

# The Impact of European Theatre on Slovak Opera Staging Practice

Michaela Mojžišová

*Institute of Theatre and Film Research,*

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

**Abstract:** A cross-cutting study offering an insight into the 20<sup>th</sup> century key European theatrical poetics that transcended the Opera of the Slovak National Theatre during its century-old existence. In the 1920s and 1930s, artists, inspired by German expressionism and the Russian avant-garde, entered into controversy with the prevailing art decorativeness and illusive imitation of reality. The fifties were marked by the tethering doctrine of socialist realism shielded by the name of Konstantin Stanislavsky. The sixties and seventies were shaped by an effort to revive Slovak staging practice according to the principles of Walter Felsenstein's psychologically realistic music theatre. And, last but not least, the final part of the study highlights the upsurge of artistic transfers in the current open Europe space.

**Key words:** Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, German expressionism, theatre of the avant-garde, socialist realism, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Walter Felstenstein, Peter Konwitschny

## The Inter-war Period and Expressionism

At first glance, the history of opera in Slovakia may appear to be more of a history of music and singing rather than of theatrical interpretation. Nevertheless, since the founding of the Slovak National Theatre (SND, 1920) until the present, there has been an ambition to invoke an idea that opera is both theatrical and musical art. The most valuable inspirations came – either directly or indirectly – from the international artistic environment.

The earliest modern theatrical stream to have penetrated the young opera of the Slovak National Theatre was German expressionism. Naturally, not in its model form, as defined by the German theatre shaped by Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner, Erwin Piscator, Alfred Roller, etc., but rather in its diluted version that took account of the deplorable financial situation and imperfect theatre engineering and stage machinery of the SND in the 1920s.

In 1923, the then only twenty-one-year-old Ľudovít Hradský (1902 – 1973), became the historically first scenographer of the SND. He was a graduate of the School of Applied Arts in Vienna, where he attended a course in architecture and scenography under professor Otokar Strnad, collaborator of Max Reinhardt and of Leopold Jessner. This happened between 1921 and 1923, with Alfred Roller being school principal. Ľudovít Hradský was the first to try to implant the ideas of expressionism into the SND stage practice. As stated by theatre historian Ladislav Lajcha: “Hradský did not have a different model. He simply transferred this expressionist style to Bratislava.”<sup>1</sup>

Ľudovít Hradský worked in the SND as a scenographer from 1923 to 1927, whereby his most noteworthy designs were created for the SND drama ensemble (especially for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, 1925, directed by Miloš Nový). However, right from the outset, his activity in opera was quite significant and throughout the 1930s, he carried on with it in the form of external collaboration with the SND. In this context, his stage design for Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1935, directed by Bohuš Vilím) was particularly well received.<sup>2</sup>

The stage designs housed by the Theatre Institute in Bratislava are compelling evidence of Ľudovít Hradský’s mastery, as well as of the influence of Adolphe Appia and Alfred Roller on his work. They demonstrate his inspiration by expressionist aesthetics, light direction, and the architectural perception of scenography: his stage designs capture stairways, an expressionist use of the colour scheme or a tower-like arrangement of the movable platform following the example of “Roller towers.” In this connection, theatre scientist Robert Bayer highlighted an interesting fact: Although it is a production from 1935, Ľudovít Hradský’s stage designs are dated 1932, which means they had originated two years before the first new production of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth, which replaced the original production by Richard Wagner.<sup>3</sup> Alfred Roller was its scenographer, but given the outcry of tradi-

1 LAJCHA, L. Európsky podnet scénografii SND. Vplyvy expresionizmu v diele Ľudovíta Hradského [European Impulses to the SND Scenography. The influence of Expressionism in the work of Ľudovít Hradský]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 1992, Vol. 40, Issue 4, p. 338.

2 Ľudovít Hradský had a valuable viewer’s experience with Wagnerian repertoire gained in the Vienna State Opera which he had frequented since his childhood.

3 For more about *Parsifal* at the SND refer to BAYER, R. Bratislavská „krádež“ svätého Grálu. Rekonštrukcia inscenácie Wagnerovho *Parsifala* v Opere SND z roku 1935 [Bratislava “Robbery” of the Holy Grail. Reconstruction of Wagner’s *Parsifal* production at the Opera of Slovak National Theatre (1935)]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2019, Vol. 67, Issue 1, pp. 5 – 22. DOI: 10.31577/sd-2019-0001.

tionalists who were reluctant to give up Wagner's original production, Alfred Roller's intentions could only be implemented in part.

