

Slovak Theatre as a European Entity

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Abstract: The article presents an overview of the conference's core themes, especially the relationship between Slovak and European theatre and the issue of values introduced by theatre in the 20th and 21st centuries. In addition to authenticity and truthfulness, there are negative themes alerting to a crisis in values that has been prevailing ever since the time of the early generation of authors of the theatre of the absurd from the mid-20th century. Sometimes the purpose of such an image is to alert our contemporaries to start seeking a way out of the crisis. However, in recent years it has become imperative to ask ourselves whether the predominance of negative themes has the power to mobilize men to defiance and put them on a mission for new points of departure. This paper poses questions and brings up certain thematic subjects, assuming that the papers presented will strive to give answers to the highlighted theme from a variety of perspectives.

Keywords: Slovak theatre, European theatre, the theatre of the absurd, in-yer-face drama, crisis of values

Slovak and European

It is no coincidence that Slovak theatre in the European context has been linked with the issue of values. Our intention was to deliberate on Slovak theatre but not ignore its context, which for convenience is referred to as "European". We have also decided to invite colleagues from other countries to talk about their theatre contexts, dramatists, and personalities shaping their national traditions and the present. Our intention was to present a multi-dimensional picture of diverse dramatic works, developmental stages, and artistic trends across the continent. Slovak theatre is perceived as an autonomous component of European culture and one of many European entities. It has absorbed a variety of influences from abroad, largely thanks to the productions of foreign playwrights whose works undergo a kind of nostrification throughout the staging process. The staging of a foreign play means its author is invariably involved in national ideological and social contexts.

Foreign influences are not only introduced via the production of foreign dramatic texts but also via immediate inspiration drawn by national theatre professionals from theatre practice. There is a variety of individual styles of direction and transpersonal schools of acting which raise the interest of our theatre professionals and are an inspiration for a positive, affirmative, or even a contradictory or controversial reaction. National theatre scenes have responded to Stanislavski's system (the director Janko Borodáč), biomechanics (the director Ján Jamnický), and postmodernism (the director Jozef Bednárík). Another option is to engage in an argument with them, for instance, with the psychological realism in the Slovak National Theatre of the late 1930s and the avant garde of the 1980s onwards which is present in the works of the creative professionals Karol Horák and Jozef Bednárík. In this manner, the national theatre is both interlinked with neighbouring and close cultures (e.g., Czech, Russian, Polish, and German) as well as with others which also cope with diverse artistic trends (e.g., French and English) as various ideas circulate across all of Europe. Without their impulses Slovak theatre would not be around; after all, would there even be a theatre culture without William Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Konstantin Sergejevich Stanislavski, Louise Jovet, or Jerzy Grotowski?

But it would not suffice to just talk about the overlap between Slovak and European theatre and about individual productions, directors, actors, opera singers, and literary authors. If we stay at the level of restaging, individual scenes, sketches, costumes, or masks, in the best case we would end up in making external comparisons or gathering statistical data; however, this would be without a more profound message. It goes without saying that individuals are also important as they provide essential factual material for research; however, if we are complacent with them we will end up analysing modern variations of *commedia dell'arte* masks, which are found in modern productions, or directors such as Ariane Mnouchkine, whose productions and rehearsing were inspired by biomechanics and impulses and were found in Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte*. Such partial characteristics of comparison will not contribute to achieving the goals of this conference.

Therefore, there is a crucial word ("values") contained in the name of the conference. At a time of a universal values crisis perceived by the modern world, we are tempted to ask what values, if any, Slovak and foreign theatre had to offer to their audiences. If there are some values present, what kind of values are they? We are not just hinting at formal declarations that interconnect the dramatic arts here and elsewhere but rather at something

more profound, something hidden deep down there and permanently and obstinately present.

It was easy to write out the conference name “Theatre as a Value-based Discourse – Slovak Theatre and Contemporary European Theatre Culture”, but it is more challenging to try to define it further. At a time of a universal value crisis, it is difficult to talk about values that are expected to connect us. Are there any such common values? Sometimes we have a problem to agree on whether uniting Europe brings a new value or whether authentic values are found in its regions in national states. Naturally, this conference is not focused on big politics; such topics will be skipped. Above all, our aim is to outline whether (if at all) and what values are communicated by dramatic art, i.e., whether there are any such common values that connect us and which everyone understands and identifies themselves with, or, to say the least, whether they are instrumental in bringing us closer together and helping us understand one another. It is to be hoped that the papers to be presented will contain such values, and that we will be able to define them.

