

## THE CASUISTRY OF DIE KLEINBÜRGERHOCHZEIT [A RESPECTABLE WEDDING] BY BERTOLT BRECHT IN SLOVAK THEATRE: A STRUGGLE FOR VALUES

Elena KNOPOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research,

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

**Abstract:** The study explores the one-act play *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* [A Respectable Wedding] by Bertolt Brecht and its productions in Slovak professional theatre.<sup>1</sup> The authoress elaborates on expert reflection and viewers' reception of key productions from the perspective of Brecht's requirements of theatre, which should be entertaining and informative at the same time. The first staging of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* under Ivan Krajíček's direction in 1978 created the basic comparative and evaluative basis for future stage adaptations of the one-act play. The study deliberates the production sequence through a lens of casuistry: individual productions represent how the creative professionals communicated forms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and declining social morality. They moved from the critique of the petty bourgeois class to capturing an entire modern society in which values are absent. As in other European countries, Brecht became the author through whom the struggle for values was fought in Slovakia. It was the last performance of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* (Slovenské národné divadlo – Slovak National Theatre, abbr. SND, 2013, directed by Diego de Brea) that provoked controversial social reactions and brought about an interesting shift in expert reflection – from the evaluation of the artwork, the interest of critics and creators shifted to the evaluation of the audience (lack of orientation in art and taste).

**Key words:** *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* [A Respectable Wedding], Bertolt Brecht, Slovak Theatre, Diego de Brea

The confrontations of Slovak theatre makers with the dramatic work of Bertolt Brecht not only directly allude to their artistic coping with avant-garde influences and the staging methods of epic theatre but also to the development of Slovak theatre in a specific socio-political context. Especially from the 1960s onwards, Brecht embodied in Slovak artistic and cultural milieu "the idea of a viable version of socialist literature."<sup>2</sup> His critically oriented work (both socially and politically) constituted an ideologically and idea-wise acceptable basis allowing the theatre to respond in an engaged way to domestic political situation (for instance, the production *Mann ist Mann* [A Man's a Man]<sup>3</sup>, Poetická scéna Bratislava [Poetic Scene, Bratislava], 1975; *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* [The Good Person of Szechwan]<sup>4</sup>, Slovenské národné divadlo [Slo-

<sup>1</sup> In Slovakia, the play was traditionally staged under the title *Malomešiaková svadba* [A Respectable Wedding].

<sup>2</sup> BŽOCH, A. Od kultúrnej reprezentácie k demokratickej diskusii (a späť). Literatúra nemeckých jazykových oblastí v slovenských časopiseckých prekladoch [From Cultural Representation to a Democratic Discussion (and back). German Language Literature in Slovak Literary Journals]. In *World Literature Studies*, 2011, Vol. 20, Issue 4, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> In Slovakia, the play was staged under the title *Muž ako muž* [A Man's a Man].

<sup>4</sup> In Slovakia, the play was staged under the title *Dobrý človek zo Sečuanu* [The Good Person of Szechwan].

vak National Theatre], 1986; *Baal*, Divadlo Slovenského národného povstania Martin [Slovak National Uprising Theatre in Martin], 1989).

As in other European countries, Brecht became an author through whom the struggle for values was fought in Slovakia. An implicit criticism of the conditions that resulted in an individual's distorted actions as a reflection of the state of society, but also the explicit criticism of the totalitarian power structures that were responsible for the misery in the country leading to the moral decline of its inhabitants, were the themes through which Slovak theatre professionals actively entered the discourse on new human and civic values.

Brecht's work was a suitable material for this purpose in various historical periods and political conditions. Although the German playwright shaped his characters as individualised figures, he saw them as representatives of society as a whole, seeking to capture the mechanisms that lead to malign influences. He was interested in the ethical, social and political, individual and collective actions on the basis of which a just world should operate. Through his work, he formulated the foundations on which modern society could build, with regard to the responsibility of the individual and society for their actions determining the overall development of social conditions. It is these elements of his work that allowed for new and up-to-date interpretations. Although the characters, their natures and especially the plots (stories) were not too elaborate or original from dramatic and psychological points of view, the form of his plays was always strictly rational and subordinated to the intention – the function of a theatre that was socially effective and corresponded to the author's left-wing ideological orientation. Brecht often used model situations and old parables (the so-called parables), which he updated and embellished, the important condition being that the theatre should be entertaining and instructive at the same time.

On the element of entertainment in theatre, Brecht pointed out that there are weak (simple) and strong (complex) sorts of entertainment, which are to be found in great drama and which are more delightful, more contradictory, and thus more fruitful.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to the element of informativeness, his focus was on the spectator, whom the theatre was not supposed to burden with moralizing, but to leave to him an independent intellectual activity: and rather than burdening him by moralising, theatre was expected to allow the viewer to perform independent intellectual activity: "It has always been the mission of the theatre (...) to entertain people. (...) We could in no way raise it [the theatre – E. K.] to a higher status if we wanted to make it, for example, a marketplace for morality; only then would we have to try to prevent it from being lowered, which would happen the moment it did not present morality in an entertaining way, entertaining to the senses, whereby morality can only benefit from it."<sup>6</sup>

By creating emotionally and intellectually powerful artistic representations of society, it was through theatre that society would ultimately be able to effect social transformation in a world that Brecht perceived on the basis of a constant dialectic of good and evil and the questioning of established values.

