

# Arta teatrală

## DRAMA SLOVACĂ MODERNĂ ÎNCEPÂND CU ANII '60

SLOVAK MODERN DRAMA SINCE 1960S

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În cartea sa "Teatrul absurdului" (1961) criticul englez de teatru Martin Esslin nu a scris nimic despre contribuția creatorilor slovaci la fenomenul dezbătut. Doar într-o carte apărută mai târziu "Cronici scurte" (1970), a fost menționat dramaturgul slovac Peter Karvaš. Oare nu am putea găsi un teatru slovac și o altă contribuție la unul dintre cele mai importante curente artistice ale secolului XX? În articolul compus din două părți (1. Din întinericul anilor '50; 2. Catifea și absurd după 1990) autorul caută răspuns la această întrebare.

### 1. From the Darkness of 1950s

In his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) English theatre critic Martin Esslin wrote nothing of the Slovak contribution to the theatre of the absurd. Only in a later book – *Brief Chronicles* (1970) – was there mention of the Slovak dramatist Peter Karvaš, though of none other. Was it right? Could not we find in the Slovak theatre any other contribution to one of the European most important theatrical stream of the 20th Century?

It is truth that in the 1950s, in Slovakia as in other countries of Central Europe, contacts with the Western part of the continent were limited. A relaxation came only in 1956, when the crimes of the Stalin personality cult were exposed and a gradual political thaw set in. As part of the then Czecho-Slovakia, however, Slovakia had still several more years to wait for certain civil and artistic freedoms to become manifest. The first public reactions of any significance to absurd drama came at the beginning of the 1960s, mostly from theatre scholars and critics. It was then that the first translations into Slovak were made and these began to be performed on our stages; at this time, too, the first Slovak plays in the mould were written.

Drama of the absurd began to appear on Slovak stages in the 1960s. The most frequently produced author was Sławomir Mrożek. The first of his plays to be performed – *The Turkey* – was staged in 1963: not at some experimental venue, but at Bratislava's showcase Slovenské národné divadlo (Slovak National Theatre). The same year students at the Vysoká škola múzických umení (Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts) in Bratislava put on *Striptease* and *The Party*, and another Bratislava theatre – Nová scéna (New Scene) – tackled *The Police*. Interest in Mrożek peaked with no fewer than three productions of his *Tango* (in 1967 at the Slovenské národné divadlo and at the theatre in Košice, and in 1969 at the theatre in Martin).

The first encounter with Samuel Beckett was via *Happy Days* at the Slovenské národné divadlo (1965), and one of the most important absurd theatre works of all – *Waiting for Godot* – had its Slovak premiere in 1968. This first outing of the play was also the opening production of a new Bratislava company, Divadlo na korze (Theatre on the Corso). This was a small theatre of contemporaries which developed a modern form of acting and put on a number of absurd plays – by Sławomir Mrożek and Arthur Kopit well as by Beckett – in addition to other satirical comedies and grotesque pieces (Gogol, Chekhov, Ostrovsky, Büchner).

Václav Havel was represented in Slovakia by two plays (*The Garden Party*, 1964 and *The Memorandum*, 1966 – in theatres in Nitra and Martin, as well as in Bratislava), but disappointment marked the reaction. Eagerly awaited in that decade were productions of Harold Pinter (*The Lover*, 1966, *The Homecoming*, 1968 – both at the Slovenské národné divadlo), but the critics took neither to

the plays nor the productions. In addition to the writers mentioned, Slovak theatres also put on in the 1960s plays by Eugene Ionesco, Albert Camus, Tadeusz Rózewicz, Edward Albee and others.

Among those to attempt the writing of absurd drama in Slovakia was Peter Karvaš. Particularly in his *Absolútny zákaz* (*Absolute Prohibition*, 1966-1969) Peter Karvaš did indeed treat an absurdist subject: the inmates of a run-of-the-mill block of flats are prohibited from looking out of their windows and have to wall them up. Those who protest are given a hard time. When they receive permission to open their windows again, they find that in the interim a wall has been built in front of them. Although Karvaš was taking a stance on the socio-political situation, the work does not otherwise present the typical traits of absurd drama – on the contrary, it has a „classic“ dramatic structure, rounded characters and no anti-heroes. The story ends with a positive message and not in philosophical nihilism. Some critics in the 1970s on several occasions proclaimed this play the Slovak incarnation of absurd drama. Some of them were motivated in this by the desire at last to find a Slovak absurd drama of quality, others by the wish to find a scapegoat for the nihilist destruction of Communist theatre. In the reality Karvaš's position was not that of the playwright of the theatre of the absurd. Although he was more than familiar with the phenomenon and wrote knowledgeably on it, his authorial creed was another, derived rather from a materialist philosophy; he was a rationalist and a realist. Earlier, in the 1950s, he had not always steered clear of the Communist schematicism, but from the close of that decade he had come to a scepticism in the Dürrenmatt mould and taken up with modern European existentialist drama. At the beginning of the 1970s, having supported the earlier leadership's moves towards Dubček's democratisation and liberalisation, he was penalised and his plays were banned. Among his works were three plays – *Velká parochňa* (*The Big Wig*, 1964, inspired by Brecht's *Roundheads and Pointedheads*), *Experiment Damokles* (*The Damocles Experiment*, 1966, close in theme to Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*) and *Absolútny zákaz* – proclaimed to be „absurd“.