The loss of values

With respect to drama creation and theatre, it can be said that it was Samuel Beckett who took away our last hope by not allowing Godot to come. *Čakanie na Godota* [Waiting for Godot] proved futile. Redemption from without by someone who will save us was never materialized in Beckett’s play, and this was clearly demonstrated by the Irish dramatist during the time of writing the play between 1948 and 1949 as well as in 1953, when the play was first staged in Paris. Let us ignore the question as to who Godot is, what he epitomizes, and what is expected of him. There are numerous answers to that, and in Slovak theatre practice one finds several interpretations of Godot productions (directed by Milan Lasica, Vladimír Strnisko, Pavel Mikulík, Štefan Korenči, Róbert Mankovecký, Martin Čičvák, and Blahoslav Uhlár). The essence is not hidden in Godot per se, in him as a person or in his face, appearance, role, or action, but rather in the fact that he did not turn up. Vladimir and Estragon lose hope and they get stuck on the crossroads of an impasse. They have nowhere to go, their past has vanished, and their future does not lie open before them. Roughly around the same decade of the 20th century, this bleak fact was also asserted by two couples (the Smiths and the Martins) in Ionesco’s *Plešatá speváčka* [The Bald Soprano], albeit viewed from a different perspective. They reach a point when they no longer under-

stand one another, and they stop in a mutually motionless posture, making no headway and losing hope and their future. One could say that *Plešatá speváčka* [The Bald Soprano] and *Čakanie na Godota* [Waiting for Godot] contain very nihilistic messages. However, after many decades, are we not in a very similar situation today? With this group of playwrights singled out by Martin Esslin (let us not forget that Jean Genet, Fernando Arrabal, and Harold Pinter also belonged there), one is fully aware of their scepticism and their dilemma, which is generally explained by the fact that they were able to artistically sense and recognize the crises and lurking threats of the century from war right down to the making of an atomic bomb more than ordinary men. Their souls responded to what posed a risk to the blinded world, and they expressed their fear through their plays. Their seemingly negativist authorial views may also be explained conversely; they were determined not to hide the truth, i.e., in terms of authorship, the motivations for their action were positive. After all, dramas are, or ought to be, about getting to know the truth, and the truth is one of the biggest of values. It depends on whether the author can be authentic in the way he approaches the audience. The truth is not always pleasant; on the contrary, it can sometimes literally be unpleasant, such as the truth about the state of the world expressed by Beckett through Godot not turning up. He talked about nothingness, and by talking about it he actually advocated the existence of man. He was engaged artistically and philosophically. The catharsis was accomplished through the purgatory process of the cruel truth. The grotesque, absurd, and almost inhuman world of the theatre of the absurd can be understood as a big warning, like tam-tam drums against inhumanity and ignorance, as something positive through the portrayal of the negative.

From the mid-twentieth century to its end, theatre experienced a period of a negativist view of the world along with the prospect of a world with a better future. However, these were not just decades during which only pessimistic plays were written or tragedies staged. There were also comedies, and most importantly there were psychologically, philosophically, and logically analytical emotional plays without nonsense and full of humanism and admiration for man, even though he sometimes failed in them. Let us recall the emotional Tennessee Williams, the socially analytical Arthur Miller, the man of principle Jean-Paul Sartre, and the humane Slovak Ivan Bukovčan as well as many others. This was a time when positive values were reached through exceptionally critical or negative attitudes towards reality, towards the state of man, and towards the world. There are several values that defy

nothingness, starting with old traditional values such as preservation, freedom, hope, love, and friendship. In theatre, which is mimetically concrete and where a human is portrayed by a human, the above values acquire a human face and a human dimension.

How are we to approach the period that came later, the early 21st century, which we are now living in? There are other changes taking place which may have been anticipated, and yet they are being ushered in with great urgency. In modern drama and theatre, things that used to be mythicized only recently are no longer a taboo. Reality has surpassed all our concerns and premonitions. For instance, the violence portrayed on stage thirty years ago was an innocent scuffle compared to what is being shown now. Sex in a production used to be a kind of metaphor compared to the modern and realistically rendered borderline practices in certain productions today where even pornographers would blush. Suicide is no longer a delicate and sad theme having an ancient touch; it appears almost as a seductive theme like *Psychosis 4:48* by Sarah Kane. When musing over modern drama, would it be correct to say that by staging such negative things the authors in fact aspire to a kind of prevention, much like the case of the theatre of the absurd? In other words, is it not about an artistic administration of a powerful theatrical medicine inducing a negative response which boosts our emotional and intellectual immunity towards evil portrayed on stage?

This is easily said. There is an overt intention to shock the audience, and the question is whether we have to make do with commercial theatre and aggressive commercial practices or rather with a genuinely true and authentic artistic narrative. It should not be forgotten that in recent decades there has been a shift across all of European society from conservative attitudes to more liberal ones, which is manifested, among other things, in the attitudes to spiritual matters. That which was unthinkable to be fit for staging twenty-five years ago would not outrage us now and would only shock the most conservative members of society. Let me mention the Polish case of *Klatwa* [The Curse] staged by Warsaw Teatr Powszechny [Powszechny Theatre] or a more recent similar experience from the Slovak town of Brezno, where an amateur performance of *Kováči* [The Blacksmiths] by Miloš Nikolič was banned by the central Slovak protector of national purity.