Brecht's work, as well as his snide remarks, often provoked stormy reactions from

<sup>5</sup> BRECHT, B. *O divadelnom umení* [Brecht on Theatre]. Bratislava : Slovenské vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry, 1959, p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

the public and theatre critics. Brecht himself liked to spark scandals. In Slovakia, perhaps not so paradoxically, the most heated intellectual disputes over the “true Brecht” took place after the Velvet Revolution (1989), when theatre, after several years of stagnation, again began to focus on committed work. They were connected with the staging of one of his early plays, *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* staged by SND in 2013. When Brecht wrote this play, he had not yet formulated the principles of his epic and politically engaged theatre. It is interesting, therefore, that it was its early 21<sup>st</sup> century production that triggered an unprecedented wave of controversy at the time, accusing, on the one hand, the nation’s top theatre institution of the manner of its artistic functioning and cultural profiling, and, on the other, its audiences of petty bourgeois taste. The question is whether this demonstrated the timeless provocative and critical qualities of the play, leading to a possible social change (or at least to a discourse), whether the focus of the contemporary theatre makers was also on the spectators and their stimulation, as it was with Brecht, or, on the contrary, whether the production did not achieve the desired artistic and social effects.

### Outlining the Brief Genesis of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*

Initially, *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* was written by Brecht under the title *Die Hochzeit* [The Wedding] in 1919, along with five other one-act plays: *Der Bettler oder Der tote Hund* [The Beggar or the Dead Dog], *Er treibt einen Teufel aus* [Driving Out a Devil], *Lux in Tenebris*, *Der Fichzung* [The Catch]<sup>7</sup>, *Der Schweinigel* [The Whole Hog], and the libretto of the short opera *Prärie* [The Prairie].<sup>8</sup> There are some discrepancies in the number of one-acts in Slovak and Czech contexts. In most of the domestic publication sources, the number of one-act plays is given as five in total. This number was used by Slovak and Czech experts on the work of Bertolt Brecht, for instance, by Martin Porubjak, Ludvík Kundera, and the information was then published in programme booklets and reviews and was adopted by dramaturgs and critics. In more recent foreign sources, however, this figure is corrected. For example, in his publication *Bertolt Brecht*, 2014, comprising an extensive material of diverse sources, Stephen Parker complements five one acts by another one-act play – *Der Schweinigel*. It is not an adapted or renamed version of another one-act play, but an autonomous miniature (a short joke).

It took seven long years after it had been written for *Die Hochzeit* to be put on stage for the first time. Brecht himself never staged it, although he had rather great expectations of the one-act series at the beginning of his career. In 1956, it was performed for a second time in Frankfurt am Main (Schauspielhaus in Frankfurt am Main) under a modified title *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*. In Europe, the one-act play was more popular with student and amateur groups than with professional theatre companies. A performance in the theatre would be followed by a fresh programme in a nearby pub in

<sup>7</sup> This short play is also known in Slovakia as *Úlovok* [The Catch] thanks to the staging of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* by Nová scéna Theatre under Vladimír Strniško’s direction in 1985. *Úlovok* was scheduled to be mounted on stage alongside *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*. However, the play’s rehearsing was discontinued (the reason, as indicated by newspaper articles, was that it lacked recentness). It has never been considered in the plans of the theatres.

<sup>8</sup> PARKER, S. *Bertolt Brecht*. Praha : Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2019, p. 147.

the form of a series of hilarious and often bawdy poems set to music (just like Brecht, he made his friends laugh at his pithy or erotic poems, jokes and songs at pub get-togethers). In Slovakia, it was different, it was only after successful performances in well-established repertory theatres that it entered the amateur theatre environment.<sup>9</sup> The play *Svadba* [The Wedding] by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was more popular with the amateur theatre environment, in which the author worked, like Brecht, with the anatomy of a short joke – the portrayal of a disastrous wedding feast.

In several sources one finds references that Brecht's one-acts served as a kind of authorial exercises, sketches that he was able to use in his later work. Indeed, many of the elements, character traits and motifs of the characters are found in his later, more complete and extended plays. The Czech literary historian Ludvík Kundera writes: "In addition to their relaxing function, Brecht emphasised in them his inspiration by Cervantes' spicy interludes. In hindsight, however, another inspiration comes to the fore: the market-place theatre of the Munich cabaret performer Karl Valentin. (...) The connection between Brecht's five one acts from 1919 and the Bavarian folk farce is nowadays limited to verbal harshness, coarseness rather than to a realistic elaborate portrayal."<sup>10</sup>

Based on his knowledge of the Czech theatre context, Kundera names one of the central problems of the staging practice in the production of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, which persists to this day. It is the emphasis on externality (verbal harshness, coarseness) at the expense of the inner mechanism of the play (realistic elaborate portrayal of the characters in mutual micro-situations). Another controversial element for staging practice is furniture that keeps falling apart, which is usually interpreted only as a comic element or an effective witty metaphor. The theoretical treatment of Brecht's dramatic work points out that the dilapidated furniture plays a more important role. In fact, the central character of the play is not the wedding party or the newlywed couple, but precisely the furniture, clumsily nailed together from crates by the groom, which keeps falling apart in a meaningful way during the wedding banquet. In this motif several theorists, including Kundera, have found an anticipation of absurd drama and the theatre of the absurd, which one could only partially agree with.<sup>11</sup>

The genesis of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* and Brecht's initial ambitions are much simpler and more pragmatic. Brecht was primarily concerned with comic effect and to achieve it, he drew inspiration from his theatre (and cinematic) models of the time. After he had been separated from his partner Paula Banholzer (nicknamed Bi), his son Frank was born out of wedlock and Brecht (nicknamed Bidi) decided to patch things up with her and her family. Part of the plan was to achieve success in the theatre that he coveted and believed he had within his grasp. His idea of domestic bliss was based on an artistic career in Munich, which would guarantee him recognition and financial stability. Bi as a wife, with all the desired skills, was part of this vision.