The really pioneer of the Slovak drama of the absurd was Rudolf Skukálek, who wrote his *Hodinky* (*Watch*) in 1963. The events unfold around a triangle of two women and one man whose relations lay bare alienation, the loss of ideals and the inability to communicate with one another. Skukálek employed methods already familiar from Ionesco: discontinuity of dialogues, vacuity of language, mechanical refrains, the absence of any psychology of character. The play was staged by Bratislava's Divadielko poézie (Small Lyric Theatre) and was received by the critics with interest as the first domestic absurd drama, though they nevertheless criticised it for assuming only the outer markings of the absurd play and being less successful in attuning to its philosophical side. Rudolf Skukálek emigrated at the end of the 1960s and was the editor at the Radio Free Europe in Munich. Before, being in Slovakia, he wrote a further two plays – *Metla* (*The Broom*, 1964) and *Piliny* (*Sawdust*, 1965) – but these were never performed.

Another playwright, Juraj Váh, the author of a number of plays, influenced by existentialism and the theatre of the absurd, created a Slovak form of modern drama in *Lakrímia, mať naša* (*Lakrímia, Our Mother*, 1970). The play summarised a monumental tableau of three traumas which he had had to confront: the horror of totalitarian regimes and the Holocaust, the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and – the thing that allowed all this to happen – the *trahison des clercs* in the 20th Century. But, the artistic results were not entirely convincing or original.

A truly original form of theatre of the absurd in Slovakia was created by two entertainers and playwrights Milan Lasica and Július Satinský. In 1968 they attached themselves to Divadlo na korze, known as a young theatre played international authors of theatre of the absurd and they performed there *Večer pre dvoch* (*Evening for Two*, 1966), *Soirée* (1968) and *Radostná správa* (*Joyful News*, 1969). These performances were built of dialogues, brief scenes and cabaret banter in which they appeared as themselves rather than taking on characters. Although their scripts arose out of improvisation and they made no claims to writing plays – because they always remained first and foremost actors and comics –, the seemingly incidental result of their work over time was, in fact, the purest and most significant form of Slovak theatre of the absurd. They employed the literary nonsense and philosophical paradox; they confused the comic and the tragic and they subjected the very essence of humankind and society to irony and inversion. Their political cabaret fell foul of the Communist power and from 1970 they

were banned. It was only after a number of years of this enforced silence that they were allowed to return to their work, performing at Bratislava's *Ľbúdió L+S* (L+S Studio), where the productions they put on included *Deň radosti* (*Day of Joy*, 1986), *Náš priateľ René* (*Our Friend René*, 1991) and later in the 1990s after the creation of an independent Slovak Republic (1993) they played many roles both in the theatre and on the TV. Milan Lasica and Július Satinský were influenced by the modern drama of the absurd, particularly its comic and political offshoot (Sławomir Mrożek, Eugène Ionesco and Václav Havel).

In the 1970s and 1980s theatre of the absurd was already castigated by Communist propaganda as something injurious to the healthy development of society. The merest indication of any assumption of its philosophy was dangerous, and so it is surprising that it should have appeared at all in some of the plays of the time. The playwright and actor of *Radoľinské naivné divadlo* (Radolína's Naive Theatre), Stanislav Ľbepka, in two plays *Jááánoľbík* (1970) and *Ālovečina* (1971), doubtless not least as a result of the great political strains of those years, wrote texts full of tragic insight and trepidation at the course the world was taking. The milieu of the madhouse, in which the first of these plays takes place, evokes feelings of absurdity stemming from the abasement of fundamental human values. The second play, for its part, illustrates the decay of common decency even in family life. The members of an average family seek to rid themselves of their grandmother – by putting her into an old people's home – and succeed in so doing only when she dies. Lubomír Feldek in his *Metafora* (*Metaphor*, 1977) splits the protagonist of a play into two parts: the head, which behaves rationally, and the body, which is capable only of being corporeal. In *Teta na zjedenie* (*An Aunt Sweet Enough to Eat*, 1978) the relatives of an aunt living in Germany receive a parcel containing powder of some sort; supposing it to be a special kind of coffee, they curiously try the beverage. Only from a letter do they subsequently learn that the receptacle was an urn containing the ashes of their beloved aunt. Such absurdities were not common place in the 1970s and 1980s: Slovak drama had taken another direction.