Have we not reached the very end of the existence of values? This could happen eventually, considering the parallel chaos of value criteria and value hierarchy along with the individualization and atomization of positive phenomena and the disintegration of the belief system into as many parts as

there are people in the world. We are witnessing the emergence of the predominance of a kind of essential and single value which egotistic humankind is still willing to profess to: a value acknowledged by billions of true selves. The history of theatre art and drama may smoothly guide us through a thousand-year old timeline of human evolution. Ancient drama had a transparent value structure; the world's order was clear and understandable, it was the infallible gods taking decisions and affecting human fate. In classicist drama, honour and the king were fought for, and man oscillated in this value frame, which was delineated by power and society. Even in the late 19th century, burgher drama was a reflection of a solid albeit slowly disintegrating social pattern. The values were clearly set in socialist realism as well: art was derived from working-class people and was intended for the working proletariat on its way to a better future.

Having said that, not everything ought to be viewed so bleakly. If we believe that ancient theatre is far too transparent while the picture of the modern world as portrayed by contemporary theatre is perceived as conflicting, contradictory, reaching to the extremes and pulling down principles and classical morality, decency, and breaking all taboos, this is not to imply that we only live in extremes and that we have abandoned initially virtuous inspirations for good. The value crisis is reflected in drama, the repertoires of European theatres, direction, and creation, and was tirelessly alerted to by the theatre of the absurd and conclusively supported by the most recent period of contemporary theatre of the early 21st century, by authors whose creation was referred to as "in-yer-face" by Alex Sierz. This is largely because contemporary theatre also contains positive values, and one should be knowledgeable of them by comparing Slovak theatre within the European context, or, better still, within a universal human context. The history of theatre art is a continuum, and it captures all facets of our lives, sometimes the better ones and sometimes the worse ones. Continuity also has a geographical dimension; the European overlaps with the Slovak and vice versa.

Connections

Having realized that Slovak theatre is connected to European theatre historically, geographically, and in terms of values, the question of how we are interconnected is very apt. Why is it that through Slovak theatre we feel we are in Europe, and why is it that Europe is mirrored in our theatre? If we are to base ourselves on external signs, such as the participation of Slovak theatres

in foreign festivals, the hosting of Slovak directors and actors in other countries, or the translation and performance of our national drama creation in reputable theatre buildings, we would get an unpleasant feeling that Slovak theatre continues to be deficient in the properly European dimension as it fails to assert itself elsewhere. (The reasons behind the external failure of contacts are different, such as the language barrier, the poor functioning of promotion-oriented institutions, and undoubtedly the indifference of other countries to get out of a rut and seek emerging and unknown cultures.)

The connection between Slovak theatre and the theatre of another countries which has no distinct external manifestation must therefore have a different form of existence. To my mind, this is taking place through a rhizomatic international dramatic structure. Deleuze's rhizomatic model refers to a branched and non-hierarchically grown acentered system: any point of this model can be transversally connected to any other thing at any point. The theatre and theatre professionals do not care much about keeping decorum, but they would much rather see things with their own eyes, read texts, meet people, learn from their colleagues, visit an exhibition, and watch a film on a projection screen. In principle, theatre is a collective art, and this really works for them. This is best proven by the hands-on experience drawn from Slovak theatre which is represented by Jozef Bednárík's productions. At the time we lived behind the Iron Curtain, he saw a great number of performances put on European and international stages. When we reflect on his productions, we recognize his innovative feedback on what was then postmodernism. At a time when our theory and critique did not exactly name the new period's artistic trend and the philosophy of postmodernism (i.e., the 1980s), Bednárík, while lacking theoretical preparation, was inspired by it in his own productions by learning from seeing. Another example is Blaho Uhlár, who started the Stoka Theatre Company in the early 1990s. We remember the "texts" of his productions that were improvised by actors, and when the critical and black glasses of Uhlár's narrative are compared to the drama staged in parallel abroad one cannot but see the obvious similarity between them. After 2000, Theatre SKRAT, which was founded by Ľubomír Burgr, was clearly inspired by Uhlár. In recent decades, undeclared ties have been nothing new. They have been known from long ago and were present in the early works of Leopold Lahola and Peter Karvaš in the 1940s, which reflected on literary existentialism. Last but not least, the inspiration drawn from Russian theatre and declared in the works of Janko Borodáč and Ján Jamnický has already been touched upon. Slovak and European theatre have

shared a common basis, and Slovak theatre, sometimes in discontinuity and with time delays, has been connecting with European theatre culture over and over again.

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