick the relevant, most accurate and most impartial ones (which also applies to entering #*dubček* on the keyboard). It is oftentimes the case that partial information becomes redundant and without a broader context, such information may simplify or distort correct understanding of the meaning. This also explains why there is a need to constantly revivify historical events which have had an impact on international and domestic politics, national awareness not excluded. Viliam Klimáček refers to this phenomenon as “the unbearable lightness of forgetting experienced by a significant part of Slovaks with respect to the past which had happened before they were born.”¹⁵ With the lapse of time, logically, the remembrances of living contemporaries and the evaluation of the events from fifty years ago tend to be distorted.

During the years of normalization (up until November 1989), the representatives of power (the communist party and the decision-making sector) withheld a lot of facts and their connections from the general public, while other information disappeared against the backdrop of new events. In the past twenty-five years, after several domestic and national archives have been declassified (for instance, minutes of meetings), there have been several books published that shed light on diverse attitudes of individuals abroad and at home¹⁶ during an era referred to by the generic term “socialism with a human face”. The victories and downfalls of the era are associated with Alexander Dubček, who is its most prominent representative. Big roles were also played by the comrades behind the scenes who were not given extensive media coverage (a number of them were high-ranking officials in Czechia and in Slovakia, not only Gustáv Husák), and yet, they had enjoyed great influence and key positions. Historians keep revisiting the period to elucidate the complex context in which gradual steps were taken to break away from an enclosed regime of a single political party, from the centrally planned economy, and from the ideological dependence on the Soviet Union. Figuratively speaking, their works contain new old facts and the explication of politicians’ action or statements which were audio-recorded or transcribed. In vivid colours, they disclose the state, situation, events and human characters, while trying to get as close to truth/reality as possible. In the preparatory stage to the dramatic work, theatre professionals would select moments and facts from the

¹⁵ KLIMÁČEK, Viliam. #*dubček*. Inscenačný scenár Divadla Aréna, p. 3 [production script, Aréna Theatre].

¹⁶ This not only refers to the politicians in Czecho-Slovakia, but also to the representatives of the Warsaw Pact countries and to many others abroad.



#dubček. Aréna Theatre, Bratislava, premiered on 18 March 2018. Reading rehearsal. The actor performing Alexander Dubček is seated in a wheelchair. Direction Michal Skočovský. Photo by Igor Stančík. Aréna Theatre archives.

findings of historians that oftentimes express their personal attitudes. This goal is pursued in theatre production *#dubček*, and it is especially true of certain statements related to normalization period.

Klimáček's understanding of Dubček is determined by his own dramatized idea of the selected political actors of the era in question. Alongside the character of Dubček (Matej Marušin), there are Brezhnev and KGB Agent (both characters rendered by Matúš Kvietik), Husák (Juraj Bača), Novotný, Svoboda, Biľak, The General (all characters performed by Marián Chalány) entering into dialogues.¹⁷ The text was written for five characters that are numbered: The First, The Second (...), The Fifth, which accentuates the distance between actors and characters. Three male protagonists impersonate several characters, they openly step in/out of their roles by putting on/taking off their sweatshirts, personalised with the names of individual characters (for instance, *#brezhnev*). It is logical, and apparent from the close of the play, why Dubček would not put on a different "jersey".

The production opens up with the first rehearsal where the text of a new play is being read on an empty stage, with chairs and tables brought in later. The First (Dubček) sits in a wheelchair.¹⁸ The only female protagonist Alexandra Palatínusová

¹⁷ Characters do not have given names, they become obvious from the story, from the text which is uttered or projected on the screen.

¹⁸ During the rehearsing period, the actor broke his leg. Later on, the producers decided to utilise the wheelchair as a theatrical means to convey the idea of a wounded man (during the Slovak National Uprising, after a car crash, etc.). This piece of information was retrieved from an e-mail correspondence of the authoress of the study with the theatre dramaturge Saša Sarvašová.

does not perform/interpret the idea of a concrete character. Occasionally she would assume the roles of a narrator, of a commentator, a kind of catalyst of the situation, while in the character of a young person (The Fifth) she asks questions just like her colleagues do. The dialogue of the "story" of a documentary text begins to interweave with the questions and commentary on who Dubček was. The questions imply that with the exception of The Fifth, the actors do not know much about him. The author highlights that: "The play's intent is not to win over convinced living contemporaries but rather to call Alexander Dubček to mind."¹⁹

An informative approach to the theme is disrupted in the first scene entitled *Interhelpo*, with actors expressively rendering or spoofing Gustáv Husák and Antonín Novotný when the following questions are asked: "How on earth did you come across the idea of defying a power like the Soviet Union? // Haven't you had an atlas at home, comrade Dubček?"²⁰, while their facial expressions stay in the dramatic character for another moment. There are several such situations in the production when natural acting is put in contrast with stylised actor's expression (with oftentimes contrived expressivity). It is impossible to infer whether it is the production's intent or an accentuation of an idea of something/or somebody, a reminder of the events and lines which were read somewhere but not actually experienced. Dubček who begins to narrate the story of his family,²¹ which is well-known from his memoirs (starting with his apprenticeship, the joining of the then clandestine communist party, through his injury in the Slovak National Uprising, down to the position of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia²²), slips into a somewhat stylised acting.

