

# The Limitations of Slovak Modernist Drama (Július Barč-Ivan as a Case Study)

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**Abstract:** The study discusses Slovak Modernist drama in the interwar period and analyses works by Július Barč-Ivan (1909–1953). It shows the heterogeneity and plurality of his approaches when constructing plays, which led to an innovative “creative destruction” of the dramatic form. Some of these innovations were based on implementing lyrical and epical principles in drama, whereas some of them were related to contexts of visual arts, painting, and film; some of them reflected philosophical, theological, and psychological concepts. The article also argues that Barč-Ivan, partially consciously and partially unconsciously, imposed limits and control on this destruction so that the form withstood and restricted the chaos. Regarding theatre, it argues that Barč-Ivan’s plays contain Modernist elements that resisted staging in his time and resisted staging generally, even though postmodern theatre might have brought some solutions to the challenges.

**Key words:** Slovak Modernist drama, Expressionist drama, Július Barč-Ivan (1909–1953), dramatic form, *dramatis personae*, dramatic plot, interdisciplinarity and multimedia in drama

Modernization processes in Europe between the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries not only enhanced industrialization and technical progress but also changed political systems and societal values as well as cultural and artistic production. Modernism encompassed numerous contradictions between the national and cosmopolitan, local and universal, natural and civilized, primitive and technically developed, subjective and collective, and the individual and the masses. In the arts, homogeneous and harmonious unity that also guaranteed a social contract was replaced by heterogeneity and fragmentation. “In Eastern Europe, as elsewhere”, Marci Shore has suggested, “the aesthetic ‘crisis of representation’ was a crisis of modernity”<sup>1</sup>. Arts following the fall of empires reflected chaos, revolution, provocation, and

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1 SHORE, M. Eastern Europe. In LEWIS, P. *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 228.

a desire for novelty. While “moderna belonged to empire, the avant-garde was modernism in a post-imperial age”<sup>2</sup>.

In Slovakia, modernization processes and avant-garde movements only manifested in the interwar period. Nevertheless, along with “opening windows to Europe”, especially in the 1920s, there was a strong desire to preserve the traditions and continuity of cultural development. The resistance to accepting innovations from foreign cultures had to do with a perception of national culture as means of perseverance. In addition, Slovak interwar culture only manifested some Modernist contradictions, such as the opposition between the urban and rural, the historical and mythical, and rational and instinctual principles. Other aspects, such as revolt and revolution, were only limited to a handful of young communist intellectuals. Slovak culture almost ignored incentives to break sexual taboos and attack institutions and language, which can be explained by historical circumstances (the persecutions of Slovak institutions and language by Hungarian authorities before 1918).

The denial of Realism in Slovak interwar literature was accompanied by the penetration of lyricism into all genres. In fiction, Expressionism gave rise to Naturism (also called Lyrical Prose School) in the late 1930s and 1940s, which emphasized irrational and mythical forces in nature and people and limited historical and social aspects. Neo-Symbolism and avant-garde movements, especially Poetism and Surrealism, developed in poetry. Drama was influenced by the Realist tradition; however, contacts with German and Czech theatre cultures facilitated the rise of some experimental pieces, echoing Expressionism and Poetism (“lyrical theatre”).

Július Barč-Ivan (1909–1953) can be considered a “founding father” as well as the “swan-song” of Slovak Modernist drama. In the 1970s, Zoltán Rampák characterized Barč-Ivan’s drama from the 1930s and 1940s as Expressionist, whereas in the 1980s Ivan Kusý wrote about the “drama of ideas and model situations” (which could be a euphemism for Existentialism at times when non-Marxist philosophies and aesthetics were rejected). Other scholars, such as Július Vanovič, pointed at the psychological and spiritual (religious) aspects of Barč-Ivan’s drama.<sup>3</sup> Attributes such as “Expressionist”,

2 Ibid, p. 217.

3 For more details, see RAMPÁK, Z. *Július Barč-Ivan: štúdie o dramatickej tvorbe*. Martin : Osveta, 1972; VANOVIČ, J. *Cesta samotárova*. Martin : Matica slovenská, 1994 (written in the late 1960s); KUSÝ, I. *Dráma ideí a modelových situácií, Július Barč-Ivan*. In ROSENBAUM, K. *Dejiny slovenskej literatúry V. Literatúra v rokoch 1918 – 1945*. Bratislava : VEDA, 1984.

