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DÁŠA ČIRIPOVÁ

So Different, So Similar

In Visegrad, the ancient picturesque rampart-surrounded royal town in northern Hungary just off the Slovak-Hungarian border, major historical decisions were made. King Charles I of Hungary moved here his royal court, including his array of crown jewels. In what is today an inconspicuous small town with typical features of a former settlement, Charles I met, in November 1335, the Czech monarch John the Blind of Bohemia and Polish King Casimir III the Great. They agreed Central European alliance, peaceful cooperation, mutual aid and support. This became the foundation for the same countries (only in a different geographical arrangement) to advance their cooperation nearly a thousand years later. In 1991, the three countries convened again, when the President of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic Václav Havel, Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall and Polish President Lech Wałęsa met, symbolically again in Visegrad.

The representatives of countries that had just got rid of Communism signed a declaration on close cooperation with the aim to integrate the three countries in European structures and to help each other find their place in Europe. Totalitarian regimes left this place empty and unfulfilled. Originally, the bloc was called the Visegrad Three. Yet after Czechoslovakia split up in 1993, it was renamed to V4. The grouping played a significant role in European integration of all four countries, as well as in the process of transition from Communism to a free and democratic society. The combined power of two smaller and two larger nations positively contributed to the integration efforts in Central Europe – the countries accessed the European Union, NATO and eventually the Schengen area. Today, despite

the unquestionable significance of the Visegrad group, critical views are increasingly presented by our Central European neighbours calling for a redefinition of the group's goal and role. This is mostly because the original objectives – predominantly political ones – have already been achieved. There is evidence of a coming change though, such as the project *PACE.V4 – Performing Art in Central Europe*. Supported by the Visegrad Fund, the project has now entered its final stage, part of which we are releasing a special issue of *kød* (a monthly on Slovak and world theatre). It is a continuous project of the Czech Theatre Institute (coordinated by Martina Černá), the Hungarian Theatre Institute and Museum (coordinated by Attila Szabó and Sylvia Huszár), the Polish Institute of A. Mickiewicz (coordinated by Marcin Jakoby and Joanna Klass), and the Slovak Theatre Institute (coordinated by Dáša Čiripová).

The main idea of *PACE.V4* is to present performing arts in V4 countries, not only by producing performances by selected ensembles from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, but also by running lecture series, stage readings, small music events and so on. Looking back at the four presentations on the various types of events, it seems that this ambitious goal has been achieved. Not only that. We are continuing with new forms of presentation and new cooperative projects (anthologies of theatre plays from V4 countries in Spanish). Every stage of the project justifies the relevance of our activity. So far, the three main stages of the project are completed – the first, and perhaps the most complex, was the presentation of performing arts in the V4 countries at PAMS 2012 (Performing Arts Market Seoul in South Korea) in October 2012. The second stage involved part presentation in form of lectures about theatres in the V4 countries in New York during APAP 2013 and the Under the Radar festival in January 2013. The third time, we all met in Warsaw at a conference New Dramaturgy where our contemporary theatre plays and playwrights were presented. The members of the conferences met also with

2 American playwrights and set up a platform to discuss

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issues they deal with, analysing the forms and problems of interpreting theatre works in their translations (May 2013).

In addition to these main events, a number of coordinator meetings were held – in Budapest (March 2012), Prague (May 2012), Seoul and New York (during the above presentations). The cooperation among the V4 countries has been characterised by dynamism, action and invention. This was foreshadowed by the symbolic title *PACE.V4*. The effort to confront ourselves with the neighbouring European countries, as well as with those on different continents, started with incessant questions such as who we are, who we are as part of the V4 group, what connects and what divides us, what is our identity.

These questions led us to decide that, in addition to a practical presentation, we needed to expound the acquired knowledge on the basis of theory as well. The result is this special issue that covers three topic areas: first, the branding of individual Central European countries with a focus on culture and performing art in V4 countries; second, the role of repertory theatres in V4 countries; and third, contemporary drama and its trends.

For the first part – the branding of V4 countries in the context of Central Europe – authors from other countries in the region (Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Croatia) were invited to contribute to the issue. Professionals on cultural policy, management and theatre presented their ideas not only about the distinctiveness and identity of the individual countries, but also about the notion of Central European identity. According to the level of the process in individual countries, the texts) reflect to a varying degree the characteristic features and outward image of the countries in terms of historical development, culture, distinctive features, habits, traditions, values, lifestyle and, last but not least, art, specifically performing art.

In her contribution, Rhea Krčmarová points out aloofness, or even indifference of Austria towards its neighbouring countries. Some change is visible in eastern Austria, also because of mutual cultural and artistic presentation with the V4 countries (mostly in visual arts and opera). Performing arts are worse

off despite some effort to bring the regions closer and to get to know each other better in this area.

Anna Ließke comments on the phenomena in Germany that create a branded image of the country and in which art plays only a secondary role. Artists are more active when they are freelancers. The German government even started for them the *Culture and Creative Industries* initiative – a network focused on helping freelance artists. One of the reasons for the support is that freelancers partake in German cultural branding. Yet at the same time Ließke claims that in Germany the relationship towards V4 countries is desperate. If only because of the fact that the term V4 group is not very widespread in Germany. There are only very few cultural events where V4 countries present themselves to some degree. Today, Germans consider European solidarity to be anachronism. From among the post-Communist countries, Slovenia has had the most developed branding strategy, improving it successfully since the country became independent in 1991. Slovenia's branding slogan "I feel Slovenia" includes an economic aspect, tourism, sport, culture, and science. Technically, it has everything that makes branding what it is. Maja Konečnik Ruzznier describes the individual steps and surveys that eventually led to the slogan. Culture and art are one of the fundamental pillars of the Slovenian brand. They are perceived as an integral part of the state and individuals. "Every Slovenian is some type of artisan or artist."

Unlike Slovenia, Croats did not feel – at least not until recently – any need to create their own brand in a cultural or historical sense. They based the promotion of their country on tourism and geography, ignoring art, literature or performance. André Ahn attempts to summarise key events that might play an essential role in the new formation of identity, thus also the branding of Croatia. He perceives theatre as an important instrument that can change the perception of what is mostly a tourism-related image of the country. The works of prominent directors in contemporary Croatian

theatre reflect the current situation in the country and the public mind. Croatia is undergoing numerous social and cultural changes which will significantly transform its identity and, in turn, help reassess the branding strategy of the new EU member state.

The second part of the branding section consists of texts by V4 authors. Unlike the aforementioned countries, with the exception of Croatia, they all understand that branding and identity building is a natural need and necessity. Until recently, the V4 countries have only tackled the branding issue rather marginally. This was one of the reasons why the Hungarian, Slovak and Czech coordinators of the Keep PACE.V4 project, inspired by this special issue, organised roundtable discussions in their home institutions to which they invited guests from the culture sector.

In the Czech Republic, representatives state administration and independent institutions participated in the discussion. Martina Černá studied the attitude of the Czech Republic towards the Visegrad Four – the V4 is viewed by the Czechs as a functional and well-developed initiative in Central Europe contributing to the positive advance of integration processes. She identifies the Czech identity precisely, though critically. At the same time, however, she mentions a non-existing branding strategy in the Czech Republic. The subsequent roundtable discussion recognised the need to help handle and work on such a strategy.

The Slovak roundtable was shared by culture managers who deal with branding and independent artists. Zora Jaurová's text about the branding of Slovakia – published in this issue – is a result of a study drawn up in 2010 and commissioned by the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was intended to be a starting material, a kind of preliminary preparation for branding in practice. Our discussion once again resurrected the need to take this step (which was not taken because of a change in political climate). Taking into account the fact that Hungary is currently in a rather difficult social and political situation, the

issue of branding would be more polemical and would exist more at the level of contemplations. Still, our Hungarian colleagues managed to organise a roundtable discussion and invite Hungarian theatremakers. The transcript of the discussion with artists, festival directors, state-funded and private theatres is a specific evidence of what has been going on in the Hungarian society, in particular in the artistic context. The transcripts aspire to initiate a change, specifically by theatremakers, in the process of Hungary's branding.

Małgorzata Mostek and Michał Wysocki from Poland scrutinised the process of brand creation, that is, what exactly it is that brands a country and what position does V4 have in this process. Their contribution became a fine example and direction how to avoid unfavourable consequences of branding when creating an image of a country. The authors warn that it is often only self-serving marketing and advertising exercise that is remote from reality. Their text concludes the first section and offers a comprehensive view with both positive and negative aspects of branding. The section thus paints a vivid picture of branding strategies while, at the same time, considerably determining the identity of the individual nations and their position in Central Europe.

The second and third sections focus on current issues in theatre and drama in V4 countries. The status and role of repertory theatres in these countries is undergoing immense changes. Bricks-and-mortar theatres recovered only very slowly from how deeply the Communist regime affected each layer of life, arts and society. In some countries a remarkable phenomenon can be observed when a multitude of independent subjects were established.

4 Independent entities could reflect social changes

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more quickly and in a more topical manner. This helped them attract audiences that gradually started to leave the perennial, rigid theatres that refocused on a more entertaining repertory. Twenty years later, a question arises again: What is the role and status of repertory theatres in relation to the audience and the society?

The third section used contemporary drama to introduce the trends and themes of contemporary theatre productions in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. The examination of identity, symbols and all that connects and divides the neighbouring countries (not merely with regard to performing arts) would lack comprehensiveness and thoroughness, if our V4 team had not met in a place that is a landmark for the *PAC&V4* project. It was in this very place where we realised our differences as well as an inextinguishable interconnection constituted by the turbulent historical circumstances. Many of them are traumatising – the Holocaust, the atrocities of World War II, Communism with its feigned equality and freedom, etc.. And yet, there were also many factors, such as the liberation movement and democratic stabilisation at the end of the 1980s, that were like a breath of fresh air for all V4 countries.

Our common past, as well as the present, is symbolically reflected by the design of the title page of this issue of our journal. We discovered it on our common trip to Visegrad, near the Šamorín synagogue (July 2013 – a camping trip called “Keep pace”). The shocks of the past are fading, but we should never forget them. We ought to remind everybody about the past without any fear to call a spade a spade, without hesitating to get to the very core of the matter. It might help us acquire and maintain an impartial view, which is immensely helpful for the strengthening of our individual identities. ☞

kód

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Editor-in-Chief

Dáša Čiripová

Associate Editors

Juraj Hubinák

Zuzana A. Ferusová

Editors

Martina Černá

Attila Szabó

Joanna Klass

Dáša Čiripová

English Translation

Ivan Lacko

Jan Shepperd

Attila Szabó

Simon Włoch

Robin Cassling

Proofreading

Lucia Faltinová

Publisher

The Theatre Institute
Bratislava

Jakubovo námestie 12

813 57 Bratislava

Tel.: + 421 2 20487504

Fax: + 421 2 52931571

e-mail: kod@theatre.sk

www.casopiskod.sk

www.facebook.com/casopiskod

www.theatre.sk

**Graphic design,
logo & cover**

ZELENÁ LÚKA s.r.o.

Cover's photo

Lucia Čarnecká

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I

Branding countries

Beyond Vienna – Austrian View on Theatre and Art in V4 Countries

The answer to whether the Austrian attitude towards the culture of the Visegrad 4 (V4) countries is more than ambiguous for, despite a population of some eight million, the Austrians are all but a heterogeneous entity. The Austrian attitude towards the V4 depends considerably on the degree of education, domicile and age. Furthermore, the term Visegrad countries makes sense mainly to political scientists and historians. An average Austrian tends to relate the name Visegrad to the Vyšehrad Hill in Prague rather than to the combination of four (neighbouring) countries.

What the V4 countries do have in common is the conspicuous absence of the term in the local media. A study of Austrian dailies and periodicals and their websites, and the public and private television programmes could almost lead to the conclusion that the Iron Curtain is still in place. The Austrian media landscape remains mainly oriented towards Western Europe and the USA. The V4 countries (together with other former Eastern Bloc countries) are mostly mentioned in connection with political crises and corruption. This may come as a surprise despite the fact that three of the four V4 countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) border with Austria. The lack of media interest in Poland is also exceptional considering that air distance between Vienna and Krakow is 330 kilometres, which is shorter than between Vienna and Innsbruck (some 380 km). Yet there is certainly little mention of these

countries in the Austrian media. One occasionally finds reports of tourist trips to Krakow, Prague or Budapest, but the cultural diversity and the large number of designers, masterchefs, architects, authors or theatre artists in the V4 countries remains of sparse or only marginal interest to the local media. An Austrian cultural journalist recently mentioned a news conference on the 2013 European Cultural Capitals Marseilles and Košice at which the journalists almost fought over the opportunity to visit Marseilles, but none had any interest in writing about the cultural events in eastern Slovakia.

One can speculate about the lack of media attention to the V4 countries. It could be the result, on the one hand, of certain degree of cultural chauvinism, reserve towards the former political enemy, language barriers. On the other hand, it might be affected by the meagre advertising budgets for tourism within the individual V4 countries. Additionally, in the case of the Czech Republic, there are political differences regarding the Temelín nuclear power plant and the issue of the so-called Beneš Decrees which resulted in the post-War expulsion of the Sudeten Germans.

On the contrary, politicians and interested cultural workers have, in the past two decades, embarked on diverse initiatives to fill the white spots on Austrian maps of Eastern Europe. These include the creation of the Centropo Euroregion in 2003 consisting of the Czech Southern Moravian region, the Slovak regions of Bratislava and Trnava, the western Hungarian communities of Győr-Moson-Sopron, and Vas) and the Austrian provinces of Burgenland (Lower

Austria) and Vienna. The periodical K-2 Culture in Centrope keeps the seven million population of Centrope region informed of the cultural events of the region. The tourist organisations, such as that of the Lower Austrian Waldviertel and Weinviertel regions, also seek more cooperation with townships and cultural centres in their neighbourhood.

In Vienna the cultural centres of the V4 countries are the first contact points for those interested in cultural events. Despite the one-sided media reports, the Director of the Czech Cultural Centre in Vienna Martin Krafl, says that he finds more awareness of the culture of his country in Vienna than in Berlin where he spent four years previously. "I have the impression that the public interest in Vienna, Lower and Upper Austria is far greater than in Germany. Even though I sometimes do feel a certain reserve on the part of Austrians I still have the impression that they understand us better than the Germans. The countries seem to be far closer to each other." He mentioned a whole series of events in which the Cultural Centre was also involved, but they were individually planned and carried out.

In eastern Austria (Vienna, Lower Austria, Upper Austria and Burgenland) the focus on the V4 tends to be stronger than in the west because of its geographical proximity to the V4 countries. In the western and southern provinces the focus is more on Germany and Switzerland, or Italy depending on which country the province borders. Martin Krafl has also noted this trend. "The further south and west one travels the less interest one encounters."

The cultural centres of the V4 countries always cooperate on the implementation of greater projects. In May 2013 the exhibition *Visegrafiken +* opened within the framework of the Month of Printed Graphics. In two parallel exhibitions the Slovak Institute and the Galerie UngArt showed graphic art from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland along with the works by Austrian graphic artists.

The Theatre – The Stepchild

Architecture, visual arts and music of the V4 countries tend to be the easiest to bring audiences to exhibitions, museums and concert halls. Of the wide range of arts of the V4 countries performing arts is the one sphere that is least known in Austria. This could partly be the result of the language barriers, but also of the wider technical-production aspects. Stage productions from other countries are staged in Vienna mostly within the framework of the Vienna Festival weeks only. Merely a few artists from the Visegrad countries have appeared in these well-known events held annually in May and June in the Austrian capital. The Hungarian director Kornél Mundruczó, is the only exception: in 2012 his company took part at the Festival for the third time.

The regular productions of the Viennese Burgtheater, Akademietheater and Volkstheater only seldom stage plays by Czech, Slovak, ungary or Polish Hungarian or Polish playwrights. Yet these stages have found their own ways to come to terms with the culture of the former Eastern Bloc. The Burgtheater (that includes the Akademietheater and the Kasino am Schwarzenbergplatz) has, since March 2012, produced the *Kakanien – New Homesteads* series. Artists, writers and scientists from the countries of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire take part in discussions with members of the Burgtheater on a given cultural event. "Everything is possible – from Bulgarian burlesque through Hungarian Hip-Hop, to Istrian fish soup." The guest list so far includes the Hungarian author and documentary film-maker Kriszta Bódis.

The Viennese Volkstheater has presented its own series of plays by young authors from eastern and southern European countries. *The Best from the East* is, however, not limited to unknown playwrights from V4 countries, but also introduces theatres from Romania, Kosovo, Turkey and Moldova in scenic readings and podium discussions.

The Viennese Playwright-Theatre project Wiener wortstätten is dedicated to the promotion of young authors of non-Austrian descent. Slovak writer Michal

Hvorecký is among its scholarship recipients. In 2012 the leaders of the project, Hans Escher and Bernard Studlar embarked on a series Generation Icons always hosting an author, director and theater group from Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Escher produced the play *Poker Face* by the Czech playwright Petr Kolečko in the GunaGU Theatre in Bratislava. Director Marián Amsler staged Bernhard Studlar's *iPlay* in Prague and Brno. The Vienna TAG Theatre staged Viliam Klimáček's (Slovak playwright) *Kill Kill* directed by Czech director Martina Schleglová and scenic readings of the plays by Kolečko and Studlar.

Endless Classic Boom

Music theatre is one of the exceptions within the theatre genre. In the past two centuries Vienna has been the centre of classical music and has attracted musicians from Mozart to Mahler. With two large opera houses and concert halls (and a range of performance opportunities) the metropolis of 1.8 million offers classical music aficionados a programme of such diversity and quality which inhabitants of similar cities of equal size can only dream of. The audiences of classical music in Vienna and its surroundings are vast, well informed and open-minded.

Soon after the fall of the Iron Curtain the first culture tourists made their way from Vienna to Bratislava to attend musical theatre and ballet in the opera house built by Fellner & Helmer. Opera visits to Bratislava remain a popular phenomenon for the Viennese public. Apart from the quality of the performances (the Viennese public is indeed critical and spoilt), the travel time of about an hour and the comparatively cheap tickets compared to the Viennese opera houses, are also a significant factor – the most expensive tickets for the State Opera cost between Euros 200 and 250, while those in the Volksoper range between Euros 80 and 150, depending on performance and category. Opera tickets for both houses of the Slovak National Theatre cost at most Euro 35.

Viennese tourist bureaus specialising in cultural

trips also offer daily trips to Brno and short stays for opera performances in Budapest and Prague.

One of the reasons for the interest in musical theatre in the four countries could be that music considerably reduces language barriers. Furthermore, artists behind the Iron Curtain enjoyed greater freedom to travel and thus became more popular than all the other artists of the Communist countries. Edita Gruberová, Petr Dvorský, Gabriela Beňačková-Čáap or Andras Schiff were also household names for those interested in classical music even before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The best-known artist from the V4 countries – the Golden Voice of Prague, Karel Gott also studied classical singing, but has been established in the pop-music scene for decades. He has been a regular guest in German entertainment shows since the 1970s. Most young Austrians know him as the one who sang the signature tune of the cartoon series *Maya the Bee*. Concerning films and television in the V4 countries, the popularity of Gott and the cartoon insect are, however, in stark contrast to the ignorance of an average Austrian. Films and television series are rarely dubbed into German and are mostly shown to selected audiences in specialised cinemas or at festivals. Thus the vibrant Polish or Czech film culture and film industry are virtually unknown in Austria with perhaps the exception of internationally acclaimed films such as *Kolja* or *Želary*, and the television fairy tale *Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella* which is one of the Christmas classics of the local television programme. 📺

RHEA KRČMAROVÁ was born in Prague in the (then) CSSR. Her family was forced to leave the country in 1981. Rhea grew up in Austria, where she studied theater studies, classical singing and acting. In 2009, she was accepted into the new Sprachkunst/creative writing class at the Vienna University of Applied Arts, where she graduated in 2013 with a B.A. She is living in Vienna as a freelance writer and occasional translator of literature. Currently, she is working on her first novel that is due to be published in fall.