The young Czech director Michal Skočovský and dramaturge Martin Kubran (who had collaborated in the staging of all the plays of Aréna Theatre Civic Cycle and this time, he was engaged as production director) portray the given period by employing minimalist means. On a half-empty scene (chairs, tables, the wheelchair with Dubček, a microphone on a stand), the projection screen in the rear plays an important role; period photos and film teasers are projected on it. However, they only serve for illustrating the text. Some of them are quite dark, so even a viewer who remembers the leading figures of that time, has problems with identifying all persons, objects and the background. Younger viewers must be completely lost at times. The first reading rehearsal of a new text by which the production opens up was enhanced by the director and set designer Dorota Volfová by placing two standing spotlights on either side of the stage. The acting space is rather poorly illuminated. The production contains several intriguing moments with subtle metaphors, with signs that appear anecdotal today but still have a chilling effect. For instance, when president

¹⁹ KLIMÁČEK, Viliam. #dubček. Inscenačný scenár Divadla Aréna, p. 3 [production script, Aréna Theatre].

²⁰ This is authorial interpretation of president Novotný's assessment of the reforms enforced by A. Dubček. A. Novotný was well known for his loyalty to the USSR but not for his unlimited admiration of this huge country.

²¹ Period photographs projected on the screen are rather blurred. For the details of the story of Czech and Slovak Interhelpo members refer to the document of Czech television *Interhelpo – Historie jedné iluze*. Available at <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10123387223-interhelpo-historie-jedne-iluze/>.

²² The Communist Party of Slovakia was a territorial organisation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and it observed the resolutions of the congresses of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. For more refer to *Encyklopédia Slovenska. 3rd volume K-M*. Bratislava : VEDA, 1979, pp. 137–145.



#dubček. Aréna Theatre, Bratislava, premiered on 18 March 2018. From left Matúš Kvietik (*The Second*, marked as Brezhnev), Matej Marušin (*The First*, marked as Dubček), Alexandra Palatínusová (*The Fifth*). Direction Michal Škočovský. Photograph by Igor Stančík. Aréna Theatre archives.

Novotný rages over his position of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia being taken by “an unimportant communist pencil-pusher” and that up until then he had been the most powerful man in the country; he fails to finish his line, as *#brezhnev* interrupts him with a meaningful gesture, while pointing at himself. It is not quite clear why the actor rendering *#brezhnev* bears resemblance with Joseph V. Stalin, by gestures, with the pipe and his speech stylised into a husky voice, and with lengthening the syllables and words (thus parodying Brezhnev’s speech in the last years of his life which can be found on Russian web browsers).

Despite a huge amount of facts, (self)questioning or confessing (*Dubček*), the director managed to create intriguing dramatic images by using sober scenic elements. For instance, in the scene of Dresden talks (March 1968), there are three actors standing at the rear of the stage illuminated in red light, in silent agreement waving the flags of invading countries while being reproached by Brezhnev for the deteriorating position of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. *Dubček* seated in his wheelchair in front of the stage is illuminated with soft white and yellow light. The director conveyed an atmosphere of confusion in the country and the resistance of citizens further to the invasion by putting the stage in disarray; upturned tables and chairs created a mini-barricade with a Czechoslovak flag, which was evocative of the photos of Prague streets of those days. In this scene, *Dubček* gets up from the wheelchair for the first time (when the military troops enter the country he contemplates resignation, as he believes the situation would then calm down), but Vasil Biľak pulls him back. Once and for all, *Dubček* gets rid of the wheelchair, but the next moment his freedom is lost. He is flown to Moscow, where he defies Brezhnev by logical arguments and he



#dubček. Aréna Theatre, Bratislava, premiered on 18 March 2018. Scene III, the meeting of the leaders of communist parties in Dresden, March 1968. From left Matúš Kvietik (The Second, marked as Brezhnev), Alexandra Palatínusová (The Fifth), Marián Chalány (The Fourth, marked as Novotný), Juraj Bača (The Third, marked as Husák). Direction Michal Skočovský. Photo by Igor Stančík. Aréna Theatre archives.

procrastinates the signing of The Moscow Protocol. From then onwards, he feels to be internally free despite the director making him stand in front of Brezhnev and others, stripped to his briefs. Only later he puts on a wet and wrung white shirt, which may convey several meanings. The character of Dubček, despite being hesitant (which ensues from the story and the line sequence rather than from the final statements of personal confessions), seems to be a victim of his time, which cannot be changed in just a few months, and of the people who made politics together with him. He is portrayed as a person who defied intimidation and refused to immigrate. He accepted his fate and continued to live as a family man for the next twenty years. He shunned dissent, although he would write letters to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (appealing for Václav Havel's release, among others), etc.