“Existentialist”, “à thèse”, “psychological”, “religious”, and many others aspire for precision and imply a potential “hybridization” of drama. It is interesting that some aspects and meanings in Barč-Ivan’s drama could benefit from the revival of theatre of the past (religious and philosophical drama), whereas others require new theatre means and languages (and spaces).

Apart from two works banned due to censorship<sup>4</sup>, Barč-Ivan’s plays were staged in his lifetime.<sup>5</sup> However, the old-fashioned Realist staging, surviving in the interwar period due to the underdeveloped theatre tradition in Slovakia<sup>6</sup>, did not enable directors and actors to communicate all aspects of his works. Even though Barč-Ivan is part of today’s repertoire in Slovak theatres (be they professional, amateur, or student-led), he is still considered difficult to stage.<sup>7</sup> However, his work largely inspired a younger generation of playwrights writing Existentialist and absurd drama in Slovakia in the late 1940s and in the 1960s. For example, the works of Štefan Králik (1909–1983), Peter Karvaš (1920–1999), Leopold Lahola (1918–1968), Ivan Bukovčan (1921–1975), and others revived the spirit of Modernist experimentation and were an alternative to the dullness of Socialist Realism.

Modernism brought a crisis of mimesis and violated the purity of genres, and Barč-Ivan’s drama reflected this “contamination”. Heterogeneity and multiplicity can be applied when discussing Barč-Ivan’s multi-ethnic origin (the German and Hungarian background of his parents)<sup>8</sup> as well as when considering his writing and dealing with the genre of his drama. Besides drama, Barč-Ivan wrote fiction, religious texts, and journalistic texts; he also attempted to write a film script.<sup>9</sup> His plays used principles and techniques of

4 Two plays, *Diktátor* [The Dictator] and *Mastný hrniec* [The Greasy Pot], were banned for alluding to the regime: the former in 1938 and the latter in 1941.

5 In theatres in Martin, Bratislava and Košice.

6 The professional Slovak National Theatre was only founded in Bratislava in 1920.

7 He was considered a playwright of a literary (book) drama waiting for a capable director, at least according to reviews from the mid-1990s when one of his plays was staged at the Slovak National Theatre.

8 His father’s family background was German, whereas his mother, née Ivan, was ethnically Hungarian. Barč-Ivan felt a deep affection towards his mother and used her maiden name along with his father’s family name.

9 One of his early short stories, *Film*, published in a collection entitled *Pohádka* [Fairy Tale] in 1933, was written in the form of a script. After the Second World War, when the Czechoslovak Film Company encouraged writers to contribute towards the development of this media, Barč-Ivan submitted a film script based on his story *Cesta ďaleká* [A Long Journey]. In spite of its interesting theme (euthanasia which could also be interpreted in religious terms as a father’s sacrifice of a son), the script was rejected.

classical drama as well as of poetry, fiction, and film. The themes of his drama alluded to political practices and ideologies as well as to Protestant theology and psychology.

With respect to drama, this study shows the heterogeneity and plurality of Barč-Ivan's approaches when constructing plays, which got manifested as "contaminating" drama by other genres and arts and led to an innovative "creative destruction" of the dramatic form. The question is how compatible various centripetal elements in a Modernist dramatic form can be in order to produce a good play. The author also argues that Barč-Ivan, partially consciously and unconsciously, imposed limits and control on this destruction so that the form withstood and restricted the chaos.

With respect to theatre, this article also argues that Barč-Ivan's plays contain Modernist elements that resisted staging in his time, especially when considering theatre spaces as well as technical possibilities and actors' preparation. Moreover, "the theatre's intrinsic connection to physical reality and social existence (communicated through the bodies of the actors and their relationship to each other) make some of the key modernist principles inapplicable"<sup>10</sup>. What is more, Barč-Ivan's plays contain elements that resist staging generally, even though postmodern theatre might have brought some solutions to Modernist challenges.

