

## LOOKING BACK AT THE THEATRE PRODUCTION OF A SCENOGRAPHER, MUSICIAN AND FILM ARCHITECT TOMÁŠ BERKA

Dagmar PODMAKOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research,

Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

**Abstract:** Tomáš Berka graduated from Department of scenography at Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava under the professor Ladislav Vychodil in 1974, lived a parallel life as a visual artist and rocker, author of incidental and later also film music, as well as co-creator of music albums with the group called Fermata for decades. He was tempted away from the theatre by the illusion of film and the collaboration with international production teams and established film directors when creating large-scale films and constructing film sets. As a representative of action scenography, he had the opportunity to work with various directors on many, but predominantly on the Bratislava stages during the 1970-80s. He did not use the curtain or horizon on small stages; he worked with acronyms, movement of parts of the set and stage props, as well as metaphor. Tomáš Berka connected the auditorium with the stage on several occasions. He made a distinctive mark in graphic design; his theatre posters are typical for their characteristic outlines and colouring (regardless of the linocut or offset technique). Based on selected productions from a total of over a hundred works, the study presents Berka's contribution to Slovak scenography from the 1970s to 2005, when his last theatre work was recorded. Tomáš Berka (together with Jozef Ciller, who is older than him and his classmates Ján Zavarský and Rasťo Bohuš) is one of the leading representatives of Slovak scenography that fundamentally influenced the direction of Slovak theatre development. Tomáš Berka is the only one among the stage designers who have also penetrated the world of music and, in recent decades, the international film industry. The study of his scenography completes the portrait of the stage designer's work in Bratislava companies as it was unjustly marginalised also by foreign critics. While at the same time, several productions that he was engaged in which made an impact by their use of action scenography were produced in confined spaces of the petit stage of the former Divadlo na korze (Theatre on the Promenade), as well as in alternative non-theatre spaces. Tomáš Berka's production of posters reflects the artist's vision of society from the beginning of Normalisation, i.e. from the 1970s to the search for a path towards democracy in the first half of the 1990s.

**Keywords:** Tomáš Berka, theatre scenography, theatre poster, book design, music, film

Tomáš Berka (1947, Bratislava), unlike his fellow scenographers, is also the author of several books, but his own theatre production has not yet been comprehensively analysed by art theoreticians and theatre historians. For example, there have been four individual publications published on the founder of the Slovak Art School, Ladislav Vychodil (1920–2005), and the work of Otto Šujan (1930–2017), Aleš Votava (1962–2001), Daniel Gálik (1919–1977), Štefan Hudák (1942–2014), Vladimír Suchánek (1934), František Perger (1937), Jozef Ciller (1942), Milan Ferenčík (1953) have also been reflected in monographs. A collective monograph on Ján Zavarský (1948–2022) is ready for print, but no one has taken up writing

about Berka.<sup>1</sup> That is understandable because, besides theatre, he is also involved in other kinds of art, which are intertwined in his work. Web browsers find the Slovak Tomáš Berka<sup>2</sup> first as the co-author of several books on architecture, one on music, a separate book on his involvement in film illusion, another reflecting on his childhood, student years up to the present, and even his own prose.<sup>3</sup> Only further down, the website offers Tomáš Berka as an author of theatre posters and as a theatre, television and film set designer. It should be noted that in the archive of the Slovak public broadcasting institution Radio and Television of Slovakia (official abbreviation RTVS), there is a fifteen-minute film about the scenographer, musician, and film architect Tomáš Berka made as part of the GEN.sk project (Gallery of the nation's elite).<sup>4</sup> By selecting excerpts from his work and from older television interviews, the director Martin Šulík created a documentary with a content structure that authentically captures the object of his interest, including even the music. Although Berka still performs occasionally, the casual life of a rocker from the period of Normalisation (1969–1989) is now history, as is working for the theatre. While he is currently devoted exclusively to film and music, he has left an unforgettable mark in Slovak theatre history.

The beginnings of his artistic journey were shaped by the inhabitants and the surroundings of the well-known functionalist building Avion, today located in the centre of Bratislava, but in the years of its creation (1930–1931), it was a peripheral district of the city.<sup>5</sup> There were 118 one- to four-room apartments in the six gates of this residential complex. As Tomáš Berka recalls in the short film by the RTVS and in the book *Blumentál Blues*<sup>6</sup>, on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, the sound of piano playing came from every window of their gate. His mother also played waltzes and arias from operettas by Strauss, while his father painted watercolours in nature and captured architectural objects. In the 1950s and later, middle-class residents of various professions, such as doctors, architects, actors and others, lived in this formerly collective housing complex. Many of their children attended after-school classes on some musical instrument at the so-called Folk Art School<sup>7</sup>. Tomáš Berka did not enjoy

<sup>1</sup> Book publications do not include catalogues with short contributions about the work of Slovak scenographers containing a significant amount of visual documentation. The National Theatre Centre in Bratislava published a catalogue about Tomáš Berka with a brief but concise introductory text by Ivan Lacika in Slovak, English and German.

<sup>2</sup> Often also the information about the guitar player's namesake, the Czech guitarist (1968–2018).

<sup>3</sup> BERKA, T. – FREŠO F. *Rocková Bratislava* [The Rock'n'roll Bratislava]. Bratislava : Slovart, 2013; BERKA, T. – BAHNA, J. M. *Vily nad Bratislavou* [The Villas above Bratislava]. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2013. Both authors have published three more books about Bratislava villas in the same publishing house: *Vily nad hradom* [The Villas above the Castle], 2016, *Vily na Slavíne* [The Villas on Slavín Hill], 2019 and *Vily okolo Horského parku* [The Villas around the Horský Park] (2022). He shares his experiences in the film industry of foreign productions with the reader in the publication BERKA, T. *Veľká ilúzia alebo Ako sa stavia filmový zázrak* [The Great Illusion, or How the Film Miracles Are Built]. Bratislava : Slovart, 2019; the narrative of the Bratislava city district where he grew up and lived with an overlap on theatre memories is captured in the book *Blumentál Blues*. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2010; he entered fiction with the title BERKA, T. *René alebo Smečno až do rána* [René, or Sunny until Morning]. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/14089/291883>. [cit. 31 May 2022]. The film is dated 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.register-architektury.sk/en/objekt/194-apartment-block-avion>. [cit. 31 May 2022].

<sup>6</sup> The title refers to the Blumentál Church, which is in the immediate neighbourhood of the Avion apartment complex.

<sup>7</sup> It was affordable after-school music education for schoolchildren. The education programme lasted eight years, and pupils usually attended this school in parallel with the mandatory nine-year primary school.

practising the piano every day and studying music theory, but eventually completed his piano studies following the advice of his primary school classmate Marián Varga, one of the most outstanding musicians of Czechoslovakia from the mid-1960s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> It was Varga who led him on the path of a musician, a path that has been intertwined with theatre and film throughout his whole life. Tomáš Berka also attended art classes after school, but unlike his future colleagues, he did not study at the School of Applied Arts like, for example, his next-door neighbour Ján Zavorský. But they met anyway while studying architecture at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava. He enjoyed especially drawing.<sup>9</sup> It was worse with mathematics and technical drawing, which are necessary for architecture. As a graduate of the Secondary Technical School of Mechanical Engineering, he had to catch up with those subjects.

His first contact with the theatre was a year before graduation in 1965, when he worked at the Art and Decoration Workshops of the Slovak National Theatre during the summer holidays. He painted backdrops and worked with wire; there, he met a self-confident guy of the same age who did not make friends with the other temps: he was the future legendary bassist Fedor Frešo<sup>10</sup>. The Bratislava theatre workshops (completed in 1959) did not appeal to him then, nor did the gentleman who often walked among the workers and was looked upon with admiration by others. The name of Ladislav Vychodil did not mean anything to him at all then, nor did he appreciate the advantages of a complex of workshops with individual operations and a rehearsal stage of the same size as the one at the Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav Theatre, where the Drama Company of the Slovak National Theatre used to perform. A student of the secondary school of engineering could not yet appreciate the functional revolving stage in the assembly hall, nor the working bridges, twenty-four hand pulls with the possibility of using electric hoists and other conveniences of the then modern workshops, which annually produced sets for more than three dozen theatre productions of the Bratislava theatres and some theatres in Vienna. But he recognised the amount of work of the hundreds of craftspeople of different professions involved in the production of the set. There was no way he could have guessed that a few years later, he would be commissioning his own scenic and costume designs for production there.

Soon afterwards, on his father's advice, Tomáš Berka visited the exhibition of the scenographer Ladislav Vychodil and the costume designers Ludmila Purkyňová and Helena Bezáková at the Union of Slovak Visual Artists' exhibition hall, Umelecká beseda. Against the black velvet backdrop, he was captivated by the model boxes and mannequins in costumes and wigs on display; he was intrigued by the role of light in

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<sup>8</sup> A prominent representative of independent, the so-called classical music, rock music, and improvised and experimental music. See, for example, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mari%C3%A1n\\_Varga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mari%C3%A1n_Varga). [cit. 31 May 2022]. Tomáš Berka recalls that Marián Varga played Sergei Rachmaninov's compositions by heart as early as the sixth grade of primary school.

<sup>9</sup> He spent a busy summer of 1967 in Paris, which completely captivated him with its intriguing buildings and the freedom of life.