<sup>9</sup> Without doubt, the availability of a language-related translation played its role in this context.

<sup>10</sup> KUNDERA, L. *Brecht*. Brno : Janáčkova akademie múzických umění v Brně, 1998, p.124.

<sup>11</sup> Likewise the Slovak theatre critic and theoretician Martina Mašlárová understands *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* as an anticipation of the antidrama of Ionesco, especially for the cyclicity of certain elements and the repetitiveness of motifs, such as the hoarding of food, broken furniture, piling of jokes with an absurd punch line or trivial dialogue. See MAŠLÁROVÁ, M. Taká podarená svadba v Slovenskom národnom divadle [Such an Amusing Wedding in the Slovak National Theatre]. In *Svět a divadlo*, 2013, Vol. 24, Issue 3, p. 87.

In a letter to Bi, Brecht writes: "I've now agreed a contract with Drei Masken and I'm working on several plays at the same time. Come what may, I want to earn money."<sup>12</sup>

So he began working on one-acts, following the examples of Miguel de Cervantes and Carlo Valentin, which were to be a successful start to his dream career. He even visited Valentino's Munich performance and became personally acquainted with the cabaret actor. Brecht was later to comment that "Karl Valentin had been for him [Brecht – note E. K.] what Arnold Schönberg had been for Brecht's composer friend Hans Eisler."<sup>13</sup>

In the end, however, Brecht's intellectual nature prevailed over the formal attributes of the hyperbolised grotesque as a commercially appealing title, which did not allow him to proceed in a self-serving manner. Karl Valentin's arid humour, specific verbal actions, hyperbolising a trivial basic situation by subtly escalating it, witty, cabaret-style songs, Chaplin-type slapstick (like the so-called Švejk humour) were among Brecht's building blocks of dramatic and stage gags. The absurdity of the situations was part of this anatomy, but ideologically Brecht was apparently concerned neither with a serious criticism of manners (an attack on respectable townspeople as representatives of polished morality), nor with conveying an authorial poetics or philosophy even remotely similar to the worldview and poetics of the authors of the theatre of the absurd. Brecht used absurd elements as part of the building of a dramatic situation and the gag (comic effect, aesthetics), but he did not use them to represent the world in its dysfunction or disbelief in man (worldview, poetics).

In Slovakia, one-act play *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* was first staged in 1978 under Ivan Krajíček's direction by Krajské divadlo Nitra [Nitra Regional Theatre]. At that time, Slovak theatre had capitalised on its rich experiences with Brecht. Brecht's crucial plays, the so-called serious plays, were staged, such as *Leben des Galilei* [The Life of Galileo] and *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* [Mother Courage and Her Children], parables *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* [The Good Person of Scheswan] or *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* [The Caucasian Chalk Circle], comedy plays *Die Dreigroschenoper* [The Threepenny Opera], *Mann ist Mann* [A Man's a Man], *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* [Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti] or short didactic plays like *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* [The Guns of Carrar] and *Die Mutter* [The Mother].

Critics unanimously described the production as a dramaturgical discovery, a directing and acting concert.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to his work with the actors, Ivan Krajíček transformed the one-act play into a full-length production. Tomáš Berka's stage design, with its brightly coloured chandelier and, in particular, the symbolically enlarged lace canopy, under which the furniture was arranged in counterpoint to its whiteness, revealing the weaknesses of the wedding guests' morals, gave way to the actors' action, interplay, imaginative physical acting and mimic-gestural reactions. The director used the elements of slapstick, caricature, satire and parody. Every detail was meticulously worked out and fleshed out. In particular, there was a rich use of acting, emphasising the realistic nuanced portrayal of the characters (which is lacking

<sup>12</sup> PARKER, S. *Bertolt Brecht*, p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Compare, for instance: F-a. [L. Fiala]. Dramaturgický objav – režijný čin – herecký koncert [Dramaturgical Discovery – Directorial Act – Concert of Actors]. In *Hlas ľudu*, 1978, Vol. 24, Issue 30, p. [4], 4 February 1978.

in Brecht's work) and the comicality of the situations played out, in which a number of provocative but impressive ideas were employed.

At the time of staging the production, Krajíček could not yet have been familiar with Kundera's generalisation based on a recurrent staging practice, i.e., simplification and shallow imitation of the genre of the Bavarian folk farce (the theatre professionals limit themselves to hyperbolising external features, verbal harshness, obscenity and baseness in the characters' behaviour) at the expense of the necessary realistic nuanced portrayal. However, starting from the actor as the dynamic element of the production, Krajíček naturally concentrated on the elaborate representation of the individual micro-situations to make the humour poignant, a little bit insulting but clever. The actors, through the characters they portrayed, continually articulated boredom while the audience had a good time watching them. Along with entertainment, they purposely drew the audience's attention to the characters' moral weaknesses, which they tastefully hyperbolised and caricatured. The noble and seemingly virtuous thoughts of the characters rang out in contrapuntally constructed situations, which actually made them seem trivial. As a result, the furniture that was in a state of disrepair functioned as a sign of the destruction not only of the environment by the petty bourgeoisie, but also of the entire petty bourgeois existence. At the same time, the course of the wedding feast, in its exuberance and shallowness, offered exactly what Brecht desired: unpretentious entertainment. Moreover, Krajíček's production offered the audience a sense of the awkwardness of such a picture of the state of society – stupid, simple-minded and spiritually empty.