Confessions, the monologues of young actors, this time, as performers, capture a wide range of themes (from co-operativisation, through an "innocent" signing of collaboration with the state security police, denunciations, down to the crash of the ideals of communist conviction). The programme booklet was compiled by Saša Sarvašová who was also one of the two production dramaturges. Alongside the basic material about Dubček, it features *The Little Dictionary of Socialist Man* (with selected entries related to the period in alphabetical order), everything within the intent of the word or phrase searched for on the Internet, even with minor inaccuracies. The programme booklet also contains the statements of five young actors-performers. Their narration is natural and humanly sincere, they identify themselves with the stories they con-



#dubček. Aréna Theatre, Bratislava, premiered on 18 March 2018. Scene V, Kremlin, Brezhnev's prisoner. Decision to be taken on the signing of The Moscow Protocol. To the left, Matej Marušin (The First, marked as Dubček) confronted with a challenging situation. In the background, original documentary historical shots are shown of a rally of citizens opposing the presence of foreign troops in their territory. Direction Michal Skočovský. Photo by Igor Stančík. Aréna Theatre archives.

vey. There is no reason for the viewer why he/she should not find their family stories and the remembrances of their ancestors credible, claiming them to be objective truths that will be further disseminated, although... the actor Matúš Kvietik, among others, shares his grandfather's²³ story who told him that "in the 1970s, there were ideological supervisors attending the performances, who would be flashing light into scripts. They were nicknamed "glow worms". They checked every single word. They checked whether actors acted as prescribed. If they digressed from what was written, the actors were immediately confronted. Every digression was understood as an insinuation against the only correct socialist world outlook. "Glow worms" did not act covertly, they ostentatiously presented their control role. They would not be eavesdropping, they bluntly kept switching on the light, scaring people. You get me, don't you?"²⁴ Apparently, there was some miscommunication in the family, as in the 1970s, there were no supervisors seated in theatres (not even in the Slovak National Theatre), who would be flashing light into scripts and interviewing actors.²⁵

²³ Popular theatre, film and television actor Štefan Kvietik, a long-standing member of the Drama Ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre Bratislava.

²⁴ Refer to the production programme booklet Viliam Klimáček. *#dubček. O človeku a dobe*, p. 22.

²⁵ This interpretation of remembrances, or, the interpretation of an interpretation, contains several misstatements. In the event of denunciation or of a viewer/functionary complaining about a performance in the 1970s, the founder (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic) or party bodies confronted the theatre director or the chairperson of the Basic organisation of the Communist Party of Slovakia operating



#dubček. Aréna Theatre, Bratislava, premiered on 18 March 2018. Scene VIII, Purgatory. The flag of the then Czecho-Slovakia is half-staff, state sovereignty is defeated. In the background, original documentary historical shots are shown of a rally of citizens. Direction Michal Skočovský. Photo by Igor Stančík. Aréna Theatre archives.

Everyone is dressed in neutral and ordinary clothes, except for Dubček. He is the only one not to leave his role, he wears a sweatshirt with the name *#dubček* and in his final speech he flashes back on his life in the 1970s. He confesses that “being a communist is a lifetime deal”²⁶. His confession spontaneously switches to the present and from his perspective, he characterises it with a few critical words. In parallel with his era, he makes a statement that if people want a change to happen, they must do it themselves. It is not an appeal or a political address but rather a surrender of an exhausted man stepping out of his role.

in the theatre, never the actor. (In 1970, Ján Kákoš, member of the Presidium of the Town Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia, was director of the Slovak National Theatre.) The only “glowing” person in the auditorium of Slovak theatre, “scaring people”, actors and theatre directors alike, was theatre and film critic Emil Lehuta with his legendary glowing pen. The authoress confronted her personal experience from almost every day theatre visits in the 1970s with the former dramaturge of the Drama Ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, Anton Kret. In a phone call (26 May 2018), he denied that it concerned the Slovak National Theatre. Likewise, critic Milan Polák, who was a regular theatre-goer, had no information about “glow worms”. Both of them alluded to Lehuta’s critical glowing pen.

²⁶ This drama confession of the character of Alexander Dubček of his lifetime communist belief is at variance with his political drift after 1989. Dubček became a member of a new party, Public against Violence. In 1992, he switched to the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia and he was elected its chairman. In 1992 pre-election campaign, he opposed collaboration with the Party of the Democratic Left which was a successor to the Communist Party of Slovakia. Refer to the article from 2012 *Dubček sen o sociálnej demokracii nedotiahol do konca. Nemal potenciál*. In <https://aktualne.centrum.sk/dubcek-sen-o-socialnej-demokracii-nedotiahol-do-konca-nemal-potencial/slovensko/politika/> [cit. 5 July 2018]. Dubček’s “personal programme and political transformation between 1970 and 1992 is also elucidated by historian Ivan Laluha in his study *K profilu osobnosti Alexandra Dubčeka (reformátor a vizionár)*. In LALUHA, Ivan a kol. *Alexander Dubček: jeho doba a súčasnosť*. Bratislava : Ústav politických vied SAV; VEDA, 2014, p. 17. ISBN 978-80-224-1414-2.