<sup>10</sup> Fedor Frešo (1947–2018), the son of the composer and conductor Tibor Frešo, later became an essential Slovak rock and jazz musician. As a bass guitarist, he was a member of several well-known bands until his death, such as Prúdy, Collegium Musicum (with Marián Varga), Fermata (where he also played with Tomáš Berka), and Traditional Club Bratislava. The co-author of the already mentioned book *The Rock'n'roll Bratislava*.

the exhibits, all of which required not only talent but also extensive knowledge and artistic versatility.<sup>11</sup> When in his first year of architecture study, he learned from his classmate Ján Zavarský<sup>12</sup> that Ladislav Vychodil was opening an independent department of scenic design at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (VŠMU)<sup>13</sup>, he decided to take up this profession.

### Approaching the Theatre

There were only four scenographers in the class; apart from Tomáš Berka and the previously mentioned Ján Zavarský, there were also Rastislav Bohuš (later known as Rasto Bohuš, 1948–2019) and Josef Jelínek (b. 1949).<sup>14</sup> Ladislav Vychodil taught them to think three-dimensionally, fostered each to develop their own vision and imagination, and supported their personal development, yet did not shape the students in his own image. He encouraged students to read the dramatic text/play through the optics of their generation, hence prioritising thinking about theatre over artistic self-presentation. The curriculum included several theoretical subjects that expanded their knowledge of visual, performing arts and architecture, as well as practical subjects in stagecraft, drawing, model making, lighting techniques, descriptive geometry, physics and others. Vychodil was a great teacher and advisor; he saved many of the wanted and unwanted eccentricities and recessions that took place at the studios of scenography in the rented premises of the Evangelical Church on Panenská Street in Bratislava.<sup>15</sup> He became one of the most prominent personalities of scenography at that time<sup>16</sup>; and had excellent contacts in the world and worked with many theatres.

He involved his students in theatre life from the very first year. He supported the connections between school and practical life not only at the stage of the Academy of Performing Arts but also at the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in

<sup>11</sup> More in BERKA, T. *Blumentálske blues* [Blumentál Blues]. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 360–361. Paradoxically, Ján Zavarský publicly claimed throughout his entire life that he learned this information from Tomáš Berka.

<sup>13</sup> In Bratislava, at the Academy of Performing Arts, this discipline was studied from the third year after two years of study at the Academy of Fine Arts in the field of painting or at the Slovak University of Technology in the field of architecture. The studies were demanding, lasting up to six years; even the first students of the already independent Department of Scenography studied for that long; only later did its length settle down to ten semesters.

<sup>14</sup> Ján Zavarský has worked on conceptual art (co-author of *Biely priestor v bielom priestore* [White Space in White Space]) – architecture (co-author of designs for theatre buildings), interior design; he engaged with the history of scenography and teaching it in Bratislava and Brno in addition to practical scenography at home and abroad. Rasto Bohuš joined Jozef Gregor Tajovský Theatre in Zvolen after school while developing his own freelance visual art. Josef Jelínek transferred to the studio of Ladislav Vychodil after a three-year study under the eminent Czech scenographer František Tröster at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Besides several scenography projects, he is still mainly involved in theatre costume design.

<sup>15</sup> At that time, both faculties of the Academy of Performing Arts were located in one building on Štúrova Street in Bratislava (today, there are three departments of the Faculty of Philosophy of Comenius University in Bratislava). In the autumn of 1972, the Theatre Faculty moved to the reconstructed building of the Istituta Academy (founded in 1465) on today's Ventúrska Street, but the premises for scenographers in the left wing were completed later.

<sup>16</sup> In 1965, Ladislav Vychodil was awarded the Gold Medal of the President of the Republic of Brazil for Best Stage Design Exposition at the 8th Biennale in Sao Paulo, and for many years he was the president of the scenography section of OISTAT (The International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians).

Brno (JAMU). The students of scenography began verifying their ideas and designs in teams with other students of directing, dramaturgy and acting or opera singing. The first official work for theatre that Berka did was a set design for a comic one-act play by Czech composer Antonín Dvořák called *Tvrdé palice* [The Stubborn Lovers], which was performed at the Chamber Opera, the stage of the JAMU Faculty of Music (premiered on 9 April 1969, directed by Josef Novák, at that time still a student at JAMU). Although he began his professional career as a scenographer with opera, the majority of his work was in drama.

Tomáš Berka participated in several productions at the Theatre Studio of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, as well as in various professional theatres during his studies. Both faculties used the studio stage for their productions. It was a smaller proscenium theatre with a classic curtain and slightly raised rows of seats. It had no side or backstage, and small wooden steps led to the stage from both sides of the auditorium, which could also be used by the directors for the arrival and departure of the actors. They were used to playing generally only on the stage. The sides of the hall were not used, at most only on the right side, where the entrance to the hall was because the last row was too close to the back wall. The spaces were not built for theatre productions, and it was only possible to achieve professional conditions for the productions of students of acting and opera singing only a few years after the establishment of the Academy of Performing Arts (1949). It was thanks to the decision of the higher authorities to create a theatre within the premises of their founding organisation.<sup>17</sup>

His first home production, in which he participated in the third semester, was *Gramatika* [Grammar] by Eugène Labiche (premiered on 24 January 1970, directed by the pedagogue Mikuláš Huba). The set was made of a few pieces of furniture and parts of doors with glass. Partially folded curtains and the prevailing white colour enhanced the airiness of the whole design. For Jean Genet's *Služky* [The Maids] (premiered on 13 June 1970, directed by Peter Opálený), he used a variety of materials: he combined the essential pieces of furniture with glass foils resembling screen "with surreal figurines," all in contrast to the ochre and black colours.<sup>18</sup> As the critic Emil Lehuta stated, Tomáš Berka's set design with the mannequins wrapped in black velvet "against the background of stationary blocks with translucent walls looked quite unusual."<sup>19</sup> In his third year, he had the opportunity to work with his classmate Peter Opálený again, that time on Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Play Strindberg alebo Tanec smrti* [Play Strindberg, or the Dance of Death] (premiered on 23 January 1971). He filled the stage to the maximum. On the left, he placed a piano, an armchair, a couch, a table, and large oval photographs that recalled the materialised memories.<sup>20</sup> It was where the suspenseful scenes, an almost straight-up battle of the married couple –

<sup>17</sup> Theatre Studio of The Academy of Performing Arts was situated in the building of the Slovak Philharmonic, and actors rehearsed in the small adjoining rooms. Still, it only became functional in 1954. After the reconstruction of this building in neo-baroque style with elements of Rococo and Art Nouveau, the Small Hall of the Slovak Philharmonic is now situated there.

<sup>18</sup> LAJCHA, L. *Súčasná slovenská scénografia* [The Slovak Contemporary Scenography]. Bratislava: Pallas, 1977, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> LEHUTA, E. Genetove služby v Redute [Genet's Maids in Reduta building]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 1970, Vol. 18, Issue 4, p. 530.

<sup>20</sup> LAJCHA, L. *Súčasná slovenská scénografia* [The Slovak Contemporary Scenography], pp. 123–153.

Edgar and Alice and their family friend stepping in all took place. The sharp cuts, at times more expressive speech of the young actors, contrasted with the static but sufficiently characterful set. For the production of Henry Fielding's *Kaviarenský politik alebo Znásilnenie na znásilnenie alebo Sudca vo vlastnej pasci* [The Coffee-House Politician; or, the Rape upon Rape; or, the Justice Caught in His Own Trap] (premiered on 13 June 1971, directed by Peter Opálený), he made room for more characters in this play by creating three playing fields out of the practicable; ladders and scaffolding which allowed for a faster pace of the action.

Opera singers at that time were not accustomed to significant movement on stage. Still, Tomáš Berka offered them again a "terraced" stage design in his student production of Domenico Cimarosa's chamber opera *Tajné manželstvo* [The Secret Marriage] (premiered on 27 May 1972, directed by Miroslav Fischer). According to Pavel Unger, a young critic, Tomáš Berka made effective use of the small stage, but the constant running up and down the many stairs was too distracting in "places."<sup>21</sup> According to the preserved sketch of the scene, the foundation material was wooden practicable of various heights, with steps of three to six which leading from different sides to the platforms with the doors then leading to the rooms. It was the last "student" production on the school stage by a fourth-year scenography student, having previously designed the set for Federico García Lorca's *Čarokrásna pani majstrová* [The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife] (premiered on 15 January 1972, directed by his classmate Katarína Schmidová). Here too, he used wood (table, chairs, benches, coffee table) and, for ease, sliding curtains made of canvas with colourful rhombuses sewn on. In the centre of the stage, he placed a cut-out of a room of the shoemaker's house, from which faced the door to the kitchen and the street. The fabric walls could be peeled back to reveal a view of the activity on the street that surrounded the "little house" better, like a chatterbox neighbour's gossip. Such a solution enhanced the dynamics of the production.