## 2. Velvet and Absurd after 1990

Only after the „Velvet Revolution“ of 1989, when a democratic regime returned after decades, all the trends of modern drama, the absurd included, began to develop and the works of absurd dramatists were again performed. Starting in the 1990s all Slovak theatres – not only those comprising actors and directors of a young generation – performed drama of the absurd. A harbinger of this had come in 1986 at the theatre in Martin with Tadeusz Rózewicz's *The Trap*, which took its subject from the life of Franz Kafka. There was a veritable sea change in the production of drama of the absurd in Slovakia. Not only did plays staged much earlier make a reappearance, but works were put on – using new translations – which had never been seen before. In a new Bratislava theatre, *Divadlo Astorka-Korzo '90*, in its first season 1990/1991 were put on Mrożek's *Out at Sea* and *The Ambassador*, Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, a dramatisation of Kafka's *The Trial* and Havel's *The Memorandum*. The plays of Václav Havel, quondam dissident and from 1989 Czecho-Slovak president, made a reappearance in the Slovak theatre. In addition to *The Memorandum*, his *Audience* and *Protest* were also performed in the 1990/1991 season. But in the decade as a whole the fascination of the banned writer seemed to dissolve and productions failed to trigger any substantial response. In the middle of 1990s Havel's plays ceased to be performed in Slovakia, not now because of any proscription, but because theatres had no interest in them. Interestingly, it was again the plays of Sławomir Mrożek that most appealed to the theatres. In addition to the works mentioned above, his *Tango* was again performed – at the theatre in Zvolen (1990) and again at the *Slovenské národné divadlo* in Bratislava (1997).

In postmodernist performances of the first half of 1990s two-dimensional, black-and-white absurd plays acquired more prolific forms, added meanings, a greater profusion of styles and genre diversity. Genet's *The Maids* was put on at Bratislava's „boulevard“ theatre *Divadlo West* (West Theatre, 1996), where it acquired an admix of the erotic. A similar fate befell the production of Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad...* at the capital's *Ľbúdió Novej scény* (Studio of the New Scene, 1990) and of Boris Vian's *Medusa's Head* at *Astorka-Korzo '90* (1992). Performed at the same theatre were Fernando Arrabal's Beckettian plays *The Tricycle* and *Fando and Lis* (1992). At the theatre in Trnava in 1990

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was injected with elements of clowning, while in Martin a similar approach was extended to the whole play, the adaptation gaining the new title *Čakanie na Bohoša* (*Waiting for Bohoš*, 1992). Two productions of Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* (1990 and 1995) also received new interpretations. The same author's *The Chairs* featured at the Slovenské národné divadlo in 1999 as a display piece for two of the country's popular actors.

In the group of the Slovak authors of absurd and postmodern theatre we include Viliam Klimáček and Ivan Mizera from the Bratislava's theatre GUnaGU. They paid homage to the legacy of Beckett, Ionesco and Mrožek. The most overt link with the ethos of absurd drama came in 1993 in a play which bore a Rumanian title *Piesa compusă din patru părți pe care teatrul GUnaGU a pus-o în scenă cu ocazia aniversării a 80 de ani de la nașterea lui E. Ionesco* (*A Play by the GUnaGU Theatre in Four Parts Staged on the Occasion of the 80th Birthday of Eugène Ionesco*). The production consisted in a mechanical reading from a textbook of Slovak for foreign learners, the parodying of a course on correct pronunciation and, finally, a tableau of the hatred in the Balkans which at the time threatened the whole of Europe. By this the writers were seeking to draw attention to the risks of nationalism and warn of the danger that what was happening in the south could make its way into Central Europe. Another play, *Hlt* (*Gulp*, 1991) has a theme akin to that of Mrožek's *Tango*: the characters have exhausted avant-garde acts and non-conformism and now long for something completely normal - in this play for tinned meat. In *Loj* (*Suet*, 1992) Klimáček wanted to portray literally a world upside down, and so at one moment he turns the set on its head. These visions proliferate along with chaos, the schizophrenia of the characters and grotesque nihilism.