Post Scriptum to What Was and to What Is

This is the impression one gets of the final short part when actors-performers are clearing and washing the stage, with additional information on August 1968 being speedily projected on the screen, shedding light on normalization practice, especially on the infringement of human rights, on the crimes of communism between 1948 and 1989, reporting on the number of dead prisoners, soldiers, etc. This addition was superfluous, needless to say that young people are taken back in time once again.

While the song by Gejza Dusík *Široká cestička* [A Wide Path] (text Andrej Bračatoris) is being sung live, basic facts on the responsibility of the communist party in the territory of Czecho-Slovakia between 1948 and 1989 are projected on the screen, “especially for a deliberate obliteration of the traditional values of civilisation, of national and religious rights, for a wilful infringement of human rights and freedoms, for miscarriage of justice in political trials, for the terror against the proponents of views that were in conflict with the teachings of Marxism-Leninism, for the deteriorating economy and for ruining traditional principles of ownership right, for the abuse of upbringing, education, science and culture for political and ideological purposes”²⁷, whereby the producers refer to the law on the National Council of the Slovak Republic on the immorality and illegality of the communist regime (1996). Despite Alexander Dubček being the supreme representative of the communist party at a certain point in time, in 1968, he raised a keen interest of citizens in domestic events and he caught international attention. The captions, quickly projected on the screen, announce that Dubček was a product of an “unheroic” era, much like many other citizens were.

The final confession that, according to them, Dubček is more than just a hero, expresses the attitude of young theatre makers, and their entire artistic production ought to be viewed in this light. The lyrics of the final song,²⁸ rendered by Alexandra Palatínusová, do not evoke a nostalgic sentiment which usually is the case of popular performers of this opus. Her alt voice is more inciting than reminiscing. Dressed up in a three-quarter down hooded coat (fit for any weather) and standing in front of a microphone, the actress mixes pianissimo with an increased voice intensity, which is suggestive of a performance having the (un)freedom of contemporary Slovak democracy as its theme rather than reminiscing the old times. Under the guitar accompaniment of her peer actor Juraj Bača, an atmosphere of the era is conveyed, much like the song *Bratříčku, zavírej vrátka* [Close the Gate, Little Brother], sung by the angry poet Karel Kryl after 21 August 1968. This time, a blue rectangle is projected on the floor, with a flashing star of the European Union.

The reviewers of the dramatic adaptation agreed on the merits of the theme, however, they had divergent views on the consistency of the use of incidental devices and on actors' performance. In general, they did not question the narrative of young

²⁷ Quoted from the preamble of Act No. 125/1996 Coll.

²⁸ “... Široká cestička vedie k nám cez lesy, // až vyjde hviezdička, spýtam sa jej, kde si. //Hviezdička vychodí, nič mi však nepovie, // (...) Možno preto neprišiel, že k nám cestu nenašiel...” [“There is a wide path meandering through the woods leading to our place, //and when the star comes out, I’ll ask it where you are. //The star is coming out but it tells me nothing, // (...) He may not have found the path, that’s why he hasn’t come...”].

actors via Klimáček's text and the expansion of the theme by the actors' personal narratives reflecting on Dubček as a human being and politician and connection with the present (meaning March 2018). Reviewers were primarily intrigued by the dramatic form and were not critical of inaccuracies or the shifts in the facts of the 1960s (or the misstatements about the situation in the 1970s, namely, about the "glow worms" in the auditorium), which is questionable when judgements are made. For instance, regarding the personal narratives of actors in the finale, Peter Scherhauser refers to them as a "powerful emotional element", whereby he points out that through monologues, "the viewer perceives the comprehensive picture of society and the effect of big politics."²⁹ To a great extent, such simplification is misleading, as monologues on people's destinies cannot portray the vastness and complexity of the era. The production is about man and the era-defining events of 1968 rather than about an era interpreted with the passage of time, based on oral narrations. The positive fact is that it ventured to bring the theme up, as seen by young theatre professionals.

The Cinematographic Representation of Dubček

A month after the production/performance #*dubček* had been mounted, the film with a simple title *Dubček* was premiered.³⁰ Both projects are connected by the script writer Viliam Klimáček. Film critics applied more stringent criteria to the cinematographic work than their theatre counterparts. In principle, professional community accepted the focus on selected events preceding 20 August 1968, when the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia held an important session on the preparation of documents for the upcoming Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The session which opened in the afternoon was disrupted late night by the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops and by an immediate forced escorting of party leaders to Moscow. The viewer watches Kremlin talks that lasted several days and were eventually concluded by signing the Moscow Protocol even by the other part of the delegation led by the then president, general Ludvík Svoboda, who voluntarily flew into Moscow (the only one who refused to sign was František Kriegel).