Before looking at the "form" of Barč-Ivan's plays, it is important to discuss the predominant themes of his drama, also mentioning their connection with concepts of utopia and dystopia. In several plays from the 1930s, such as *Tritisíc ľudí* [Three Thousand People] (staged in 1934, published in 1935), *Človek ktorého zbili* [The Man Who Was Beaten] (staged in 1936, published in 1964), *Diktátor* [The Dictator] (staged and withdrawn from the repertoire in 1938, published in 1981), and *Na konci cesty* [At The End of the Journey] (staged in 1939, published in 1942), Barč-Ivan showed the decline of trust in humanity and democracy among individuals and in society. However, except for *Diktátor*<sup>11</sup>, order and justice were restored in his plays, which were mostly set in a historically or geographically distant milieu. The resemblance with

10 INNES, Ch. Modernism in Drama. In LEVENSON, M. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 131.

11 Based on the title, one is tempted to think about possible parallels with the American movie *The Great Dictator* by Charlie Chaplin from 1940. However, Barč-Ivan seemed to allude to European dictatorships in a more abstract manner than Chaplin did. It is also interesting that in his story *Pohádka* from the early 1930s, Barč-Ivan presented the anarchist movement. He considered it a similar danger to democracy.

Czechoslovakia was still perceivable, but the plays had a more general validity; the situation was similar but not identical to the Slovak one. The use of simile already implied Barč-Ivan's inclination to metaphor. Through clashing principles, ideologies, and worldviews, the plays showed various possibilities of resolving conflicts. Multiple options ("versions"), along with a film-like technique of replaying some scenes, were used to violate the linearity of the plot. *Diktátor* pointed out the "theatralization" of political life as well as the affinities between politics and theatre. For example, instead of a "character" (a unique personality with a clearly defined distinguishing principle), politics required a "role", since characters wear "masks", faces are irrelevant.

The predominant feature of Barč-Ivan's plays written during the Second World War – such as *Matka* [Mother] (staged and published in 1943), *Neznámy* [The Unknown] (staged and published in 1944), and *Dvaja* [Two] (staged and published in 1945) – was the effort to re-establish an equilibrium; this happened as "transubstantiation": the antagonist integrated the protagonist's oppositional principle that was originally strange to him or her, and thus "evil" got subdued. In the 1930s, Barč-Ivan's dramas resulted in the idea that "yet, the world is a good place", but his plays from the wartime period show almost a Manichean duality: an eternal struggle between good and evil. Evil is present and strong but good penetrates it and hinders its expansiveness. The plays *Veža* [The Tower] (staged and published in 1947) and *Koniec* [The End] (written in 1948, fully published and staged in 2001) were written in the interim post-war period between 1945 and 1949. The former was set in Biblical times (alluding to Babel) and the latter after a nuclear catastrophe, but they both dealt with the future of mankind. They can be perceived in the context of utopias and dystopias related to traditional eschatology as well as the fear of abusing technical progress. In *Veža*, Barč-Ivan stated that an absolute good was impossible if evil persisted; evil would remain an active force and the world was doomed to duality. In *Koniec*, darkness (decline, death) absorbs light (life), but life might have been preserved somewhere (u-topos). Both plays communicate the superiority of universal (history) over individual desire, and this perspective brings them closer to religious writing. Since utopian and dystopian elements also express a collective fear of the decline of values in the existing world as well as of the rising new world<sup>12</sup>, these plays also reflected the clash between ideologies in the era of "phony peace".

12 KLAÍČ, D. *The Plot of the Future. Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press, 1991, p. 7.

The initial and final parts of Barč-Ivan's writing emphasized his worries about the current state and future of humankind, whereas his best plays written during the Second World War examined the nature and manifestations of "evil". In the initial period, empirical and psychological realities remained separate and autonomous. During the war, they mirrored each other and merged. In the final period, a panoramic perspective of universal action dominated; setting in time and space, as well as individuals and their psyche, became less relevant. Barč-Ivan's ideas about the universe might echo the Protestant theology of crisis based on the concept of the separation between God and the created world. Humans wishing to bridge the gap make a futile effort to reach God but remain limited to their human standards. However, revelation and salvation have been going on throughout history. The divine and the human, totality and fragments, might overlap like panoramic and partial perspectives on the stage. This concept should obviously be taken into consideration when thinking of a theatre space for staging Barč-Ivan.