Branding in Germany

If you search the web for the brand of the German cultural landscape you may be both disappointed as well as surprised. Disappointed because of the vast amounts of options and cultural brands that can hardly be mapped out, but also because of some obvious marketing shortcomings. Surprised at the diversity of clever regional strategies, and the potential of one common plan.

The federal government only has a limited responsibility in cultural affairs. The states (Länder) govern these matters themselves and also like to maintain this control at the state level. Only cultural institutions and projects of nation-wide importance are dealt with at the federal level. The states keep the responsibility for cultural programmes, strategies and visions, and despite their cultural diversity, they share some key approaches: developing what is already available and preserving traditions, pointing out the unique and fostering cultural sustainability.

The states (Länder)

The political and cultural situation in Germany allows the states to point out what is unique about their regions and to engage their own marketing agencies. Since branding works best if you focus on the well-known and point out its most appealing aspects, landscape, traditions and history are the usual eye-catchers. This leads to a variety of cultural options which take us back to extraordinary legends and historical events. For instance, the annual Störtebecker Festival that commemorates the North Sea pirates of the 14th century and the myth surrounding Störtebecker's execution or other significant

German personalities, in particular Goethe and Wagner. This year Germany celebrates the Brothers Grimm jubilee to commemorate their contribution to the culture of fairy tales and language research in Germany; 2017 will be the year of Luther and the Reformation. Both worthy and popular are mediaeval events and festivals, events that all states perceive as identity boosting and all of them have several natural sites as well as castles available which can serve as their backdrop. Niche events have their charm too: the vibe of Wild West at the Karl May Festival or this year's Skat Festival in Altenburg commemorating the 200th anniversary of this popular German card game. However, UNESCO Heritage sites are the states' trump cards because they are indispensable for their brands and often make the region and its culture exceptional.

All these projects string together a multitude of theatre performances and smaller events, which would hardly be attended if they were promoted on their own. The arts usually have only a supportive role because very few states derive their brand from traditions in the arts. Berlin, on the other hand, advertises its varied cultural offers because the capital city, like many other German cities, provides space for progressive artists and diverse theatre. The brands of the states tend to be shaped by main-stream options that the majority of people are both familiar, and can identify with. Here, an important role is always played by three corner stones - wine or beer, castles and music - where each state picks its own particular trio. This trinity definitely sums up the German understanding of feeling alive (Lebensgefühl) but can also be easily communicated to the foreign visitor. Since the world of culture is much more complex, this can be interpreted as a phenomenon of the German identity fairy tale.

In spite of the fact that the promotion of culture in the states is more progressive and considers innovative projects and young artists important to shaping the identities of the states. These value-ads are, of course, only involved after they have achieved a certain level of popularity.

The German federal government

Since the states claim sovereignty in cultural matters, finance and support is within their discretion. Some of them have set the promotion of culture as a goal in their constitutions and attempt to implement it accordingly. Nevertheless, when budget cuts take place, we can see particularly, that cultural institutions and projects have their supply of money cut off. Presumably, free-lance creative artists who provide the visible majority of culture on offer, are those who can sustain themselves in this sector. To support them, the federal government launched the Culture and Creative Industries initiative in 2007. This programme created a network of institutions that help artists set up their livelihoods, advise them on legal and business-related matters, and list funding opportunities. Another goal is fostering networking among artists as well as between state institutions and artistic circles. The artists take part in discussions on the future, challenges and opportunities in their field of activity. For instance, at the 2010 international theatre and dance expert meeting Searching for Plan C more than 500 dance and theatre artists from all over Europe came together.

The goal of the federal government is to facilitate networking within the German cultural scene and promote a positive picture of Germany abroad. The best method so far has been long-term planning of campaigns and themes for upcoming years. The annual themes should always target new groups. This year youth is in focus. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram will be the key communication channels. For instance, there is an app that makes it possible to check out the destinations before your trip or the Youth HotSpot app that details 1,300 free Wifi locations across Germany.

The thematic emphasis is complemented with PR topics that always deal with a particular affair. For example, this year there is the 200th jubilee of Wagner and on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Elysee Treaty, there are many joint projects initiated and implemented in the German and French bordering regions. Light is thus shed on new facets of German culture and individual locations get a chance to take part in new projects in order to present other chapters of the history of their civilisation and to apply their potential.

The network of foundations, along with the academic exchange service and the 136 foreign posts of the Goethe Institute, support the goals of the federal government. The Goethe Institute not only promotes German language education, but also conveys the current image of Germany and fosters international cooperation in cultural affairs. Developing a regional strategy is within the discretion of the local Goethe Institutes and depends on the interest of their staff and local counterparts.

Germany has had a rather critical stance on the idea of the European Union in defining and supra-nationalising Europe as a brand. It is obvious how foolish this portrayal would be and how much cultural wealth would have to be reduced to a couple clichés for this reason. According to wide-spread opinion, the EU should only be responsible for particular projects with international scope.

Cultural cooperation among the countries of the Visegrad Group

You will probably not find the term Visegrad Group in modern German usage and those who are not interested in these particular countries would not have come across it. However, there are festivals and projects involving these nations, which are held even beyond the bordering regions. Unfortunately there is only interest in cultural exchange and cooperation amongst a few. The majority of Germans orient themselves towards the West, even if Germany is often seen as the connecting piece between Eastern and Western Europe. This assumption is certainly justified in the realm of

economy, but when it comes to culture, unfortunately, indifference is the norm. Every year artists from other east, central and south-central European countries attend the Off-Theater Festival in Leipzig (www.boft.de). Knut Geißler, the initiator and curator of the festival, answered a question about the interests of the German audience: “I find in particular colleagues, i.e. organisers and artists, but also media rather ignorant about the East (of Europe). They still find what I do exotic. And yet, there is nothing more exciting than to be curious and discover things that are not within reach.” Despite existing connections there is plenty of space to grow.

Some people paint political relations with the neighbouring countries, in particular Poland and the Czech Republic, as the source of this situation. It is good that the reappraisal of the German Nazi past and the expulsion of Germans from pre-war German provinces have not yet been concluded. The results of the Czech presidential election earlier this year prove that. When it comes to intrigues and rows, the victims can be quickly brought in; when there is discontent with the others, topics that drive people apart can always be found. However, it is particularly the German exiles who are most interested in their old homelands and often maintain close links with their native regions. These links are mostly dropped among younger generations as they don't play any role in their lives, at least among young Germans. Moreover, a general ignorance, even a lack of sensitivity, towards our neighbours is spreading that could cause new tensions as a result of the fact that in different countries the discourse on the issue of German expulsions are handled differently. It has to be definitely added, that since the entry of the V4 countries to the EU, but probably even earlier, the topic of Central Europe has belonged to the past.

In connection with EU integration and with the purpose of fostering cross-border cooperation various bilateral and European agreements and funds were created that involve Bavaria, Saxony and the Czech Republic or Saxony, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-West

Pomerania and Poland. From among those that concern the Czech Republic, programme Objective 3 (Ziel 3/ Cíl 3) and the German-Czech Future Fund should be mentioned. These support such projects as the Prague German Theatre Festival (Prager Theaterfestival deutscher Sprache) and the Center of Europe Festival (Festival Mitte Europa) as well as many smaller events. There are similar initiatives created together with the Polish neighbours. The German-Polish Theatre Festival Unitha and the Music Festival on the Oder are two good examples of successful cooperation and lasting interest on both sides of the Oder river.

What can be of better use at the moment: personal relations spanning the border, or great well-known international festivals? Certainly, both are important in order to get to know each other. For mutual trust building, personal contacts seem to be better since trust between Germany and its Eastern neighbours is always in demand. Nevertheless, many projects have borne fruit already. One is sometimes surprised that even though we had known very little about the cultural wealth of others until recently, we have slowly but surely learned to go from self-presentation to a mutually enriching cooperation. Only the masses will not get excited about it yet. ☺

ANNA LISSKE is studying Bachelor of European Studies extended at the Otto-von-Guericke-University in Magdeburg, Germany. She studied one academic year (2010–2011) at St. Petersburg State University, Russia.

Let's Feel Slovenia: Success of the Country Brand "I feel Slovenia"

Slovenia: young country with rich culture and history

Slovenia declared its independence in 1991, having been previously one of the Yugoslav republics. Appearing on the world map as an independent country in 1991, it faced the need to introduce itself to the world with an appropriate marketing strategy that would differentiate it from the crowd of competitors. Although small, Slovenia is unique given its extreme diversity both in terms of geography and history, as well as culture. Over the centuries, Slovenia belonged to larger empires or countries, but has nonetheless continually preserved and pursued its identity, as remains evident in Slovenian life today.

The discussion about how to best brand Slovenia as a unique country was popular since its independence. There were several attempts in the country's short history aimed primarily to communicate visual elements – slogans and logos. Moreover, after the first successful campaign "Slovenia, my country", frequent changes occurred in marketing strategy that were evident especially in slogan changes. They brought much confusion to Slovenia and internationally. Therefore Slovenia needed an up-to-date brand that would distinguish and place it on the map.

"I feel Slovenia": The first comprehensive country branding

To capture the unique characteristics of Slovenia and at the same time give a strategic orientation for its further development, the country brand "I feel

Slovenia" was developed in 2007. It represents the first comprehensive country branding that incorporated all key country areas (tourism, economy, sport, culture, science, etc.). Although visual elements represent an important part of the brand, this brand goes beyond visualisation. Thus the slogan and logo are not the only elements of the brand. "I feel Slovenia" contains a combination of brand identity elements that offer background and story for its further market implementation and development. It was developed to guide further direction and marketing of Slovenia as a country.

One of the main issues in the branding was the approach to its development. In contrast to a number of other countries, where the brand has been mostly developed by consultants all key stakeholders (different groups of Slovenians) had been invited to be part in its development. The so called community-based approach is an important aspect in brand building. Thus the main ideas of the brand were developed based on the opinions of different stakeholders who constitute and shape the country brand. At the same time, they are those who live the brand and fulfill its promises.

All the interviewed stakeholders emphasised the important role of Slovenian nature as the key component of the brand identity. It is this continuous contact with nature that forms the cornerstone of Slovenia's mission inherent in the phrase: "Forward to nature." The vision of Slovenia vision builds on nature preservation through a niche-oriented economy and technological advancement.

The brand values are based around family and health, attachment to local context and responsibility towards the environment and fellow humans. With regard to the brand personality, Slovenians have a desire for recognition and are tenacious, active and hardworking individuals who like to receive praise for their work.

Preferences that differentiate Slovenia from other countries include unspoiled nature, crossroads of various natural and cultural foci in an exceptionally small space and safety. These distinctive features lay foundation for the benefits that Slovenia offers to residents and visitors. It is accessible and characterised by high quality of life. A typical Slovenian lifestyle promotes activity and the desire to make a contribution and difference. The benefits of Slovenia also include being in touch with nature and the subsequent awareness of responsibility towards the environment.

These brand identity elements represent the basis for developing the promise of Slovenia's brand. The brand functional (elemental) and emotional (pleasant excitement) values represent the prerequisites for an experiential promise of Slovenian green that is not associated exclusively with the colour, but also the overall experience of Slovenia.

The story of the brand is expressed and visualised by the slogan "I feel Slovenia" and accordingly designed logo. The final visualisation of the logo draws from the brand identity characteristics. The green colour evokes the experience of the brand. At the same time it has a deeper meaning, as it emphasises the sustainable direction of the "I feel Slovenia" brand, and thus the country of Slovenia.

I feel Slovenia in the area of culture and arts

Although I feel Slovenia brand was developed for the whole country and is in its essence closely linked to nature, culture and arts play an important perspective in brand development. Slovenians perceive culture and arts in an elemental way. Culture is both a part of us and present all around us. Because we are a nation of

individualists, culture is a choice of each individual. At the same time we are a nation of artists. The manifestation of culture created by an individual is translated in the pride we feel towards our creations. Arts and culture are not only a domain of institutions but also of people and our daily life. We leave a part of ourselves in all our creations. Culture is one of the foundations of Slovenian balance.

I feel Slovenia stresses the culture as a value. Slovenians are one of the few nations worldwide whose statehood and national affiliation are based on culture and arts. From the Freising Manuscripts onward, the milestones of our development have been mainly cultural and artistic achievements. Culture is a part of our sustainable development and we respect it. It connects us and fills us with pride.

Every one of us feels that the Slovenian character is closely linked to culture. Every Slovenian is some type of artisan or artist – a poet, painter, cook, dancer, winemaker, musician, actor, director, blogger, wood-carver or something else entirely. We make art from things that are dear to us. Consequently, cultural involvement has many faces but they all reflect pride towards what is created. With art Slovenians fulfil desires; however, the best artists among us also fulfil the desires of everyone around them. Without cultural and artistic participation Slovenians would not be in balance. This is where respect for everything we make with our hands, for the elemental, originates from.

Appeal of the brand "I feel Slovenia" in a short time

Positive responses to the appeal and attractiveness of the "I feel Slovenia" came quickly. A survey conducted in June 2008 (only six months after the launch of the brand) showed good recognition of the slogan and highly favourable attitudes towards it among Slovenians. On the other hand, the survey also revealed a lack of familiarity with the brand story beyond an awareness of the so-called 'Slovenian green'. Slowly, the perception and meaning of the brand began to change first among

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professionals who used it. The best understanding of the brand content has been detected among opinion leaders from the tourism sector that was the first to employ the guidelines and systematic use of the new brand.

The brand is also well perceived among foreigners, especially professionals who are familiar with it and its content. The chapter about the brand is included as a case study in a book *Destination Branding: Managing Place Reputation* (published in 2011; edited by Morgan, Pritchard and Pride) and used as a good example at key conferences and other events on country branding (World Tourism Organisations, etc.).

Success of the “I feel Slovenia” in tourism

In 2010, the Slovenian Tourist Board introduced the ‘Slovenia green’ and started to develop and promote the main idea of the “I feel Slovenia” brand. In this period, a shift was made from understanding Slovenia green only as a colour to recognising it as a strategic orientation toward a more sustainable development. The main idea of sustainability was developing slowly, but was being consistently incorporated into all aspects of Slovenian tourism. A clear sign that tourism accepted the new brand is seen in the Slovenian Tourism Development Strategy for 2012–2016 (Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, 2012). It is based on the identity of “I feel Slovenia” and emphasises sustainable orientation. The main elements of sustainability issues are introduced and interrelated through the positioning of Slovenia as a ‘green, active, healthy’ country and the use of the “I feel Slovenia” brand as the main marketing tool. The Elements of “I feel Slovenia” are also clearly evident on the official website that promotes Slovenian tourism.

Results (as of 2012) show that the “I feel Slovenia” brand has been used by two thirds of the Slovenian tourist economy. As much as 84 percent of the Slovenian tourist economy believes that the use of the “I feel Slovenia” brand is important in terms of international market positioning, and 38 percent

believe that the use of the brand in international markets enables to achieve higher sales price.

I feel Slovenia, I feel basketball

Other areas use the brand less systematically, although they do show some support for the it. For example, it has also been used in culture (i.e. among the events of the European Capital of Culture 2012 held in Maribor and other partner cities). The brand has also been included in the key sports events, including the Football World Cup, Basketball World Championship, Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver. The European Basketball Championship to be hosted in Slovenia in 2013, will be support the country brand. The championship in Slovenia is not only related on the brand visualisation (I feel basketball), but also supports its sustainable perspective. Thus the entire event will be organised and managed in a way to highlight the sustainability aspects in the most comprehensive manner.

So, welcome to Slovenia! Feel and experience Slovenian green in all the varieties. If you hurry up, do come and feel basketball in Slovenia in September 2013. 🏀

For further information about “I feel Slovenia” see:

<http://www.majakonecnik.com/index.php?module=page&pageID=28>

<http://www.spiritslovenia.si/en/brand-i-feel-slovenia>

<http://www.spiritslovenia.si/en/brand-i-feel-slovenia>

MAJA KONEČNIK RUZZIER is working as the Associate Professor of Marketing, Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana and external brand expert in “I feel Slovenia” development (maja.konecnik@ef.uni-lj.si; <http://www.majakonecnik.com/>)

The many facets and questionings of the Croatian cultural brand

Fragmentation, multiculturalism and branding

To talk about the brand of Croatian culture is necessary before to define and analyse what the term constitutes. It is often thought that a brand is something static when in reality, by means of perception, it is mutable and something that accompanies its time, environment, surroundings and the people connected to it or in other words, politics. That is valid for all sorts of branding, be it commercial or, as in the case we are analysing, cultural.

Significantly, a brand is, by definition, an intangible asset, something that exists within and above reality. This paradox reflects itself in the changes that sometimes seem arbitrary, even when they aren't.

It is obvious that Croatia is slow in taking the leadership in the area of the Southern Balkans, while it looks to detach itself from its political past, i.e. Yugoslavia, that does not seem politically viable anymore. The trade of goods and services is slowly becoming the window to the region, especially at this moment of accession of Croatia to the European Union, in 2013. This possibility assumes that the EU neoliberal trend will continue even after its crash. In case it does not, the multicultural nature of the region, while having a shared language opens this possibility to a point not seen in the V4 countries through culture and arts.

The perception of the real (image) – Psychoanalysis and semiotics applied to the regional and Croatian arts scene

“Aside from that reservation, a fictive tale even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity more purely to the extent that we may believe its conception arbitrary.”

– Jacques Lacan

Perception, subject formation, language and image are common stakeholders in both psychoanalytic, mediatic and artistic discourses.

To situate subjectivity within a system of perception and a dialogue with the external world, is it good or bad that a neighbouring country, like Austria, is associated immediately with a single cultural asset such as Mozart, which is static and immutable since only *indexes* (vestiges) are left? Both answers are possible since while it may facilitate marketing, it actually damages the newly emerging new arts from that state, especially when it aims at universality, one of the theoretical constituents of contemporary art. Yet it may be good when used as a starting point to make the local universal.

Croatia is immediately associated with Dubrovnik, sun, and summer holidays, ignoring a rich cultural past that includes the modernist novelist and playwright Miroslav Krleža, internationally recognised as the most important Croatian writer, and poets (a strong point for Croatian culture) like Ivo Andrić. The results then are the same as in the Austrian case, difference of forms accounted.

Croatian performance art in the 1970s – the “Group of the Six”

“The artist who does not speak English is not an artist”
– Mladen Stiljinovic, 1994/1995

Yugoslavia had a strong visual arts scene. In the 1970s the Group of the Six (composed of Vlado Martek, Boris Demur, Zeljko Jerman, Sven Stiljinovic, Fedor Vucemilovic and Mladen Stiljinovic) were one of the most important artistic groups to question the museum/

gallery system and dynamics. Mladen Stilinovic was born in Belgrade, but lived and worked in Zagreb. His work, often on the border of the absurd, focused on reflecting politics rather than its praxis. The Group of the Six was between the first in the ex-YU states to break away from what had become the new tradition of social realism in the arts. Their work frequently broke the borders of visual arts and became real time actions, sometimes conceptual, that later would be called performance art. Such as the work of Zeljko Jerman *c/b foto.*, *fotokemikalije na foto papiru* in which he wrote on a banner, later glued to the pavement under the eyes of passers-by, "Ovo nije moj svijet" (This is not my world). He made of that happening a photography, thus connecting it to visual arts; something that today would be called registering the ephemeral act of performance art.

Examples of Croatian folk art and festivals

Croatia is a small country by European standards. Its population is of 4 million Croatia-born individuals, and other 4 million Croats born and living abroad.

Yet, it has a strong and very diverse folk culture, if we understand it as art that emerges from a network of communities for the purpose of strengthening, connecting and re-enacting in those communities.

Arts and crafts definitely have a space in this panorama, as demonstrated by the Pag Lace (Paska cipka). Lacemakers did their work without any drawings. They base their work on that of their mothers' who in their turn based it on their mothers' and this tradition was propagated through generations. In a circular network of threads they make the outer line with intricate circles that are in a second line contrasted by inverted triangles, finishing in the middle with a circular form surrounded by lozenges. This lace has been declared to be an intangible cultural asset of humanity by UNESCO.