The positive reception of this production by theatre experts and audiences played an important role in Slovak theatre. In fact, in this way a basic comparative and evaluative basis was created for future stage adaptations of the one-act play, as well as for a polemical discourse on the approach of directors, who mostly used the play to fulfil their own ambitions in the form of the so-called directorial theatre. Knowledge of the Slovak staging genesis is therefore important in the analysis of further interpretations of the play and reflections on the productions. Staging history shows that *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* was used in Slovak theatre as a rather controversial title, especially in the context of a theatre that is both entertaining and instructive – a condition formulated by its author. This tenet is confirmed by the subsequent productions of the title directed by Vladimír Strnisko (1985, 1990), Svetozár Sprušanský (2001) and Diego de Brea (2013).<sup>15</sup> If we are to explore the above production sequence through the prism of casuistry, that is, to evaluate the productions as individual cases through which the creators communicated forms of appropriate/inappropriate behaviour, attitudes and declining morality, it is necessary to compare them not only in terms of theatre's artistic development, but also in terms of the effect of theatre on the spectator.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimír Strnisko directed the play at Nová scéna Theatre in Bratislava in 1985. In 1990, the production was renewed and transferred to ASTORKA Korzo'90 theatre with a changed cast. After him, the play was directed by Svetozár Sprušanský at Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra with the generational group of the ZDVIH Ensemble under the title *Svadba* [The Wedding]. Most recently, it was performed by the Slovak National Theatre under the direction of the guest Slovenian director Diego de Brea.



### The Casuistry of Staging *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* – from a Satiric Grotesque to Polemic

Ninety-five years after writing the text of *Die Hochzeit* by Bertolt Brecht, director Diego de Brea conceived its Bratislava production, its last for the time being, as a genre of slapstick in the manner of reality TV shows, where nothing is hidden or revealed. From the beginning, the worst human traits and the most obscene behaviour are explicitly shown as normal and ordinary in an escalating pace. The director viewed the wedding guests as an ethically homogeneous group representing the whole of today's society as a society incapable of distinguishing between virtue and vice. On the contrary, this society, as seen through the director's lens, seems not even to know moral values anymore, and therefore it made little sense for the theatre professionals to try to educate it in an entertaining way: "Each of them is a desperate existence void of positive human qualities, closed in his or her own type, without any claim and chance for any development. They are living corpses trapped in the darkness of their inner selves; even the wedding dance is not an orgy, as one would suppose, but the actors sway like figures from an oriel, smirking at the audience. They are unable to do any more."<sup>16</sup>

The contrast to the group of wedding guests was created by a long white festively set table and by the festive clothes of the wedding guests, which were also the central elements of Ivan Krajiček's staging of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, although visually in a much more romanticised way. Given the fact that it is a chamber play, director and set designer de Brea surprisingly placed the table with a white tablecloth that got gradually stained (from food, wine and excrements) in the large space of the stage of the Drama Ensemble of SND, on the floor artistically designed as a large chessboard; the costumes did not caricature the characters, and attention was brought to the details of their faces. Svetozár Sprušanský, on the other hand, situated the worldly wedding guests dressed in Crimplene fabric costumes in a village socialist house of culture. At the time of mounting the production, Crimplene fashion was referred to by designers as a fashion hell. The cheap setting and the materials of the costumes, complemented by imitation jewellery, were meant to evoke feigned luxury. The actors wore wigs, some attached padded bellies that outwardly made them essentially ridiculous figures of wedding creatures. At the banquet, the characters and viewers were no longer served wine and cod, but beer and sausages. The contrast between the quasi-high (artificial festive dress) and low (beer and sausages on plastic trays) achieved a comic effect during the course of the wedding banquet, with the plastic material being a metaphor for pretence.

In contrast to Sprušanský, de Brea did not caricature the characters through external features; for him, caricature resulted from hyperbolising the characters' inner qualities, their interaction and agency without more sophisticated motivations.

Space played an important role in all the productions. From a studio, chamber stage, through the imitation of the house of culture, the walls of which barely held together, the viewer is exposed to the large open stage of the Slovak National Theatre.

<sup>16</sup> MIŠOVIC, K. Svadba, na ktorej je všetko dovolené [Wedding Where Everything Is Allowed]. In *Divadelní noviny*, 12 March 2013. [online]. [cit. 21 April 2021]. Available at: <https://www.divadelni-noviny.cz/svadba-na-ktorej-je-vsetko-dovolené>.



Bertolt Brecht: *Malomeštiakova svadba* [A Respectable Wedding]. Nitra Regional Theatre, premiered on 28 January 1978. Direction Ivan Krajíček. From left Eva Matejková (The Bride's Sister), Dušan Lenci (The Young Man), Ján Kováčik (The Woman's Husband), Božena Slabejová (The Woman), Nora Kuželová (The Bride), Marián Slovák (The Bridegroom), Jozef Dóczy (The Bride's Father), Vladimír Bartoň (The Bridegroom's Friend), Žofia Martišová (The Bridegroom's Mother). Photo by Pavol Dřížhal. Theatre Institute archives.