At the same time, Barč-Ivan's religious background contradicted, or at least limited, his approach to Modernism. Even though he showed that there was duality in the universe, his faith was probably not Gnostic. Postulating God as utterly different and silent, but One, he also confirmed that totality was superior to any partiality and could be exposed to destruction but not annihilated. In accordance with this principle, Barč-Ivan understood protests, pleas, and sacrifices but rejected upheavals, revolts, and revolutions.<sup>13</sup> Humans, including artists, can aspire to creative destruction but will inevitably remain limited to re-arranging existing elements: abandoning the form would be similar to killing God, and would only bring chaos and nothingness.

Since the titles of most of Barč-Ivan's plays are nominal, the processes of synthesis, analysis, abstraction, and concretization can be applied when thinking about them. The plays stimulate two-fold operations. Firstly, generic terms get analytically divided into partial and more specific manifestations; then the restoration of meanings again requires synthesis and abstraction. (Barč-Ivan's plays also could be "deconstructed" and interpreted by asking questions like "What is a mother?", "What is a father?", "What is strong?", and "What is weak?") Modern arts, especially Cubism, largely depended on a similar attitude to structure and composition. Another trend

<sup>13</sup> See, for example *Matka* and his works of fiction, such as *Pohádka* (from the early 1930s) as well as *Cesta ďaleká* and *Železné ruky* [Iron Arms], which were both written in the late 1940s.

worth mentioning in relation to Barč-Ivan's dramas of the 1940s is his tendency to empty the stage of props and reduce colours and shapes (which reminds one of the avant-garde in the visual arts).

As already mentioned, Barč-Ivan's drama drew upon lyrical and epical principles, which also meant an intrinsic tension within the dramatic form. The lyrical principle was considered to be generally present in the modern arts; in Barč-Ivan, it was related to the focus on the subject and on the inner psychological reality. Barč-Ivan's use of duality and masks reflected the crisis of identity and echoed the Romantic and Modernist tradition of the *doppelgänger*. The split of the personality was expressed by exploiting two or even more characters (i.e., *Neznámy*). The loss of substance led to an arbitrariness of "signs"; as a consequence, individuals could be replaced by roles and faces by masks.

Like many Expressionist artists, Barč-Ivan expressed states beyond reason and instinctual reactions, such as madness, visions, premonitions, "dark nights of the soul", violence, and crime. These could be interpreted either by "ascending" to spiritual realms or by "descending" to unconscious realms. The subjectivity and arbitrariness in his works enhanced uncertainty and fear as well as isolation. This situation was also reflected in the nature of dramatic repartee and dialogues<sup>14</sup>, which either became brief, repetitive, and often tense, or tended to be rhetoric and pathetic. This feature could be perceived as one of the Expressionist techniques experimenting with language where "concentration" meant the reduction to elementary and substantial utterances and "decentration" emphasized the eloquence and ornamental qualities of language.<sup>15</sup> By using this approach, his plays acquired a diverse tempo and rhythm. Dialogue got closer to monologue (which is also typical for lyrics); on the other hand, he also produced mass scenes with polyphony (which obviously was inspired by the social reality of his era). Since Barč-Ivan also widely used pause and silence, much of the action was to be expressed by emphasis, intonation, and volume of the voice as well as by non-verbal means such as mimicry, gesticulation, body posture, and proximity. Some scenes in Barč-Ivan's plays would thus require experimental or physical theatre, pantomime, and dance, which was obviously far beyond staging practices in Slovakia in his time. Barč-Ivan implied the limits of language; one of

14 RAMPÁK, Z. *Július Barč-Ivan: štúdie o dramatickej tvorbe*. Martin : Osveta, 1972, pp. 13– 57.

15 TERRAY, E. K poetike nemeckého literárneho expresionizmu. In *Problémy literárnej avantgardy*. Bratislava : VEDA, 1968, p. 348.



the remaining challenges for theatre is whether one can transcend and find a new language capable of expressing states beyond reason and *logos*.

In addition to lyric and epic, Barč-Ivan's drama largely benefited from techniques developed by film such as retrospection, freezing, and repeating as well as slowing down and accelerating action with different emphases. The simultaneity of time and space was made possible by implementing techniques of cut and montage. The relationship of the partial and total could also be expressed by using different focus and shifting between the full image and the detail.