In 1990 was founded in Bratislava by Blahoslav Uhlár and Miloš Karásek the Stoka Theatre („stoka“ means „the drain“). This young company showed affinity with the tradition of absurd drama. From the very outset it bore a strong influence of postmodernism, and it could be said to synthesise the two currents into one. Uhlár and Karásek published three theatre manifestos and proclaimed their adherence to the principles of decomposition, deconstruction, super-subjectivism and anti-traditionalism. These principles they put into practice as early as the end of the 1980s, when at the theatre in Trnava they produced their own composition, *Predposledná večera* (*The Next-to-Last Supper*, 1989), at the Ruthenian minority theatre in Prešov *Sens nonsens* and *Ocot* (*Vinegar*), both 1988, and at Stoka *Impasse* (1991), *Dyp Inaf* (1991), *Vres* (*The Heath*, 1992), *Eo ipso* (1994) and *Dno* (*Bottom*, 1998). In these productions first came the actors' improvisation during rehearsals, then entire performances before spectators, and only after the first night were the lines recorded and a script made for library purposes.

Blahoslav Uhlár paid his dues to absurd drama. In his *Záha* (*Heartburn*, 1990), for example, he took the liberty for the first time of bringing onto the stage the long-awaited Godot. It was an old man in a wheelchair, arrogant and course, who tried to pay for everything in dollars. Such a Godot was intended to express the encounter of the country following the fall of the Iron Curtain with the attributes of a go-ahead, but not always correct West. Uhlár's political theatre fizzled out at the end of 1990s, and in his productions at Stoka he applied himself ever more to a non-verbal theatre in which body movement, lighting and plasticity of set prevailed; he descended ever further into the human psyche and the deeper he found himself, the more his characters were brazen, feral and vulgar.

### 3. Conclusion

In Slovakia no important strand of absurd drama came into being. In terms of its own development, Slovak absurd theatre achieved its peak period at the end of the 1960s (Rudolf Skukálek, Milan Lasica and Július Satinský) and the beginning of the following decade (Juraj Váh, Stanislav Štepka, Lubomír Feldek), and then again at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s (Viliam Klimáček, Blahoslav Uhlár, Miloš Karásek). By the close of the century, however, it had been largely replaced by the poetics of postmodern drama (Rudolf Sloboda, Silvester Lavrík, Pavol Janík, Laco Kerata). Although never part of the mainstream of modern theatre in the country, Slovak absurd drama did have a number of distinctive traits. Generally speaking, from the 1960s Slovak absurd drama, in line with other Central European cultures, leaned to the social and the political. Questions of human existence and its individual dimension, as well as the philosophical questions issuing from an awareness of the absurdity



of the world, were less frequently advanced. In the unpropitious political circumstances writers often took humour as their armour, and Slovak absurd drama was on the whole more comic and grotesque; the tragic is harder to come by.

The theatre of the absurd is not a moral or healing institution; it makes no claim to either hide evil or put it right. Absurd drama is merely an instrument of diagnosis; it shows a world of inverted values, of decay of the personality, of anti-heroes and pessimistic prospects. This is typical also for the Slovak version of the theatre of the absurd.

Photo 01



Samuel Beckett: *Čakanie na Godota (Waiting for Godot)*. Divadlo na korze Bratislava, 1968. Directors Milan Lasica and Vladimír Strnisko. Pavol Mikulík – Lucky, Martin Huba – Pozzo.

Photo 02



Peter Karvaš: *Absolútny zákaz (Absolute Prohibition)*. Slovenské národné divadlo Bratislava, 1969. Director Peter Mikulík. Gustáv Valach – Adam, Jozef Kroner – Otec.

Photo 03



Blahoslav Uhlár, Miloš Karásek: *Predposledná večera (The Next-to-Last Supper)*. Trnava, 1989. Director Blahoslav Uhlár. Margita Šefčovičová, Ladislav Kerata, Viera Pavlíková, Vladimír Oktavec, Tibor Vokoun.

Photo 04



Eugène Ionesco: *Plešivá speváčka (The Bald Prima Donna)*. Prešov, 1995. Director Christian Ioan. Vasil Rusiňák – Pán Martin, Jozef Tkáč – Pán Smith, Eugen Libezňuk – Veliteľ požiarnikov, Natália Mihaľovová – Pani Smithová, Svetlana Škovranová – Pani Martinová.

Photo 05



Blahoslav Uhlár et al.: *Donárium*. Stoka Bratislava, 1992. Director Blahoslav Uhlár. Vladimír Zboroň, Lucia Piussi, Ladislav Kerata.

Photo 06



Blahoslav Uhlár: *Dno (Bottom)*. Stoka Bratislava, 1998. Director Blahoslav Uhlár. Lucia Piussi.

Photo 07



Viliam Klimáček: *Hlt (Gulp)*. Director Aleš Votava. GUnaGU Bratislava, 1991. Ivan Mizera, Zuzana Benešová, Viliam Klimáček.

Photo 08



Martin Esslin in Bratislava, 1990. With playwright Peter Karvaš and profesor Ján Boor.