This time, the story about Dubček was conceived by the playwright/script writer as the remembrances of a politician travelling by car to Prague. The film is a combination of a double authorial fictional composition and facts. The first layer is a documentary novel (as referred to by literary reviewers) by Luboš Jurík *Rok dlhší ako storočie*³¹ [The Year Longer than a Century], which, as the author claims, is based on published documents and on fiction. The other layer of authorial adaptation of historical events is built by characters and situations interpreted (performed) by ac-

²⁹ SCHERHAUFER, Peter. *Hľadá sa statočný a slušný politik*. In <https://www.etrend.sk/trend-archiv/rok-2018/cislo-13/hlada-sa-statocny-a-slusny-politik.html> [cit. 5 July 2018].

³⁰ *Dubček* (Slovak Republic, 2018). Based on the novel by Luboš Jurík, script Viliam Klimáček, Luboš Jurík, dramaturge Roman Brat, director of photography Peter Kelišek, music Lubica Čekovská, directed by Laco Halama. Cast Adrian Jastraban, Táňa Radeva, Vladimír Hrabal, Jiří Zapletal, Radoslav Šopík, Peter Trník, Ivo Novák and others. Premiered on 19 April 2018. Produced by Radio and Television Slovakia, Film-park production and Czech Television.

³¹ JURÍK, Luboš. *Rok dlhší ako storočie* [The Year Longer Than a Century]. Martin : Matica slovenská, 2015. ISBN 978-80-8128-132-7.

tors, based on actual reality and in places slightly modified by the author (authorial fiction) and supplemented by producers by the projections of period documentary material or intercuts (in the film). Klimáček and co-script writer Jurik made use of the opening of the novel (fiction in which Dubček, after regaining consciousness in a hospital in Prague, where he recovers from a car crash in 1992, faintly flashes back on his trip on the highway near the town of Humpolec), to frame Dubček's reminiscing the important events of 1968 and after his political downfall, during his last trip from Bratislava to Prague, on 1 September 1992.

Right in the opening captions the producers announce that the film was inspired by true events. It is not strictly a documentary but rather a blending together of an idea, of an authorial shifting of facts and of archival film documents and photos. They work more with acted scenes of working meetings (telephone calls), performed by actors, and with the director's intercuts of Dubček's family life. Apparently, their purpose is to portray a politician with a human face in even a more humane light. However, some of them have been selected and adapted in a manner which disrupts the logics of thinking and of events and they distract the spectator's attention from more relevant facts and connections. By way of example, the front shot of a government BMW limousine and a driver's mysterious look (cast Marcel Ochránek) in the rear mirror and a slight turn to a member of the House of Nations of the Federal Assembly of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic³² on the rear seat, are a premonition of a tragic end of Dubček's trip. In sharp contrast to the "federal" driver driving him to Prague was the nice character of his personal chauffeur in 1968. Stanislav Pitoňák portrayed an easy-going, nice character, almost a member of Dubček's family.

The story is narrated by Dubček whose confession winds through the film. It unfolds with the pleasant voice of performer Adrian Jastraban who announces that he was unexpectedly elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, without prior consultation with Moscow. His memories go back to 1 March 1968,³³ to Dubček's home (father chatting away with his youngest 15-year old son about school, while shaving), when Mrs. Dubčková, standing in the bathroom door, says she worries about her husband. After him replying whether it should be fourteen million citizens pushing for a change, or the communist party to be replaced, she asks: "Will Russians allow it?" Amusingly enough, Dubček is convinced he will work it out with them.

The above example alerts an attentive viewer with an average knowledge of history to a simplistic producers' view of an artless, more gullible than clairvoyant politician who, rather than convincing his party opponents, tries to persuade his family. His optimistic political anticipation of future events is refuted by director Ladislav Halama by inserting shots of the grim faces of the Soviet delegation (Brezhnev and others) during Dresden talks in March. The lines selected from the talks accentuate the gravity of the situation which is once again alleviated by the director by a cut to family shot of a vehicle heading for Prague, where Dubček had moved with his wife and their younger son. While listening to the wireless (Dubček's authentic speech address regarding the Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, April

³² At the time of the car crash, Dubček was no longer Speaker of the Federal Assembly. In June 1992, he became a member of a chamber of this legislative federal assembly.

³³ The captions in the left bottom part of the film indicate date and time of the story.



Dubček, film, Slovak Republic, 2018. Based on the story by Ľuboš Jurík, script Viliam Klimáček, Ľuboš Jurík, direction Laco Halama, premiered on 19 April 2018. *Dubček* in the bathroom of his house in Bratislava, talking to his son and wife. Adrian Jastraban (Alexander Dubček), Táňa Radeva (Anna Dubčeková). © RTVS, Filmpark production and Czech Television.