It is relevant to mention Klapa, the all-male a capella singing. LADO, the national folk dance ensemble of Croatia, created in 1949 to transfer to the stage the many types of Croatian dance and music. The Rijeka Zvoncari, a public

performative custom of the city that dates to the Pagan antiquity in which people dress in striped shirts and wear a sheepskin mask marching and making noise through the streets to scare away evil spirits. The Sinjska alka, horseman who dressed in local costumes, the same worn by the warriors in the 18th century, try to aim their laces at hanging metal ring (alka) at full gallop. The *alka* as Croats call it is staged every year in the town of Sinj since 1715 to commemorate the victory over the Turkish administration. Only men born in Sinj and surrounding villages can take part in the competition. It has also been declared by UNESCO to be an intangible cultural asset of humanity. This performative act strengthens the cultural and social network of the nation's cultural scene, being attended by foreign and local high government officials.

The Dubrovnik Summer Festival of theatre and the Pula Film Festival have been created around the same time as the Festival d'Avignon and other relevant European festivals with the clear goal of political unity, of connecting nations.

In the visual arts field, Croatian Naïve Art, often depicting rural landscapes and registering the way of life of its people, is an important starting point and still a reference from which Croatian contemporary artists draw.

Examples and short analysis of the Croatian contemporary theatre scene

Having established that performative acts are enrooted in the Croatian cultural scene it is relevant to mention that the most notable Croatian theatre director nowadays is Oliver Frlic. In his original project with the title "Damned be the traitor of his homeland!" Oliver Frlić radically approaches love and hatred towards theatre, surrendering both the actors and viewers to the intertwinement of madness and pain. The actors produce a scathing, disturbing, sometimes even shocking performance. They use wartime and political traumas to ask universal questions about the boundaries of artistic and social freedom, individual and collective responsibility, tolerance and stereotypes. The theatrical framework of this laboratory is provided

by stories from the break-up of the former Yugoslavia; the title comes from the last verse of the national anthem of this now defunct country. This piece has been shown around Europe and North America.

His work dwells on a recent political and cultural past in a very contemporary blend of performance, dance, singing and acts that remind us all of a country and a time that do not anymore exist but that still has its marks.

Branko Brezovec is an older theatre director, who is also a professor at the Academy of Drama in Zagreb. He has been active in the Croatian scene since the 1970s. His work has the monumental characteristics of the then current political mainstream of Yugoslavia, with an abundance of singing, iconoclastic features and big gestures.

Though the history of theatre in Europe is filled with iconoclastic directors that have tried time and again to break the clear frame formed by the proscenium arch, Brezovec is among the pioneers of this type of theatre and has added the multiculturalist question to his works by working within the quasi foreign cultures of Croatia's neighbouring countries. This can be illustrated by his subversive theatrical interpretation of the literary works of Miroslav Krleža that dislocates characters from their original geographical places to the countryside.

Through these two examples one can identify common features in the Croatian theatre scene. Such as the preoccupation with and questionings of multiculturalism, the break away from the theatrical stage, the use of performative actions to question the possibilities of living together or apart, and the further exploitation of the integration and break-up and then, again, the integration through another political system (EU) of the region.

Croatian (re)integration into the Central European arts scene

Croatia has been going through extensive social, economic, political - and artistic - changes. The latter, one would not expect, have been perhaps equally as traumatic as political and the other transitions. From being a part of Yugoslaviathat had a special position

between the East and the West, which only meant that the artists in Yugoslavia got the best of both worlds, to an isolated position at the margin of what was going on in the world with only a few festivals serving as windows to current international artistic practice, while the local cultural sector was unable to cope with the systematic changes and new challenges of functioning. The state focused on saving its inherited institutions and its vast number of employees at those institutions, while completely putting in the backseat any artistic practice outside of those big institutions. This brought a vacuum of development possibilities and international presence for an entire generation of artists in Croatia.

However, in the past ten years, there has been a major resurrection of smaller venues, organisations, festivals, artistic impulses that gathered around a so called independent arts scene that Croatia at the moment boasts with some of the most recognised performing arts directors, performance artists and a talented and recognised generation of younger artists in the Balkans. The situation in Croatia, still far from ideal, is more hopeful, more optimistic, and simply better for artists and arts organisations than in any of the ex-Yugoslavian countries. Festivals like Queer Zagreb and Perforacije played a major role in that development.

What is obviously missing is a production house and venue which has a financial and administrative capacity to match similar organisations in the West, so it can be present in the circuit of international co-productions in a more stable and steady interval. 📍

ANDRÉ VON AH is originally from São Paulo where he studied philosophy and literature and was a contributor for the Mix Brasil – the Festival of Sexual Diversity in 2006–2007. Later he studied art history degree at the Paris IV La Sorbonne University in Paris and has collaborated with the Queer Zagreb Festival in Croatia since 2008. He is currently the artistic co-director of the Queer New York International Arts Festival and resides in Zagreb, Croatia.
www.andrevonah.com

Cultural rebranding as a challenge for Czech society

“For the first time in the history of man, the planet he inhabits is encompassed by a single civilization. Because of this, anything that happens anywhere has consequences, both good and ill, for everyone everywhere. Many dangerous conflicts in the world today can be explained by the simple fact that the closer we are to each other, the more we notice our differences. All of this makes the modern world an especially dramatic place, with so many peoples in so many places resisting coexistence with each another. And yet its only chance for survival is precisely such coexistence.” (Václav Havel: World Theatre Day Message, 1994)

Taking positions on the Central European scene

The Czech Republic is a country of two post prefixes. Like the majority of Central European countries, it belongs to the group of post-communist countries and like in the rest of East European countries, the disappearance of the Iron Curtain was compensated by new borders, which were politically and culturally important as well, and caused for instance that Ukraine did not border the Czech Republic anymore. In 1993, the dissolution of the state we shared with Slovaks moved us more to the West, yet it has been really difficult for us to find our identity or a name in the new position. Czech society was forced to use its archaic name, which does not sound very natural even nowadays: “Česko/ Czechia”,¹ whose name can be traced back to the

times of National Revival in the late 18th century, however, it is more post-Czechoslovakia than Slovakia with its positive expectation, vitality and creativity² when founding a new state. Unlike Slovaks, we, as those, who represented “what was left from Czechoslovakia”, were not forced to reformulate our new identity so radically even when the Czech Republic joined the EU because “whereas European integration is a historically unique opportunity for the Slovaks and mainly for the Poles to geopolitically and economically attach to the West, the Czechs perceived their accession to the European Union as a return somewhere they think they naturally belong from the historical interwar democratic period, which was economically successful.”³

Paradoxes and absurd situations are as common in the Czech Republic as in the whole Central European region. Constantly changing borders and answers to the so-called Czech Question⁴ swing our adherence between Russia and Germany, or the East and the West, according to the current political climate. After the Yalta Conference, Central Europe, which Milan Kundera defined as maximal cultural diversity in minimum space, was ‘hijacked’ to the Soviet zone and existed as a demonstration of spiritual resistance more than ever before.⁵ Prague still lies west of Vienna as it did before 1989. Having in mind our traditions, official Czech politics still considers Hungary to be a neighbour⁶ and the role of Slovakia as a new

1 The term “Czechia” was rejected by CzechTourism: “Native speakers told us to forget about using ‘Czechia’ because nobody knows it and everybody would confuse it with Chechnya.”

(<http://zpravy.ihned.cz/c1-56401510-czechia-czech-lands-nebo-cr-vypadame-jak-bananova-republika-tvrdi-odbornik>).

2 See article by Zora Jaurová. (35-42 p.)

3 Ehl, Martin: *What does Europeanism mean for the U4 countries?* [Co znamená evropanství pro země Visegrádské čtyřky] in Bútora, Martin – Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Bútorová, Zora – Kollár, Miroslav: *From Where and Where to?, Twenty Years of Independence [Odkiaľ a kam, Dvadsať rokov samostatnosti]*, p. 188. It is not only a hint to one of crucial works by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, first published in 1895, which speaks about the position of Czech and Slovaks in Austria-Hungary as well as discussions about the meaning of Czech history in general.

- 4 It is not only a hint to one of crucial works by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, first published in 1895, which speaks about the position of Czech and Slovaks in Austria-Hungary as well as discussions about the meaning of Czech history in general.
- 5 See Milan Kundera's essay *The Stolen West or The Tragedy of Central Europe*.
- 6 See *The Report on the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic* with the paragraph dedicated to Hungary in the chapter "Neighbours", 2011, p. 16.
- 7 Kopeček, Michal: *Politics, Antipolitics, and Czechs in Central Europe: The Idea of „Visegrad Cooperation“ and Its Reflection in Czech Politics in the 1990s*, Questionnaires Returns, ed. A. Bove, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conference, Vol. 12, 2002, p. 4
- 8 See the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, <http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni.vztahy/multilateralni.spoluprace/visegrad/index.html>.

foreign country is quite unnatural for the majority of Czechs. Havel's apolitical politics initiated the so-called Visegrad Group, which was established in 1990, using the message to "play up the specific cultural identity of Central Europe as distinct from Eastern Europe, especially the Soviet Union",⁷ yet it had to primarily solve political challenges like repatriation of Soviet soldiers from Central Europe and integration of the region in European structures.

Cooperation of the V4 countries is still a priority of Czech foreign policy in the field of multilateral cooperation and "it has become the most clearly profiled initiative in the Central European region. The Visegrad Group has a good reputation as a catalyst of integration processes, the only pragmatically operating form of multilateral cooperation in the region as well as a symbol of stability in Central Europe (compared with unstable Balkan, for instance)."⁸ The only stable organization structure of the group is the International Visegrad Fund (<http://visegradfund.org>) established in 2000 "with the purpose to facilitate the development of cultural cooperation, scientific exchanges, research and cooperation in the field of education, youth exchange and the development of cross-border cooperation." The political consensus regarding the cooperation in the above-mentioned fields is demonstrated by growing funds allotted to projects and new programs of regional cooperation with Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. The winning field concerning the number of supported projects is cultural cooperation, which proves its high importance for the identity of the region.

From the Winter's Tale to post-dramatic Bohemia

The Czech nation is small like most Central European nations. Therefore it is interesting to

find out what national stereotypes originate in self-reflection. Our small republic is often divided into the Czech west and the Moravian east regions when speaking about identity. Whereas the western part is enclosed by the German border and defined by Czech beer and goulash, industrial and urban as well as atheistic culture, the (south-)eastern part benefits from the more distinctive neighbourhood of Poland, Slovakia and Austria and it is traditionally perceived as an agricultural and more religious part dedicated to grapevine and Moravian smoked meat. All exceptions, like highly industrialized Moravian Silesia, are accepted in this generalization. We would probably agree with Slovaks, with whom we shared one state for almost the entire 20th century, on myths of a peaceful pigeon nation, bohemian plebeianism and a fatal influence of more powerful entities on existence of the state as such. We and other Central European nations share the awareness of cultural togetherness through personalities, who freely fluctuate in the Central European space (art history including the significant tinge of Jewish culture is a great example), and political-historical discontinuities represented by a mutual stigma of 20th century totalitarian regimes and a chaotic transformation after revolutionary "year zero" in the states of the former socialistic bloc as well as history of this politically unstable region. However, it is a matter of the corresponding community, what narrative it is going to create having in mind geographical, historical and cultural facts.

In the Czech Republic, we use to say "small is beautiful". Are "little Czechs" beautiful even if they give excuses using their small-mindedness to titanic heroism, which is very unfamiliar with Czech nature? In his book *The little Czech and the great Czech nation: national identity and the post-communist transformation*

of society, Ladislav Holý describes Czech small-mindedness: “The little Czech is not motivated by great ideals. The world he lives in is limited by a family, work and close friends and he is cautious and suspicious of everything, which lies outside this world. His opinions are shallow and he is definitely not a hero: this is why the good soldier Švejk is so popular... The Czech nation survived three centuries of oppression due to little Czech people, which created the nation, not heroes... A little Czech... is a social role model, therefore it is important to lack individuality.”⁹ Miniaturisation, liquid identity and a conspiratorial strategy of resistance against suppressing powers resulting in Kafkaesque mysteriousness are demonstrated in the nationwide popularity of fairy-tales or puppet theatre with typical Czech characters: a devil, Death and brash and coward swagger Kasperle. Except for the above-mentioned “myths about Czech national nature”, these formats show a specific mixture of Czech humour, irony and melancholy.

The genesis of the long-term project of the Arts and Theatre Institute PACE.V4 (Performing Arts Central Europe – Visegrad Countries Focus) seems to be postdramatically non-linear in the context of nonexistent branding strategy of the Czech Republic. PACE.V4 aims at creating a common strategy of promotion of contemporary performing arts of the countries in the Visegrad group or similar projects in cooperation with other Central European countries. Research has accompanied activities realized within the network of cultural institutions and organizations from the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary like presentation of contemporary theatre, dance and music at significant international platforms.

20 Research is necessary for content – or, simply

said, one of the “by-products” is development of mutual awareness of participants and colleagues of the network, which is not on the anticipated level despite Central European analogies, intersections, traditions and stories, although the International Festival Theatre in Plzeň regularly presents contemporary drama of the Visegrad countries and magazines *Svět a divadlo/World and Theatre* or *Taneční zóna/Dance Zone* provide us with periodical reflection. Czechoslovak projects in coproduction originate especially in the field of dance physical theatre and several Czech directors are engaged in Polish puppet theatre. However, we have less information about contemporary Hungarian or Slovenian theatre and contemporary Visegrad drama. On the contrary, drama of the German-speaking countries is continually and systematically introduced, reflected and integrated in the Czech Republic in a greater extent – especially due to the Prague Theatre Festival of German Language, which has been organised since 1996.

The logo of the network (108 pages) corresponds with the mentioned content of the PACE.V4 project with quadrangles representing four cooperating states in white, red, blue and green, i.e. colours of the national flags of the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. Squares are clustered in a variable mosaic,¹⁰ which is assembled in various shapes, borders and territories of activities and reminds us of a figure symbolizing a human body, which is inseparable from various forms of performing arts and intercultural dialogue of the project. The project of the international cooperation PACE.V4 was initiated by the Arts and Theatre Institute in 2012. It was the time when first materials for the branding strategy of the Czech Republic came into existence¹¹ in the “Identity” stream for the research project

9 Holý, L.: *The little Czech and the great Czech nation: national identity and the post-communist transformation of society*. Prague, 2001, p. 62.

10 See the trailer of the PACE.V4 project, <http://www.theatre.cz/performing-central-europe>.

11 The project Czech Cultural and Creative Industries Mapping was launched in 2011. The aim of the project is to get complete quantitative and qualitative information about the state of branches of cultural and creative industries in the Czech Republic and a subsequent analysis of these data and findings. Creative industries bear a lot of negative aspects speaking about cultural globalisation and this is why the project also deals with the issues of Czech national identity and the status of Czech culture in the globalized world. In this context, round-table discussions are held.

Czech Cultural and Creative Industries Mapping. Nevertheless, intersections are more important than chronology. In May 2013, a round table with the topic Branding of Czech Culture in the Context of the V4 Group and Central Europe took place. Experts from various fields and institutions accepted the invitation and discussed three topics:

- “Visegrad” and “Central Europe” versus disciplines of art in the Czech Republic
- project / brand “Visegrad” and cultural policy
- cultural mobility.

The objective of the first part of the discussion was to identify strong and weak disciplines of Czech art in Central Europe, present cooperation among artists in specific disciplines in this region and a position of Czech artists at the regional art market. The result was recommendations about which disciplines and forms should cooperate within the region (it can be a bilateral or trilateral cooperation).

Although we heard a radically critical opinion that no contemporary Czech art discipline is really strong, the majority of participants agreed that film and music are the strongest disciplines in contemporary Czech art speaking about both regional and world contexts. Both of them draw from the tradition (the so-called Golden Sixties of Czech film and classical music) and contemporary production in the field of Czech documentary film, jazz and folk music and activities of chamber orchestras.

Design is considered to be a discipline with a great potential, which suffers from non-existent institutional support and bad marketing or ineffective interconnection of authors and Czech companies. We speak especially about product design, traditional Czech glass and to a lesser extent about graphic design.

Visual arts and literature are perceived as weaker disciplines because of weak marketing, the language barrier and the lack of continual support of translation or absence of personalities with international overlap.

Theatre was split into strong disciplines like

traditional Czech puppetry and Czech contemporary dance as a young and internationally open discipline, or smaller companies of so-called experimental theatre, which are usually very active in the field of international cooperation. Weaker theatre discipline in this context is drama including contemporary drama.

Speaking about Visegrad cooperation, experts from various disciplines perceived it very differently. Common branding is rejected in some fields, like in classical music because of an existing strong brand or in literature due to the language barrier.

However, in experimental, physical and dance theatre, regional cooperation exists as an important element and example for Eastern Europe where there is no financial support tool for international art production, which would be similar to the International Visegrad Fund. Moreover, mostly independent companies, which form small communities, operate in this field and common branding can help them perform a breakthrough in strong international competition.

Other important phenomena are showcases and festivals with participating artists and artworks from the Visegrad countries, although the Visegrad brand is not accented very much in these cases. They are various theatre and music festivals as well as projects of the Institute of Documentary Film called East European Forum (the major meeting of Central and Eastern European documentary makers and leading European and North American producers and distributors), Ex Oriente Film (the international workshop of documentary film, which supports its development and funding in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe) and an online videotheque *East Silver*. The international showcase Designblock in Prague or the Brno Biennial rank among the top events in the context of Central Europe and they have great reputation in the whole world.

The second part of the discussion was dedicated to the brand/project Visegrad and questions like: Is contemporary art still a link to the Central European

region? How can art (co)create and strengthen identity of Visegrad countries in the international context? In the discussion, we focused on the contemporary state of the Visegrad Group project and cooperation within the V4 Group in the field of art and culture. Its result should be recommendations for common cultural policy of the Visegrad Group and its tools.

The main thesis that was generally agreed on was dysfunctionality of the “Visegrad brand”. The recommendation regarding promotion and branding was work with the concept of Central Europe with the accent on the link between tradition and innovation. The main objective against the Visegrad brand was unnaturalness (unlike cross-border bilateral or trilateral cooperation) and the lack of content or unambiguous “Visegrad specifications” compared with the concept of the Czech-German Future Fund.¹²

It is true that we heard opinions with the trace of persisting fears or resistance to cooperation with Austria and Germany having in mind Czech historical experience. Common branding strategy and promotion of Scandinavian countries was also mentioned and it can be inspiring for Visegrad cooperation only into certain extent because Nordic countries show much smaller cultural differences than the Visegrad countries.

There was an interesting remark about Prague, which Czechs consider to be the heart of Europe. Whereas the capital city of the Czech Republic is partially set aside due to its geographical distance from the Central European context, the Moravian metropolis Brno has much better conditions. The triangle of Vienna – Bratislava – Budapest was mentioned as well because the cities are connected with the phenomenon of Danube with a natural

functional international exchange in the field of culture and education and with natural integration of the ‘German element’.

The result of the above-mentioned discussion was that the meaning of the Visegrad cooperation should not be the ambition to unite this cultural space but to create a platform for meeting people and cultures and last, but not least, to use it within common presentations. A strong tradition in connection with the emphasis on growing innovative “small” disciplines with strong pro-international orientation (dance, design, documentary film) should become the Visegrad specific.

The positive recommendation from the participating experts went to cooperation within festivals (circulation of artworks and artists), common showcases (theatre, film, design), big coproduction exhibitions, support of curator trips, educational programs, already-existing projects (mostly avoiding of support of artificial interconnection) and projects, which have a new point of view of the past.

The last part of the meeting was dedicated to the issue of mobility. At the beginning, we heard a slightly provocative question, whether Czech art actually needs mobility and what it brings to our country. We focused on tools for common branding and interconnections of brands Visegrad and/or Central Europe with Czech cultural policy. The result of the discussion should be recommendations for export of Czech art and international cooperation regarding branding of Czech art as a part of cultural context in Central Europe.