Ľudovít Hradský did not turn out better with his ideas either. In the words of Ladislav Lajcha, "in Wagner's *Parsifal*, he experienced the bitterness of the defeat of a scenographer when sadly comparing designs and their realisations. He categorically rejected the stage decoration and insisted on replacing it with different sets."<sup>4</sup> However, this fact does not diminish Ľudovít Hradský's contribution to Slovak theatre, opera including. As Ladislav Lajcha aptly summarises: "He was among the artists building a bridge between European stimuli and national Slovak artistic ambitions. The value of his contribution is all the greater because he stood at the very beginning of a never-ending process."<sup>5</sup>

Another personality bringing Slovak operatic and dramatic arts closer to European events was the avant-garde director Viktor Šulc (1897 – 1945). Like Ľudovít Hradský, Viktor Šulc was mostly preoccupied with drama direction (between 1932 – 1938, he was drama director of the Czech drama company of the SND), but his contribution to the Slovak opera theatre is equally fundamental.<sup>6</sup> Between 1934 and 1938, he staged eight productions at the SND Opera, opposing the ideas of trivial illustrativity and approach to visual arrangement that dominated the local opera staging practice. The directorial poetics of the leftist theatre professional combined the influences of German expressionism and the Russian avant-garde. They were reflected in the visual element through a dramatic-semantic stage lighting or in combining illusive wings with anti-illusive movable platforms, and the element of acting was liberated from portraying details which were subordinated to the dramatic whole. But perhaps Viktor Šulc's most revolutionary contribution to opera was the ideological engagement of his concepts and also conviction that music theatre, just like drama theatre, should fulfil its social function (in this case, especially socio-critical). He introduced the opera to a dimension which the Slovak opera staging practice had never before, and after, been exposed to.

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4 LAJCHA, L. Európsky podnet scénografii SND. Vplyvy expresionizmu v diele Ľudovíta Hradského [European Impulses to the SND Scenography. The influence of Expressionism in the work of Ľudovít Hradský]. In *Slovenske divadlo*, 1992, Vol. 40, Issue 4, p. 353.

5 Ibid.

6 For more about Viktor Šulc's opera productions at the SND refer to BLAHO, J. *Operné inscenácie Viktora Šulca 1934 – 1938* [Viktor Šulc Opera Performances 1934 – 1938]. [online]. [cit. 2 December 2020]. Available at: <http://udfv.sav.sk/dokumenty/opera.SND-Sulciada.pdf>.

Viktor Šulc collaborated with the SND senior stage designer Ján Ladvenica (1898 – 1947) on the first two opera productions, Gounod's *Faust* (1934) and on the work by contemporary Austrian composer Alexander Zemlinsky, *Der Kreidekreis* [The Chalk Circle, 1934]. Ladvenica catered to the director's request for a light, allusive scene, using neutral movable platforms instead of robust wings. Three productions that followed were staged by Viktor Šulc in collaboration with František Tröster (1904 – 1968), who was a creative professional, one generation younger than Šulc, and was among the most acclaimed personalities not only in Czechoslovakia, but also in the world scenography of the second third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mentally, he was deeply connected with Viktor Šulc – he also tended towards German expressionism and the Soviet avant-garde theatre, and by majoring in architecture, he would disprove of flat painted sets and old, naturalistic representations of reality. In 1935, in the article *Lžitvary a kritický plyš* [Deceptive Forms and Critical Plush], Viktor Šulc explained their aesthetic preferences: "(...) we want to liberate ourselves from the illusive and static means of naturalistic theatre (...) we strive for reaching constructive and dynamic means. We no longer want mock-up items and we replace them with metal ones."<sup>7</sup> Viktor Šulc and František Tröster were able to materialise the idea thanks to the fact that in 1934, a sweeping reconstruction and refurbishment of the SND stage took place. A turntable, spotlights, projection, and sound equipment were mounted – the stage machinery became an integral part of their joint drama and opera productions.

*Les Contes d'Hoffmann* [The Tales of Hoffmann, 1935] by Jacques Offenbach, the first joint operatic piece by Viktor Šulc and František Tröster, was characterised by a kinetic understanding of space and the dramatic function of scenography. For example, they used mirror glass as a material facilitating dynamism and enhancing changes in the mood of individual stage actions. An important function was played by colour lighting or conjuring with shadow play and projection, which enhanced the surreal tone of Jacques Offenbach's opera. In the stage cantata of Slovak composer Alexander Moyzes *Svätopluk* (1935), the creative professionals did not attempt to reconstruct

7 ŠULC, V. *Lžitvary a kritický plyš* [Deceptive Forms and Critical Plush]. In *Robotnícke noviny*, 17 May 1935. Cit. According to LAJCHA, L. *Predvojnová Bratislava a František Tröster* Pre-war Bratislava and František Tröster (1934 – 1937). Symposium to Commemorate the 100th Birth Anniversary of professor of architecture František Tröster. Prague, 29 November 2004. [online]. [cit. 2 December 2020]. Available at: <http://host.divadlo.cz/frantisek.troster/symp/lajcha.pdf>.

period facts of life, but rather build the scene using staircases, platforms, and erected poles.<sup>8</sup> In his study reflecting on the poetics of Viktor Šulc, opera historian Jaroslav Blaho underscores the fact that the spatial arrangement of a stable, horizontally and vertically richly split stage area, had both practical and symbolic connotations. The raised platform acquired the shape of a circle and its two separated halves created acting spaces for the antagonised choirs of the Bavarians and of the Slavs. Two large blocks crossed over each other were placed by the right portal, which was interpreted by Jaroslav Blaho as a “sign of conflict.”<sup>9</sup>