### Opportunities and Conditions for Creative Work with Professionals

In 1971 Marián Puobiš, a classmate from the faculty, approached Tomáš Berka to collaborate on the production of Alexander Ostrovsky's play *Les* [The Forest] for the legendary Divadlo na korze (Theatre on the Promenade) in Bratislava (premiered on 14 June 1971). Činoherný súbor Divadelného štúdia (The Drama Ensemble of the Theatre Studio – the official name of this generational group) used to perform in the basement of the former Bristol Bar on Sedlárska Street, which was part of the Bratislava promenade. And although it was only in its third season, it became an important part of theatre life. The first première of Beckett's *Čakanie na Godota* [Waiting for Godot], which took place in December 1968, four months after the August occupation of Czechoslovakia, offered an acting technique of grotesque realism, which the collective also applied in other productions. The last title of the season before its cancellation was *Les* [The Forest]. They prepared the translation and dramaturgy adaptation which enhanced the hypocritical relations in society through the authenticity of a grotesque vision presented by an actor who dominated the small space.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> -Ung- [Pavel Unger]. Cimarosovo Tajné manželstvo [The Secret Marriage of Cimaroso]. In *Večerník*, 1972, Vol. 17, Issue 105, p. 5, 30 May 1972.

<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic dissolved the group as of June 30, 1971, with

The invitation to work with such a company, whose productions were admired even by the critics in Prague, was an honour for the third-year student of the Academy of Performing Arts. The stage was small, the walls and arches were worn down, and the auditorium had up to a hundred wooden seats, like the ones in the cinemas at that time. People often sat on the steps in the narrow alley between them. The scenography by Tomáš Berka consisted of an oblong oval table on the left side covered with a long tablecloth with wavy ends, four narrow armchairs and a sofa with backrests resembling the Biedermeier style. The production, directed by Vladimír Strnisko, kept from the design only the sofa in the classical style with a striped fabric on the back, a smaller table with edges with a plain tablecloth around the perimeter with a narrow drawn-work and simple embroidery, an armchair and a couple of chairs also in the pseudo-classical style. Everything looked shabby, reflecting the dire situation of the Gurmyzhskaya landlady and her house slowly falling apart. It was not only about the space of the *Divadlo na korze* (Theatre on the Promenade); it was a metaphor for the disintegration of society at the beginning of the Normalisation, the elements of which (the furniture) were at the right moment covered by white sheets. The scenographer also designed the poster. It is unique in that, unlike his future poster work, characterised by the symbolic expressiveness, in this one, he used a photograph of two actors in the upper half: on the left, a frowning Peter Debnár as the Neschastlivtsev, and on the right, a smiling Marián Labuda, who portrayed the Schastivtsev. He placed the title and the playwright's name between the actor's spread arms. The creators are shown in the lower centre of the poster. The green screens with mildly wavy edges (a reference to a forest) became only two meandering cracks or boundary lines running from left to bottom and up again towards the right side, only to finally disappear and then outside of the picture, they seal off the landscape in which the citizens of Czechoslovakia were trapped.

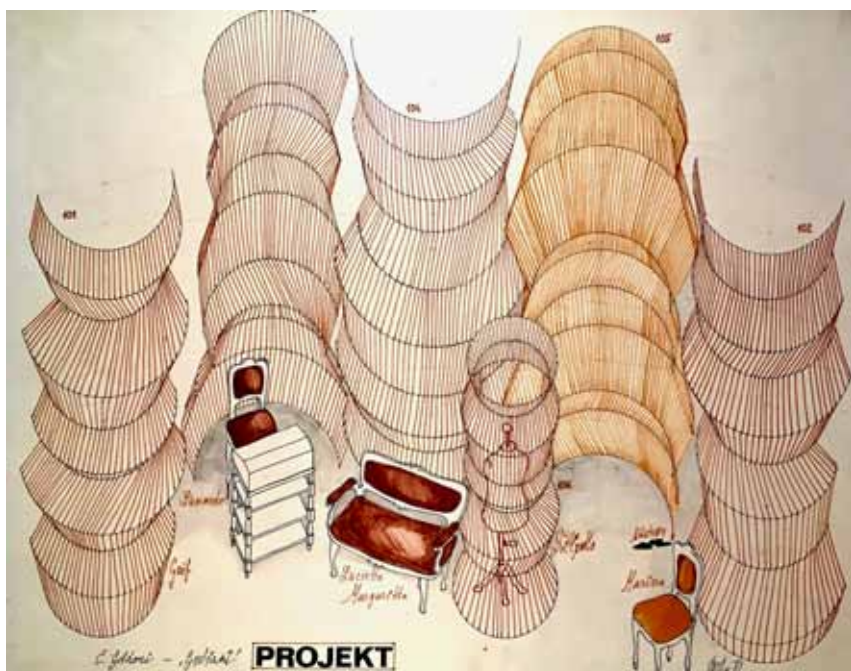
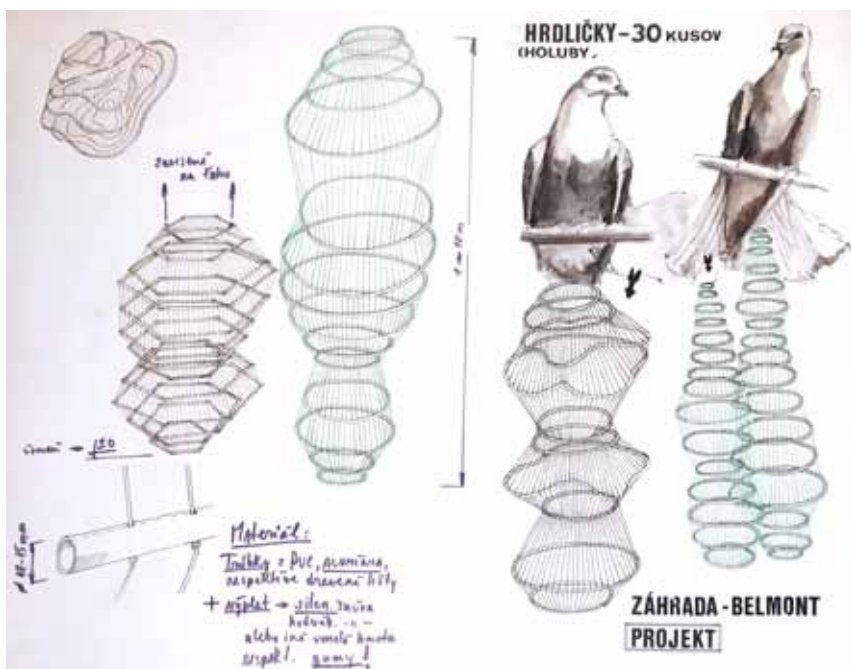
At the beginning of the 1970s, there was a shortage of scenographers in Slovak theatres. That is also why they used to invite students as guest designers, a fact that was certainly facilitated by the good reputation of Vychodil's older pupils. The younger ones did not become advocates of the realistic conception of the scenic representation of the theatre play; they no longer painted horizons or backdrops, the actor gradually became part of the transformation of the scenography on the stage, and action scenography became popular.<sup>23</sup> Peter Scherhauser, one of the most prominent directors of the studio spaces, referred to the merging or interpenetration of the directorial and scenography components as the directing and scenography key of the entire concept of the production, with the significant role of the actor and his non-verbal expression.

Tomáš Berka participated in eleven productions outside the school before his graduation (mid-June 1974), besides the previously mentioned production of *Les* [The Forest]. For some titles, he was also the author of costume designs and scenic music. Unlike some of his classmates, he was not yet employed in the theatre, but in addi-

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the explanation that „the constant violation of financial and economic regulations and for ideological and artistic deficiencies in their activities.“

<sup>23</sup> The best example of such a connection was the *Divadlo Husa na provázku* [Theatre on a String, later *Goose on a String Theatre*] in Brno. The director Peter Scherhauser together with the dramaturge Petr Oslzlý, the Slovak scenographers Jozef Ciller and later with Ján Zavorský, worked in synergy and with irregular dramaturgy in an unconventional space. Here, the scenography became a partner of the director, and the direction concept of the future production was often based on the stage design and spatial solution.



Stage design. Carlo Goldoni: *Štyria grobiani* [The Four Grobians]. Jozef Gregor Tajovský Theatre in Zvolen, premiered on 19 May 1973. Direction Mikuláš Fehér. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.



tion to studying and working for theatres, all his free time was taken up by playing in a band. For the production of Ernest Štric's poor contemporary play *Brigitka a drozdi* [Brigitka and the Thrushes] directed by Petr Jezný on the stage of Divadlo Jozefa Gregora Tajovského (Jozef Gregor Tajovský Theatre) (premiered on 14 October 1972) he drew a standard apartment with a few pieces of furniture. For another original play, *Zurabája alebo Epitaf pre živého* [Zurabaya or the Epitaph for the Living] by Oswald Zahradník and directed by Mikuláš Fehér (premiered on 20 October 1973), he also designed the costumes. For the scenography, he exaggerated the importance of a tiny man with a large desk, a high office chair, and walls made of metal filing cabinets. In Carlo Goldoni's *Štyria grobiani* [The Four Grobians] (premiered on 19 May 1973, directed by Mikuláš Fehér), the period furniture was characterised by the hoop constructions on pulls, which were joined by straps.<sup>24</sup>

Poetická scéna Bratislava (the Poetic Scene Bratislava)<sup>25</sup>, which previously focused on poetry and prose performances, decided to shift its repertoire towards drama theatre. Tomáš Berka then participated in a production of Carlo Goldoni's *Mirandolina* (premiered on 27 May 1973). The director Marta Gogálová, with whom he later worked more often in that theatre, wanted to connect the stage with the auditorium as much as possible in a miniature basement environment<sup>26</sup>, with the intention of creating a small pub which would blur the difference between the characters and the audience/visitors. The scenographer used the screen to divide the two areas for actors to perform, highlighting the comic aspect of the situation.<sup>27</sup> Against the orange background of Berka's poster for this production, there is a caricature silhouette of a woman's head with one blinking eye and a question mark-shaped nose with red pouting lips, large corals and a distinctive bust. He framed those outlines with five coloured curved contours, softening the enticing invitation to a mischievous comedy. For *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander S. Pushkin (premiered on 9 February 1974), he used a folded screen at the back of the small stage, which also moved sideways, thus revealing the backstage of this setting, thus hinting at a play on the theatre. The set was completed by a few pieces of furniture, just like in *Mirandolina*.