At this point (and we must say that it was based on previous discussions organized within the project Czech Cultural and Creative Industries Mapping), the discussion completely avoided the topic of art mobility in general, which

12 The mission of the Czech-German Future Fund is: “The CGFF helps built bridges between Czechs and Germans and purposefully supports projects, which bring together people of both countries, which allow and deepen insights to their worlds, common culture and history.” The support of the CGFF does not aim only at cultural, scientific, publication and social projects, scholarship programs, youth projects, restoration of sights and support of municipalities as well as compensation for victims of national socialist violence, i.e. prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, jails and other prisons and those, who were hiding from persecution in inhuman conditions. See more at www.fondbudoucnosti.cz.

is considered to be an indisputable contribution for Czech society, and emphasized the criticism of the situation in the Czech Republic. It concerned the lack of concept of the state in the field of export strategy, dramaturgic vision and synergy among public administration institutions, and support of art in general. Last, but not least, there is a lack of support of art from private funds (including tax assignments like in Slovakia). The participants also mentioned the missing or insufficient evaluation of support in these fields on national and regional levels.

The above course of the round table naturally brought a partial point of view of the Czech culture branding issue in the context of the V4 Group and Central Europe and we need to understand it as one fragment of the long-term process with representation of a wider opinion spectre from various art and sociologic fields and humanities. However, it was a confirmation of some premises that were present at the beginning of the PACE.V4 project:

- increase of visibility of performing arts of the V4 countries;
- enrichment of art and cultural production of the V4 countries through international cooperation;
- support of performing arts export from the V4 region;
- better conditions for negotiating the participation of the V4 countries at priority performing arts events;
- financial and organizational synergy when realising common presentation of performing arts in V4 countries;
- higher competitiveness of the cultural offer of the V4 countries with cultures of big countries including positive impacts on competitiveness and economics of V4 countries;

- presentation and support of cultural diversity of the V4 region and Central Europe;
- synergy and cooperation with other European countries; and,
- culture and live art with the main accent on performing arts as an integral part of the creative process of good reputation of the V4 countries and image of the whole region abroad.

We validate their force not only within project activities in the field of theatre and dance but also on the basis of debates with colleagues from other disciplines. The most serious statement of the round-table with experts was the lack of self-confidence, insufficient support and insufficient state policy in the field of culture, which naturally lead to low awareness and minimum interest in local (cultural) events. But it is cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation when promoting one's concerns and influencing one's reputation that can be the main tool of efficient foreign policy of smaller countries.

To brand or not to brand?

The term nation branding did not emerge in the field of culture. Its origin is closely connected with political sciences, mostly with public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, which is its integral part. Joseph S. Nye implements the term 'soft power' when analysing tools and strategies of cultural diplomacy: "The soft power of a country rests heavily on three basic resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority). The parenthetical conditions are the key in determining whether political soft power resources translate into the behaviour of attraction that can influence

others toward favourable outcomes.”¹³ The important thing is that culture is listed on the first place in this definition. Soft power as a tool for foreign policy is not anything new in the 21st century¹⁴, we can trace its use in history. It depends on trustworthiness of governments and represents a bilateral dialogue (in Nye’s words: “soft power is a dance that requires partners”¹⁵). Its opposite is manipulative propaganda.

An image of a certain country and nation depends on culture, political values and foreign policy. Its evaluation can take place by measuring the power of a brand. “The term ‘nation branding’ was first coined by Simon Anholt in the 1990s and refers to the application of marketing strategies to individual countries. The aim is to create and promote a distinct self-image and international reputation that will most effectively serve nation’s interests. The tactic has become especially important for countries aiming to carve out particular niches for themselves in the international system as global markets continue to expand and international competition for trade, investment, and tourism intensifies. The field remains one of the most controversial arenas of public diplomacy, but the growing interest in the power and potential of nation branding suggests that its presence and legitimacy will only continue to grow in the coming years.”¹⁶

Although the term nation branding is derived from the field of international relations, diplomacy and marketing strategies and it is closely connected with economic and political interests of specific countries, Anholt brings more general arguments for systematic and continual work with country’s image: “Not every government, and indeed not every population, treats international approval as an important goal in its own right; but when we speak of

the images of places, we are talking about something more significant than mere popularity. The only sort of government that can afford to ignore the impact of its national reputation is one that has no interest in participating in the global community, and no desire for its economy, its culture or its citizens to benefit from the influences and opportunities that the rest of the world offers them. It is the duty of every responsible government in the age of globalisation to recognise that the nation’s reputation, one of the most valuable assets of its people, is given to it in trust for the duration of its period in office. Its duty is to hand that reputation down to its successors, whatever their political persuasion, in at least as good health as it received it, and to improve it if possible for the benefit of future generations.”¹⁷ What relation does culture have to country’s image? The Anholt Hegaxon proves its integral incorporation in theories of public diplomacy, nation or place branding and competitive identity.

Anholt and the American GfK Company developed the so-called *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands IndexSM* for analytical measuring of national brands. It has been a “barometer of global meaning” since 2008 and it measures image of 50 nations in the world every year. The analytical chart is based on a questionnaire from 20,000 people of 18 years of age and above from 20 panel countries¹⁸. The index describes strength and attractiveness of a brand and image based on six criteria: export, governance, culture, people, tourism, investment & immigration¹⁹. The survey regarding culture concerns the following aspects: “Cultural aspects measured are perceptions of a country’s heritage, its contemporary cultural ‘vibes’ from music, films, art and literature,

13 Nye, Joseph S.: *The Future of Power*, New York, 2011, p. 84.

14 Although Nye speaks about so-called “smart power” in connection with the shift of power in the 21st century, between traditional superpowers and other states and in direction from the national state to non-governmental parties.

15 *Ibid.*

16 See http://publicdiplomacy.wikia.com/wiki/Nation_Branding

17 Anholt, Simon: *Engagement. Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2008, p. 43.

18 The core 20 panel countries are: Western Europe/North America: U.S., Canada, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden; Central and Eastern Europe: Russia, Poland, Turkey; Asia-Pacific: Japan, China, India, South Korea, Australia; Latin America: Argentina, Brazil, Mexico; Middle East/Africa: Egypt, South Africa

19 See more about methodology at

<http://www.gtai.de/GTAI/Content/CN/Invest/SharedDocs/Downloads/Studies/diwochenbericht-9-2010.pdf>.

20 Ibid.

21 Simon Anholt: The Czech Republic is not running shoes [Česká republika není běžecká obuv], 2011, <http://www.mistojakoznacka.cz/temata/simon-anholt-ceska-republika-neni-bezecka-obuv/>.

22 Van Ham, Peter: 'Place Branding – The State of the Art', *Annals of the American Academy*, p. 12. In his study, Van Ham speaks about the rise of so-called 'competition state', which is changing to a quasi-enterprise association in contemporary economic conditions: "The emerging dominance of the competition state certainly undermines the achievement of the communal goals that have constituted the *raison d'être* of the (European) state since the late nineteenth century. The Western competition state now values efficiency over equity; it merits competitiveness over

as well as the country's excellence in sports. Various cultural activities are presented to respondents to gauge their strongest images of a country's cultural 'product.'"²⁰

Arguments, which prove the involvement of culture in the economic growth especially in connection with its support from public funds, are overruling contemplations about culture from the point of view of humanities. At the time when representation, postmodern philosophy and growing multiculturalism are in crisis and it is more difficult to reach a consensus about generally shared values except for the economic ones, it is a logical development. A discourse regarding branding of nations, countries, cities and places also includes opposition voices, which express objections, that this type of strategies supports stereotypes in perception of nations and cultures and it is a demonstration of neo-colonialist domination of American culture. Even Anholt, as a 'guru' of national brands, claims that nation branding is not a panacea: "I said that a nation image is essential but I did not say that you can provide a country with a brand like you do with a mobile phone or a bank. I have never seen a single case in 20 years, which proves that country's reputation can be changed through marketing communication... If a country succeeds in improving its image, it is because what is going on in the country, not because of what a country says... When nation's image really changes, it is all about management, society, culture, politics, economics and timing... nations must deserve their reputation very slowly and patiently through their policies, investments, innovations, people, culture, society, tourism and especially contribution for mankind."²¹

If we examine the image of Central European countries, it seems that the situation

for all European countries is aggravated by the fact that the European Union is considered to be a top brand, which actually competes with other 25 national European brands and the content is naturally adjusted: "The EU's Constitution... illustrates that the Union hesitates to formulate clear-cut 'European interests'. Instead, the EU prides itself for the normative foundations of its foreign policy. The EU promulgates and defends its basic principles (like peace, democracy, and the rule of law), ideas (sustainable development and the social market economy), and norms (good governance and institution-building). The Constitution summarises the EU's global mission as a fighter for and contributor to 'peace, security, the sustainable development of the earth, eradication of poverty and protection of human rights and in particular children's rights, as well as the strict observance and development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter.'"²²

In the results using the method of Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands IndexSM in 2009²³, the Czech Republic can be found in the chapter Central/Eastern Europe with other Central European countries like Poland and Hungary (Austria belongs to Western Europe, Slovakia was not evaluated). The evaluation countries from Central/Eastern Europe are Poland, Russia and Turkey (sic!). In 2009, there was not any Central European country in the "Top Twenty", however, it is interesting that Germany ended up on the third place. The first place went to the USA, the 'silver medal' went to France (the first place in the culture category as one of six categories for evaluation). It is good news that the Czech Republic and Hungary were at least taken into consideration in this 'club' of evaluated countries and the role of Poland as an evaluator tells a lot about

the perception of its geopolitical role in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

Except for Anholt Index, London-based Brand Finance deals with evaluation of nation brands as well. The BSI index, developed by this company, works with a different methodology of brand evaluation “of infrastructure & efficiency, brand equity, and economic performance. These categories are each worth 33% of the overall BSI. The BSI is based on factors such as the quality of a country’s workforce and ability to attract foreign talent, perceptions of its quality of life, and its projected GDP growth. Brand Finance uses a combination of government statistics, consensus forecasts, and analyst projections to quantify these variables and create an overall brand rating.”²⁴ Although the methodology of evaluation does not include the category of culture as such, some results from 2011 and 2012 bring interesting findings regarding Central and East European countries about branding of countries in their region.

The third fastest growing brand out of one hundred nation brands was Estonia in 2011 for the following reasons: technologically developed society with low taxes and a high level of justice strengthened its brand also due to rebranding to a Nordic country, which is singled out from the Baltic region associated with Belorussia. Croatia, the ninth fastest growing brand of 2011, strengthened its position due to its distance from problematic Balkan neighbours and the effort to profile as an Adriatic state connected to Central and West European countries.

In 2012, the only East European country, which made it to the “Top 20 Nation Brands”, was Poland (the last 20th place) as the fastest growing brand of 2012. The good result was achieved mostly due to performance of Polish economics but positive impact of the European

Football Championship²⁵ is mentioned as well. The Czech Republic occupied the 7th place in the chart of the fastest growing brands; Ukraine (2nd place) and Romania (10th place) rank among the Central and East European countries that scored.

Although we can raise a lot of questions about the aforementioned methodologies concerning objectivity (the selection of evaluators, evaluation etc.), there are two factors, which are important for reputation of a country on the level of a global international community. Synergy of public, private and civil sectors is essential as well as interconnection of economic, political and cultural indicators when improving national image as it results from a complex evaluation represented by the Anholt Index. The development of the BSI Index shows the importance of regional branding for reputation of countries involved. Both factors can be inspiring starting points for branding strategy of the Czech Republic.

Czech Republic: The land of cultural heritage without present stories

The topic of branding is new in the Czech Republic and it is a matter of theoretical-academic circles rather than practical implementation. As the *Export Strategy of the Czech Republic for 2012–2020*, elaborated by the Ministry of Industry and Trade in 2012, says: “the result of consultations realized during the preparation of this strategy is that marketing and branding of the Czech Republic and Czech brands abroad as well as lobbying for Czech economic concerns are perceived by exporters as two of the weakest pro-export state services. Czech exporters have experienced low activity of Czech representatives when competitors of Czech companies get full support of their home country and this weakens Czech global

solidarity. By doing so, it utilizes the universal discourse of commerce, which now more than ever dominates the public sphere,” p. 6.

23 Data from the following years are not available.

24 BrandFinance® Nation Brands 100, 2009, p. 49.

25 This could be also a factor of success of Ukraine as the co-organiser of the championship, see further.

competitiveness.” It is typical that this document does not count with participation of the Ministry of Culture when suggesting measures how to strengthen marketing, economic and business diplomacy and establish or maintain the network of Czech fans abroad; this contradicts the above-mentioned methods leading to better image or stronger country brand.

Let us briefly look at documents of institutions of public administration, which are supposed to promote Czech culture abroad or create image of the Czech Republic abroad (with help of culture).

A new strategic document by Czech Centres reacts to reproaches about minimum synergy among institutions of public administration in the field of support of Czech art and its promotion abroad. The priority for 2012 – 2015 is “enhancing the positive image and perceptions of the Czech Republic abroad”,²⁶ which should be achieved by cooperation of various subjects and organizations, specific topics of presentations, involvement of Czech exporters, enhancing internal functionality of the Czech Centres network and cooperation among embassies and other organizations in state administration like Czech Tourism (Ministry for Regional Development), Czech Trade and Czech Invest (Ministry of Industry and Trade) and organizations administrated by the Ministry of Culture (e.g. the Arts and Theatre Institute). The strategy also promises to raise the number of live art events in programs of Czech Centres.

Whereas the document by Czech Centres is dedicated mainly to tools of foreign presentation of the Czech Republic and it leaves out specific features of contemporary Czech art or its regional context for now, other organizations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are more specific in this point. Czech Invest – the investment

and business development agency – mentions Czech highlights like Václav Havel, legendary tennis players and top quality of ice hockey. It considers “commitment, competence and competitiveness” as well as high intellectual capital to be the main qualities of Czech business environment. Czech Trade agency, whose main mission is the support of the growth export by Czech companies, emphasizes reliability of Czech business partners and suppliers, a strategic geographic position of the Czech Republic, a long-term industrial tradition, reasonable prices, developed infrastructure and experienced workforce. The chapter Life in the Czech Republic, published on the website of the Czech Invest, is quite interesting as it lists the following qualities: “relaxation and peace of mind, glorious countryside crisscrossed with thousands of kilometres of hiking tracks, an incredible number of cultural sites, picturesque historical towns, renowned spas”. Modern sport centres including golf courses contribute to high quality of life in the Czech Republic together with cinemas, theatres, concert halls as well as Czech cuisine and beer.

“Czech Republic – Land of Stories”: this is the main motto of Czech Tourism, which highlights the following advantages of the Czech Republic: “ancient towns reflecting the rich history of Central Europe in the past millennium, stone castles and ruins on rocks, splendid chateaux surrounded by fancy parks, noble religious monuments, folk architecture and traditions, museums, galleries, music events, cultural festivals, cosmopolitan Prague” and others.

European Quartet – One Melody, a unique example of regional cooperation, is the project of Visegrad countries where Czech Tourism plays the role of a co-organizer. It offers common

26 Strategy of the Czech Centres 2012–2015 [Strategie činnosti Českých center 2012–2015], <http://www.czechcentres.cz/o-nas/>.

promotion materials and itineraries with Visegrad monuments enrolled in UNESCO, spa towns or places for active holidays and this year, it organizes the first common Visegrad countries roadshow in several states of Latin America.²⁷ We can trace a clear tendency towards emphasizing the tradition and history of the Czech Republic through cultural heritage. Contemporary “stories” from everyday life in the Czech Republic are still missing. In comparison with Slovakia, we brand “hardware” despite the fact that comparable “software” is available. Unfortunately, support of its creation and conditions for operation including its integration in international promotion is not perfect. Is it the fault of state cultural policy?

The currently valid documents of the Ministry of Culture, i.e. *State Cultural Policy 2009–2014*, emphasise general values such as openness, diversity, creativity and freedom of creation. An important declaration of the minister of culture²⁸ in his introduction is that “culture does not spend money but it earns it.”²⁹ The main objectives of cultural policy are: 1. economic and social dimension, 2. civil dimension – the development of personality, 3. the role of the state, regions and municipalities and support and maintenance of cultural values, and 4. the role of the state when making rules. The role of culture in relation to enforcement of foreign-political concerns of the Czech Republic is mentioned at the first point.

Information about development tendencies in culture are listed in the chapter entitled *Background study for State Cultural Policy 2009–2014*. The authors³⁰ speak about the SWOT analysis of the development of Czech cultural environment with strengths like the ways of funding and economic support, activities and improving infrastructure of cultural organizations, information and

communication technologies, cooperation with the non-profit sector and other organizations and institutions as well as an existing institutions of education. The lack of funds in all ways and disciplines and on all levels (the request in the document about “setting the proportion between support and protection of cultural heritage and live art as a condition for a better use of cultural heritage and its multiplication”³¹), a spectre of cultural activities, work with the public and cultural management rank among the weaknesses. Only the point “Opportunities” mentions a geographical location and the possibilities of cooperation with other subject in connection with the accession of the Czech Republic to the EU.³²

The concept of presentation abroad is emphasized in the document *Update of the State Cultural Policy for 2013–2013 with Outlook for 2015–2020* especially in the point “Enhancing the role of culture in external relations policy and enforcing business concerns abroad” with the main tasks of creating foreign cultural policy of the Ministry of Culture, participation of the Czech Republic in important international art markets, exhibitions etc., projection of the needs of foreign cultural policy in the state budget proposal (growth of export), coordination of the preparation of specific projects with the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other points of the updated comment in the fields of interdepartmental cooperation are: “Art and culture as a part of presentation of the Czech Republic at world exhibition and other forums, which are not exclusively of cultural nature” and “Improvement of the system of cultural parties and contents through Czech Centres abroad”.

The final version of the Concept of more effective operation of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic in relation to foreign

²⁷ See www.european-quartet.com for more information.

²⁸ Václav Jehlička at that time.

²⁹ *National Cultural Policy 2009–2014* [Státní kulturní politika na léta 2009–2014], amended in 2008, p. 4.

³⁰ The Department of Theory and Culture, Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Charles University Prague in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 46–50.


countries for 2013–2018 was amended recently (July 2013). The main aims are creating and enhancing the positive image of the Czech Republic abroad, cultural awareness and education capacity of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic when learning about cultural heritage of other countries with its presentation in the Czech Republic (with the emphasis on its influence when suppressing tendencies for xenophobia and racism), preservation and support of cultural differences, enhancing international awareness of common roots of preserved cultural heritage, maintaining and enhancing favourable conditions of international cooperation in the field of cultural and creative industries, support of export of Czech culture as a tool for establishing, enhancing and expanding international political relations of the Czech Republic and reaching general aims of Czech foreign policy as well as opening doors for Czech economic export; presentation of Czech cultural heritage abroad for enhancing motivation of tourist visit rate of the Czech Republic and support of enforcing the objectives and strategic concerns of Czech foreign policy through the tools of cultural diplomacy.

The priorities of Czech foreign cultural policy are the development of bilateral cultural exchange and common projects with neighbouring states and European cultural powers as well as contribution to an intercultural dialogue between Central and South-East Europe where the cooperation of the Visegrad Group rank among the priorities.

As we can see from the contents and date of the aforementioned documents, nation branding in the Czech Republic is replaced by rebranding of strategies and institutions, which should take care of the creation and support of good image of the Czech Republic abroad. We can agree on

the fact that we should do something about the state of Czech society internally and its reputation in relation to foreign countries. The contrast between aims in the listed strategic documents, which emphasize the long-term cultural tradition in the Czech Republic and the current negative image, which the Czech Republic keeps building (euroscepticism, corruption, political instability, racism, non-uniform image of the Czech Republic abroad), is quite striking. If we add limited awareness of the region the Czech Republic belongs to (and the time when we compared political stability of Central Europe with Balkan is over), the interdisciplinary debate among institutions about the image of the Czech Republic on the national and regional level seems to be one of possible ways out of current atmosphere of social decay. However, it should not be inspired by a highly ironical and almost offensive motto “We shall show it to Europe” (ed. note: verbatim translation is “We shall sweeten it up for Europe!”) used during Czech presidency in 2009.