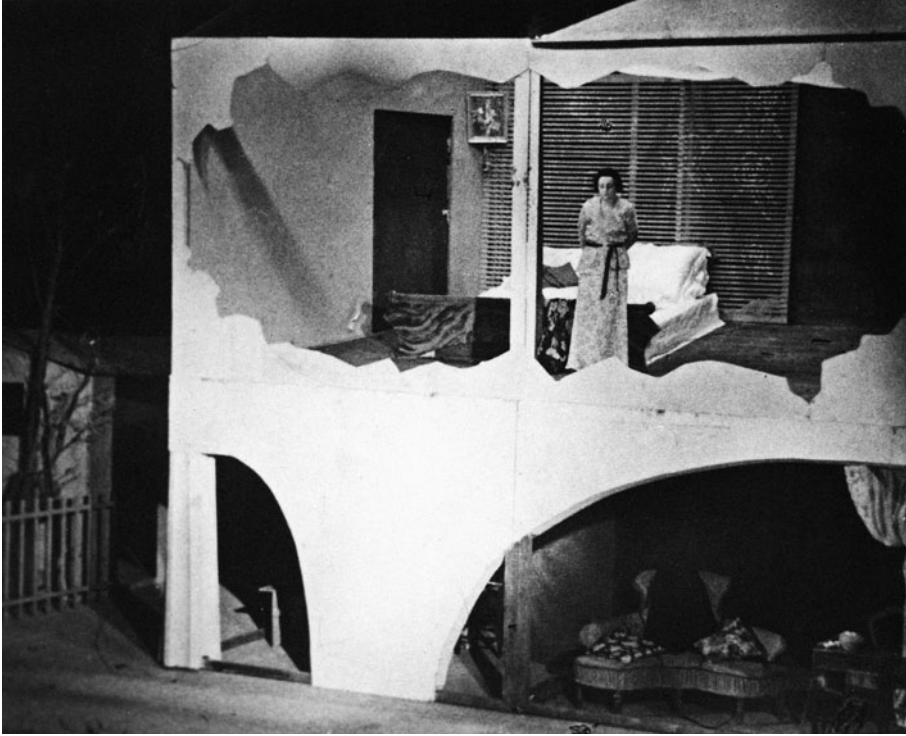
The production of this team that followed Dmitri Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, staged in Bratislava under the title *Russian Lady Macbeth* (1935), is one of the most memorable events in the century-old history of the SND Opera.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the basis of František Tröster’s most functional stage was the structure of a house composed of allusive walls and blocks and its placement on a turntable which allowed for rapid transformations of the story setting. Allusive stylisation stood in contrast with naturalistic and realistic details, which were applied both inside the structure (one could look into it through wide slits) and in the surrounding environment. According to reviews, it was the last, i.e., the fourth act, having the most powerful impact. In it, the story moves from inside of the house to the river bank, along which the convicts continue on their way to exile. Viktor Šulc empathically tuned into Dmitri Shostakovich’s sympathy for Katerina Izmailova, broken by empty life, as well as into the socio-critical dimension of his work: “The drama ends with endless pain and sadness, with almost a prayer for empty, forsaken, and lonely lives.”<sup>11</sup>

8 František Tröster’s stage designs of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* and of *Svätopluk* by Alexander Moyzes were awarded the golden medal at the VI Triennial of Milan International Exhibition, 1937.

9 BLAHO, J. *Operné inscenácie Viktora Šulca 1934 – 1938* [Viktor Šulc Opera Performances 1934 – 1938], p. 7.

10 The production of almost a novelty by the 29-year-old Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich (world premiere in 1932) is among the most progressive dramaturgical achievements of the opera director Karel Nedbal, although it was not a European premiere, as believed by the creators and by the period press. Actually, it was the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm taking historical primacy over the SND, premiering Shostakovich’s work a week earlier than Bratislava, on 16 November 1935.

11 ŠULC, V. – PÁTEK, J. Šéfredizér V. Šulc o premiére opery Ruská lady Macbeth [Director-in-chief Maintains about the Premiere of Russian Lady Macbeth]. [Interview]. In *Robotnícke noviny*, 1935, Vol. 32, Issue 268, p. 6, 23 November 1935.



*Dmitri Shostakovich: Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District (staged under the title Russian Lady Macbeth). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1935. Milada Formanová (Katerina Izmailova). Direction Viktor Šulc. The Slovak National Theatre archives.*

The production of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1936) had a higher ambition than just to idyllically unfold the story of a faithful conjugal love. The concept created on the eve of the tragic war events satisfied the principles of a thought-provoking, engaged, appellative, and foreboding theatre. The clearly rhythmic space was dominated by a broken, collapsed ancient column, which epitomised the decline of civilisation and the decline of values. A powerful symbol of almost a visionary dimension were metal columns with barbed wire wrapped around them heralding the coming of the time of ruthless killing.<sup>12</sup> The opera's finale mirrored Viktor Šulc's left-wing political orientation: freed prisoners waving red flags in their hands alluded to revolutionary popular rallies.

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<sup>12</sup> At the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris 1937, František Tröster was awarded Grand Prix for his *Fidelio* stage design.