While in Krajíček's and Strnisko's productions the furniture was about to crumble, mock-up walls were tearing apart, and in Sprušanský's production the whole structure made of cardboard was falling down, de Brea avoided using these material signs as a metaphor altogether. He relied entirely on external physical action and drastic elements (both verbal and physical). In his interpretation, a parade of white painted-up characters, who made freaked-out grimaces on their faces like masks, stepped out in front of the audience's gaze and the camera lens in the opening scene. These determined their typology and patterns of behaviour throughout the performance. Genre-wise, this element evokes the silent grotesque. It also alludes to the practice of the theatre makers to extend the duration of the performance by adding an introduction or prologue to this short Brecht's play – whether it was a text (Brecht's poems set to music or recited) or a pantomimic miniature. The short visual prologue, however, was not what extended the production of the short text to its one-and-a-half-hour duration. The emphasis of the Bratislava production was on the variations of animalism, instincts, biologism and scatological elements: "The actors burped, gagged, spat, covered themselves with mayonnaise and doused themselves and the tablecloth of the wedding table with cheap, disgusting red wine, (...) urinated and had sex (...),



before leaving the wedding party, a guest defecated and wiped his bottom with the tablecloth from the wedding table."<sup>17</sup>

In his 1985 production, director Vladimír Strnisko pointed out that petty bourgeois manners and pseudo-values had become the basic build-up of a society that no longer hid its moral decay and hypocrisy behind a mask of decency. Reviews confirm that domestic critics at the time mostly blamed him for his lack of a sense of refined entertainment at the expense of overexposed gags, which sounded at times harsh and embarrassing: "Not only the humour, but also the acting, often straddles the line dividing taste from tastelessness. Krajíček in Nitra did not cross this line. Strnisko crossed it, and not once. (...) By overexposing the grotesque, both the characters and the satirical core of the play suffered. Although they were not completely lost, they were considerably weakened for the sake of a dubious effect."<sup>18</sup> Both Strnisko and de Brea, in the spirit of Brecht's inspirational sources of coarse-grained folk farce and market-place theatre, found new hyperbolised expressive positions for them in the form of precisely staged, dictated acting, especially physical actions. In this way they moved the grotesque closer to coarse-grained farce, harsh in verbal expression, indecent in humour, filled with alcohol, sexuality and undressing. According to critic Vladislava Fekete, Sprušanský also set his theatrical goal too low, which means that he concentrated only on the extraction of humour and shallow entertainment. "The absolute driving force behind all the situations was the sexual energy of the wedding guests and their dissatisfaction with their partners, their marriage. A strong libido shook everyone without exception."<sup>19</sup>

De Brea also used several elements of Brecht's epic theatre: the prompter sat directly on the stage, the make-up was expressive, the lighting was sharp, the sound of cracking furniture or a western music motif parodying the tension in the various situations sounded loudly from the speakers, the wedding dance looked as if the actors rendering the characters were key-operated dolls, the guitar played even though the actor only held it in one hand, and so on. Krajíček and Strnisko did not use similar elements, they focused on playing out comic actors' actions, which they supplemented sometimes with more, sometimes with less effective gags, and some hints of Brecht's later principles were only heard in the productions in the form of an enhanced narrative function (telling inappropriate jokes and stories).

Svetozár Sprušanský, however, had already worked with the motif of epic theatre in Nitra and, like the Slovenian director Diego de Brea later on, used it to achieve a comic effect. In the text of the production he incorporated textbook lessons concerning Brecht's method. "The actors demonstrated or passed up psychological motivations (...), they 'stepped out' of characters through songs, i.e., Brecht's poems set to music (alas, not adequately chosen and certainly not trying to advance the plot).

<sup>17</sup> POLÁK, M. Svadba až na doraz [A Wedding to the Limit]. In *Literárny týždenník*, 2013, Vol. 26, Issue 15 – 16, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> F-a. [L. Fiala]. Málo satirická Malomeštiakova svadba. Preexponovaná grotesknosť [Not Very Satirical Respectable Wedding. Overexposed Grotesqueness]. In *Hlas ľudu*, 1985, Vol. 31, Issue 134, p. [3], 10 June 1985. See also KNOPOVÁ, E. Bertolt Brecht v slovenskom divadle v rokoch 1975 – 1985 [Bertolt Brecht in Slovak Theatre between 1975 and 1985]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2020, Vol. 68, Issue 2, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> FEKETE, V. Rozvod (rozhnevaná recenzia) [Divorce (An Angry Review)]. In *Kultúrny život*, 2001, Vol. 2, Issue 12, p. 8, 21 March 2001.



Bertolt Brecht: *Malomeštiakova svadba* [A Respectable Wedding]. Nitra Regional Theatre, premiered on 28 January 1978. Direction Ivan Krajíček. From left Nora Kuželová (The Bride), Marián Slovák (The Bridegroom). Photo by Pavol Dřížhal. Theatre Institute archives.

The formal form of *The Wedding* overwhelmed its content, i.e., its message.<sup>20</sup> In this respect de Brea did not introduce any novelty into the Slovak staging tradition. Rather, one could say that he tried to change the already tried and failed attempt (by Sprušanský) to employ *Verfremdungseffekt* in the staging of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, i.e., a text with a completely different poetics than Brecht's later plays.