Simon Alholt offers a simple manual with the set of basic questions: “instead of asking: What can we say to make the Czech Republic famous?, we should ask: What can we do to make the Czech Republic significant? Instead of asking how to enchant or force people to admire the Czech Republic or look for new ways to tell them how marvellous it is, we should ask: Why should people in other countries primarily think about the Czech Republic? What are the priorities of the Czech Republic? What is its contribution to solution of global problems and its role in the United Nations? There is not any connection with advertising, public relations or branding. Everything connected with proper public administration and good leadership is important.”³³

The question whether to brand or not to brand seems pointless to me. It is startling to read the following words by Petr Pithart, prime Czech politician of the post-1989 era: “We have gone through the past twenty years with faint-hearted motivations and phobias and in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, some of them led to dissolution of the state twenty years ago. In this sense, nothing interesting has happened in our country. We have not undergone any crisis or a harsh test..., we have not experienced any catharsis for that matter... Czech society is not a confined society yet but we cannot say that it has ‘opened’ more during the past twenty years.”³⁴ It is typical that we forget the potential of the cultural and intellectual community, which has experienced a lot of existential tests, essential development of thought and it opened for international cooperation. And by the way: Did cultural and spiritual heritage in the history of the Czech Republic originate under different circumstances? In her documentary essay Prague: the Restless Heart of Europe from 1984, Věra Chytilová repeats the motto “The most important thing is the awareness of the context”. If we do not want to be a cheap post-communist postcard where the time stopped in chaos and turbulence of social, political and economic changes after 1989, we should fill this set with new contemporary stories. It is a major mistake of Czech politics and society that they do not ask for such stories in contemporary art. It is probably absurd but in the time of crisis, art and culture should finally become the flagship of the positive course of the Czech Republic heading to the functional heart of Europe and member of the global community, which self-confidently and steadily occupies its place on the crossroads of West European powers, Central European neighbours and East European cultures. 

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 Branding countries

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MARTINA ČERNÁ is theatre researcher, critic, translator and arts manager. Since 2010 Head of the International Cooperation and PR Department of the Arts and Theatre Institute in Prague. She graduated at the Department of Theatre Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Charles University in Prague. Her research is focused on contemporary drama, mainly German and Spanish speaking theatre and current Czech performing arts scene. She is secretary of the Research Board of the Arts and Theatre Institute and secretary of the Czech OISTAT centre.

34 Pithart, Petr: One state becomes two. Why and how did it happen? [Z jednoho státu dva. Proč a jak se to stalo?] in Bútorá, Martin – Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Bútorová, Zora – Kollár, Miroslav: From where and where to, Twenty years of independence, [Odkiaľ a kam, Dvadsať rokov samostatnosti], p. 29.

Visegrad Branding

A brand is more than just a logo – it is the emotions, values and connotations behind the graphic symbol. Does the designation “Visegrad Group” evoke any emotion anymore? Could it have its own brand? Could creation of a brand usher in a new vision of Central Europe? Finally, is it really the logic of the market, of supply and demand, that should be the deciding factor of political projects and cultural exchange?

National brand-book

First, let's take a look at the current situation. Today, national and regional brands pop up on a mass scale: nearly every city has its own logo and boasts a slogan. Yet, very few of these identities leave a lasting impression, arouse connotations or bind our emotions to the given territory. It is clear that the overriding goal of this kind of brand is to bring profits from tourism, with the target being potential tourists who may be enticed by the logo to visit and spend money in the location. Yet, is tourism really influenced in any way by a logo?

Using market logic in reference to national identification only goes so far. A brand is, above all, an expression of certain values, a condensation of “user” expectations embodied in a graphic symbol. It is also a manifestation of us being different from the rest, as the essence of branding is differentiation. The paradox lies in that a good brand is both unambiguous (embodies certain idea or vision enabling the consumer to decipher the values behind the product) and enigmatic – unpredictable, awaking imagination, intriguing. Only when it fulfils the latter does a brand become memorable.

Meanwhile, what is happening with logos that promote particular countries? To a large extent, they play to national colour schemes and stereotypical connotations. Visit Denmark. Romania – explore the Carpathian garden. Germany – simply inspiring. Britain – you're invited. Visit Sweden... Such statements run alongside flags and sashes, suns and sunflowers, butterflies and sea waves. Their dynamics and colours reflect the tourism options available (sea, mountains, greenery). An examination of these logos shows that, aside from the mass of national colours, there is another element at play. They all attempt to create the impression that they belong to the realm of the market; that countries are not nations, but modern corporations. National logos only differ from corporate ones by trying to mean too much or, on the other end of the spectrum, by distancing themselves from any clear, unequivocal associations.

Is it even possible today to imagine a logic other than the market logic that is rooted in competition, cost reduction and profit maximisation? Such driving force is equally present in the realm of culture which, it may seem, constitutes a different type of order and is governed by different rules. It is increasingly apparent that in politics and politically-dependent finance the word “culture” is being replaced with the term “creative industries” which can be generally interpreted as indicating that market forces are being applied to the realm of culture.

The logic governing creative industries increasingly permeates the field of national identification. The slogan of Poland *Move Your Imagination* does belong to the very same category. Doesn't it also belong to the category of catchphrases and intense colours that do not relate to anything specific, failing to identify difference and emphasise a unique character? *Move Your Imagination*

could equally well be a slogan promoting some new technology. These logos and slogans bear nothing that would lead to an abstract association being connected to something concrete. That is exactly why market logic falls short: there is a logo but no brand. There is a symbol, but no emotion. There is a slogan, yet what it promotes, is no different than all the other “products”.

V4, meaning distinct ...

With all this in mind, what then can we say about the identity of the Visegrad Group? It consists of four points and two words. There are no national colours, no geographical outlines, or even national symbols.

Moreover, it is through the logo that the Visegrad Group project reveals its extremely political face: it is a project concerning capitals and not countries; a project of politicians, not citizens. It is interesting that this very logo was the one selected in 2005 (i.e. after the accession into the EU) in a competition organised for art school students. It defeated all other entries, including those accentuating cooperation, relations and affinity between the individual countries.

But let us return to the matter of a brand being a representation of a certain vision. What is the current idea behind the Visegrad Group? Tracing the genesis of the organisation, it is worth noting that, from the very outset, it aspired to be like the West. In spite of the persistent efforts of particular politicians, it was a rather individual aspiration of the particular member countries in a largely independent fashion.

To answer the question of the group’s current aims, we shall first look at the wider context of the project. Fundamental issues of identity come immediately to the forefront. How do we define Central Europe, if not by negation (i.e. neither West nor East). How does the Visegrad Group differ from the other countries within Central Europe? Finally, if the essence of the Visegrad Group lies in its being different (not here or there), is it even possible to build a common identity on the basis of negation?

... yet actually similar

If external criteria fail, then perhaps building a vision of Central Europe on the basis of local similarities would be more effective. East Central Europe is a region to which there is more than just paradox. A common history, similar experiences and similar languages (except Hungary, perhaps), though continuing shortage of cooperation and inability to share personal experience. It is a region of countries large enough to strive for independent action, but not quite strong enough to achieve their goals on their own. They are adequately strong to articulate their own ambitions, yet only strong enough to be able to imitate models Western European models.

Central Europe has still an untapped potential. It is an area that is undeveloped both in political and cultural terms. This is ironic, for we believe that we have accomplished all that we could. Having overthrown communism, we established stable democracies with relatively sound economies. We were able to achieve some much-desired goals: to join NATO and the European Union. Perhaps it is just a matter of a temporary deficit of further goals, but there seems to be no novel idea for the Visegrad Group.

20th century history is probably the most relevant aspect among the region’s commonalities. The two world wars – as well as the geopolitical separation of Europe – cost the region more than they cost the countries of Western Europe. The fall of monarchies and the establishment of nation states also meant that Central Europe underwent changes that went beyond a mere shift in how authority is organised.

Historically, it is a region that has always been torn between the West and the East (hence an identity strongly rooted in negation). It has always been subject to civilisational stimulus coming from beyond. It would be difficult to identify a region that has experienced more volatile socio-political changes. Tracing the course of 20th century history, we discover that all of the Visegrad Group countries experienced similar fate. They were reborn after the First World War and carried out considerable

modernisation efforts in the interwar period. That was followed by another, even more brutal conflict. Next came Communism and forced participation in the experiment to build the Communist utopia, which was eventually overcome. Though once again single-handedly, with little outside help. Common history does not only mean coincidence of dates and events. The populations of East Central Europe all demonstrated unprecedented vitality.

Now, in the midst of another historical turning point – the economic crisis, Europe’s uncertain future, rapidly ageing population and new challenges connected with multiculturalism – the region has an opportunity to play a vital role. We learned much from the 20th century, we understand that it is unwise to naively latch on to the next great project or formula that promises to be the panacea. We are sceptical and often quite ironic, but history has taught us that we can survive in any circumstances

Samuel Huntington wrote that typically unnoticed similarities between neighbouring nations become evident only in contact with foreign civilisations. Similarity is not something we notice in our day to day lives and rarely do we have an opportunity to see what connects us. Perhaps, it is also true that since 1939 we simply didn’t have time for such matters.

New directions, new patterns

Are our chances of success in the highly-competitive national brand market better if we enter it as a group? Why should one section of the European Union be different from the others? Could such it not foreshadow the fracturing of the European Union into smaller, regional political agendas? We must remember that the Visegrad Group arose not for the purpose of promoting the common heritage of East Central Europe. Its inherent aim involved reciprocal support in efforts to join the European Union and Western European security structures. Both goals have been achieved.

It was never possible to fully utilise the structure towards other goals or to generate a new concept to

blossom within the existing framework, a project that would breed a collaborative effort. In this aspect, problem of the Visegrad Group seems to be consistent with the dilemmas accompanying the multiple deliberations on the subject of Central (and Eastern) Europe. It is easy to notice the similarities and the common elements that constitute convergent identity, though it is ever harder to apply such conditions to any specific action. The abundance of literature on the region has not been exploited to alter the political and cultural reality. Such deliberations, in line with Miłosz or Kundera, serve better to define the conditions of the region than to provide tools for its change.

Over the course of the last few centuries, Central Europe has never emerged as an entity culturally strong enough to transcend the East – West dichotomy. The region has always been subject to one or the other gravitational field. It was no different after 1989 when, under the Visegrad Group banner, the member states originally meant to lend each other support in their pro-European aspirations and asserted their membership in the Western structures of the continent.

The cultural and historical difficulties of the Visegrad Group are also linked to the geopolitical circumstances that do not necessarily correlate directly with historical experience or matters of identity. The Visegrad Group does not correspond in territory to either the boundaries of Central Europe nor the boundaries of the entities that historically played the most meaningful roles in this part of Europe, i.e. the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the 1st Republic of Poland.

Today what is most needed is a new task. The key is to identify an interesting perspective for the future, new challenges and new goals. Harnessing the distinctiveness of our historical and cultural experiences (with respect to both the East and West) is only possible if a new concept, a new idea for ourselves, can be formulated in an interesting and engaging way. Only a vision for the future, a far-reaching project that can galvanise the people and awaken interest in history and culture, will

ensure that the Visegrad Group is deemed relevant to societal consciousness and continuously indispensable.

Existing and currently-undervalued elements, such as common history, culture, religion, similar economic standing and comparable quality of life, are waiting to be used. The question is whether we will be able to come up with new goals and worthy tasks. That is what will enable us to see the region's potential. That is no doubt greater than we believed for over the past thirty years when we successfully carried out economic, social and political modernisation on an unprecedented scale. The transition from planned to market economy, from totalitarianism to democracy, and from social atomism to culture of partnership and civil society is a success in which we all share credit. It is a pity that we still have not learned to speak about it and to share our unique experience with others.

Constructing a new vision for ourselves not as individual nations but as a region can lead to an evolution of a brand for the part of Europe we refer to as Central. In such a scenario, we would not need to worry about logos, because their structure and character will arise from the direction in which we will be heading. And it may, hopefully, turn out that the direction is not one that is dictated by the market, but by culture and is rooted in communication, cooperation and an authentic exchange. Perhaps looking at these anti-market values might give us a legitimate chance to compete with the other political projects in the region and globally.


Postscript (culture against market)

Still, we – as authors of this short essay – are not sure that we should think about ourselves, about our cultures, countries and regions in the market perspective. Truly, do we need brands – or do we need cooperation? Where, if not in the culture field, we can find utopia, where we can celebrate a situation of being together? It is a difficult battle, but it doesn't mean that we should stop our work.

How we could escape from the market logic?

First of all, we should focus on quality of art and

treat an audience as an intelligent partner. Then build relationships stronger than trends, seasons and temporary political interest. That is something what we still try to do during promoting of Polish culture abroad in the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. How? We usually prepare a programme of presentations together with our partners from foreign institutions. Generally, the first step is a study visit to Poland and meetings with artists. Conviction that we show the best performances each time, is the basic precondition. We present proposals, but the final choice always belongs to curators from abroad. Why? Because we trust only that can be beginning of real dialog.

By this kind of projects – increasing during long process of mutual understanding – it is hard to create any brand of Polish culture. Everything, what we can do, is help people to see, touch and learn our culture. Associations, which appear during this process, are partly out of our control. It is difficult to know how partners from abroad will memorize the visit, what kind of experience will they have. And that is something what creates space for freedom, areas free from the market. 

MALGORZATA MOSTEK is the producer of theatre projects in Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Poland. Graduate of culture studies on the University of Warsaw.

MICHAŁ WYSOCKI is the coordinator of cultural programs, mainly in the field of scientific research and education. Involved in the preparation of scenarios of new museum exhibitions. His research interests include the commemoration perceived in terms of public policy.

ZORA JAUROVÁ

Slovakia – country with a potencial

1 We draw on the approach of Simon Anholt (Anholt, S. (2007): *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*). An alternative view of the methodology used to analyse an image can be found, for example, in Eytan Gilboa (2008): “Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 616 (1): 55-77. It emphasises how an analysis of a country image based on combining several globally recognised indices can prove beneficial.

2 See also Batora, J. (2011): “Úvod: Hľadanie obsahu a foriem globálnej prezentácie SR” in Batora, J. a Jambor, E. (eds.): *Global Presentation: Opportunities and Challenges*. [Globálna Prezentácia: Možnosti a Výzvy] Bratislava: Ústav európskych štúdií a medzinárodných vzťahov FSEU UK.

The way people perceive an image of a country, just like the image of a person, or a commercial brand, seems to be a matter of a few seconds. A country image is the first association one has with it, often just a single, but significant sentence uttered about it. A country image is an iceberg showing only the tip of a simple emotion.

And yet, creating the image of a country, state, territory, or city is a lengthy, complex and conceptual undertaking. Countries have been working on their image for centuries. Still, their carefully polished image can be tarnished by circumstances beyond their influence. A country trademark is made of several factors – the first-hand experience of individuals in various types of tourism; export of goods, services, brands; the quality of public policy, be it in relation to other countries, or as a result of the efficiency and ingenuity of domestic strategies; the ways in which the country in question is able to attract investment and talent; its culture, particularly cultural exchange and cooperation; but, most of all, interesting people, leaders, stars.¹

Nation branding is a concept which – in theory and in practice – aspires to measure, create, and manage the reputation of countries. Once the main component of the branding process (of products and countries) was the primary value and feature of the offered goods and services, recent years have witnessed an increasing importance of the symbolic value of products (feelings, emotions and stories related to them). This is why nation branding often emphasises the distinctiveness and specific character of individual countries.

In nation branding, the story a country tells is as important as what it truly represents, promotes, produces and sells.²

The image of a country can be changed only through a systematic strategy that focuses on the creation of sets of innovative and specific products, services, policies and initiatives in all sectors, as well as the outward communication thereof through a story about what the country has been doing and what it is becoming. It is therefore understandable that the process, particularly in small countries, is determined by the activities of the governments and political representatives. Coordinated nation branding strategies have recently been implemented by governments, among others, in Finland, Sweden, or Slovenia, what has brought a significant shift in their image. The change is best visible in the upward move of the aforementioned countries within the so-called Anholt index – an internationally recognised chart of countries’ reputation.

In terms of statehood, Slovakia is a new country which still has to build its reputation. If, however, we take into account the nation branding of the country, this might be an advantage of sorts. It might be easier to create the desired image without having to fight strong stereotypes. So far, the image of Slovakia has been created mostly randomly. It consists of bitsy and distorted information from the tabloids, draws from superficial experience of tourists who spend an hour in Bratislava on their way from Vienna to Budapest, or from isolated mentions in global pop

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culture in films like *Hofstetl*. Only sporadic attempts were made at the level of government policy, and most of them lacked deeper concept and, in particular, comprehensive coordination of ministries and professional institutions.

STEREOTYPES AND DILEMMAS

Our perception of ourselves and others is often based on stereotypes. In relation to nation branding, stereotypes become relevant at least at two levels. First, a autostereotype, i.e. *self-image of the society/ community/country*. Second, heterostereotype, *the picture the others create of us*. These two types often exist in sharp contrast. It is evident that a trustworthy story and the picture of a country have to rest on a trustworthy picture of ourselves.

Slovaks are somewhat notoriously pictured as hard-working, hospitable, friendly and sincere – all features which, allegedly, most pertinently describe a typical Slovak character. Among the negative characteristics which, by the way, Slovaks admit only minimally, are often weak national pride, envy, and excessive alcohol consumption. One way of self-assessment became evident in the questionnaire included in the competition “The Perfect European Should Be ...”, modelled on similar surveys in other countries prior to their accession to the EU. It posed the question “What are we like?”. Some 800 proposals entered the competition and the winning entry – “inhospitable like a Slovak” – was a response to the familiar autostereotype. Nonetheless, it primarily became a very authentic statement about our lack of self-confidence and self-irony.

And how are we viewed by our closest neighbours? What the heterostereotype of Slovakia in the Czech society? In the early 1990s, Czech respondents certainly did not perceive Slovaks as hard-working, amiable, sincere, hospitable and honest people. Quite to the contrary, they saw them as short-tempered, nationally oriented, arrogant and also, though to a lesser degree perhaps, as people with hang-ups. Later on, in the first

decade of the 21st century, Czech respondents answered the questions about Slovakia on a Czech mostly with the following attributes: agricultural, corrupt, romantic, folklore-loving, friendly, but dishonest country. The current Czech perception of typical Slovaks mostly recognises the belief that Slovaks honour traditions, are amiable, nice, hospitable and good-hearted. By the way, Czechs view themselves as intelligent, clever, amiable, with a ‘Švejk-like’ sense of humour.

Yet (national) myths are also a kind of stereotype and could be called stereotypical narratives. In Slovakia, several unflattering myths are being kept alive. There is a myth about Slovaks as the nation of harmless doves, or a plebeian nation, or that of the fate of Slovaks having always been in the hands of some mysterious powerful people abroad. Such myths are used with much gusto not just by common Slovaks in everyday conversation, but also by political elites and authorities to explain the past and present events. Slovaks believe in a number of other myths, such as that Slovakia has the most beautiful women in the world; or that there was Jánošík, a folk hero who stole from the rich and gave to the poor; that Slovaks were oppressed by Hungarians for a thousand years; and/or that of a nasty twist of fate prevented us from having our own state.

In addition to the narrative representation, stereotypes can also have a visual representation. Slovakia is most frequently presented as a country of natural beauty and folklore. Its self-presentation typically rests on vast valleys shown on the backdrop of mountain ranges, bickering streams, wooden houses, folklore festivals and dumplings with sheep cheese. This fairy-like aspect of Slovak self-presentation is often rounded by the sale of traditional wooden mugs, engraved shepherd’s axes and string cheese.