*Fidelio* stirred an unprecedented heated debate in domestic press. However, favourable reactions outnumbered those who called the production “anti-Beethovenian” and demanded the comeback of traditional approaches. The then Slovak critique – with but a few rare exceptions – failed to capture Viktor Šulc’s directorial poetics using adequate terminology and to place it in international theatrical context. However, it goes without saying that by his concept of progressive operatic theatre, he planted a viable seed in the way it was perceived. The growing understanding of opera reviewers for modern theatrical currents in opera is also evidenced by the reception of the opera novelty *Dibuk* [The Dybbuk, 1937] by the contemporary Italian composer Lodovico Rocca,<sup>13</sup> which was staged by Viktor Šulc in collaboration with stage designer František Zelenka. The opera, whose story draws on a Hasidic legend of the reincarnation of the souls of the dead into the living, was staged by Viktor Šulc and František Zelenka on an almost empty stage. By using curtains and a turntable and thanks to an extensive work with the lights, the mysticism and symbolism of the theme were highlighted. The author whose articles were published by the left-wing daily *Slovenské zvesti* clearly pointed out “modern tendencies gravitating toward the transformation of colour wings, theatrical gestures, and various illusionist effects embellishing the opera into a live stage form.”<sup>14</sup> *Dibuk*, by its poetics tying into *Ruská lady Macbeth* [Russian Lady Macbeth], was referred to him as a proof of “(...) the immense importance to be attached to an uncompromising requirement for innovative experiment”: by that meaning a conscious transformation of scenography and the actor’s and the singer’s breaking away from “stiff and emotionless movements”.<sup>15</sup>

An epilogue to Viktor Šulc’s short yet invaluable contribution to the Slovak opera theatre was Amadeus Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* [The Magic Flute, 1938], which he designed in collaboration with Stanislav Kuttner, creative artist from Pilsen. The two theatre makers renounced the fairy tale decorative art style or architectural robustness that until then had been associated with this work in Slovakia. Instead, they worked with allusions, stylisation, geometric projection, and colour toning. Their consistent guidance of ac-

13 The work was staged by the SND only three years after its author had won composition competition Teatro alla Scala in Milan and his reputation as a composer accrued in value thanks to the productions in Europe and in the USA.

14 M. P. Premiéra “Dibuka” [The Premiere of “The Dybbuk”]. In *Slovenské zvesti*, 1937, Vol. 2, Issue 75, p. 6, 18 April 1937.

15 Ibid.

tors was both seen on soloists and the choir, the latter performing in geometrically precise lines. Viktor Šulc's staging principle was summarised by Jaroslav Blaho, "For Šulc, colour is a fantasy element, while geometry is an ideological element, epitomising order, a system."<sup>16</sup>

The Bratislava era of Viktor Šulc – and of his life in the years that followed – was disrupted by the tragic political events of 1938: the break-up of the Czechoslovak Republic, the rise of fascism, and a forced expulsion of Czech citizens from Slovakia. His short yet intensive collaboration with the Opera of the Slovak National Theatre was imprinted in the history of the ensemble as the first conceptually formulated and consistently implemented art manifesto of a progressive European theatre. Regrettably, it was the last one in the period that followed. The priorities of theatre makers during the Second World War Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945) shifted to setting up a Slovak ensemble and to translating opera librettos into the Slovak language (until then, the vast majority of titles had been performed in Czech). The sprouting ambitions of a handful of modern opera makers (Croatian director Branko Gavella, his Czech colleagues Jiří Fiedler and Karel Jernek, the internationally acclaimed Czech scenographer Josef Svoboda), who after the war endeavoured to introduce a more elaborate, psychologically justified style of acting or stage stylisation and the metaphor into the visual arrangement routine, was to be soon disrupted by the doctrine of the so-called socialist realism, soon to become a binding norm after the communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia (25 February, 1948).<sup>17</sup>

### **Socialist Realism and Stanislavsky System of Acting**

It was Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863 – 1938), leading personality of the Russian interwar theatre avant-garde, Soviet actor, director, and pedagogue, founder of the famous Moscow Art Theatre (MKHAT Theatre), lending his name to socialist realism. Regrettably, his psychological and realistic system of acting whose noble aim was to attain veracity and authenticity of art, was presented on socialist stages in an ideologically vulgar form. Communist aesthetics, with-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> In 1948, at the Congress of National Culture in Prague, the criteria of the prominent ideologist of Soviet art Andrey Alexandrovich Zhdanov (1896 – 1948) were presented as a recommended direction for art development, while the IX Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia adopted Zhdanov's propositions of class, revolutionary, and people's art as a binding norm.



in the meaning of the propositions of the prominent ideologist of Soviet art, Andrey Zhdanov, insisted on enforcing Stanislavsky system as a whole, which “is a set of theorems based on the experiences of Soviet theatre, it is a manifestation of the Marxist interpretation of theatre, it is part of the Marxist theatre aesthetics.”<sup>18</sup> Anything not corresponding to the official concept of progressive, ideological, class, revolutionary art, disseminated among the popular masses in an understandable form, was labelled as formalist, decadent bourgeois pseudo-art. Other than class-motivated interpretation of the works of art was inadmissible. A visual allusion, the metaphor, and other means of expression employed by the theatrical avant-garde had to yield to the straightforward illustrativity of painted backcloths and to the robust stage sets imitating reality.