An interesting detail related to Barč-Ivan's drama is the prevalence of "male" protagonists, except for Mother in the eponymous play and Marianna in *Dvaja*, both of whom are desexualized characters. Marianna's madness eliminates her sexuality, making her reminiscent of Ophelia, the Woman in White, or the female patient in Robert Wiene's film *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* [The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari] (1920). Even though Modernism and the avant-garde challenged traditional concepts of family and broke sexual taboos, Barč-Ivan remained conservative in this regard. In numerous works, for example, in *Na konci cesty*, *Matka*, and especially in the novel *Železné ruky*, he showed the crisis of the family but was against the removal of hierarchy, authority, and paternal superiority.

The epic principle, traditionally related to the category of dramatic plot, also manifested as personal history or pre-history that was not always shown on the stage in actions but often only reconstructed in speaking, which caused Barč-Ivan to be reproached for the predominance of words over actions on stage, or, in other words, for writing "literary" dramas. In utterances, he frequently used the past tense considered typical for epics as well as a conditional mode that suppressed time implications and emphasized alternative actions. Barč-Ivan also used various concepts of time: besides linear and chronological time of events and actions, he used the subjective experience of time as well as the cyclical concept of time. In his plays with elements of utopia and dystopia, he violated and denied concepts of physical and measurable time in accordance with modern physics and philosophy. Since human actions were only a part of universal processes, they were to be perceived as fragments close to a scene in a play. This concept could be communicated by exploiting space in theatre, for example, by using a second, circular, or panoramic space (which brings us back to Medieval theatre spaces), or by using technical means such as the reflection (mirroring) of two or several spaces or a projection. Using multiple spaces and implementing multimedia in perfor-



mances is one of the possibilities of how to communicate the deeper meanings of Barč-Ivan's dramas. The plot of Barč-Ivan's plays is neither "united" nor "of appropriate magnitude". It covers a timeframe that does not overlap with real time or the time of performance and cannot be presented through Realistic acting on the stage in "brick and mortar" theatres.

On one hand, Barč-Ivan's plays showed affinities with the drama of ideas (*à thèse*); on the other hand, they favoured subjectivity. Philosophical and religious aspects primarily underlined universal principles and concepts, whereas psychological and psychoanalytical elements focused on individuals. Two-fold manifestations in Barč-Ivan's drama were seemingly contradictory, but they became united in abstraction and metaphor. As was the case of the setting with looser references to historical time and space, his characters lost concrete and typical features and functioned more as principles or archetypes.

Barč-Ivan innovated dramatic categories by multiple means. Some of these innovations of dramatic form were based on implementing lyrical and epical principles in drama, whereas some of them were related to contexts of visual arts, painting, and "moving pictures". Some of them reflected philosophical, theological, and psychological concepts. Using duality and masks, showing irrational states, and preferring silence and non-verbal communication to language, he created characters that were able to express a crisis of identity and crisis of reason. (He also "democratized" his drama, often choosing characters from the social periphery.) He rejected the linearity and unity of a dramatic plot. His familiarity with different time concepts, as well as with film techniques, resulted in presenting multiple and simultaneous actions with a different rhythm. The complexity of Barč-Ivan's drama surpassed Realist theatre, and some approaches and meanings also went beyond the possibilities of Modernist theatre of the era. In this respect, Modernist drama challenged the rise of postmodern theatre. In addition, Barč-Ivan's Modernism was also limited in a different sense: even though he approached several limits (concerning the Christian religion, family, language, and so on), he did not go beyond them. He was probably aware that if the destruction got out of control, it would change into chaos, similarly to the situation when the lack of rational control means madness.<sup>16</sup> Barč-Ivan defended the world that had

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16 For Marianna in the play *Dvaja*, her madness also means happiness and harmony while her rational and conscious existence was miserable (the idea of happiness beyond reason). Barč-Ivan also used the motif of madness in his story *Návrat* [The Return], but he treated it as a distortion of reality leading to violence.

a form: a person endowed with life, reason, and language nonetheless only has access to this side of being.

*Translated by the author*

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