In 1975 Tomáš Berka joined the Poetic Scene permanently. It was convenient for him to stay in Bratislava and, at the same time, pursue music. At that time, the theatre was not satisfying him. The confined spaces of the Poetic Scene with no pulls and a small light park did not offer sufficient conditions for personal growth. Especially when producing plays that required a larger number of characters on the stage. He had to compromise with only a suggestive or gestural scenography, addressing more often the variability of the set and the incorporation of the low cellar and the arches into the stage design.

In the 1970s, Tomáš Berka also participated in several productions at Divadlo pre deti a mládež v Trnave (Theatre for Children and Youth in Trnava) (today Divadlo Jána Palárika (now the Ján Palárik Theatre)), which was soon joined by a num-

<sup>24</sup> LAJCHA, L. *Súčasná slovenská scénografia* [The Slovak Contemporary Scenography], p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> The company was formed in 1972 by some members of Poetické divadlo (the Poetic Theatre) and others; as of the summer of 1972, the role of dramaturge was held by the editor, poet and translator Ján Štrasser.

<sup>26</sup> They used to play at the same venue as the Divadlo na korze (Theatre on the Promenade).

<sup>27</sup> STANČEK, L. V krčmičke U Mirandolíny [At the Mirandolina's Cosey]. In *Smena*, 1973, Vol. 26, Issue 132, p. 6, 5 June 1973.

ber of younger classmates from the Academy of Performing Arts. One of them was Blahoslav Uhlár. With him, he was able to use more playful and colourful scenography on the stage of the oldest functional theatre building in Slovakia (1831). For example, Tomáš Berka conceived the programme booklet for Blahoslav Uhlár's first clown show for children, *Nevedko v Slnečnom meste* [The Adventures of Dunno and his Friends], (premiered on 12 February 1975, a dramatization of Nikolai Nosov's work) as a jigsaw puzzle of drawings that developed children's imagination the same way as the stage which stimulated children to participate. The large, hollow, striped cylinders or circles in the centre resembled children's building blocks. The parts served as variable elements of the scene (one could hide in them, jump on them or jump over them) and at the same time, they encouraged the actors to improvise. In their hands, the objects took on various humorous meanings (cupboard, vacuum cleaner, ball, etc.), as well as soft larger or smaller balls. The production became an example of playful designs for children using the variability of objects on the stage. Thus, already in the first years of his work, the scenographer had the opportunity to show his "spatial kinetic thinking,"<sup>28</sup> as the scenography historian Ivan Lacika put it. For Molière's *Scapinove šibalstvo* (Scapin the Schemer) (premiered on 29 October 1975), which Blahoslav Uhlár staged as a fairground theatre full of improvisations, jokes, artistry, Tomáš Berka provided the actors with fewer objects but just as functional and witty (e.g., an old pot, which served as a gong), the foundation of the set was a couple of practicables and a black canvas as a curtain. It could be built anywhere, which the theatre appreciated, as the premiere was held in a non-theatre space of the auditorium of the Faculty of Education of the Comenius University in Trnava because of the repair of the fallen ceiling in the auditorium of the theatre. There would be nothing unique about this if it did not – only metaphorically for the time being – mark the beginning of the future journey of the scenographer through various halls of Bratislava's culture houses with his home theatre the Nová Scéna Theatre.

Although he no longer worked with Blahoslav Uhlár, he was invited by the guest director Stanislav Párnický to work with him in Trnava. The director and the dramaturg Štefan Havlík rewrote the text of *Hry na hore Gellért* [The Play on Mount Gellért] by Ferenc Karinthy (premiered on 22 November 1975) into four characters and a narrator, thus creating more layers for reflection on the past and the present, illusion and reality. The rational structure of building a stage antipode to the original two characters (a deserter soldier in hiding with a Jewish woman at the end of World War II), who interacted with each other's actions, thoughts, and dialogues, and commented on their story, demanded the variability of the space. Tomáš Berka's solution was to create several planes above each other. He left enough space below to play out situations and dialogues and provided the actors with simple furniture: a table, a chest, an armchair, a piano, and a bed that could be pulled out of the space below the first floor. On the left side, he placed steps with a metal handrail and a small platform with the possibility to climb up the slope on the right side. The wardrobe, the screen, the bookshelves or the doors to the make-believe rooms, together with the spotlights on the stage, became part of the anti-illusionist approach to this play. The creators applied a play on reality and dream approach, fully supporting the image of theatre within

<sup>28</sup> LACIKA, I. (ed.) *Tomáš Berka*. [Catalogue]. Bratislava : Národné divadelné centrum, 1991, p. 28. Ivan Lacika has also written the untitled editorial.

a theatre. The designer also designed the costumes, which in combination with the props of this action set, enhanced the physical attributes of the actors.

It should be remembered that scenographers in Slovakia, not excluding Tomáš Berka, developed the practices of action scenography in traditional theatre halls with a separate stage and auditorium with no possibility of shaping the entire space.

### The Nová Scéna Theatre – The Second Bratislava Theatre

Tomáš Berka, as an employee of Poetická scéna (The Poetic Scene), could not choose his creative team; he had to collaborate with various people, often even with those who realised their own scripts and attempts at directing, but those titles have fallen into oblivion. The situation partly changed when in the summer of 1976, the Poetic Scene was attached to the Nová Scéna Theatre under the new name of Poetický súbor Novej scény (the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre) in Bratislava. For the stage designer, who increasingly devoted himself to poster work, the opportunity opened up to work with the drama and light opera ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in addition to his home collective, and thus to get on the grand stage. However, he also continued to work for the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre, which included a number of versatile, talented and different actors. In addition to original theatre plays and dramatizations of fiction, the ensemble also began to perform plays picked from world literature that have not been previously produced. Tomáš Berka enjoyed being part of such productions.

Let us mention his simple but purposeful set for an intriguing and exceptional production of two plays by the 13th-century Chinese playwright Guan Hanquing, *Pavilón nad riekou* [The Pavilion Above the River] and *Násilník* [The Execution of Lu Chaj-lang] (premiered on 21 January 1978), directed by Stanislav Párnický. The director and the guest dramaturge Štefan Havlík adapted and rewrote the plays, replacing the original songs with contemporary ones (music by Jaroslav Filip, lyrics by Lubomír Feldek), all of which were designed to be a stage form of theatre in motion with stylised elements of pantomime, clownery and gymnastic-acrobatic components. Nevertheless, as the critic, Pavol Palkovič, stated, "the production had a solid shape, as well as a sophisticated, highly topical, escalated ideological and social concept and a moral message."<sup>29</sup> There were hardly any props used on the small stage. The three multifunctional screens/stands on wheels sufficiently dynamised the action; they represented the objects (bed, door, etc.) but also indicated the place of the action (stage, tomb, etc.). Together with the gesture and movement of the actor, they became part of this kinetic apprehension of two interconnected stories. At the back of the stage, behind the bamboo strips curtain, the musician Jaroslav Filip played the drums, which underlined the rhythm of the production and the sound of the wooden castanets as Dana Sliuková wrote that all referred to the traditions of the old Chinese theatre.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> PALKOVIČ, P. Divadlo v pohybe [Theatre in Motion]. In *Pravda*, 1978, Vol. 59, Issue 21, p. 5, 25 January 1978.

<sup>30</sup> SLIUKOVÁ, D. Svojrážna interpretácia čínskej hry [A Unique Interpretation of a Chinese Play]. In *Práca*, 1978, Vol. 33, Issue 26, p. 6, 31 January 1978.