Jiří Fiedler, art director of the SND Opera, was the leading proponent of Stanislavsky method. In the 1950s, this former adherent of the avant-garde moved towards the aesthetics of socialist realism which he implemented in a systematic and consequential manner so typical of him. To give an example: when staging the opera *Tiefland* [The Lowlands, 1951] by Eugen d’Albert, he had the protagonists of three village gossipers, who struggled with a convincing rendition of their parts, walk in Bratislava streets and look for the models of rendered characters. The actresses found them in the market place where they kept observing quarrelling market women. “From then on, our acting improved, and at some rehearsals, our gossipers were so convincing that our colleagues found it difficult to believe that it was all play-act.”<sup>19</sup>

By their sophistication and intricacy, some of Jiří Fiedler’s productions (Beethoven: *Fidelio*, 1951; Alexander Borodin: *Prince Igor*, 1952), moved close to the idea of a realistic theatre avoiding trivial illustrativity. In general, however, the artistic side of the productions which were mostly reviewed by their musical quality,<sup>20</sup> was belittled by acting clichés and mock-up stage design. Using the words of theatre historian Ladislav Čavojský, this resulted in an unwished-for paradox: “(...) instead of reinforcing opera performances in the meaning of real-life veracity, directions with superficial and naturalist portrayal of life began to proliferate. (...) For the most

18 KARVAŠ, P. Niektoré problémy našej opery a systém Stanislavského [On Some Problems of Our Opera and Stanislavsky System]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 1954, Vol. 2, Issue 2, p. 142.

19 Herci o svojich úlohách [Actors Reflecting on Their Roles]. In *Eugen D’Albert: Nížina* [The Lowlands, programme booklet]. Bratislava : SND1951, pp. 14 – 15.

20 At that time, the SND boasted a high-quality ensemble and conductors.

part, it was about debasing Stanislavsky's heritage rather than its creative use."<sup>21</sup>

In a study published in the early 1950s in the scientific journal *Slovenské divadlo*, playwright and theatre theorist Peter Karvaš maintains: "Today, it is no longer possible to claim that Stanislavsky system encountered resistance; to the contrary, his propositions are accepted, his Method is brought to life. But not everywhere this happens out of a deep conviction and of inner need, based on an artist's personal knowledge that this very system of theatrical work is the best means for operatic realism in direction and acting; on the contrary, inconsistent provision of the most favourable conditions for the application of this Method is an eloquent symptom of the system being introduced from the outside, often by the Establishment, or that it was successful elsewhere, or that it was given general recognition. (...). If Stanislavsky system is to be the path to truth on stage, it is clear that the main front here will be an opera, musical-dramatic character, credible interpersonal relations between the characters, the persons/people on stage."<sup>22</sup>

Peter Karvaš, much like other contemporary theoreticians, critics, and art journalists, made references to the Soviet director Nikolai Severianovich Dombrovsky who staged *Eugene Onegin* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1952) in Bratislava, followed by Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1954). In his study *Niektoré problémy našej opery a systém Stanislavského* [On Some Problems of Our Opera and Stanislavsky System, 1954], Karvaš referred to Dombrovsky's works as "isolated peaks": "They have introduced, and in an exemplary fashion met, the requirement for a truthful social and period environment in an operatic work, communicating the need for and the concrete opportunities of acting and singing on a live (...) music and dramatic character, they have revealed our new perception of the relations between characters (...), while contributing to solving certain partial issues of the opera staging practice, the role and the technique of the extras, costumes, props, working with the lights, etc."<sup>23</sup>

The visits of guest Soviet directors in the countries of the socialist bloc were a targeted mission, with an aim to promote realistic art. Inviting a vi-

21 ČAVOJSKÝ, L. Križovatky našej opery [Our Opera Intersections]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 1962, Vol. 10, Issue 3, p. 311.

22 KARVAŠ, P. Niektoré problémy našej opery a systém Stanislavského [On Some Problems of our Opera and Stanislavsky System], p. 142.

23 Ibid, p. 140.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1952. Scene 1. Direction Nikolai Severianovich Dombrovsky. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

siting Soviet director to an opera ensemble had a strong ideological justification. The opera was perceived as a place where formalism managed to maintain its position while socialist realism succeeded in other art forms. Dombrovsky, director of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, was also regularly seconded to friendly countries in the 1950s, and alongside Bratislava, he directed opera performances in Budapest, Prague, and Tirana. He introduced the SND to a hitherto unexperienced work performance across all the interpretive elements and in parallel with staging a production, he attended discussions with theatre makers, performers, students, and critics. Director Jiří Fiedler summarised the working principles applied in the staging of *Eugene Onegin* in the article *Skúsenosti z práce režiséra N. S. Dombrovského* [Experiences from the Work of Director Nikolaj Severianovich Dombrovsky].<sup>24</sup> The principles included a close collaboration between the conductor and the di-

<sup>24</sup> FIEDLER, J. *Skúsenosti z práce režiséra N. S. Dombrovského* [Experiences from the Work of Director N. S. Dobrovsky]. In *Divadlo*, 1952, Vol. 3, Issue 5, pp. 448 – 453.

rector, a dramatic character's logic of action, emphasis on interpersonal relationships of dramatic characters, the art of listening to a partner, the correct singing expression derived from the style of singing peculiar to a particular operatic piece, intelligibility of the word sung and its meaning, authentic, personified style of acting (to achieve it, performers were tasked with elaborating internal monologues of their characters). Likewise, Dombrovsky gave a lot of weight to ensemble rehearsals and to working with choir and ballet ensembles. The choir's task was not only to provide for background music or to be a decorative embellishment, but rather act as a dramatic factor, with each individual having a role to play. A similar principle applied to the ballet element. Nothing on stage could be there for the sake of decoration or for filling in the space, every prop and every piece of furniture were given a legitimate place and function.