1969), his wife comments on the boldness of the programme “which no other communist party between Berlin and Moscow has”. Apparently, these and other similar utterances of Anna Dubčeková are intended not only to allude to her awareness of facts, but also to her interest in politics and to accentuate the intimacy and closeness of the couple (which is also detailed by Dubček in several parts of his book *Hope Dies Last*. However, in a work of art, they sound anecdotal, if not naive.

The images of political negotiations/events (the letter of warning sent by the leaders of five Warsaw Pact countries further to their meeting in Warsaw, which was not attended by the political leaders of Czecho-Slovakia), the document *Dvetisíc slov*³⁴ [Two Thousand Words], the meeting of Czechoslovak and Soviet delegations in late July and early August in Čierna nad Tisou, the talks of the leaders of six communist and workers’ parties in Bratislava, early August, switched with the shots of a swimming pool in Santovka, of a relaxed family setting with son and a caring mother performed by Táňa Radeva with her natural and sensitive acting.

³⁴ The full title of the manifesto *Dva tisíce slov, ktoré patrí dělníkům, zemědělcům, úředníkům, umělcům a všem*, [Two Thousand Words that Belong to Workers, Farmers, Officials, Scientists, Artists, and Everybody] compiled by Ludvík Vaculík, called upon the citizens to continue the democratisation process and to defy the counter-reform pressure. The text is available online, with a list of signatories, e.g., http://www.totalita.cz/txt/txt_2000slovt.php. The manifesto was dismissed across the board by the Presidium of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, i.e. even by reformists who deemed it a betrayal of intelligentsia and of their efforts to implement gradual reforms. In the film, the document is deliberated by Dubček and Josef Smrkovský, the latter holding a position of Speaker of the Federal Assembly of the CSSR. Dubček concludes their conversation by the following line: “Why are they doing this to me? It’ll break my neck” (a subtle foreboding of future events).

The viewer cannot infer the concept of the montage of the images of political events and family scenes, which likewise deal with politics.³⁵ A strong family cohesion between Dubček and his spouse is maintained by the filmmakers in hospital scenes, where Mrs. Anna had been hospitalised (which is a real event) only a day before the breakthrough events.

After an initial shock and hopelessness following the invasion, the producers managed to convey the complexity of Moscow talks, especially of the role of several members of the involuntary “delegation”, which, in fact, was an act of internment. Some images of the adjourned session of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia may appear untrustworthy to a lot of viewers who do not know the facts of the night from 20 to 21 August 1968, especially the dismay over the troops shooting at people in the streets. Other images are found interesting, such as the reaction of some members of the presidium confronted with a non-standard situation of the apprehension of several pro-reform politicians headed by Alexander Dubček by order of “the workers’ and farmers’ government led by comrade Alois Indra” (which was not recognised by the then president Ludvík Svoboda, thus making it more difficult for Brezhnev to deal with the political solution after the invasion³⁶).

In terms of the content and dramatic aspects, the scenes of Moscow talks are more thought-provoking. They portray divergent positions of the Russian and the Czechoslovak delegations and the opinions amongst Czechoslovak politicians. The producers, through images and dialogues, indirectly admit that Dubček failed to cope with the situation, as his health betrayed him. He had to take time out for rest and treatment, and the talks would continue without him. Images and dialogues allude to the fact that the outcome of the talks was utterly dependent on Dubček’s decision (tension between Dubček and president Svoboda, Biľak’s information that Svoboda agreed to signing the Moscow Protocol by which the Russians wished to legalise the invasion, and especially admitting the fact of going astray from the common road of socialism, etc.). The last ten minutes following Dubček’s radio address in which he announces the conclusions from the talks after arriving in his home country, are to be understood as a wrap-up of the era. Husák’s address³⁷ at the extraordinary congress of the Communist Party of Slovakia, on 28 August 1968, Dubček’s fate (constant surveillance by the State Security Police, his employment with State Forests enterprise) and him heaving a final sigh over people no longer interested in his opinion, are wrapped up in his final words: “I’m no exclamation or a question mark, I’m a mere hyphen between two eras.”

The film, by its editing and camera work, by close-ups and medium close-ups and by an almost non-existent inner dramatic conflict, is suggestive of a television adapta-

³⁵ A critic referred to this combination of acted scenes and archival materials as a “bizarre fictitious world in which Dubček on film has a photo of real Dubček placed on his nightstand”. KREKOVIČ, Miloš. Tento film o Dubčekovi je zbytočný. In *Denník N*, 2018, Vol. 4, Issue 74, No. 13, 12 April 2018.

³⁶ During World War II, president of the republic, army general Ludvík Svoboda, led troops of the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps on the Eastern front. Later on, he was minister of national defence. He was familiar with the practice of the Soviets and with the strength of their military.

³⁷ Husák’s words “Let’s get rid of that which is unsteady, let’s get rid of that which is opportunist” are used in production *#dubček*. Part of the address is available at <https://soundcloud.com/ondrej-urban/nechodpadne-kolisave>.