Previous directors and dramaturgs made only minimum modifications to the original text, expanding it to include physical action and agency. The director Diego de Brea took advantage of the possibility of textual over-interpretation at the level of character motivations, relationships, situations, as well as the play's final denouement. In Brecht's work, the true face of society was revealed with a relaxing mood; the decrepit furniture symbolised the moral decay of one social class. In de Brea's production, wine was a non-drinkable potion that everyone preferred to spit out, and the loosening of morals thus did not occur under the influence of alcohol. The characters as a picture of people today were simply bad (hypocritical, neurotic, licentious and indecent). All the guests sat together in an unbearable stench from the glue made by the groom, the furniture was not falling apart but was being destroyed by the wedding guests themselves. This can be seen as a logical line of interpretation

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

of Brecht's furniture metaphor in the light of theatre and social developments both in Slovakia and in other, especially Central European, cultures. At the wedding feast portrayed by Vladimír Strnisko, it was no longer just the furniture that was falling apart, but the walls of the interior, the whole petty bourgeois world, were crumbling down. Svetozár Sprušanský, unlike Vladimír Strnisko, used the individual pieces of crumbling furniture in isolation, not as a unified metaphor, but at the end of the performance, the entire structure of the house of culture collapsed. In fact, the climax of the Nitra production was the collapse of the back wall of the room, which unsuccessfully resisted the hysterical convulsions of the characters. In Diego de Brea's case, the furniture as the main character was almost absent – it was crumbling with the sound from the speakers. Its violent destruction was the fault of the instinct-driven characters, who nevertheless acted the same way from the very beginning of the production.

The shifts in de Brea were also visible in the characters. The father of the pregnant bride (Dušan Jamrich) hinted at an incestuous relationship with his daughter and perversely amused himself at the whole wedding parade. The groom (Richard Stanke), as an incompetent handyman, would only fuck and plane. Right from the womb of his chosen one, he pulled a hammer, a wooden plank and a fish.<sup>21</sup> His bride (Petra Vajdová), in a moment of solitude, automatically offered him her vulva (from the back), while enjoying a pudding dessert. The bride's sister (Judit Bárdos) was in turn unbearably eccentric, until her lust was satisfied by having accidental intercourse with the Young Man (Peter Brajerčík), who finally, provocatively, out of spite, first urinated all over the table and then passed stool on the table.

Brecht offered fierce criticism of a morally disintegrated (bourgeois) class and a theatre that was both entertaining and instructive (he was thus waging a struggle for values). Strnisko's production (1985, 1990) laid emphasis on pseudo-values and the emptiness of interpersonal relationships. In his vision, today's petty bourgeois morality (not just class) has already lost the last vestiges of judgment. "People have become coarse and coarsened. Vulgarly and obscenity in action and speech no longer need even a disguise."<sup>22</sup> Strnisko thus continued his interpretation of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, which in 1978 Ivan Krajíček was still only subtly hinting at through spontaneous humour and amusement. But the critic Stanislav Vrbka noted in his review at that time: "(...) ever since *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* was written, petty bourgeoisie has done more evil and has become an ally of much darker forces than its own narrow-mindedness, stupidity and complacency."<sup>23</sup> As if predicting the future staging of this play in Slovak theatre, Sprušanský turned satirical-social criticism into a travesty, while the director-dramaturg duo Diego de Brea and Miriam Kičiňová went the furthest yet in hyperbole and caricature, creating an image of the absolute devaluation of social norms and values as a highly polemical demonstration of disgust of a non-agonic nature.

<sup>21</sup> The production employed several elements as allusions to Christian or biblical motifs – wine symbolising sacrifice for sinners, the fish symbolising adultery, etc.

<sup>22</sup> KNOPOVÁ, E. Bertolt Brecht v slovenskom divadle v rokoch 1975 – 1985 [Bertolt Brecht in Slovak Theatre between 1975 and 1985]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> VRBKA, S. *Bertolt Brecht: Malomeštiakova svadba*. (Hodnotenie) [Bertolt Brecht: A Respectable Wedding. (Evaluation)]. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 1978, p. 2.



Bertolt Brecht: *Malomeštiakova svadba* [A Respectable Wedding]. Nová Scéna Theatre, premiered on 1 June 1985. Direction Vladimír Strnisko. From left Ivan Letko (The Woman's Husband), Eva Rysová (The Bridegroom's Mother), Ida Rapaičová (The Woman), Boris Farkaš Slovák (The Bridegroom), Oľga Solárová (The Bride), Stano Dančiak (The Bride's Father), Ivan Romančík (The Bridegroom's Friend). Photo by Igor Teluch. Theatre Institute archives.

The 2013 production of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* caused a group exodus from the auditorium during the preview, which was repeated during the premiere.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, such a repeated reaction of the audience aroused an extraordinary media interest in the production. Articles with attractive and scandal-evocative headlines were published in both specialised and gossip periodicals.<sup>25</sup> The struggle "for values" thus took place not on the theatre stage, not in the auditorium or in front of the theatre, but rather surprisingly by Slovak standards, on the pages of newspapers and magazines.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, the theatre makers urged the audiences to such a response during the performance, after prior modification of Brecht's provocative allusion to the play *Baal* in the original text and replacing it with an allusion to *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, i.e., to "dirty stuff" one should not even bother seeing. Afterwards, the play was recommended by the theatre for viewers over eighteen; it was on the repertory for a little less than a year and a half, with as few as twenty-four repeats.

<sup>25</sup> Let us give some examples: Škandál : Grganie a sex v SND! : Pobúrení diváci odchádzajú z predstavenia [Scandal: Gaggling and sex in Slovak National Theatre! : Outraged spectators leave the show]); Nechutnosti v SND: Pýtali sme sa hercov, čo si o hre myslia [Disgust in Slovak National Theatre: We asked the actors what they thought of the play] (in *Plus JEDEN DEŇ*); Terapia šokom [Shock Therapy] (in *Pravda*); Svadba až na doraz [A Wedding to the Limit] (in *Literárny týždenník*).