The reviews of *Eugene Onegin* unanimously agree that the director managed to connect music, singing, acting, and visual elements into a powerful dramatic whole and to do away with operatic mannerism, thus putting on a performance which was genuine theatre captivating the viewer by its truthfulness and by an appetite for life. Opera historian Ladislav Čavojský, who referred to the attempts of domestic directors to apply Stanislavsky system of acting to the opera staging techniques as being "perfunctory" or "overstated", made mention of just a single exception from perfunctory, naturalist portrayal of life, and that were two guest directions by Nikolai Dombrovsky: "They were a proof that the Method could also be applied to opera. Above all, they were a transposition of MKHAT drama staging techniques onto the opera stage."<sup>25</sup>

### **The Theatricalisation of Opera – Walter Felseinsten's Music Theatre**

In the period that followed, stage realism remained to be the predominant poetics of opera and drama, however, realised through elaborate acting and veritable music theatre rather than through embellished, colour idyll. In the politically relaxed 1960s, the ambition to enforce the idea that opera is both theatre and a musical art was apparent in theoretical and in practical terms. Critics and teatrologists repeatedly called on directors to cleanse their productions of realistic-descriptive clichés and acting routine, which were especially symptomatic of romantic and veristic operas. Scientific and

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25 ČAVOJSKÝ, L. Křižovatky našej opery [Our Opera Intersections], p. 312.

professional journals regularly featured analyses or extensive reviews of productions and also more general texts on domestic and foreign opera theatre, or papers from thematised conferences.

Speaking about the realisation side, the beginnings of the departure from trivial illusiveness are noticeable especially in the productions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century operatic works, which by their very nature provided space for implanting more progressive scenic elements and a more civilian acting poetics. Needless to say, the results were not clear-cut either. In general, it may be stated that the productions of modern opuses increased the ensemble's acting potential, which was gradually reflected in the classical repertoire, even though it was a slow process, involving both successes and failures.

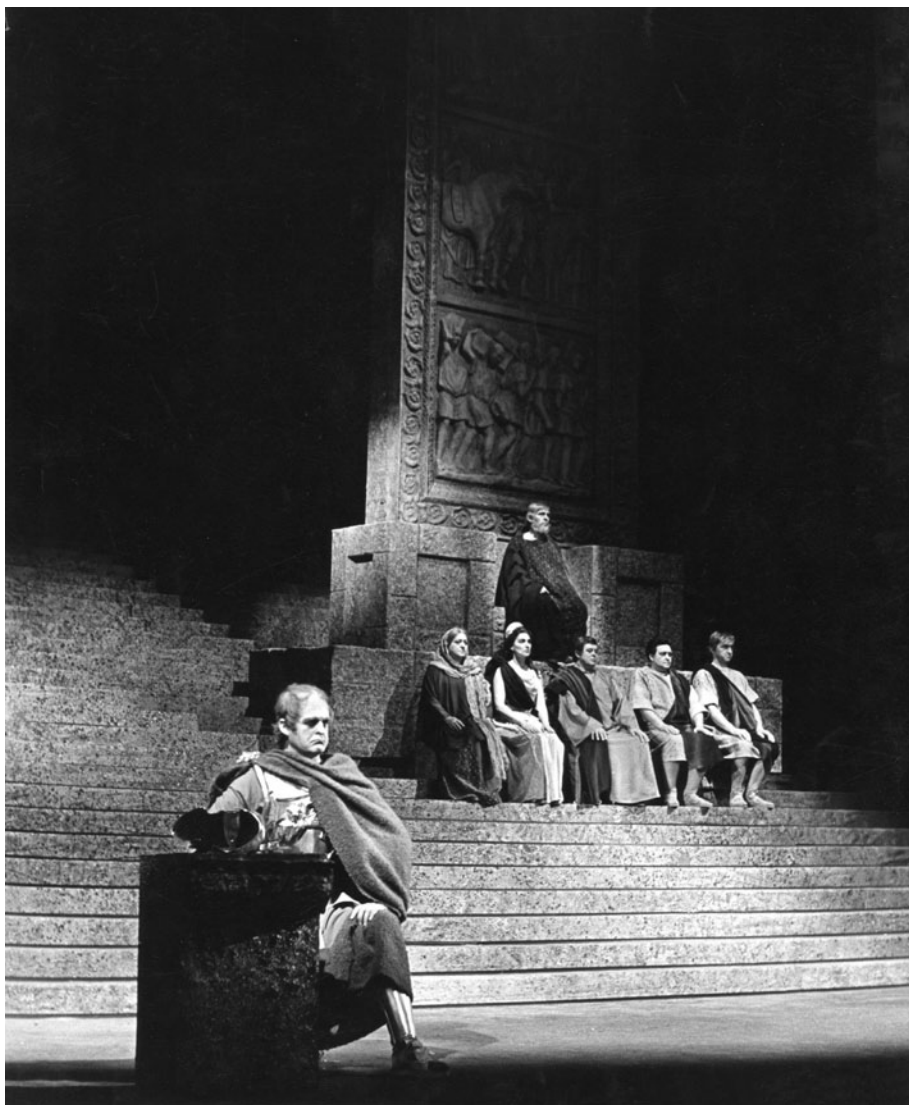
It was not only the stage where the origination of new music theatre was accompanied by difficulties. Initially, at the theoretical-critical level, the ideas about it were defined rather vaguely, without a clearer specification or set criteria.<sup>26</sup> While in the 1950s, the theatre professionals and critics of Slovak theatre were shielded by the name of Konstantin Stanislavsky, in the decades that followed, the East German director and pedagogue Walter Felsenstein became the representative of the ideal. His productions and the work of his students Götz Friedrich and Joachim Herz at the Komische Oper Berlin in (East) Berlin were based on a clear motivation of characters' action and a compelling acting interpretation. The director's interpretation was to augment the intellectual charge of the works, especially by emphasising their socio-critical aspects. So, if in the early 1960s, Slovak opera critics called for a modern music theatre, it was because they saw the model in the performances of East Berlin opera, or in the application of its principles in the creation of the opera houses in Dresden and Leipzig.