SLOVAKIA – THE STORY AND ATTRIBUTES

1. DISTINCTIVENESS (deep-rootedness, earthiness, heritage)

The strangest figures we saw were the Slovaks, who were more barbarian than the rest, with their large cowboy hats, great baggy off-white trousers, white linen shirts, and enormous heavy leather belts, nearly a foot wide, studded all over with brass nails. They wore high boots, with trousers tucked in, and had long black hair and heavy black moustaches. They are very picturesque, but do not look prepossessing. On the stage they would be set down at once as some old Oriental band of brigands. However they are, I am told, very harmless and rather wanting in natural self-assertion.
Bram Stoker: *Dracula*

Slovakia as ‘work in progress’

Wise and learned people at home and abroad, as well as folk wisdom, have already attributed the most diverse of features to Slovakia and its inhabitants – favourable and noble, yet also disparaging and insulting; warm and sympathetic, then again unflattering and ill-favoured; promising and progressive, as well as parochial and simple-minded. The greatest challenge is to use these characteristics to draw a complete picture – undistorted, dynamic, open, and attractive. A picture that would reflect Slovakia in its development as Joycean “work in progress”, a piece of work which is being created with respect to the fact that the country is being made and shaped on the go, and that the final decision about its shape is still being made.

If we want to paint this picture driven by an aspiration to present Slovakia as a country with a potential, a country able to offer more than just the popular, but stereotypical icons of beautiful women, ravishing beauty of the mountains, and delicious beer, we find ourselves in a multi-dimensional time and space where tracks of the past cross the features of the present,

and intertwine with the contours of the future. This mental map can include Slovakia’s individual elements, features, determinants, characteristics, and qualities.

If we want to name what makes the roots of Slovak identity, the first words that come to mind are authenticity, genuineness, originality and singularity. It can also be expressed using the term deep-rootedness, because we sense certain earthiness that accompanies Slovak identity. There are whole lines of heritage and many burdens we carry (our past, ancestors, genes, sins, our contribution to the wider world. The most fitting and comprehensive meaning of this polysemantic term, however, is *distinctiveness*.

On the one hand, distinctiveness is a neutral term, somewhat devoid of content and specific meaning. On the other hand, it is a word full of content that changes depending on perspective. Its important constituent can be the diverse versions of the pre-modern Slovak existence, including solidarity, mostly in smaller communities such as family, and/or self-help or mutual help (applied in agricultural communities long time ago, later on in small communities during the scarcity of the Communist era, still surviving in some forms). As far as psychological characteristics and bonds are concerned, *emotionality* ought to be mentioned. It is often referred to in older analyses by ethnologists and social psychologists of the Slovak common folk. The distinctiveness of Slovakia and Slovaks becomes also visible in the attachment to *the intimate space of a smaller community* (home, family), in the desire not to fully leave well-known scents, flavours and views.

At first sight, the opening quotation from the novel *Dracula* may seem to present a negative delineation of Slovak distinctiveness. Nonetheless, it can help to show how the “oriental bandits” have progressed in the hundred years since the publication of the book thanks to their resourcefulness, vitality, or diversity. Slovakia can be presented as a country of *paradoxes*, a country which exists despite everything and the distinctiveness of which is defined by its paradoxical

essence. A paradoxical definition of Slovakia's attributes makes it possible to take advantage of opposites, unexpected connections, and humour.

2. DIVERSITY

Slovakia's diversity is characterised, in particular, by concentration of diverse phenomena, objects and events in a very small area.

As far as biodiversity and natural variety is concerned, the country is one of the richest in Europe. There are vast differences in altitude, temperature, landscape, as well as an unparalleled range of species, habitats and geotopes (including smooth transitions between them across a tiny territory). Its location between the Carpathians and the Pannonian Basin gives the country a diverse climate, soil, and hydrologic conditions. These phenomena are so condensed that they give the country a specific diversity compressed in a tiny area where everything is close, and where totally different experiences can occur almost concurrently.

These characteristics are further enhanced by the diversity of the cultural heritage – a visitor may find in close proximity Romanesque rotundas, Gothic churches along with the 20th century architecture. The diversity of Central European cultural heritage may not be exceptional for its range. Yet, again, its concentration on a small area is quite unique.

Cultural diversity in Slovakia has several layers. Historically, it is mostly ethnic, religious, social, regional, and residential diversity. Its source is a spatial looseness because Slovakia never was, at least until the 20th century, an independent state, only a part of larger units. It never had the opportunity to define itself in relation to its neighbours, and all influences were spread, mixed and created without the need to follow one line of thought, one archetype. For centuries, the territory of contemporary Slovakia was a cultural melting pot where the internal and external diversities blended, creating harmonious and authentic flavours. The result

is present diversity; the very character of Slovakia is diverse. The old sources of diversity are being extended by new ones, which often go beyond the traditional sources, yet in many respects they still carry them within. The new diversities are mostly about a whole range of lifestyles and life trajectories, as well as about new minorities – expatriates who now live among us.

At the beginning of the 21st century we see a variety of lifestyles in Slovakia mostly against the backdrop of the unifying greyness of Communism and its normalisation period of the 1970s that suppressed or even punished all that was different. Since 1989 Slovakia went through an accelerated differentiation in a process of catching up. It suddenly opened up to new opportunities. The diversity of lifestyles has many dimensions – life trajectories, subcultures, forms of coexistence, leisure activities, or car makes.

The most distinctive feature of this social diversity is its incredibly fast emergence and the specific issues related thereto (e.g. the contrast between the old and new), and its concentration in a small space. The new diversity is not polarised, but continuous, significantly, it is widely tolerated. Diversity is Slovakia's potential for the future. It is known that diverse teams are more effective.

3. VITALITY (flexibility, dynamism, perseverance)

Slovakia is a new country. As such it harbours great potential for future endeavours. Its appearance is changing (architecture), new institutions are established (legislation), bold measures are taken (reforms), people are becoming more open to change (they yearn for new products, want to learn new things, enjoy diverse lifestyles). The country is continuously shaping in matters institutional, civic and human.

Yet being young as a country as well also means acquiring experience and growing up. In a number of aspects matters Slovakia still has to exert a lot of energy to grow and mature, to develop its vitality

important organs which most older countries have already grown. Given the historical circumstances, perhaps even the wariness of youth, a great deal of quiet, accumulated, and unconsumed energy lies in store here, harbouring a lot of potential, viability and vitality.

Not much may be seen on the surface right now, but underneath there is incessant tension, muffled vibrations, dynamic potential. It would suffice if the conditions changed just a little and the energy would suddenly burst into the surface. Using this accumulated and unconsumed energy, we will be able to achieve great things.

Vitality as a term

Vitality denotes *viability, physical and mental abilities, and a positive mindset*; Nevertheless, it transgresses these meanings by how it resists the wear of time and current mood. Vitality endures at times of crisis as well as conjuncture. It ought to be perceived as a permanent matter, like water that is sometimes stormy and sometimes still, yet running deep in any conditions.

Creativity is a symptom of vitality. It is a precondition of the ability to find one's own way and to survive in any circumstances. Vitality/creativity is thus a guarantee that the potential of Slovakia can be realised. It stands against the backdrop of an optimistic worldview epitomised by the common saying: "We'll manage somehow." We have been often surprised, and surely will be surprised many more times in the future, by how creativity – which is inherently present in the genes of Slovaks – finds a way to the surface. This creativity enables us to adapt to changing conditions, making us tenacious and resistant.

With individuals, naturally, vitality is closely dependent on physical health and the physical side of the quality of life and survival. Visually expressed, a vital individual can be anyone from a pretty young girl, a sportsperson, a vital retiree, a restless kid, all the way to a suave forty-year-old firmly holding the reins of his or her life – distinguished, but still with a sense of humour and passion, and with a child-like curiosity without which they would never have got to where they are. It

is humour, in particular, as well as curiosity, positive thinking and, most of all perhaps, healthy self-confidence which characterise the mental side of a vital individual.

As far as vitality is concerned, Slovakia is a country of potential, of present and future changes, and a great deal of life energy. As such it is quite understandably a total of its peoples' vitality, represented by the people, their abilities and individual stories. This dynamic concept of vitality is what distinguishes the submitted attempt to depict Slovakia from the previous depictions, which were exclusively based on matters such as nature, traditions, as well as the other rigid, unchanging attributes.

Vitality is connected with an element of surprise

Vitality and creativity of individuals, and that of the entire country, is what makes Slovakia a country of positive surprises, a country the abilities of which allow it to amaze its visitors.

The surprise element connected with Slovakia is also synonymous with *expectations*. A new country full of paradoxes, surprises and dynamics arouses expectations about how it will reach its potential. Thus Slovakia's story – now in full swing – is one of the most interesting and compelling stories taking place in contemporary Europe.

It is fascinating to see how Slovakia managed to quickly transform from an unknown, overlooked, and in many aspects also underdeveloped rural country to what it is now. From the initial images of shepherds in the mountains to the present pictures of modern cities and industrial zones, Slovakia is embroidered with *perseverance, a sense of adaptability, ability to find its place, understand the expectations and meet them*. It is a story full of incessant and accumulated energy which has quietly driven these changes all along, and in exceptional cases (e.g. M.R. Štefánik) even burst onto the surface.

4. RESOURCEFULNESS

The territory of Slovakia is naturally heterogeneous, geographically asymmetrical and ever since exposed to turbulent historical and political changes. Therefore, people who live here have always had to search for *innovative ways* to live in their complex reality and to take advantage of it.

To a large degree, Slovakia's history and development are a story of *resourcefulness*. Natural conditions, scarce resources, inexistence of statehood and own governance institutions – all of these factors repeatedly drove Slovakia to seek various alternative solutions.

Our educational structure was not traditionally anchored in bricks-and-mortar universities, but (particularly) in the development of “a common sense” based on an observation of the environment and experience of our ancestors. Slovaks have never been theorists, but rather people using their common sense, seekers of practical innovation based on empirical knowledge, at times supported by some degree of chance. Slovak resourcefulness is based on the ability to combine things which do not seem to be combinable. In the past, Slovak inventors were able to conceive such ground-breaking inventions as the telegraph (Jozef Murgaš), parachute (Štefan Banič), photographic lens (Jozef Maximilián Petzval), helicopter (Ján Bahýľ), underground water pumping machine (Jozef Karol Hell), turbine (Aurel Stodola), or the somewhat futuristic invention of a chess *automaton* (Wolfgang Kempelen).

The ability to create, invent, find a way out is thus not just a memory, or a historical artefact. Nearly a fifth of all computers around the world is protected by an antivirus software made by Slovak company ESET; experiments in the distinctive particle accelerator in the Swiss CERN are administered and conducted by a large team of Slovak scientists and technicians; and democratic trends in transforming countries can be effectively enhanced with increasing success when supported by the case study of Slovakia as presented

by a number Slovak diplomats and non-governmental organisations. Of course, a lot of us can still be called passive, introverted and calculating. Yet there are also a number of those who are creative, innovative and open to non-traditional solutions. And so there are a lot of objects or phenomena in the world which we can point at and say that they have been *invented in Slovakia*.

Slovakia still presents itself as a country providing cheap industrial labour and one that is primarily focused on mass production without much added value. Yet even today there are numerous examples of how *small and medium-sized enterprises producing goods and services with significant added value* and top quality contribute to diversification of Slovak economy and offer a more sustainable model of its development than just mass production. Sophisticated enterprises of this kind have become one of the system keys to sustainable and successful development of economy in such countries as Austria, Denmark or Sweden. Effective nation-branding using the trademark of all things that have been invented in Slovakia can help attract a new type of investors who are looking for *specific innovative products* (niche market). In turn, the success of small enterprises can motivate other resourceful companies.

Slovak resourcefulness is also visible in politics. Some examples include the Velvet Revolution of 1989, followed by the peaceful separation of Czechoslovakia in 1993, and the numerous political and economic reforms implemented during the last two decades. The experience gained from the process of democratisation can become a significant element of the external branding of the country also in terms of its foreign policy. This is a key aspect of the relations with social actors in countries are to become democratic (e.g. Ukraine, Belarus), but also with governments and leaders in countries that support democratisation financially and politically (such as U.S.A., Germany, Sweden). Foreign policy today is not merely a matter of traditional diplomatic relations between governments, but also a matter of efficient engagement of various social actors and

segments. While classical diplomacy valued, proved and established procedures, the contemporary diplomatic environment attaches an increasing importance to creativity (resourceful!) and an ability to activate all types of players at home and abroad. Being resourceful in foreign policy, Slovakia can become the bearer of a new kind of practice in foreign policy and thus also an attractive partner for various types of initiatives.

THE POTENTIAL OF SLOVAKIA

The potential of Slovakia is, most of all, the sum of a great number of minor features, their interconnection and possible combinations (as opposed to a single dominant association). To a large extent, this potential is based on the possibilities offered by the fact that the country remains quite *unknown* (undiscovered, able to surprise), as well as by what lies ahead of Slovakia (youth, freshness). The potential of Slovakia resides in *creativity conceived as applied imagination, intelligence, resourcefulness, and the ability to learn on the go.*

Based on what has been said above, it can be suggested that the range of features in which we see Slovakia's potential is fairly broad. It is up to those who work with the communication identity of Slovakia to decide which features to use and develop further:


- Slovakia as a *work-in-progress* – offers distinct opportunities to take part in its future shape;
- Slovakia as a *distinctive country* – original, culturally genuine, with specific history of battles that have shaped the original story of survival;
- Slovakia as a *country of paradoxes* – opposites existing next to each other, and the ability to transform negative stereotypes into positive promises;
- Slovakia as *concentrated, all-in-one, Central Europe* – history, nature, culture, lifestyles;
- Slovakia as a *country of innovations* – the ability to seek alternative solutions, space for resourcefulness and the source of inventions and reforms;
- Slovakia as a *country able to adapt* to hard conditions;

- Slovakia as a *country of accumulated energy* – youth, viability, a country of present and future changes;
- Slovakia as a *country of interesting people* – creative individuals, human potential; and,
- Slovakia as a *country of positive surprises* – potential of discovery.

Slovakia is a country without a traditional hard infrastructure. A seeming disadvantage can, however, turn into new advantage. The importance of *soft infrastructure* is on the rise and the '*software*' of a place is as important as its '*hardware*'. The '*software*' here means mostly human potential, resourcefulness and energy: only a country with a creative potential can be successful. Slovakia can become known as a place and environment where the exchange of ideas is supported and where ideas are allowed to turn into products, services and innovative solutions. Slovakia can stake on its *mental infrastructure*, the way to face opportunities and problems, the ability to generate living conditions and an environment to create specific atmosphere, as well as the policies and structures that generate support tools, schemes and programmes. Taking into account its history (Communism, Velvet Revolution, separation of Czechoslovakia, EU accession, reforms), Slovakia appears, even at the time of global crisis, to be surprisingly rich in matters

- economic (owing to bold reforms, early stage of development, some measure of modesty and deep-rootedness),
- cultural (specific Central European diversity, a laboratory of central Europe),
- natural (unexplored and well-preserved nature, potential to develop new forms of tourism),
- human (unconsumed energy, ideas, ability to find solutions in hard conditions).

In the recent years, Slovakia has, quite paradoxically, benefitted from the fact that, as opposed to its neighbours, it is not so strongly bound by tradition, established systems and deep-rooted ways of

functioning. After the somewhat problematic start in the early 1990s when Slovakia evidently fell behind the development among its neighbours in all aspects, it then managed to get ahead of the neighbouring countries in many indicators (not just economic, but also social and democratic).³ Furthermore, at times of crises or paradigm shifts, an underdeveloped state might be an advantage for it facilitates the exploration of new possibilities and allows the country to skip some of the stages in order to go in new directions without risking greater damage. At the same time, an element of surprise is still present: *the country has much more creative potential than is visible at first sight, or than standard indicators show.* 

Slovakia – country with a potencial

(Taken from a study with the same title drawn up for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic by a team of authors in 2011⁴)

ZORA JAUROVÁ studied theatrical dramaturgy at the Academy of Music and Drama Arts in Bratislava, Faculty of Drama and Puppet Theatre. From 2004 to 2008 she was the director of the National Agency of the European Culture Programme (2007-2013) – Cultural Contact Point. In 2005 she founded the Institute for Cultural Policy, dedicated to the analysis and opinion-making in this area. She is the Vice President of the European Organization Culture Action Europe (www.cultureactioneurope.org). She was working as the Chief Consultant of the project Košice – Interface 2013 (European Capital of Culture in 2013) and in 2008 she was appointed as the director and the artistic director of the project, where she worked until May 2011.

3 See e.g. *World Value Survey, The 2011 Legatum Prosperity Index*, assessment of Slovakia as a “strong” country of the Eurozone, etc.

4 A. Bán, J. Bátora, M. Bútorá, O. Gyárfášová, P. Hunčík, P. Hajdin, Z. Jaurová, M. Madrová, V. Talian, M. Timoracký.

ANNA LAKOS, SYLVIA HUSZÁR, ATTILA SZABÓ

Branding Hungarian Theatre in Europe

The following roundtable was organised by the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute in June 2013. The aim of the discussion was to give an overview to the international readers of the present situation of the Hungarian theatre, its attempts, challenges and structure, and to show to what extent and how the Hungarian theatre is connected to the European scene. Participants were asked to define the specific nature of the contemporary Hungarian theatre and to describe the tendencies and problems they identify in the theatrical and cultural life. We tried to invite people from all the key fields, but this could only partially be fulfilled, due to the commitments of theatre people at the end of the season, shortly prior to the National Festival of Theatres in Pécs.

As every roundtable, this meeting had also its own dynamics that led the discussion in the directions as shown below. We must note beforehand that this is only one possible approach for presenting the state of the Hungarian theatre and we are well aware that there are numerous other views and ways out there.

The Hungarian Theatre and Europe

HTMI: Our theatre life can be presented in many ways to each other and to the foreign theatre lovers. There are many festivals and several theatres also organize showcases for international guests presenting their own works. The people who organize such festivals and showcases what aspects do they consider, which principles do they follow during the programming and what are their aims with such events?

Tibor Csizmadia (director and chair of the Hungarian Theatre Association): Let me answer the question in a single sentence. When we organised a monodrama festival in Eger with the participation of Visegrad countries, or when we later launched the so-called travelling festival with three partner theatres from abroad, my first and foremost aim was to educate the audiences. I wanted to have the audience of a small town see other theatrical styles and use them as a reference in evaluating our performances. Because we as theatre makers work in an international context, while the audience lives in a local context.

Mária Szilágyi (Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest): We are trying to invite from abroad performances and dramatic works which represent something novel, a trend less known or entirely unknown to the Hungarian audiences or theatre professionals. We are driven by the desire to demonstrate to the profession that 'things can be done this way, too', that there are very different approaches to every topic. What concerns the contemporary Hungarian performances, there are several aspects to be considered. When we launched the festival in 1997 we were experiencing a boom in the Hungarian playwriting, better and better plays came one after the other and they were made into very exciting performances. The first festival was a true Hungarian showcase. However, the Hungarian theatre changes, and so did the interest of the foreign specialists. Our festival mainly presents what is happening in the Hungarian theatres. It would be in vain to force the presentation of Hungarian plays if the theatres themselves are preoccupied with different things. The Contemporary Drama Festival was striving to present new Hungarian plays and theatrical styles. Hungarian theatre makers

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often come to me and say that they have just put on one or another interesting foreign play asking us to present it at the festival because it would surely interest international visitors. But they are not interested at all. If they set out to invite a Hungarian show they are either looking for something specifically Hungarian or for a performance that represents a unique aesthetic in the international or European context. And, next to the form language it is also important for them what the performance is about. It can be either local or global, both could be interesting, but it's crucial for it to be specific. Specifically Hungarian.

Zsófia Rideg (Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, DESZKA Festival): There were plans for the DESZKA festival to grow into an international event. But as we were struggling with serious cuts of the festival budget we were happy to carry through with the regular programme. Yet we tried to invite one or two international guests, but unfortunately we could not have a performance as well. However, this would have been very important for the dialogue to start. The plan was to have a Hungarian play in a foreign performance and a foreign play in a Hungarian performance. We managed to carry this out when Valere Novarina was invited by the Csokonai Theatre to stage his text and we were able to present the show in the framework of the festival. The performance was an interesting counterpoint to the usual performances in Hungary. We also planned to hold a translation workshop for Hungarian plays to be shown to the international guests. It has always been a problem that the shows for larger stages were missing, since the majority of the new plays are written for studio stages. Anyway, DESZKA has always been an ever-changing workshop to me.