Bertolt Brecht: *Malomeštiakova svadba* [A Respectable Wedding]. ASTORKA Korzo '90 Theatre, renewed premiere on 1 April 1990. Direction Vladimír Strnisko. From left Boris Farkaš (The Bridegroom), Ida Rapačiová (The Woman), Ivan Romančík (The Bridegroom's Friend), Oľga Solárová (The Bride), Stano Dančiak (The Bride's Father). Photo by Igor Teluch. Theatre Institute archives.

Young critics in particular championed the production. They wrote that the director could have been even more cruel and crude, because Brecht's text would have sustained it;<sup>26</sup> that he did not use real urination, defecation, nobody on stage really passed out or stripped naked;<sup>27</sup> they asked who in the audience had not experienced a wedding where someone did not get drunk and throw up, the best man did not flirt with the bridesmaid and dirty jokes were not told.<sup>28</sup> Others would get Slovak National Theatre and its audiences involved in their defensive attitudes. From the criticism of the artwork and its qualities, spotlighting the value-added for the Slovak staging context in terms of interpretation and values, the reviewers' attention was shifted to a press "trial" with the audience and the criticism of their dismissive attitude. They justified the non-acceptance of the production by the lack of audience insight in contemporary European theatre, resulting in "a furore on the Danube lagoon caused by a production that in most European countries would have been perceived

<sup>26</sup> SMOLKOVÁ, S. Terapia šokom [Shock Therapy]. In *Pravda*, 2013, Vol. 23, Issue 37, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> MAŠLÁROVÁ, M. Taká podarená svadba v Slovenskom národnom divadle [Such an Amusing Wedding in the Slovak National Theatre]. In *Svět a divadlo*, pp. 85 – 88.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.





Bertolt Brecht: *Svadba* [A Wedding]. ZDVIH Ensemble in Andrej Bagar Theatre, Nitra, premiered on 23 February 2001. Direction Svetozár Sprušanský. From left Stanislav Pitoňák (The Young Man), Gabriela Dolná (The Bridegroom's Mother or The Bride's Father), Klaudia Kolembusová (The Bride's Sister), Erik Peťovský Slovák (The Bridegroom), Miloslava Zelmanová (The Bride). Photo by Filip Vančo. Theatre Institute archives.

as a normal and qualitatively average piece of theatre,"<sup>29</sup> and by the audience's taste, which the SND profiles through the shallowest tabloid titles, which actually made de Brea's staging of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* "a well-aimed fist bump to the audience of the Slovak National Theatre, which is largely composed of the very petty bourgeoisie whom the play is about."<sup>30</sup>

The older generation, unlike the younger critics, knowing the broader context of the work and its directorial interpretation in Slovak theatre, focused more on staging as a way of artistic representation of reality and modelling the social value discourse. It drew attention to the polemical nature of one-sided exaggeration and the use of shallow vulgarity as a demonstrative gesture in relation to Brecht's poetics of a socially effective theatre. It was critical of the voguish and elitist seclusion of theatre makers and of some reviewers, into a postmodern ghetto in which, instead of a new identification of the values of post-communist society, these are mistakenly conflated with the manifestations of boundless postmodernism that is blindly adored. The attitudes of the younger generation of theatre critics towards the audience's rejection of this production were in many ways reminiscent of the context of the creation of Brecht's poem *Die Lösung* [The Solution], as pointed out by the Czech playwright

<sup>29</sup> ZWIEFELHOFER, M. Malomesto okolo/v nás [Small-town around Us/in Us]. In *kód*, 2013, Vol. 7, Issue 3, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> LEŠKA, R. Malomeštiakova svadba (Slovenské národné divadlo), 24 February 2013. [online]. [cit. 18 June 2020]. Available at: <http://nadivadlo.blogspot.cz/2013/02/leska-malomestiakova-svadba-slovenske.html>.





Bertolt Brecht: *Svadba* [A Wedding]. ZDVIH Ensemble in Andrej Bagar Theatre, Nitra, premiered on 23 February 2001. Direction Svetozár Sprušanský. From left Marcel Ochránek (The Friend), Klaudia Kolumbusová (The Bride's Sister). Photo by Filip Vančo. Theatre Institute archives.

and dramaturg Jan Vedral in a study published in the journal *Slovenské divadlo* [The Slovak Theatre].<sup>31</sup> Instead of seeking answers as to why the opinion of the theatre makers and one part of the critical community diverged from the public opinion of the audience, they leaned towards blaming the “stupid people.”<sup>32</sup>

The management of the Slovak National Theatre and the actors' ensemble took cautious positions, admitting their initial embarrassment about such a harshly interpreted and staged *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*. At the same time, however, they expressed their support for the director and the production, as it was a new experience with directorial work, part of which is to provoke irritating reactions. Roman Polák, director of the Drama Ensemble of SND, said that the Slovak National Theatre had not counted on a mass exodus of spectators from the hall, but Brecht's work – his plays from the pre-Marxist period – had always caused scandals in society. “One can look at the production from two angles – as a demonstration of vulgarity and cynicism or as a society of empty people who live only by their own carnality, instincts, animalism, where there is not even a hint of the spiritual. I recommend the latter view.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Brecht's plays and their staging forms have more than once in the history of the theatre provoked fierce controversy and social scandal. For the sake of

<sup>31</sup> VEDRAL, J. Ghetto postmoderného divadla [The Ghetto of Postmodern Theatre]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2013, Vol. 61, Issue 3, p. 305.