The only foreign theatre makers visiting the SND during this period also came from the German Democratic Republic. In Bratislava, director Klaus Kahl from Dresden staged an opera by Paul Dessau based on Bertolt Brecht's libretto *Odsúdenie Lukulla* [The Condemnation of Lucullus, 1962], which was highly rated by critics but not particularly well received by viewers, in which the elements of epic theatre were applied in a stunning way. A year later, he directed Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1963), with much the

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26 Viac k tejto téme pozri napr. HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ, Š. Teoretické dílo Miloše Wasserbauera v kontextu dobového myšlení o operní inscenační tvorbě [Theoretical Work of Miloš Wasserbauer in Relation to the Contemporary Thinking about Staging Opera]. In *Theatralia*, 2017, Vol. 20, Issue 2, pp. 69 – 95. DOI: 10.5817/TY2017-2-4.





*Paul Dessau: The Condemnation of Lucullus. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1962. Direction Klaus Kahl. Photo by Anton Šmotlák. The Slovak National Theatre archives.*

same intentions. However, Brecht's poetics, which proved rather difficult to render useful in Slovak drama theatre and the results were ambivalent, was not eventually put into practice in the SND Opera and there were no domestic followers of the path outlined by Klaus Kahl. The principle of observing rather than empathising was alien and undiscovered to the Bratislava en-



semble. The production of George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* (1974), staged by a visiting team from Leipzig, called forth a keen reaction. Director Günter Lohse achieved the production's consistent realism by building exacting actor's actions and by individualising the choir, while bringing out the hitherto unexpected acting skills of some singers. The final form, in which every detail was meticulously incorporated into a dramatic whole, oscillated between a drama set to music and a modern opera.

However, since foreign directors made only sporadic visits to the SND Opera in the period in question, the poetics of Walter Felsenstein's psychologically-realistic music theatre was only indirectly imported to Slovakia, through the experience of the creators visiting German theatres or festivals as spectators, and through scientific literature and expert discourse. In his approach to opera scores in the 1960s and 1980s, his poetics was creatively transformed especially by director and teacher Branislav Kriška (1931 – 1999), who tuned to Walter Felsenstein's perception of opera as a synthetic theatre uniting all branches of stage arts, which are jointly subordinated to the main idea of the work and the scores. His productions were preceded by a meticulous dramaturgical preparation, which entailed learning about the vocal and instrumental plans of the opera, analysis of characters and their actions, and psychological motivations. Martin Bendik, Branislav Kriška's student at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, characterises him as a representative of "theatricalised" opera within the meaning of a sweeping Felsensteinean reform, with a refined taste in art consistently applying the psychological probability of subtexts and with a consequential argumentation underlying the use of theatrical devices within the interpretation framework, using a simple term – directorial concept.<sup>27</sup>

Branislav Kriška was a travelling artist and spectator, leaving behind accounts of his foreign experiences in the form of several reviews that revealed the roots of his taste formation and of his directorial signature. He believed that exposure to foreign opera and theatre activity was an important prerequisite of the formation of Slovak opera directors: "The lack of original works and translations is a significant impediment to our art education and directorial practice. Since the directors, who are referred to in Europe as personalities setting the tone of the world of contemporary opera (Giorgio Strehler, Juraj Herz, Boris Pokrovsky, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Luca Ronconi,

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27 (mb). [M. Bendik]. Reprezentant zdivadelnenej opery [The Theatricalised Opera Representative]. In *Portál SND*, February 2016, p. 29.

Götz Friedrich), have not yet come to direct operas in our country, it is necessary to get to know their works either by travelling to a performance (which is the best), or from their theoretical works, television, or film.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Opera of the Slovak National Theatre as Part of an Open Europe**

The events of November 1989, which brought the rule of the party-state – the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia – to an end, cleared the way for open state borders and a free contact with international opera activity in both directions: the viewers were free to travel and see foreign productions and conversely, foreign producers were free to travel and see their viewers. While the audiences at the National Theatre in Prague were exposed to the work of acclaimed European directors quite early (for instance, David Poutney, Robert Wilson, Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, and others), the Opera of the SND remained a “provincial” scene in this respect.