Dubček, film, Slovak Republic, 2018. Based on the story by Ľuboš Jurík, script Viliam Klimáček, Ľuboš Jurík, direction Laco Halama, premiered on 19 April 2018. On the night of 20th and 21st August 1968, the invasion of Soviet troops took place and the session of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was disrupted. © RTVS, Filmpark production and Czech Television.

tion of a segment of political events and of Dubček's life, only a few months before the invasion of Czecho-Slovakia in August 1968. It is difficult to define its form, although the script, through Dubček as narrator, largely employs narration. It works with an objective element (archival film and photo film material of political events) and with two subjective elements. The first subjective element is applied in the staging of historical political events, the other one are the film scenes of the life of Dubček's family, of which several distract from the political plot (for instance, holding a conversation with the driver while planting flowers).

Initially, the producers contemplated the shooting of a television film *Krátká jar, dlhá zima* [Short Spring, Long Winter].³⁸ The title *Dubček* is more apt, although it creates an expectation of a film drama of selected events portraying a man and an era which the completed film work does not meet. A positive side of the film is chronological and linear sequencing of the images of historical facts. This applies to acted scenes based on historical documents (partly with fiction) and to the selection of archival documents. It also uses cross-fading (cutting) in a scene, for instance, in Dubček's final address edited from a recording from radio archives and a shot of the actor reading Dubček's words, etc. Director Halama transforms acted scenes and archival film material into a subjective authorial narration. However, several acted scenes look unnatural: "For instance, the scene of the assault on protesting young people gives a strikingly make-do impression and the film features more of such crampy moments that are devoid of naturalness and lightness," wrote reviewer Hana

³⁸ The intended title was used as a subtitle to the Czech version of the film in festival projections.



Dubček, film, Slovak Republic, 2018. Based on the story by Luboš Jurík, script Viliam Klimáček, Luboš Jurík, direction Laco Halama, premiered on 19 April 2018. Early morning of 21 August 1968, Soviet soldiers escorted František Kriegel, performed by Zdeněk Bureš, to a tank. © RTVS, Filmpark production and Czech Television.

Lippová.³⁹ The same applies to another acted scene of detained young people in a vehicle with inscriptions “Nech žije Dubček” [“Long Live Dubček”] and “Захватчики домой”/“Zachvatniki domoi” [“Invaders Go Home”], or for the scenes in the hospital which clearly demonstrate the citizens’ support for Dubček; the nurse’s lines, diction and acting are blatantly amateurish and disrupt its potential authenticity. *Dubček*, performed by the Czech actor of Slovak origin Adrian Jastraban, was predominantly melodramatic which followed from the script and even though the actor tried his best to be natural, the character fell short of veritable lightness.

Lack of vividness, of the veracity of acted or fictitious events is an issue for the script and the film image of *Dubček*. This may be partly due to the fact that *Dubček* as a person and personality offers a very limited space for a dramatic conflict. Unlike several of his political peers, he did not resort to self-criticism after 1969, instead, he maintained his position of trust in reformed socialism. Apparently, his signing the Moscow Protocol, or the so-called Truncheon act,⁴⁰ did not provide a weighty enough material for building a dramatic conflict in a film documentary-artistic work that works with historical documents.

The actors are to be given credit for portraying the political personalities of our recent history without resorting to the imitation of all their gestures, facial expres-

³⁹ Refer to <http://www.kinema.sk/recenzia/37945/dubcek-dubcek.htm> [cit. 25 May 2018].

⁴⁰ Legislative measure of the Presidium of the Federal Assembly No. 99/1969 Coll., of 22 August 1969, on certain transitional measures necessary to strengthen civil order, valid at end of December 1969. Although *Dubček* did not vote for the law, he signed it, being Speaker of the Federal Assembly, when the majority of its members voted in its favour. He regretted that until the last of his days.



Dubček, film, Slovak Republic, 2018. Based on the story by Ľuboš Jurík, script Viliam Klimáček, Ľuboš Jurík, direction Laco Halama, premiered on 19 April 2018. Talks held in a train at Čierna and Tisou, 31 July 1968. To the left, Adrian Jastraban (Alexander Dubček), Volodymyr Necheperenko (Leonid I. Brezhnev). © RTVS, Filmpark production and Czech Television.

sions, or of vocalisation. Peter Trník excelled in his rendition of Vasil Biľak, by a sober selection of the characteristic attributes of his manner of speaking, facial expressions, movements, and of posture. Stano Král portrayed President Gustáv Husák by using truly modest acting devices and the actor bore resemblance with the politician without mimicking him. Even today, the cold and cruel face of Alexei Kosygin rendered by the Ukrainian actor Oleksander Loginov, gives the shivers, as Kosygin, thanks to his position and activity, initiated Brezhnev in high politics. Another Ukrainian actor, Volodymyr Necheperenko⁴¹ portrayed and played around with made up the character of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev. On rare occasions, the humane side of his character would flash on the surface; however, his absolute power and scorn were present in the background. By way of example: when Dubček leaves Brezhnev's coach in Čierna nad Tisou (Eastern Slovakia), Brezhnev makes a remark to his closest collaborator: "Безнадёжный случай. Сотрудничает только Бияк." ["A hopeless case. Only Biľak collaborates."] After dramatic negotiations in Moscow, when Kosygin denies a nation of fourteen million its right to a sovereign policy and Husák advocates the country's own way of reforming socialism in Czecho-Slovakia, Brezhnev asks in a low voice why Husák has been overlooked. By this line the producers allude to the foreseeable future.