<sup>32</sup> In the poem, Brecht reacted to the violent suppression of the East German workers' uprising in 1953. When the government subsequently expressed its distrust of the people, Brecht ironically suggested to the government that it should be replaced.

<sup>33</sup> POLÁK, R. 4 otázky pre riaditeľa činohry SND Romana Poláka [Four Questions for Roman Polák, Director of the SND Drama Ensemble]. In *Plus JEDEN DEŇ*, 2013, Vol. 8, Issue 36, pp. 16 – 17, 12 February 2013.



Bertolt Brecht: *Malomeštiaková svadba* [A Respectable Wedding]. Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 9 February 2013. Direction Diego de Brea. From left Anna Javorková (The Bridegroom's Mother), Richard Stanke (The Bridegroom), Gabriela Dzuríková (The Woman), Ivan Vojtek (The Woman's Husband), Petra Vajdová (The Bride). Photo by Martin Geißberg. Slovak National Theatre archives.

comparison, let us take the example of the first production of Brecht in the country neighbouring Slovakia, in Poland. In 1929, Teatr Polski w Warszawie [Polish Theatre in Warsaw] staged *Die Dreigroschenoper*,<sup>34</sup> directed by Leon Schiller, which ended in scandal. After the premiere, a fight took place outside the theatre. A newspaper campaign followed. Right-wing journalists critically rejected the production for its distinctly left-wing interpretation and conception. They wrote of "anti-British provocation" or "promotion of the Bolshevik-Jewish spirit." The performance was subsequently withdrawn from the repertoire by the director of the theatre on the orders of the censors, who justified their action on the grounds that it was clearly a pro-Bolshevik performance.<sup>35</sup>

The case of reflection and social reaction to Diego de Brea's production at the Slovak National Theatre is somewhat different. While in most cases evaluative statements usually refer to a work of art, to its ideological or staging aspect, in this case, the interpretive and aesthetic aspects took a back seat. Instead, the focus shifted to the audience, who were criticised and preached about how they should receive the

<sup>34</sup> In Poland, the play was staged under the title *Opera za trzy grosze* [The Threepenny Opera].

<sup>35</sup> See: PAWŁOWSKI, R. *Kariera Bertolta Brechta* [The Career of Bertolt Brecht]. In *Wyborcza.pl*, 5 September 2003. [online]. [cit. 21 December 2020]. Available at: <https://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,1657186.html>; KĄŻMIERCZAK, B. *Opera za 3 grosze*. [online]. [cit. 21 December 2020]. Available at: <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/99408/opera-za-3-grosze>.



Bertolt Brecht: *Malomeštiakova svadba* [A Respectable Wedding]. Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 9 February 2013. Direction Diego de Brea. From left Petra Vajdová (The Bride), Dušan Jamrich (The Bride's Father), Richard Stanke (The Bridegroom), Judit Bárdoš (The Bride's Sister), Peter Brajerčík (The Young Man), Gabriela Dzuríková (The Woman), Ivan Vojtek (The Woman's Husband). Photo by Martin Geišberg. Slovak National Theatre archives.

production and how ill-informed and uninformed they were about art and their own lived realities. The audience's dismissive reaction was judged to be their own fault and therefore contrary to Brecht's key aim – to engage the audience's intellect, to force them to debate and choose a personal stance.

*Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, directed by Diego de Brea, brought into the continuing staging tradition the question of interpreting Brecht's plays in an unorthodox way, i.e., in such a way as not to lose their social-critical function and at the same time to fulfil the vision of theatre as an engaged medium. Although none of the directors featured in this study were concerned with articulating the play's noetic value for the present in their staging of *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, in de Brea's case this aspect of the play was lost entirely and no new values were articulated. The world was portrayed as permanently dehumanised, without morality or its questioning.

## Conclusion

After 1989, Slovak theatre makers quite naturally, in relation to the social transformations, became more and more seriously and openly interested in the moral values and morals of the man of the new epoch. In the contemporary productions of Bertolt Brecht's plays, one may also trace this interest and development from aggressive and nihilistic counter-heroes (*Baal*, Divadlo SNP Martin [Theatre of the Slovak National Uprising Martin], 1989) through insights into human weaknesses filled with under-

standing (*Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, Divadlo SNP Martin, 2000) to grotesque and mocking sneers at postmodern post-revolutionary society (*Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, SND, 2013). The productions of this period represent the last phase of the interpretations of Brecht's plays and the application of epic (dialectical) theatre practices in Slovak theatre, corresponding to the issue of interpreting Brecht's plays in an unorthodox way, i.e., in such a way that the social function of the theatre, which Brecht emphasised, is preserved. Indeed, Brecht's plays are characterised by a thoughtful, precise form reflecting on their social function. Their staging should therefore not be an arbitrary updating, but a reconciliation of specific Brechtian poetics and aesthetics, so that the audience is at the centre of the theatre makers' concern and eventually, theatre is linked to its own epoch. *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit* is an example of how Slovak theatre makers have dealt with Brecht's legacy and how, although not without problems, they have contributed to the staging tradition of Brecht's plays, which to this day still deals with the question of what intellectual and emotional effect theatre should avoid and what it should, on the contrary, strive for.

Translated by Mária Švecová

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Elena Knopová  
 Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy CVU SAV  
 Dúbravská cesta 9  
 841 01 Bratislava  
 Slovakia  
 e-mail: elena.knopova@savba.sk