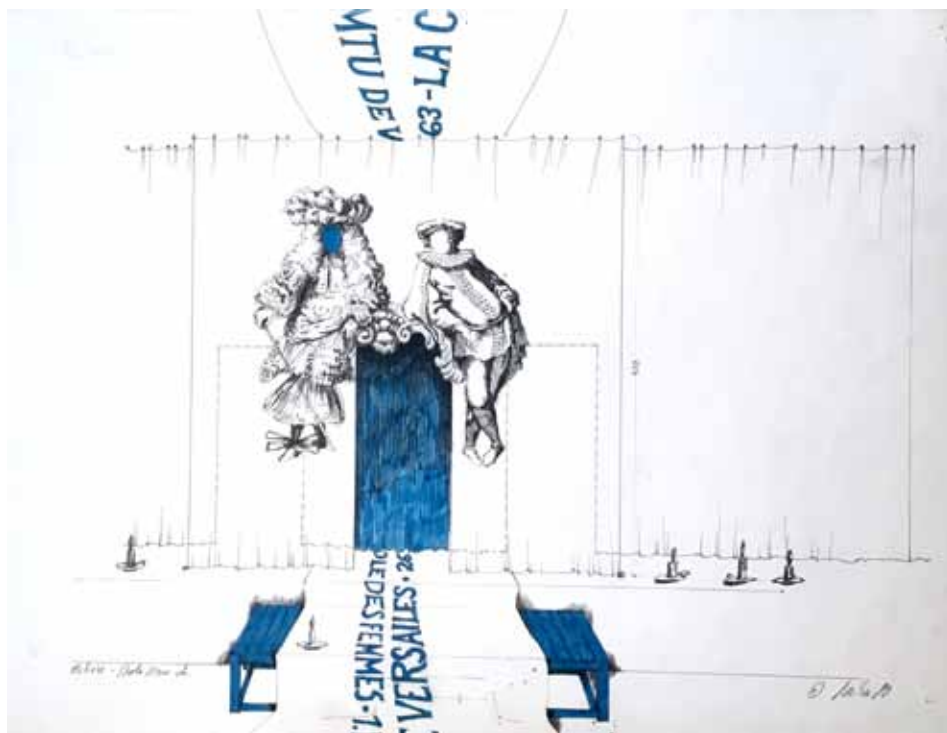


Stage design. Guan Hanqing: *Pavilón nad riekou* [The Pavilion Above the River]. The Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 21 January 1978. Direction Stanislav Párnický. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

The collective of this company impressed audiences with their artistic expression also in Molière's *Škola žien* [The School for Wives] (premiered on 24 January 1981). From the aspect of the scenography, it is not so crucial that Stanislav Párnický adapted the script and extended it with excerpts from two other texts by the author (*Kritika Školy žien* [The Critique of the School for Wives] and *Versailleská improvizácia* [The Impromptu at Versailles]), which framed *The School for Wives*, but did not pervade it in terms of its content. The director built the action to emphasise physical activity, for which he needed sufficient free space. At that time, the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre no longer performed in its theatre and premiered new titles in various alternative spaces that were not intended to accommodate the productions of professional theatres. However, the creators had to adapt to the situation, and the several-year provisory period marked the work of the scenographer and his thinking about the space that Ladislav Vychodil taught his pupils. Some of their productions were staged at the Studio of the Nová Scéna Theatre and later at the Malá scéna (The Small Scene) of the ROH House<sup>31</sup>. However, the main part of the production was staged at the House of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship on Herlianska Street in Bratislava. The hall in Darnica<sup>32</sup>, as the Culture House in a 1970s apartment blocks area was called, was rectangular and empty and

<sup>31</sup> ROH House (a shortcut for the House of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, or Trade Union House) on Trnavské mýto in Bratislava was later renamed Istropolis, and this spacious multi-purpose building is currently being demolished. <https://www.architektura-urbanizmus.sk/2022/01/03/the-trade-union-house-istropolis-the-birth-and-liquidation-of-an-innovative-generator-of-social-life-culture-and-education/>

<sup>32</sup> This Culture House was named after the new district of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, which was a sister city of Bratislava. This cultural centre has already been destroyed.



Stage design. Molière: *Škola žen* [The School for Wives]. The Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 24 January 1981. Direction Stanislav Párnický. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

had no stage. The Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre had to provide at least the essential lighting (the audience often stumbled over extension cords or spotlight stands). The artists tried to connect the created stage with the audience sitting on chairs as much as possible, but it was not always successful. However, unlike the Divadlo Husa na provázku [Theatre on a String, later Goose on a String Theatre] in Brno and other Czech companies, the theatre could not modify those temporary spaces (e.g. by adding a lightweight ramp or spotlights on the walls on the sides of the hall).

Tomáš Berka designed *The School for Wives* predominantly in white and blue, and the realisation followed his idea. He created a wall made of white cloth attached to the small stage made of practicables, with two openings at the back for the actors to enter. He only added blue-painted chairs to the stage, which in the hands of the actors took on different meanings (e.g. the antlers of the antler<sup>33</sup>), or they “replaced” other objects. He connected the stage with the auditorium by a large banner above the audience’s heads with the original titles of Molière’s plays. Together with the two mannequins of the king and queen placed in the middle of the last row along with others on the stage, he indirectly drew the audience into the atmosphere of the action.

<sup>33</sup> MISTRÍK, M. Škola modernej réžie [The School of Modern Theatre Direction]. In *Pravda*, 1981, Vol. 62, Issue 41, p. 5, 18 February 1981.



The Model Box of the scenography. Joseph Heller: *Hlava XXII*. [Catch-22]. The Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 6 December 1985. Direction Stanislav Párnický. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

Stanislav Párnický, who preferred television and film, chose Tomáš Berka as a collaborator for another equally interesting project: a production based on Joseph Heller's own adaptation of the bestseller *Catch-22* (*Hlava XXII*, premiered on 6 December 1985). He built two levels of playing space to accommodate the dynamic scenes and action sequences in which the director exposed this play on theatre (actors putting on make-up and changing clothes behind a screen<sup>34</sup>). He used wood, metal, wire and fabric as primary materials. In addition to the metal beds with their wire inserts and military crates, the most striking component was a large white parachute, which the critic Stanislav Vrbka read "as a symbol of a fictional salvation from an anticipated physical and spiritual death."<sup>35</sup> Tomáš Berka's scenography accentuated the absurd grotesqueness intertwining with the horror of war in a dynamic pace of interplay

<sup>34</sup> This solution may have been based on necessity, as the dressing room for the actors, was far from the stage area, which was open from the side and the back.

<sup>35</sup> -Vr- [S. Vrbka]. *Divadelná Hlava XXII*. (Theatre Catch-22). In *Večerník*, 1985, Vol. 30, Issue 241, p. 5, 9 December 1985.

of word and action. Through a military infirmary, an ammunition warehouse and an airstrip reaching all the way to the end of the auditorium, he was able to portray “the Mediterranean Pianosa, the Rome flooded with Yankees and prostitutes, and the airspace above the bombarded Bologna.”<sup>36</sup>

The grotesque and ironic exaggeration of the visual component of the comedy production of Johann Nestroy’s play *Lumpacivagabundus* [Lumpaci the Vagabond] (premiered on 21 October 1978) on the stage of the Nová Scéna Theatre was undeniably impressive. The giant sheet covering a substantial part of the stage was raised at times and lowered at others. As the critic Ján Jaborník explains accurately, “the use of its white side (in fairy tale scenes, stylised into as the sky, it was walked on) and the coloured reverse side (in the scenes of real life it hung above the stage).” Tomáš Berka achieved both the separation and the fusion of the two worlds.<sup>37</sup> The costumes of the fairy-tale and supernatural characters by the designer Naďa Šimunová enhanced the humour of the stage interpretation of the comedy by the classic Austrian dramatist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This pair of designers have worked together many times, in fact, since university (for the production of Guan Hanquing’s plays, the costumes were designed by the former classmate Josef Jelínek), Naďa Šimunová, Tomáš Berka and their slightly older colleague Judita Kováčová, were members of the Nová Scéna Theatre’s creative team.

Tomáš Berka has also participated in several Slovak plays. Let us mention the theatre realisation of the dramatization of the book debut by Ján Papp called *Kára plná bolesti* [A Wagon Full of Pain] (premiered on 7 June 1985, directed by Juraj Svoboda, the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre)<sup>38</sup>. Unlike Joseph Heller, the Slovak author focused primarily on the story of two poor people from the periphery of a small Slovak town in the period before the beginning of World War II and before its end (among other things, the transport of people to work in Germany, which were in fact deportations to concentration camps, the scenes from a military hospital, etc.). The adaptation by Jozef Mokoš focused on the social aspect in the background of the war events, and it underlined the performances of the artistes<sup>39</sup>. The scenographer designed a simple universal space for this more narrative than dramatic form, with a sheet mounted on a few thin poles: it covered the floor, demarcated the backdrop, the place of the action (e.g., a circus tent allusion), which was finished off with a mattress and a few pieces of props. He also used the white decorative fabric to cover the furniture at the end of Šulaj’s dramatization of Ladislav Ballek’s novel *Pomocník* [The Helper] with the same ensemble (premiered on 2 March 1979, directed by Marta Gogálová). For *Agáty* [Locust-trees], which was an indirect continuation of the novel *Pomocník* [The Helper], again dramatized by Ondrej Šulaj (premiered on 10 December 1983, directed by Vladimír Strnisko, the Drama Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre), he interconnected the interior space with the exterior with a piece of a landmark armchair, when he designed a carpet “consisting of dried mud and fallen leaves.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> JABORNÍK, J. Nestroy zábavný [The Entertaining Nestroy]. In *Večerník*, 1978, Vol. 23, Issue 210, p. 5, 25 October 1978.

<sup>38</sup> Parallel to Ján Papp’s prose, a Slovak film with the same title was made (1981) but by a different creative team.

<sup>39</sup> These groups offered visitors attending their performances a chance to win a cash prize by entering a contest with their strongest man.

<sup>40</sup> LACIKA, I. (ed.). *Tomáš Berka* [Catalogue], p. 30.



The Model Box of the scenography. Jan Cziviš, Alena Vostrá, Jaroslav Vostrý. *Candide alebo Optimizmus* [Candide, or Optimism]. The Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 23 April 1982. Direction Peter Mikulík. The Archive of the Museum of the Theatre Institute in Bratislava.