László Upor (dramaturg, literary translator): I will try to be very short. For the past ten-fifteen years I have been constantly organising a two-dimensional festival, in two directions. The publication of international plays in Hungary and the publication of contemporary Hungarian plays in foreign languages. That of course is not a true festival. My vantage point was, as was later supported by experience, that only those plays

are worth offering internationally and importing into Hungary which are exciting, interesting and significant in their native place and there is a receptive audience for them. Furthermore, an editor or a selector can only perform these tasks well if he or she is deeply familiar with both cultures, the Hungarian and foreign one. When I brought something to Hungary they were rather offers which I then tested in the Hungarian context. When I suggested plays for export, I and a small circle of specialists offered to foreign partners Hungarian plays which we found interesting. We tried to read the plays through their eyes. Though ultimately it was a matter of joint decision what we deemed to be interesting both to us and them. I can only say what the Hungarian theatre and drama is like when I cross the border: at home, everything seems so natural, so self-explanatory. If I see something I can tell that this is not like a French play or a Danish show. I am thus often surprised to see the special nature of what I and we are doing.

Zsófia Rideg (dramaturg of the Csokonai Theatre): Let me respond to this: I agree that it is crucial to probe the demands of the receiving side, but it is also important not to show the performances abroad which they want to see from us. There are certain topical issues, which are very fashionable in Europe at the moment and the international programmers are eager to spring at them, saying: "Look, these issues are dealt with over there." For instance, the problems of the Roma communities seem a very important topic now and if a Hungarian performance deals with them, the gate suddenly bursts open, and the production is invited to a festival just because the show deals with the topic. I think this is a trap.

László Upor: That is clear enough. Let's not try to comply with the stereotypes and let's not deem something current because of the conjuncture, but rather because it is of high standards and a good performance in itself. I think we all agree on that.

András Kozma (literary translator, dramaturg, Csokonai Theatre): There was a discussion at the DESZKA

festival about why the Hungarian drama does not really appear abroad. There are certainly ever mentioned reasons, such as the language being too difficult, not spoken by many people and hard to translate. Translator Patrícia Pászt told us that in Poland, Hungarian and Central European plays are dealt with much more often and on an institutional level than here in Hungary. We came to the conclusion that, despite the very positive personal initiatives, the theatre profession does not put a strong enough emphasis on popularising its own theatre, the Hungarian plays in an institutional manner.

László Upor: Absolutely, there is no real strategy for this. It's worth looking at how the Finns do it. You are right, there is no strategy, there are no joint forces out there to perform this task.

György Szabó (founder and former director of TRAFÓ): My experience is that the extent to which we are open to the developments outside will define the extent to which the international audiences are curious about what is happening here. It is a real challenge for a theatre to form, to build its own audience. This is also true for the international presence. It is not enough to write a good play or to organise a show. It is a process, a dialogue that consists of a number of different elements. The process is not well developed and devised in Hungary. Hungarian culture is generally governed by artists. The professionals who are good at branding are often put aside. I see that the theatre profession is slowly starting to realise the complexity of the work required for a show to go abroad. On the other hand, they are often trying to mystify the role of the showcases. They are no doubt important, but if someone or a theatre group is not selected, it is no tragedy. The DunaPart project¹ gave rise to certain conflicts with some artists who felt that it was awful that they would not be seen by

theatre professionals arriving to the show from abroad. The truth, on the other hand, is that if a good performance comes to life somewhere, an interesting artist works somewhere and for some reason we fail to notice him, he could still have an effect and get into the bloodstream. I can offer a number of such examples. The truth is that the news of good theatre, whatever people say, will gradually spread in and outside of Hungary. We should not boost the tension between each other. There is severe competition in the world both in economy and culture. Instead of jumping at each other's throats we should rather stick together and learn to enjoy each other's success. I remember when Árpád Schilling and the Krétakör had their breakthrough and were already regular guests at different festivals. International experts kept asking me to suggest other workshops, artists and performances to discover and invite. I was not the only one asked.

HTMI: Actually, how could you define what is specific about Hungarian theatre?

György Szabó: International specialists usually point out two things – and this applies to both the repertory theatres and the independent artists: it is the actor who is the driving force in the Hungarian theatre. Independent theatres are allegedly approaching interesting topics which Europe finds challenging and seeks answers to them. There are, of course, trendy topics and adaptations, but for the international audiences are only interested in those performances that step out of their local context are interesting.

Károly Eperjes (actor, artistic consultant of the Petőfi Színház in Veszprém): Back then, when we presented Mrozek's last play with the Művész Színház, we were invited to a Polish festival.² The Hungarian state didn't give us a penny for the trip. And then the entire theatre

- 1 The Platform of Contemporary Arts – DunaPart was held between 20–25 January 2011 by the TRAFÓ House of Contemporary Arts Foundation
- 2 The Művész Színház (Artistic Theatre) worked between 1993–1995 in Budapest, in Nagymező Street 22.

community refused to stand up for a very good quality theatre, moreover, it was brought to a failure by the very community. This could only happen in Hungary. Today, there is a crisis of values all over the world. Just think of how much money there is in Germany. Can we bring good plays from them? Until now I have not found one.

László Upor: In a healthy theatre environment the question of what can be offered abroad is not the only important one, but it is also very significant of how theatre can elaborate on the contemporary life for its own use. This is where the German theatre is light for years ahead. I can imagine that of all that is extremely important for the German theatre and society is of limited interest to us. But then the German theatre would still not count as worthless or uninteresting.

Gabriella Kiss (theatrolgist, lecturer at the Gáspár Károli University): I feel very much addressed here, since I am also a German philologist. I think the Hungarian culture could adopt quite a few points from Germany. The Berliner Theatertreffen celebrated its fiftieth anniversary this year. For the past fifty years, no-one ever thought there to claim that the best performances were presented at the festival – they were selecting the most noteworthy ones. That is an important difference. The question of a conjuncture in topics was mentioned. A performance was invited to the festival which dealt with the Roma issue. Yet the interesting thing was not what the critics said about the performance but that there was a symposium held around the show, which was not about the performance or about the Roma issue, but was trying to shed light on the whole context of the issue in the past few years. These are strategies of exclusion and how to deal with them. One more thing. I basically reject the question of what is the uniqueness of Hungarian theatre. Hungarian theatre culture is so thoroughly structured, segmented, not to speak of its Europeaness or its relation to German culture, that the only viable way to respond to these things is what György Szabó suggested. Namely that there should be someone to think about what is worth importing and exporting,

taking a closer look at what the audiences are open to. If I were looking for a Hungarian show, for instance, to take to the Volksbühne, I would have to know that there is now a strong interest in the middle class theatre of laughter, in the well-made plays staged by remarkable directors in quite intriguing ways. I would have to give a deep thought to what can be brought there from our comedy production that would be of interest to us and the Germans.

HTMI: Yet for a foreigner it would still be interesting to see the currently prevailing tendencies. How is it possible to grasp that? Can we talk about certain specific topics or techniques employed by the Hungarian theatre makers?

Bence Mattyasovszky (administrative director of the Katona József Theatre in Budapest): International experts of the shows at the Katona József Theatre always single out the importance of the work in an ensemble and its artistic benefits. During the four-five days they watch the shows, they are mostly impressed by our ensemble. This is an important feedback we always get.

András Kozma: Hungarian theatre is remarkably vibrant, layered, because due to the very tragic historical background the Hungarian theatre includes not only the theatre life in present-day Hungary, but also the artists, actors, directors who come over from Transylvania, Ukraine, Serbia, Slovakia, or reside there and work. They are artists who come or stay deeply touched and impregnated by a different culture to which they also react. Their contribution to the let's say universal Hungarian culture is of great importance. I, for instance, have experienced in Debrecen that in a theatre ensemble an actor from Transylvania and one from Vojvodina (Serbia) could play along with another actor from Ukraine, and all of them would also bring their own tastes, life stories and gestures, and all this could mingle, brew and age into something extremely valuable.

István Ugrai (theatre critic and editor-in-chief of 7óra7 online theatre portal): To me, the Hungarian theatre is

the performance I saw last week at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest: the People's Theatre from Subotica (Serbia) performed a play by Mayenburg, directed by András Dömötör, who has strong ties to the Katona. This arrangement is by itself very interesting. It is what I believe to be representative of the Hungarian theatre. It includes the theatre life here in the country and the one across the borders, the outlook. All this has a strong effect on me as a viewer. Or take Szabolcs Hajdú's play at the Euregio Theatre Festival (TESZT-Temesvár, Romania), at the opening of which the local vice-mayor and the leader of the German theatre speak in Romanian, and Attila Balázs, the Hungarian managing director of the theatre also speaks Romanian. All this leads into the performance in Hungarian. This is also a face of Hungarian theatre. But also, when someone writes a play, sells it to one-or-another theatre, they start rehearsing it and finally give up and schedule the the operetta *Csárdás Queen*, instead. This ad-hoc nature is also part of the Hungarian theatre. Another feature is that the directors don't actually belong to the theatres and that the repertory theatres do not really dare to try out the young directors. Tibor Csizmadia said that the theatres and spectators have to get to know the director, just as the director needs to get acquainted with the audience. The city repertory theatres do not dare to do this and choose instead someone who has been directing around the country for the past forty years. A young director, recent university graduate would rather work for independent theatres. But there is no money there. The young artist thus cannot ,learn' not only how to work in a theatre, but also how all the theatre making works. If, by chance, he does succeed, then fifteen times fifty people see his show, because no more fit in the studio. It's also in the Hungarian theatre that we watch O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, and the American plays from the fifties, just as we did in the sixties and seventies. Of course, they could also have valid readings, but I still find myself falling asleep while watching them. Yet sometimes I also

happen to discover an exceptional actor in an awful performance, who was truly ,present' and, despite all, their effort gave birth to a valid character. The Hungarian actor can also do such things, and not one of them.

Balázs Erős (manager of MU Színház): I think the solution would be a structure that not only reads from above, but also from below. In my view the Hungarian theatre, and thank God we are not the Czech or the Polish theatre, previously brought examples of independent theatres not receiving much subsidies. Hungarian theatre does support these bottom-up approaches. Let it stay like that, because we will have a chance to have a normal, clean structure, in which we don't take ourselves to pieces slowly, we don't get stuck on certain topic and will not have such black-and-white remarks. Instead, the real live Hungarian theatre structure is one that can define itself both from below and above, and there is funding for both systems.

László Upor: You are talking about a normal, clean and flexible structure. Yet we are instead heading towards stiffening, rigid structures. We are constantly running towards them instead of finding how to leave the door open behind. This would be of utmost importance.

Tibor Csizmadia: I would like to refer to what Gabriella Kiss said. I was quite impressed by the fact that, at the Theatertreffen in Berlin, the most noteworthy performances are showcased. I think it is hard to define whether the Hungarian theatre is the one which is the most noteworthy or is something very different. We can say that the most characteristic matter is the actor or the life in a theatre ensemble. Alternatively we can choose an approach which suggests that, for instance, a certain company has is a strong acting training and this is what sooner or later becomes noteworthy. When someone graduates from a theatre academy, one does not know anything yet. They are those with very exciting potential, but years and years are needed until they 'grow up', get formed. If this happens within an ensemble, the plays will be well cast. I could sum up in one sentence what the Czech,


Polish or Slovak theatre is to me, but I would be unable to define the Hungarian theatre in a single sentence.

László Upor: Earlier György Szabó drew our attention to the fact that the telecommunication technology is radically transforming the thinking and attitudes of the generations which are just growing up. As a teacher at the Theatre Academy for the past three years I have experienced a stunning change. These young people are communicating very differently with the world, they notice utterly different things and react in other ways than we do. All this is noteworthy for the future and present of our theatre.

György Szabó: It would be interesting to look into the present theatre programme of the Wiener Festwochen festival and compare it with the one five years ago. One will see a spectacular change: in the past three years they have radically broken with the Viennese traditions. The same stands for the dance festival in Vienna. But also in England, the British Council overtly supports the productions where new technologies are embedded into theatre performances. I have seen a performance in Paris by Robert Lepage at the Chaillot Theatre. I only saw elderly people in the audience.

Attila Vidnyánszky (director, former manager of the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen, presently the managing director of the National Theatre in Budapest, president of the Magyar Teátrumi Társaság association;): I could testify for exactly the opposite to this. Come to the countryside and look at the theatre. The theatres in the provinces are packed with young people. Moreover at the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen the season-ticket performances of classical opera are full of youngsters.

György Szabó: I would only like to draw your attention to what is happening in the London-Berlin-Paris triangle. There's a different cadence, a different rhythm there. We have to come up against this and work out a strategy of our own. Just one fact: the world of the internet, on the other hand, is very unified. It does not matter there whether a nation is rich or poor. Hungarian theatres will also have to face up to this soon.

András Kozma: I believe that it would be worth looking at these matters from a broader perspective of cultural history. The spirit of film was a challenge and the end of theatre was heralded. Obviously, the advent of ever newer technologies means that the attention and association system of the future generations undergoes significant changes. Yet in the meanwhile their need for the personal touch of theatre will still prevail. What I see is that the young viewer will soon get fed up with the technicality of theatre performances and will be more drawn to the uniqueness, the intimacy of a relationship between two people on stage. And yet another thing: to the triangle mentioned before let me add another pole, the Russian theatre. Let me offer an additional angle, the Russian theatre, to the aforementioned triangle. It is a statistically well-known fact that the Internet in Russia develops most dynamically. Despite this the emphasis in theatre training is put, in the classical way, on observation, on human sensitivity, the heart and the mind. This also comes back later in the running of theatres. So they invest not half or one and a half month in the preparation of a performance, but sometimes even years. That does not only apply to the independent sector, but also to large theatres, as it remains a living part of the tradition of repertory theatres. We thus need to see these two directions and decide at a certain point which path to follow: let's say the 'Eastern' contemplative or the 'Western' technology-centred dynamic trend. 

The roundtable discussion was organised by the International Relations Group of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (Anna Lakos, Sylvia Huszár, Attila Szabó)
edited by: Anna Lakos, translated by: Attila Szabó



II

Dramaturgy of brick theatres

MARTIN BERNÁTEK

The dramaturgy of identity: the position of permanent repertory theatres in Czech culture and society today

The Czech Republic has a dense network of permanent repertory theatres. Often these theatres are home to more than one company, and most of them fall under the administration of municipal entities. Like in other Central European countries, this network developed through the efforts of prosperous (German and Czech) urban elites, out of the boom in associational activities, through socialist cultural policy, and out of the changes in public administration after 1989.

On the one hand, similar theatre buildings, originally designed for regular drama and opera production, can be found from Zurich in Switzerland, to Prague, Vienna, Bratislava, and Budapest, and to Odessa on the Black Sea, and to some extent they mark out the wider boundaries of the Central European space. On the other hand, the actual legal status of the majority of repertory theatres – as a subsidiary organisation – is grounded in the former socialist conception of the state as the bearer of ‘the unity of power and property’. This kind of legal institute is almost non-existent abroad (except in Slovakia) and represents an anachronism in the Czech legal and cultural system.¹

In 2010, in the Czech Republic, with a population of ten and a half million, there

was a total of 198 theatres (146 companies, 254 stages), of which 46 are commercial subjects and 48 non-profit organisations, and which within the scope of one year put on approximately 27,000 performances that were attended by a total of 5.7 million people.²

In a field of diverse theatrical production, the municipal repertory theatres offer the clearest representation of the theatrical tradition in the area of culture in the present-day Czech Republic, and are also the recipients of the largest amount of public finance. But how firm a part of the intellectual foundation of society – one of the gauges of maturity of a society – are they? How do theatres contribute to the quality of life in the places where they are located? These questions relate to the role of the state, regions and municipalities in creating and preserving cultural values and developing the rules that govern cultural activities and the political environment around them. However, they also relate to how the traditions of the theatre, new creative theatrical work,

¹ LOVĚTÍNSKÝ, Vojtěch – MYLKOVÁ, Petra. ‘The functioning of a subsidiary organisation in CZ an selected European countries.’

The Parliament of the Czech Republic, April 2011 [online] [accessed 30. 5. 2013] URL: <http://www.avpo.cz/sdata/prispevkove_organizace_v_CR_a_EU_78.pdf>.

² NEKOLNÝ, Bohumil – ŽÁKOVÁ, Eva (eds.) *A Study of the Current State of Subsidies to Art. [Studie současného stavu podpory umění.] Sv. II. Prague: Institut umění – Divadelní ústav, 2011, p. 76.*

Ivan Landsmann, Tomáš Vůjtek: **Colored Layers**, director Janusz Klimsza, Petr Bezruč Theatre Ostrava, 2011, photo T. Ruta



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Dramaturgy of brick theatres

the functions of theatres as truly public and artistic institutions in the place they thrive are interpreted.

This text is based on a survey of the current significance of repertory theatres. It was conducted mainly among their managing directors, but also among managers and artistic directors from the independent theatre sector and representatives of municipalities were also addressed. They were asked to respond to the following three questions: Why is the tradition of repertory theatres important and why keep it in the era of new creative and organisational practices? How would you define the 'public benefit' that repertory theatres as organisations funded from public budgets should provide to the public? What purposes and tasks should be included in state, regional and municipal cultural policies concerning repertory theatres funded from public budgets and how they should be evaluated? First, an attempt will be made to assess their views and then to consider the questions posed therein in a broader socio-political frame

Regional centres, regional issues

The prevailing importance of permanent repertory theatres is their role in cultivating the region they operate in. As the (now former) managing director of the theatre in the town of Šumperk René Swiderski says, "Thanks to subsidised operations, these theatres are able to perform for a low admission price, are able to stage work for young people, and thanks to tours they bring the theatre arts to remote areas. They are also able to focus on both a sophisticated repertoire and stage original work." Repertory theatres are also viewed as the 'natural creative hub of a region' by Kateřina Pešatová, the Head of the Department of Culture of the Municipal Authority of the eastern Moravian regional capital Zlín. She argues that this kind of cultural and creative centre strengthens the identification of the people with their region and builds their awareness of its culture and history. They also assemble professions in the arts and crafts that have a role in maintaining the cultural heritage and wealth of the Czech Republic, bring

together naturally creative and talented people whose work generates a 'creative refuse which in turn becomes the impulse for the development of amateur creativity.'

A sense of attachment to a cultural institution and intergenerational continuity and coherence is born through the attendance of the same institution over time and following the changes in a company. According to the director of marketing at Prague's National Theatre, at repertory theatres with a tradition, audiences can "follow their development, the actors that appear in the theatre's comic and tragic roles; they can see how one role passes across the generations from an older to a younger artist. Audiences are better able to share in the life of their theatre."

The director of the Arena Studio Theatre (Komorní scény Aréna) in Ostrava, Renáta Hausarová, sees preserving the traditions of repertory theatres as "one of the priorities of the continuous development of society, its awareness of its co-belonging to the legacy of the generation of those who came before us, to the understanding of historical development. A particular repertory theatre is attended by grandparents and parents, and they then gradually taught their children and grandchildren to do the same, and in doing so they taught the young generation to accept and recognise their cultural roots and develop a relationship to cultural values."

The theatres in Ostrava, once a region of coal mining and heavy industry, nicknamed 'the steel heart of the republic', frequently draw on local industrial history to prepare original stage works and use former factories and mines for their performances. Compared to the rest of the country, there is lively and productive migration and guest artistic production as well as organisational and marketing cooperation between theatres in Ostrava. Such activities no doubt help to create a special artistic community and serve to strengthen the identification of the audiences with the region. However, unlike for instance the work of Paweł Demirsky and Monika Strzępka in Walbrzych, Poland, a location with a history similar to Ostrava, these activities focus on highlighting Ostrava's

genius loci and on mythologising local idiosyncrasies and, despite all the difficulties, the 'okay' and 'unique' life there. Meditations on the social conditions of life in a region marked by the closure of heavy industry, pollution, damaged environment, and rising poverty, unemployment and social tension for the time being do not fit within the mould of local theatre production.