Artistic transfers within the meaning of visiting foreign production teams were accelerated after 2000. The leading representative of a new era in Slovak opera shaped in direct contact with the latest European theatrical trends was Peter Konwitschny (1946), who put on five productions at the SND between 2005 and 2018: *Eugene Onegin* (2005) by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, *Madama Butterfly* (2007), and *Bohéma* [La bohème, 2014]<sup>29</sup>, *Vec Makropulos* [The Makropulos Affair, 2015] by Leoš Janáček, and the grand opera *Židovka* [The Jewess] by Fromental Halévy (2018). Peter Konwitschny’s signature is a synthesis of the tradition of politically and socially appellative theatre of Bertolt Brecht, of Walter Felsenstein’s psychological realism, and of the stylised symbolism of Ruth Berghaus. It claims affinity with the anti-capitalist aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno which interprets opera as an active politics within the meaning of the Greek word polis. His productions are characterised by social criticism, political commitment, and moral appeal. Opera theatre understands it as a space where the creator can (or even must) convey to the audience his view of society and of the values professed (or rejected by it). In his productions, he shares his critical view of the patriarchal organisation of Western society, of the dependence of modern civilisation on matter, of the consumerist way of life, and of ensuing disruption of moral values, whereby

28 KRIŠKA, B. – MACHALA, D. Režisér má byť divadlom posadnutý [The Director is to Be Obsessed with Theatre]. [Interview]. In *Nové slovo*, 28 February 1980, p. 13.

29 The three cases were a remake of his earlier works on German opera stages.



*Leoš Janáček: The Makropulos Affair. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 2015. Finale scene. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The Slovak National Theatre archives.*

he is especially intrigued by their impact on an individual's psyche and interpersonal relationships. Foto Mojžišová\_4

During almost half a century of professional activity, Peter Konwitschny has developed a rich database of isotopies, by which the viewers are pushed outside their reception comfort to activate their socio-critical perception and to appeal to civic responsibility. Peter Konwitschny puts to use a variety of methods, to break through the so-called fourth wall. Among the methods most frequently used and experienced by the audiences in Bratislava was turning on the lights in the auditorium during key scenes, an alienating contact-making between the performers and the audience, developing plot situations amidst the audience, or creating emotional distance from emotionally powerful opera scenes through a grotesque stylisation of acting expression. The recipients of Peter Konwitschny's productions, within the meaning of Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetics defying "culinary" approach to art<sup>30</sup> and Ber-

<sup>30</sup> The concept was first introduced by the members of the Frankfurt School and by its prominent member musicologist Theodor W. Adorno, to refer to operatic art which wants to be enjoyed in the first place.

tolt Brecht's socially engaged theatre, should not indulge in an aesthetic experience but rather leave the theatre emotionally stricken, concerned, and engrossed in thoughts.

The acclaimed director has introduced the Slovak opera to the staging criteria of leading European theatres: a clearly formulated artistic opinion and placing high professional requirements on all parts of the stage form. Not all performers were able to identify themselves with his uncompromising requirements (there were conflicting situations cropping up especially during the rehearsals of *Židovka* [The Jewess]), but without doubt, his distinctive signature had a profound impact on the perception of opera theatre by both Slovak audiences and domestic artists.

From among Slovak opera directors, Peter Konwitschny's most prominent mental ally is Martin Bendik (1960), student of Branislav Kriška, in the domestic community of directors enjoying the status of the only consistent proponent of the principles of the so-called Regietheater [director's theatre]. His theatrical concepts had departed from the traditional interpretations of operatic works and had been deeply socio-critical long before he, as playwright of the SND Opera, was first-hand exposed to the work of Peter Konwitschny, so it is questionable to what extent the mise-en-scènes resembling the work of his famous German peer, are an outcome of direct inspiration and to what extent they are Bendik's authentic authorial input. The influence of Peter Konwitschny's signature on him is most visibly evoked by Bendik's production of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* (2016), not only by its political-critical concept, with the central idea being a warning against the detrimental influence of oligarchs on state policy (at that time it was an issue causing strong emotional response in Slovak society), but also by specific stage means (e.g. additionally written part of the alienating dramatic speech by the protagonist of the despotic governor Don Pizarro, turning on the lights in the auditorium, etc.).

Alongside Peter Konwitschny, there were also other reputable European theatre makers visiting the SND, e.g., Mariusz Treliński (Christoph Willibald Gluck: *Orpheus and Eurydice*, 2008), Gintaras Varnas (Charles Gounod: *Faust*, 2010), Andrejs Žagars (Richard Wagner: *Lohengrin*, 2013), David Radok (Antonio Vivaldi: *Arsilda*, 2017), and others. Though these were one-off collaborations, they brought variety, in better cases, enriching tones, to the still relatively closed Slovak opera theatre. Another form of artistic transfers, which is slowly but steadily gaining a foothold in the SND, are co-production collaborations with foreign theatres. A regular confrontation between do-

mestic creators, spectators, and international trends is undoubtedly among the positive achievements of an open opera in Europe.

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Michaela Mojžišová  
Institute of Theatre and Film Research  
Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences  
Dúbravská cesta 9  
841 01 Bratislava  
Slovakia  
e-mail: [michaela.mojzisova@savba.sk](mailto:michaela.mojzisova@savba.sk)