Tomáš Berka tried to apply a distinctive visual character in his theatrical practice from the beginning of his career. For example, for Bertolt Brecht's *Malomeštiakova svadba* [A Respectable Wedding] (premiered on 28 January 1978, directed by Ivan Krajíček, Regional Theatre Nitra), he placed a large white cloth resembling an open umbrella with carelessly created drawn-work bands running from the centre to the tips near the table and chairs of the wedding guests. He covered the floor with a similar piece of cloth, thus amplifying this society's relationship to any values. A simple coloured chandelier, topped with a regular toothed band as if made of reinforced paper, corresponded with the furniture that was falling apart and was made by the groom. On other occasions, a single feature was enough for him, such as in the scenographic realisation of Robinson Jeffers' poetry *The Loving Shepherdess*, staged by the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre under the title *Pastierka putujúca k septembru* [The Shepherdess Wandering towards September] (premiered on 3 March 1984, directed by Roman Polák). He suggested using two large stones to connect with the nature of two periods: the present and the past were separated only by a curtain on a cord.

Only a year earlier, Tomáš Berka won a silver medal at the Prague Quadrennial for the scenography of the different concepts of approach to two plays, namely the design for the production of *Candide alebo Optimizmus* [Candide, or Optimism] by Voltaire, and the scenic contamination of three Chekhov's short stories under the title *O ľud'och, kvetoch a psoch* [About People, Flowers and Dogs].





The Model Box of the scenography. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: *O ľuďoch, kvetoch a psoch* [Of the People, Flowers and Dogs]. The Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 3 July 1982. Direction Jozef Pražmári. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

The work of the French philosopher and Enlightenment writer, dramatized by Czech theatre makers Jan Cziviš, Alena Vostrá and Jaroslav Vostrý, was staged by the local director Peter Mikulík by the Drama Company of the Slovak National Theatre (premiered on 23 April 1982). The uniqueness of Berka's approach to addressing the multitude of constantly changing situations and places of action on the small stage of the Malá Scéna Theatre of the Slovak National Theatre involved the simplicity of anti-illusory and functional surface means (e.g., the Leporello floor, which assumed several meanings and signs through various changes, from sea waves to a curtain demonstrating a bed) with illusory decorative means (shrubs, trees).<sup>41</sup> The scenographer used wooden, white-painted, easily movable walls – screens – to create a variety of environments so that in this "...colourful and form minimalism, the scenic elements shone – painted decorative or narrative fragments – appropriates of illusionistic baroque theatre, which here paradoxically functioned as tools for disturbing illusions."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> POLÁČKOVÁ, D. Tendencie akčnej scénografie 1972–1985 [The Action Scenography Tendencies 1972–1985]. In MOJŽIŠOVÁ, I. – POLÁČKOVÁ, D. *Slovenská divadelná scénografia / Slovak Stage Design 1920–2000*. Bratislava : Slovenská národná galéria; Divadelný ústav Bratislava, 2004, p. 200.

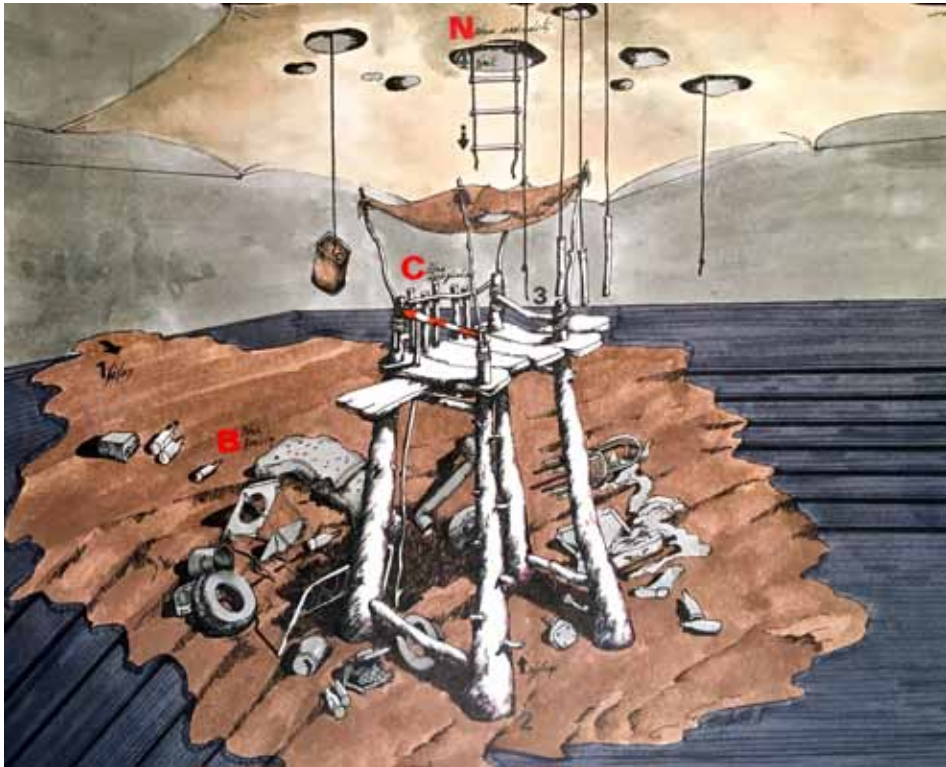


The Model Box of the scenography. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: *Višňový sad* [The Cherry Orchard]. Nová scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 13 September 1984. Direction Vladimír Strnisko. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

The interconnection of the three short stories by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (*Před sobášom, Zločinec a Drahý psíček* [A Marriage Proposal, Thieves and The Lady with the Little Dog]) with the central idea of exposing the theme of disrespect for man, violation of his human dignity, with the general title *O ľuďoch, kvetoch a psoch* [About People, Flowers and Dogs] (premiered on 3 July 1982, directed by Jozef Pražmári), inspired the scenographer to bring the actor and the spectator as close together as possible. The round stage made of processed pale wood exposed the nature of each of the characters and the environment in which they live, but also all the elements of the action stage (rearranging, unfolding, or folding of furniture and multifunctional props) related to the three model situations. One can agree with the statement of the art historian Dagmar Poláčková that it is Berka's "most radical action design,"<sup>43</sup> which, paradoxically, has survived moving from space to space. The premiered took place in the Small Hall of the ROH House. Later, it was performed at Studio S Theatre, which was perfect for it. For another Chekhov, which was *Višňový sad* [The Cherry Orchard] (premiered on 13 September 1984, directed by Vladimír Strnisko, the Studio of the Nová Scéna Theatre), he worked with wood and screens that defined the space of interiors and exteriors. The destruction of the orchard was expressed by crumbling the white horizon evoking a blossoming orchard.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> See LACIKA, I. (ed.). *Tomáš Berka*. [Catalogue], p. 30.



Stage design. Yordan Radichkov: *Lazariáda* [Lazarica]. Nová scéna Theatre – Studio S, Slovkoncert artistic scene in Bratislava, premiered on 7 March 1987. Direction Milan Lasica. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

He did not give up wood even when designing for *Lazariáda* [Lazarica], a monodrama by the Bulgarian playwright Yordan Radichkov (premiered on 7 March 1987, directed by Milan Lasica, Studio S Theatre, Slovkoncert artistic scene, and the Drama Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre). For the peasant Lazarus, who voluntarily lives through four seasons in a limited space of a pear tree, he designed a tree bed in its crown, to which the actor climbed up wooden steps. The stage was filled with various props, which the actor carried up or returned down until the sheet that sheltered this philosopher of nature covered him at the end.

He also worked with Vladimír Strnisko and Milan Lasica after the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 at the newly founded Theatre – Divadlo Korzo '90 (Korzo '90 Theatre).<sup>45</sup> The production of one of Václav Havel's first plays, *Vyrozumenie* [The Memorandum] (1965), had an important political and social aspect (premiered on 14 September 1990, directed by Vladimír Strnisko). The absurd drama of the parody of the bureaucratic system and the "changing of coats," also underpinned by the use of

<sup>45</sup> The title of the new theatre is a reference to the abolished theatre company Divadlo na korze (Theatre on the Promenade).

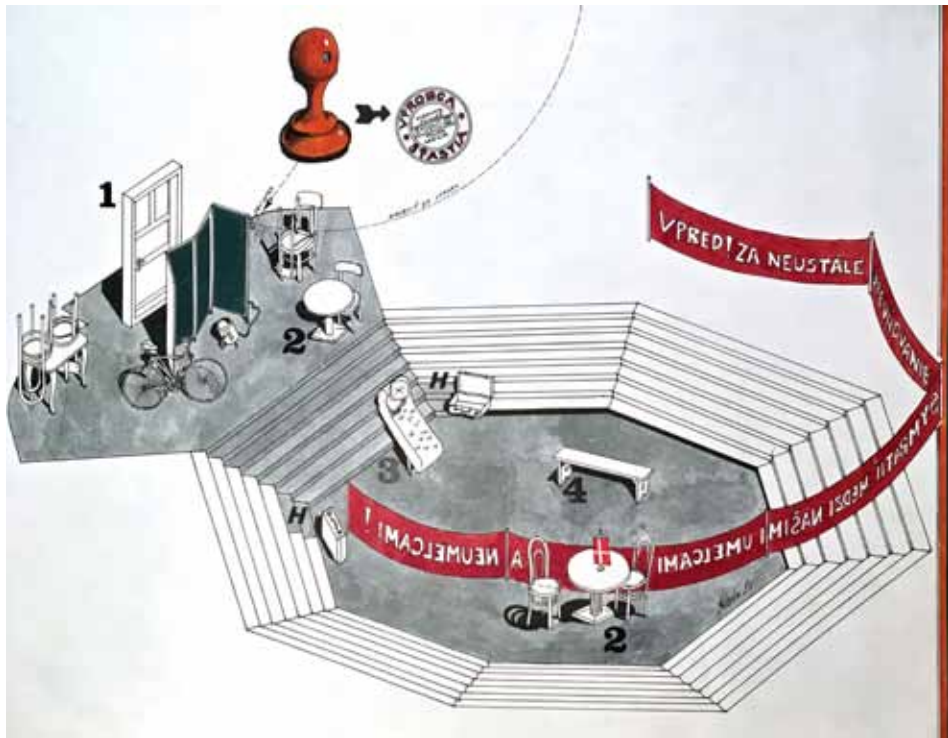
the artificially created language of “ptydepe,” later replaced by the equally incomprehensible language of “choruktor,” referred to the plans for economic change and their failure to materialise.