However, there is only a handful of such scenes in the film, or, they get lost in cross-cuts to the scenes of the Dubček family life back in 1968, when the role of the "head of the family" is assumed by his driver (he holds a conversation with Mrs.

⁴¹ This is the transcription of the actor's name featuring in film captions, in Ukrainian it is Володимир Нечеперенко. Visit the website of his home stage: <http://ft.org.ua/ukr/people/24>.

Dubčeková about politics, on 21 August, he takes their son Milan away from the house and drives him to Bratislava several days on, and others). Although the director gives ample space to the portrayal of the human side of Dubček and of his relatives, the scenes are trivial and comical: they merely illustrate what is going on rather than make the story advance.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Alexander Dubček was a charismatic personality, an honest politician. He enjoyed socialising with people and endeavoured to convince them by sincerity and arguments. He has become the symbol of socialism with “a human face” (greater freedom of expression, economic reform, etc.). He talked about things everyone had been waiting for and even some promises began to materialise. People’s trust in Dubček did not cease when the revival process was disrupted by military invasion. By virtue of his private life, assiduity, perseverance at the time of normalization he set a positive example of an honest man and an ex-politician. This explains why he was pardoned wrong decisions of the past by many, even after the socio-political turnaround triggered by the events of November 1989. Based on a public research work conducted in the early 1990s and in 1997, Dubček was the most positively rated personality in Slovak history, and the same applies to 2011 research findings.⁴² Another research conducted in 2004 showed that Dubček’s membership and functions in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia were opposed by only six per cent of respondents.⁴³

How, then, can it be explained that neither theatre nor film adaptation, through the narration about Alexander Dubček, has been able to convey the complexity of the era, the diversity of opinions of its stakeholders and their wriggling in the labyrinth of political decisions, while offering an artistic adaptation that does not significantly digress from historical facts and is found interesting by the viewer? It is because both artistic adaptations⁴⁴ have been affected by an illustrative approach to the theme and to its adaptation, which has affected the final theatre and film forms. Presumably, one of the reasons is an intention to give an account of the events of 1968, among them being the pressure of Warsaw Pact member states and their opposition of the reforms in Czecho-Slovakia (*#dubček*), military intervention, invasion, and, most of all, Moscow talks. Through the personality of Dubček, both works relate to the normalization period. While the theatre piece managed to go further by presenting personal views of young people who reflect on an era and a personality, the film brings forward in time the past events reminisced by the politician. In neither of them the producers have managed to create space for a dramatic conflict, be inside the character of Dubček, or in his clash with other characters. Dubček and his era are neither cursed nor advocated; they are only brought back to memory. Theatre production *#dubček* is a series

⁴² Refer to TÍŽIK, Miroslav. *Náboženstvo vo verejnom živote na Slovensku. Zápasy o ideový charakter štátu a spoločnosti*. Bratislava : Sociologický ústav SAV, 2001, p. 161. ISBN 978-80-85544-72-5.

⁴³ LALUHA Ivan. *K profilu osobnosti Alexandra Dubčeka (reformátor a vizionár)*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ The authoress would like to express gratitude to Aréna Theatre for providing the production script and a video recording of the production, and her thanks are also due to one of the producers for the possibility to watch the film multiple times.



Dubček, film, Slovak Republic, 2018. Based on the story by Ľuboš Jurík, script Viliam Klimáček, Ľuboš Jurík, direction Laco Halama, premiered on 19 April 2018. Adrian Jastraban as Dubček going to work, normalization period. © RTVS, Filmpark production and Czech Television.

of scenes and utterances, as if devoid of an opinion, whereby the opinion is expressed through the segmentation of parts and the sequencing of acts, the performers' stepping in/out of their characters. The film *Dubček* is educational by its nature, and it is not superfluous, as was noted by a critic⁴⁵, because, unlike the series *České století* [The Czech Century] shot by Czech television, in Slovakia, the theme is only being debated in television and it is overlooked by creative professionals.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ KREKOVIČ, Miloš. This film about Dubček is useless. In *Denník N*, 12 April 2018.

⁴⁶ On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the landmark in the history of Czecho-Slovakia, the internationally acclaimed mime of Slovak origin, Milan Sládek (1938), put on a production of pantomime and dances *Dubčekova jar* [Dubček's Spring], (premiered on 8 June 2018, State Opera Banská Bystrica). The production is the artist's avowal to Dubček and to the various stages of his life through an artist's perception of the era and of its actors.