Tomáš Berka represented the appearance of an artificial clerical setting with several office cabinets, a desk and a typewriter table, a filing cabinet, stamps and a pile of files. The alternation of characters in different positions within the same organisation could also be seen as a metaphor for the system used in the last twenty years. By that time, the scenographer had moved away from action scenography, more often resorting to descriptive solutions, as since the mid-1980s, action on stage had been replaced by words with a sparse metaphor of character. Perhaps that is why Slawomir Mrozek’s *Veľvoyslanc* [The Ambassador] (1991) or *Hlava Medúzy* [Medusa’s Head] by the French chansonnier and jazz performer Boris Vian (1992) did not impress from a visual point of view.

### Conclusion 1 – Theatre on the Stage

Tomáš Berka also collaborated on the famous, iconic production of the first Slovak rock musical *Cyrano z predmestia* [Cyrano of the Suburbs] (premiered on 8 October 1977, directed by Ivan Krajíček, the light opera ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre). The librettist Alta Vášová was inspired by Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* and set the story in the local music clubs of the 1970s. The stage reflected the then-current interior design trend (flashing horizon, etc.) with some features such as the café with a raised place for the band. Tomáš Berka knew well not only the authors of the lyrics, Kamil Peteraj and Ján Štrasser, but also the authors of the music: the previously mentioned Marián Varga and Pavol Hammel. They were creatively involved in some of the productions of the Poetic Scene, later the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava. This was at a time when well-known musicians of the time and later were keen to compose original music for the theatre and when the texts of plays were often expanded to include original songs. Tomáš Berka also designed the poster for *Cyrano z predmestia* [Cyrano of the Suburbs]. He drew a stylised bench with side rests featuring head profiles on a grey ground, applying side-by-side pale brick, burgundy, and orange paint to each section. The four Cupid’s arrows sent from the other inner side hit the brain, not the heart. The drawing has several implications; in addition to a gathering place for young people and lovers to express their love, one can also identify the bench on which the prominent Slovak musician Miroslav (Mecky) Žbirka used to play in his youth.

As an employee of the Nová Scéna Theatre, Tomáš Berka also had to propose scenic designs for the theatre’s light opera ensemble. Soloists, chorus members and ballet dancers filled the stage; for those titles, it was not possible to use a variable sign, a distinctive element of the action scenography. The singer had to be heard (they used to sing live) and seen, but Tomáš Berka was not used to working with the magic of the lighting or a dazzling set. Moreover, in 1985, after the reconstruction and completion of the premises for the administration of the Nová Scéna Theatre), the reconstruction of the stage, the auditorium and the service staff began. The small productions of the Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre were adapted better to the conditions, but the light opera ensemble performed in the Culture House in Dúbravka borough, in the larger hall of the Culture House in Ružinov borough and in the large hall of



Stage design. Vladimír Mináč: *Výrobca štastia* [The Happiness-Maker]. Nová scéna Theatre – Studio S, Slovkoncert artistic scene in Bratislava, premiered on 18 May 1985. Direction Peter Opálený. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

the ROH House in Bratislava<sup>46</sup>. They had a few pulls at their disposal, and the action on the stage was lit by large standing spotlights on the sides of the stage from the auditorium side.

In addition to the spaces at the Studio of the Nová Scéna Theatre, where Korzo '90 Theatre later began to perform, the drama ensemble performed in Dúbravka borough, Ružinov borough, the previously mentioned hall in Darnica, and at the Studio S Theatre, the Slovkoncert artistic stage. No other Slovak scenographer worked in such conditions. Nevertheless, it must be appreciated that Tomáš Berka, working with the directors and the texts of the plays, always sought to incorporate the environment into the set and to apply the elements of action scenography on the various stages in Bratislava. In his domestic theatre, he collaborated mainly with his former classmate Peter Opálený, the older Marta Gogálová, the guest Stanislav Párnicky, later Oto Katuša, but also with Vladimír Strnisko and Milan Lasica, and in the Slovak National Theatre with Peter Mikulík. As for materials, he most often used wood, metal, and various types of fabrics on the floor, instead of walls, a large sheet as a canopy

<sup>46</sup> At the ROH House, the audience was seated only in the middle zone of seats due to acoustics and visibility conditions; the hall was primarily intended for national meetings of various organisations.

covering the playing area, or even a drapery or screens. He avoided a lot of colour, doors and windows; instead, he used different variations of a few steps for a two-level set. Gradually, he pushed his creative vision of the location and movement of the parts of the set into his realised designs.

But he seemed to have denied himself with his last theatre production after a thirteen-year sabbatical from the theatre. For the intimate story, *Obrázkari* [The Image Makers] by Per Olov Enquist (premiered on 10 June 2005, Andrej Bagar Theatre – Studio), he designed a set with typical film set features; the action took place behind a high, as if a two-level transparent wall of the studio (its upper part could be slightly angled as a window of a rooftop studio), and it could also be used for projection. Director Yvonne Vavrová used several cinematic characters with stunning coloured lighting to bring the story of Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf to life.

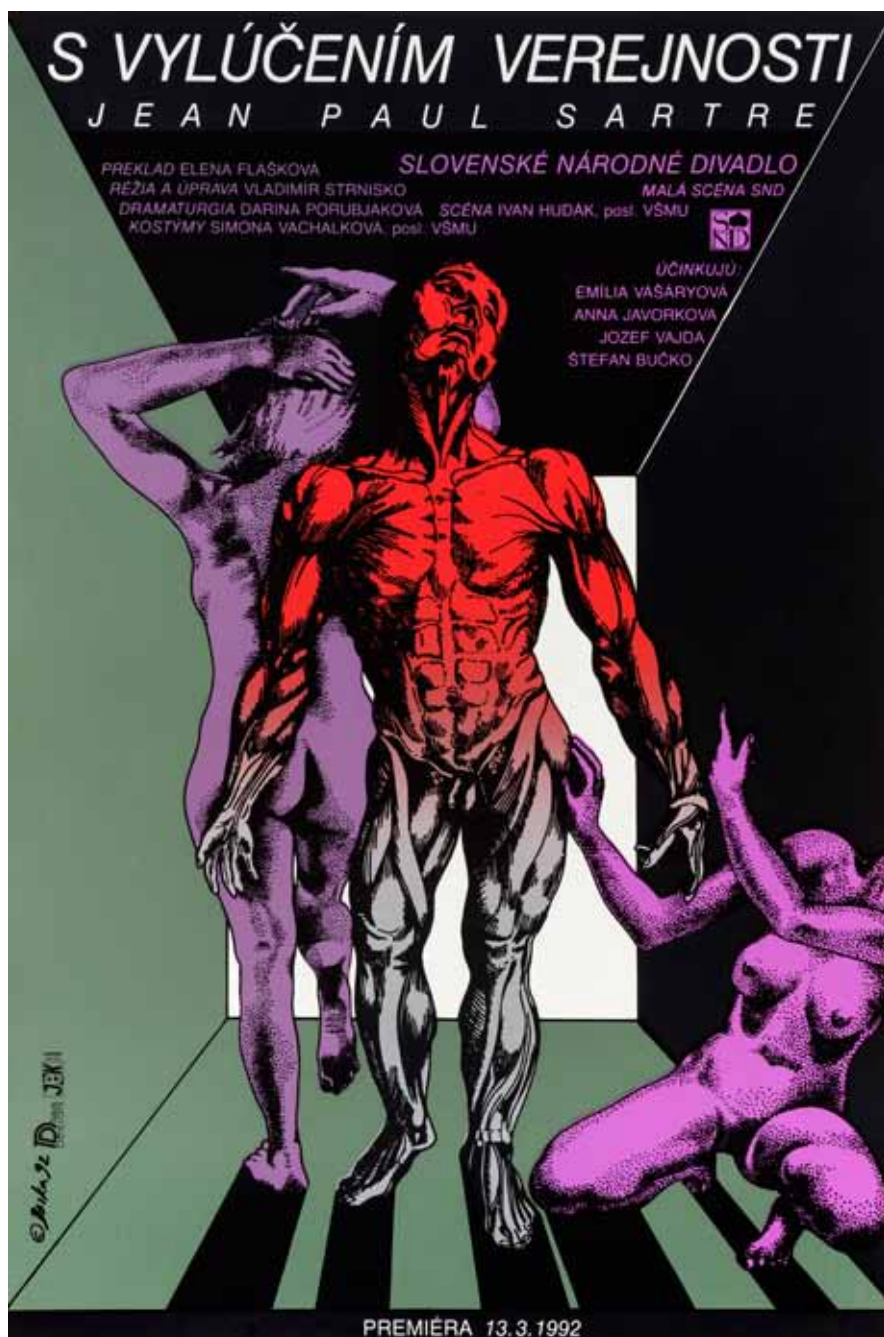
### Conclusion 2 – Theatre Depicted on a Poster

In addition to stage and initially also costume designs, Tomáš Berka's poster work is also noteworthy. After the first attempts and inspirations drawn from the Polish theatre poster, he began to focus on it more systematically. The typography is not essential in that case, but the colours, the shape of a stricter, later looser contour line, a distinctive character, hyperbole, and caricature are of key importance. They

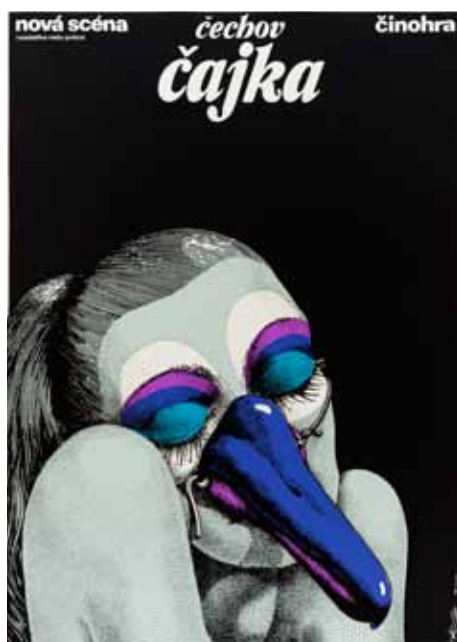


The theatre poster for the production of Volker Braun: *Velký mier* [Great Peace]. The Poetic Ensemble of the Nová Scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 21 January 1989. Scenography Otto Šujan, Direction Martin Kákoš. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

are free-standing works of art indeed. At first sight, they do not correspond with the content of the linked titles. Instead, they are more of the artist's interpretation, often aiming to shock. At the time of Real Socialism (the 1970s and 1980s), there were plenty of areas in the centre of Bratislava where posters for cultural events were mounted regularly. They aimed to captivate the potential visitor; the expressiveness of the artistic expression attracted more attention than minimalism or various features of typography. Tomáš Berka created a substantial part of his poster work for the Nová Scéna Theatre with several symbols that are still recognisable today. The predominant symbols were body parts – hands, fingers, eye/eyes, nose, their composition, together with other symbols provokes, often to the point of political subtext. This can be seen, for example, in Ondrej Šulaj's *Ako v pavučine* [As if in a Spider's Web] (1984): a clenched fist, half-covered by a bandage, emerges from the theatre floorboards, together with red-eye-glasses, partly broken. However, it



The theatre production poster. Jean-Paul Sartre: *S vylúčením verejnosti* [No exit]. The Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 13 January 1992. Scenography Ivan Hudák. Direction Vladimír Strnisko. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.



The theatre production poster. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: *Čajka* [The Seagull]. Nová scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 2 December 1988. Scenography Miloš Pietor Jr. Direction Miloš Pietor. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.



The theatre production poster. Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol: *Mrtve duše* [Dead Souls]. Nová scéna Theatre in Bratislava, premiered on 9 September 1988. Scenography Miloš Pietor Jr. Direction Vladimír Strnisko. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

offers multiple associations, among others, related to the theatre's internal operations. He depicted Ignatius Dvoretzky's play *Riaditeľ divadla* [Theatre Director] (1985) by means of the central symbol of a round stamp – a chess pawn with a telephone number pad, a receiver, a bow tie and an inventory number. Jana Kákošová's *Vďaka za dôveru* [Thanks for the Trust] (1986) as an ear closed into a bass case in a cuboid without walls.

Towards the end of the 1980s, he was more forthcoming. The poster for *Veľký mier* [The Great Peace] (1989) by Volker Braun depicts a stylised caricatured handshake of hands tied with a white ribbon of peace, consuming each other and unable to be separated. Even more daring is the design for Friedrich Schiller's play *Fiescovo sprisahanie v Janove* [The Fiesco's Conspiracy at Genoa] (1990) – a busty head wrapped in red cloth, with a mask over its eyes and two fingers raised in victory.<sup>47</sup> The poster for the play by Jean-Paul Sartre *S vylúčením verejnosti* [No Exit] (1992, the Drama Company of the Slovak National Theatre) presents en face a male red and white skeleton with muscles as a victim with one naked female body from the back. The other woman, also in purple colour representing emotions, crouches to the side, and her hand reaches for the man they are both interested in. Tomáš Berka has confined the characters of

<sup>47</sup> The two fingers raised in this way also became the symbol of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in November 1989.



this strange triangle to a small space resembling a cargo elevator, with the back walls narrowing into perspective to match the plot of the play. The female lips and breasts came to his attention several times; let's mention Jacques Offenbach's *Krásna Helena* [The Beautiful Helen] (1989) with breasts in the shape of a sailboat, at the bottom of their centre, fingers cling to a small Trojan horse. After 1989, we can also find signs of equivocal, almost surrealistic jokes in his free poster work, which, according to the art historian Ivan Lacika, reveal the artist's virtuosity as a draughtsman.<sup>48</sup> An exception is a simple poster for *Čajka* [The Seagull] by Anton Chekhov (1988): a graphic portrait on a black background depicting a young girl with hunched shoulders or the wings of a crowned woman wearing a mask with a pointed nose.

Approving posters during the years of Real Socialism was not always easy, although Tomáš Berka does not refer to it negatively. The experience of designing a poster for the national (Czechoslovak) theatre festival Divadlo Dnešku (The Theatre of Today) 1989 has probably slipped his memory.<sup>49</sup> While the director of the Department of Arts at the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic, Jozef Kot<sup>50</sup>, approved it without any reservations, the Czech side demanded the removal of the vigilant eye from the letter D as 'Divadlo' [Theatre] created by the fingers of the hands. That happened only two months before the Velvet Revolution.

### Postscript

The theatre work of Tomáš Berka has been concluded for a long time. He exhibited some of his scenography designs, but especially his poster work, in Japan and throughout the then Western Europe. He was able to overcome the problematic socio-political times of the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovakia thanks to music; along with Fero Griglák<sup>51</sup> and other members of the jazz-rock band *Fermata*, he decided to focus on instrumental compositions, and they performed more than two hundred concerts a year at home and abroad in socialist countries.<sup>52</sup> After 1989 – when the Iron Curtain was torn down – working for the film became his way of compensating for the previous times. Paradoxically, he was led to it by Peter Mikulík's offer to participate in the set design of the TV series *Štúrovci* [Štúr's Group] (1991). Other films followed later, he had to pick up the period realia on the go, which is not so important in the theatre. He described his path to creating cinematic illusions, as he called the great films he worked on, in the previously mentioned book *Veľká ilúzia alebo ako sa stavia filmový zázrak* [The Great Illusion, or How the Film Miracles Are Built]. He went through all the positions of an architect – from production designer, art director, and construction manager to construction coordinator. The observations about different approaches to the production design during the preparation of a film by several Slovak and Czech directors (e.g. Juraj Jakubisko, Juraj Herz), but also American film-makers (e.g. Stanley Kubrick)

<sup>48</sup> LACIKA, I. (ed.). *Tomáš Berka*. [Catalogue], p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> The festival was organised in turns in Košice City and in Ostrava City. Since the theatre building in Košice was restored in 1989, the Slovak organisers held the festival in Ostrava.

<sup>50</sup> He also grew up in the Avion apartment complex.

<sup>51</sup> František Griglák is one of the most renowned guitar players of Slovak rock music today.

<sup>52</sup> Because of the inability to travel freely during the Normalisation, only some bands with commercial contracts were allowed to go west to play in various bars. In the mid-1980s, Tomáš Berka took an almost twenty-five-year break from public stage performances.



The poster to advertise the graphic and design work of Tomáš Berka – Thalia design for presentation in Canada, 1992. Photo archive of Tomáš Berka.

and British film-makers (e.g. Ridley Scott) are particularly intriguing. Tomáš Berka writes about his practical experience with various film productions (Paramount, 20th Century Fox), as well as about the preparation – the construction of sets for such large-scale films in Slovakia, Hungary and elsewhere.

The covid pandemic has dampened filming in Europe, and Tomáš Berka is currently working on two or three television or film projects a year in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Unlike the theatre, those will remain recorded on various media, as well as the original creations on music albums<sup>53</sup>. Much of his theatre work is forgotten, and the archive photographs do not capture the atmosphere or the various external contexts that influenced the outcome of the stage production. Theatre is ephemeral; only the poster and the physical stage design, along with the model boxes, remain and bring back memories of the past. Until they are caught up in the vortex of futility for the times to come.

Translated by Zuzana Koblišková

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Dagmar Podmaková  
 Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy CVU SAV  
 Dúbravská cesta 9  
 841 01 Bratislava  
 Slovakia  
 e-mail: dagmar.podmakova@savba.sk