Forming an identity with a region presupposes a choice of the past with which to connect and consequently leads to the exclusion not just of pasts deemed 'inappropriate' but also presents deemed as such. The recent sudden dismissal of Swiderski from the post of managing director led also to the withdrawal of a planned production about a local dissident. For several years now the major controversies have been generated by the dramaturgical programme pursued by the Drama Studio (Činoherní studio) in Ústí nad Labem in Northern Bohemia. Among other things it focuses on the originally German history of the region, and organises, for instance, the Sudeten Festival (Festival Sudety). It also deals with themes like the holocaust and the post-war violent revenge of Czechs committed during the expulsion of the German population after the Second World War. A couple of years ago the managing director of the theatre and an opposition politician Jaroslav Achab Haidler were dismissed probably because of their criticism of the political leaders of the town and the region.

Multiple traditions and budget constraints

Tradition and generating a sense of belonging are thus not phenomena that occur automatically. The decisions about the methods and milieux that will be used to create a relationship between audiences and the places they live in, their past and their present are important. As the artistic director of Brno's HaDivadlo Marian Amsler notes, "Closely connected to the tradition of repertory theatres is the issue of a considered and guided dramaturgy. In order for the survival of the tradition of repertory theatres to make sense even today, in my

view such a theatre needs to apply a dramaturgy that takes the individualised style and poetics of the theatre and a clearly defined target group into consideration."

The company Hadivadlo now operates as part of the municipally subsidised Centre of Experimental Theatre. It represents a different tradition that took hold in the Czech Republic. Besides the tradition of town theatres, usually concentrating on drama, opera, ballet or musicals, from the 1950s so-called small, studio-type stages founded on a programme of varied dramaturgy and original work, gradually became a part of the municipal cultural map. Under the Communist regime, these theatres represented an alternative to the official ideology of the vulgarised large 'traditional' stages and gradually created their own 'tradition' of a theatre of unorthodox forms. Although organisationally they were classed as official cultural institutions even before 1989, after the change of the regime they de facto expanded the portfolio of official municipal cultural institutions. They preserved their aesthetic individuality – and thereby their essentially unchanging artistic management – over several decades. They are only slowly managing to re-orientate towards new poetics, current issues, and break out of the niche of their original artistic focus. A successful example is HaDivadlo itself. Amsler's comments, however, also raise a question of where the next generation of artists will work (and where are they going to create a new 'tradition') when not only all the theatre buildings are occupied, but the discussion is already closed about which theatre is the guardian of the region's tradition and creativity and is therefore entitled to continuous support.

The problem of artistic stagnation and the excessive shielding of tradition are mentioned by the representative of NGO and non-profit organisations and director of the international festival Tanec Praha Yvona Kreuzmannová: "Only very few repertory theatres have been able to even come close, let alone become a part of the dynamic development in the performing arts in recent decades. So they rely too much on tradition. Yet that is not about repeating never changing principles,



Anna Saavedra: *A Secret Message from the Planet of Mothers*, director Marián Amsler, HaDivadlo Theatre Brno, 2012, photo M. Zeman

methods, and clichés. I see, the good tradition of Czech theatre to have consisted in original, contemporary work able to keep pace with the world, or with Europe, or at least our closest neighbours. Unfortunately, many of our brick and mortar theatres, especially the multi-company ones, keep pace solely with each other, their managers support each other, lobby intensively for their own interests, but their artistic development has long since stagnated. There are some shining exceptions, there are quality, tight-knit companies led by strong directors. Why maintain the status quo? To me that is the constant question. Repertory theatres lack the vital pressure of confrontation with a progressive, independent scene that does not get even 10% of the same conditions.”

Risks: artistic stagnation, unstable public support

Debates about the position of permanent repertory theatres are currently directed by the theatres themselves and the expert public primarily on their funding. There is no deeper and more systematic discussion of their artistic programmes and relationship to what’s going on in the society. Regional theatres are under-funded, this is true. However, the more the sphere of culture is subjected to cuts in financing, the more their cultural productions become a patent value and a tradition automatically worthy of protection. There are historical reasons for this situation, and it is a source of enduring inequalities between theatres that fall under the administration of

public authorities and so-called independent subjects. It is also a source of the continuous controversies that plague the selection and dismissal of their managing directors because of the legal status of these theatres as subsidiary organisations under direct administration of their founder. This escalated *ad absurdum* when the new director of the National Theatre in Prague, Jan Burian, was dismissed and then reappointed by the new (and, at time of writing this article, already former) Minister of Culture on his very first working day at the theatre on 1 August 2013

In 1991 the majority of cultural institutions including theatres that had formerly come under the administration of the regions were transferred to the municipalities. A change in the taxation system strengthened the autonomy of municipalities, but this transformation initially envisioned financial input from the higher regional administrative units. These units were created in 2000, but they did not assume any part in funding theatres. They primarily dealt with the administration of other property they had assumed charge of from the state. As a result, cooperative funding of cultural institutions has no support in legislation. The entire burden connected with the funding of artistic bodies whose activity is primarily regional or even state-wide in scope is left to the municipalities and their budgets are subject to a disproportionate burden. As Eliška Balzerová, the Managing Director of the private Prague theatre Na Fidlovačce, says: “The redistribution of what little funding is set aside for culture again turns us into dependent vassals, among whom often incompetent politicians decide and determine who gets merely a pittance and who gets more.”

The towns provide in average 93% of the funding of the professional theatres in their administration, compared to the regions’ contribution of 4% of funding and the state contributing on average 3%. Moreover, from a geographic perspective, 90% of the total public support goes to theatres on the territory of the capital City of Prague.³ The state began directly supporting professional theatres in 1996. In 2003 it set up the Programme of State Support for Theatres, Symphony Orchestras, and Choirs and

the government committed itself to fulfilling this programme in 2006 in the Concept of More Effective Support for the Arts for 2007–2013. However, the programme suffers from severe under-funding. For 2013 a financial sum of was CZK 150 million supposed to be provided and approximately CZK 61 million was distributed.⁴ It is important to add that CZK 150 million represents the minimum rather than the optimum sum required.

The theatres run by the municipalities are inadequately and unevenly funded. This leads municipalities to primarily finance the organisations under their administration and to devote less funding to the system of grants. This disproportion is a source of long-term animosity between the so-called brick and mortar theatres, which have their ‘guaranteed’ funding, and the ‘independent’ stages, which always come second in matters of funding and, like Yvona Kreuzmannová, criticise the brick and mortar theatres for collecting subsidies while failing to produce first-rate artistic work. Professional permanent repertory theatres, which have a stronger organisation base and thus also a stronger presence in the eyes of the public and politicians, in turn ignore the professionalism of so-called independent theatres.

The entire system is thus quite unstable, even though in some towns, such as Prague, an adequate system of grants has been successfully created that guarantees continuity of artistic production. Another source of instability is the relatively low culture that governs the selection procedure for appointing the managing directors of theatres, and controversy usually surrounds the resignation or, frequently, dismissal of figures from these posts. Controversy also tends to accompany job appointments made through open competitions, where calls for application are moreover not issued sufficiently in advance and do not contain even the general objectives the managing director should

meet. The absence of initial criteria to work with makes it difficult to assess the work of a theatre and can lead to the formation of informal clientelism, top positions being occupied by the same people, even for more than a decade, and consequently the risk of artistic stagnation. Or the overly close relationship between the administrative authority of a theatre and its management. In legal terms it is defined as a semi-budgetary organisation, offers applicants no incentive to take on the management of these types of theatres and reduces the motivation of young artists and graduates to work for such an institution.

The Programme of State Support for Theatres, Symphony Orchestras, and Choirs is intended to support professional activity of state-wide significance, new creative work, creative work aimed at children and young people, and young artists. It is also supposed to heighten the prestige of the Czech Republic abroad and ensure equal access to cultural capital.⁵ The aims of the programme do not fully match its performance and artistic criteria. For example, while performance data take into account the number of productions for children, they do not account for the number of original premieres or productions staged by a young director or conductor. Support seems to be reserved exclusively for drama, puppetry, and multi-company theatres, and the benchmark of 100 performances by a theatre, which is one of the criteria of its professionalism, is unattainable for many independent essentially professional groups. A positive example can be seen in the system of grants in Prague, which provides long-term funding to independent companies via a transparent system of grant distribution and evaluation.

Public theatre and the legitimacy of the ‘res publica’

De facto insufficient funding for culture – in particular in light of the commitment made

³ Documents from the campaign Help Your Theatre, run by the Association of Professional Theatres of the Czech Republic [online] [accessed 30. 5.2013]. URL: <<http://www.pomoztesvemuvadlu.cz/dokumenty/>>.

⁴ The Programme of State Support for Theatres, Symphony Orchestras and Choirs of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic [online] [accessed 30. 5.2013].

URL: <<http://www.mkcr.cz/cz/profesionalni-umeni/granty-a-dotace/program-statni-podpory-profesionalnich-divadel-a-profesionalnich-symfonickych-orchestr-u-a-peveckych-sboru-2330/>>
⁵ Ibid.

6 SULŽENKO, Jiří. *Mapping the Needs of the 'independent' theatre sector in the Capital City of Prague [Mapování potřeb „nezávislého“ divadelního sektoru v hl. m. Praze.]* [online] [accessed 30. 5. 2013].

URL: <[http://www.divadlo.cz/mapovani-potreb-nezavisleho-divadelniho-sektoru-v->](http://www.divadlo.cz/mapovani-potreb-nezavisleho-divadelniho-sektoru-v-).

7 KUNST, Bojana. 'The projected horizon: on the temporality of making.' *Maska*, vol. XXVII, no. 149-150 (autumn 2012). ISSN 1318-0509, pp. 64-71.

by the Government in its Cultural Policy and its failure to adhere to it – is the basis for the prevailing hegemony of economic discourse over an artistic-critical and social perspective on permanent repertory theatres and generally on all theatrical and cultural production. There are several reasons for this state of affairs. The dominance of a neoliberal point of view of public administration and in particular of the 'commons' results in the subjection of values to economic criteria and consequently also in the favouring of such themes in culture. This is also evident among polar opposites to the permanent repertory theatres, i.e. the independent professional groups that justify their needs and position vis-à-vis the repertory theatres by highlighting their own 'flexibility', greater 'competitiveness', and focus on 'research and development'.⁶ Independent theatres are still just in the stage of beginning to group themselves into larger interest organisations and only the future will tell how effective they have been in adopting the language of the dominant political force that supports these independent projects even less than it supports repertory theatres, and which consistently undervalues the economic significance of the arts and cultural and creative industries and generally marginalises them. The very foundations of the project-based method of work are also increasingly exposed to substantial criticism. As Bojana Kunst has pointed out in reference to the project mode of production, temporality, and the adaptation of creative work to the political order: "That, which still has to come is already projected in the present [...] The possibility of the future is only coming out of the balance with current power structures." At the same time, the more works of art are understood as the paramount generator of creativity (with multiplication effects and potential for economic yields), the more the current political order is

presented as the only one possible and notions about some other order of society disappear.⁷ As also Jiří Rumpík, the Director of the Municipal Theatre in the town of Most, notes, "New project-based and creative methods are applicable in certain in specific conditions, mainly in the conditions of a strong and sufficiently large market." At present, however, the Czech network of cultural organisations lacks production houses that would provide a base for independent projects, private-public partnerships, systematic sponsoring and philanthropy are not sufficiently widespread. Wherever they exist, they focus primarily on supporting traditional institutions. The Czech Republic also lacks a dominant private donor, like a lottery, which works, for instance, in the UK and Finland.

The Czech Republic has no legislation on the public benefit of cultural organisations. A public cultural service denotes the provision of access to culture through public institutions, that is, institutions supported by public funds, by citizens. As a result, the purpose of permanent repertory theatres in the current post-Communist Czech society is defined as the provision of equal access to culture, and equal access means the broadest possible scale of cultural service, with no consideration of the quality of the work that the public is being provided access to. Public support takes into account performances for children and young people, but not, for instance, for the socially vulnerable or excluded.


In general, discussion about the goals and programmes of cultural work and more consequential reflections on the relationship between aesthetics and politics continue to enjoy little favour among the general public and the management of cultural organisations. This ideological construct in part rests on the primary focus of mainstream criticism on the work itself, and not on the social circumstances in which a work is created and exists. It is also often possible to observe a paradox in the rhetoric

of the artistic protest against governmental or municipal so-called austerity measures in the last few years: the austerity measures are often explained as something unexpected and not as a consequence of long-lasting problems. Protesting artists reproduce the polarity (good) art versus (bad) politicians, which occasionally leads to the foregrounding of problems de facto rooted in the post-Communist system and inherited from the former communist regime (now non-existent for more than two decades). Consequently, not only the product-oriented approach but all artistic production is increasingly problematic as the very concept of society and notions of any kind of 'common' goods within post-Communist societies becomes increasingly problematic.⁸

Tradition is based on sharing. It is a synonym for passing something on; it expresses the relationship between generations, and is a bridge through time. At present it appears that tradition has become automatised, yet municipal and repertory theatres earn numerous theatre awards (such as the Alfred Radok awards) and are used to performing more abroad than independent companies. At the same time, it is hard to imagine today any questioning of the discursive fusion of the essentially separable entities of a theatre house and the company that operates there. Repertory theatres, traditionally the privileged sites of the production of art, could thus easily turn into a bizarre luxury, a kind of obscure – continuously present and at the same time superfluous – accessory in a social situation that Boris Groys has aptly referred to as the era of the mass production of art.⁹ The existence of permanent repertory theatres remains incontestable. There is a growing generation of young artists familiar with the processes of the current theatre who are establishing themselves at regional stages.

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Just as the arts are becoming increasingly daring, ever stronger doubts emerge about the sense of public support to arts; sooner or later open confrontation must result. As Bojana Kunst suggests: "It is of primary importance for art and workers in the artistic field to demand endurance, continuity and to occupy the present spaces as much as possible. What is common is namely what is now, and not what will be in the future: How to create modes to support the present, how to give it back its temporal value, its complexity with others?"¹⁰ If theatre artists remain unable to take account of the social and political dimensions of their ever more precarious position and continue to resort to a defensive standpoint and the assertion of solely their own particular interests, their work will lose significance and legitimacy. If artists fail to reflect on this state of affairs, they will assume the role of assembly-line workers. Through their pseudo-activity they will help to cover up the collapse of the public sphere, stifle the potential for sharing world experience with the world, and experiencing that which is common between you and me. This risk exists not just for the Czech theatre but for theatre across Central Europe and even worldwide. 

MARTIN BERNÁTEK is a theatre critic, researcher. Graduated from Theatre studies and Theory of Interactive Media at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in 2011, he has been studying at the Department of Theatre Studies as Ph.D candidate. Currently he serves as researcher at the Department of Theatre, Film and Media studies, Palacky University in Olomouc and as researcher at the Department of Theatre studies. He is a member of the Society for Theatre Research, the Association of Czech Theatre Critics and cultural policy initiative Brno kulturní. He is a co-editor of the *Manifests of Moving image: Color Music* (2010). He is interested in mutual relation between theatre, technique and architecture, in particular.

- 8** See BUDEN, Boris. *Zone des "Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus. Frankfurt am Mein: Suhrkamp, 2009.*
- 9** GROYS, Boris. Art production [online] [accessed 30. 5. 2013]. URL:< <http://www.formerwest.org/>
- 10** KUNST, Bojana. 'The projected horizon: on the temporality of making.' *Maska*, vol. XXVII, no. 149-150 (Autumn 2012), p. 70.

ZUZANA PALENČIKOVÁ

Dramaturgy on the borderline – live dramaturgy

Dramaturgy, as an institutionalised function performed by the dramaturge, is the consequence of the development of theatre in Northern Germany. From there, it spread to Central Europe starting in the middle of the 18th century. Jan Čísař sees the original cause for this movement in the transition from 'improvised theatre' to 'literary theatre'. Theatre was divided into 'higher' and 'lower' categories (similarly to higher and lower culture) and the former type purposely learned to read dramatic texts, hence to examine the literary model as independent artificial reality.

Jan Čísař defines dramaturgy as *the borderline* activity between literature and the stage. It involves an ability to judge to what extent

Martin Čičvák: **Kukura**, director R. Ballek, Arena Theatre, Bratislava, 2011
photo R. Skyba



a dramatic text can be transformed for stage of a particular theatre, using a particular ensemble at a particular time, and to what extent the piece can have not only literary, but also theatrical value. The literary value of the text itself is thus no longer the focal point – it is now the text as part of the theatre (a component of the stage structure). Given its theatricality, it becomes an open system and acquires new content (connotations).

If only applying the first part of this definition – dramaturgy as *the borderline* activity, an even more detailed delineation of dramaturgy can be reached in the context of a new perception of it. Being on the borderline of what exactly can new dramaturgy be defined?²

In order to define the meaning of new dramaturgy most pertinently, the term LIVE DRAMATURGY shall be used.

Live dramaturgy (or a live dramaturgical plan) is what Slovak theatres, in particular the bricks-and-mortar state-funded ones, vitally need today. Yet the call for live dramaturgy is nothing new. The phenomenon of the so-called 'deadly' and 'immediate' theatre was dealt with already back in 1968 by Peter Brook in his book *Empty Space*. 45 years have passed since; however, not much has changed. Deadly theatre with deadly dramaturgy still exists and keeps us entrapped. Nevertheless, since deadly theatre does not mean dead theatre, even this kind of theatre is capable of change. One just has to keep asking Brook's questions, even after a hard and

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1 Čísař, J: *The Foundations of Dramaturgy* [Základy dramaturgie]. Prague: NAMU, 2009.

2 The original intention was to work with the reactions of Slovak dramaturges and theatre theorists to questions relating to the transformation of dramaturgy in Slovakia, which were asked in an e-mail. The author was particularly interested in possible reasons why so little new drama is staged in Slovakia. However, only two dramaturges and two theatrologists responded to the queries. The original intent had to be abandoned because of the too limited a sample of opinions.



Roman Polák a Dano Majling: **Piargy**, director Roman Polák, Andrej Bagar Theatre, Nitra, 2008, photo Collavino

exhausting theatre season: “Why theatre at all? What for? Is it an anachronism, a superannuated oddity, surviving like an old monument or a quaint custom? Why and what do we applaud? Has the stage a real place in our lives? What function can it have? What could it serve? What could it explore? What are its special properties?”³

The term live dramaturgy refers to dramaturgy that is searching, creative, sensitive to subjects which are in the air, bold, open, provocative and inspiring.

Live dramaturgy looks for new authors, shows interest in the system according to which new texts are created and produced.⁴ It wants to know what is live in other theatre cultures and to what degree it can be transformed to its specific context. It encourages new drama translations.⁵ Live dramaturgy initiates, contacts, searches for authors who could be commissioned to write for the theatre, for the ensemble.

Live dramaturgy does not equal contemporary dramaturgy just because it stages contemporary texts. It ought to make an effort to make

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a theatre portrayal of the contemporary world. And the contemporary world is depicted also when old worlds-texts are interpreted. Live dramaturgy also searches for topics in other genres – in prose or poetry, in authentic biographical documents; it looks for material also in seemingly non-dramatic sources.⁶

Live dramaturgy perceives theatre as a wider cultural space and what takes place in a theatre need not be only productions, but also other kinds of projects that stimulate critical thinking and an open mind. With its background, theatre has the potential to organise discussion platforms, invite inspiring people, and host philosophical, environmental, social, cultural, and political talks.⁷

Live dramaturgy trusts its spectators. It has to work with the public and the audience. Along with the management of the theatre it feels responsible for the *development* of its audience (not *recruitment*). The greatest reward for live dramaturgy is when it can meet its live audience – an audience that will instil its role as spectators with an active interest, focus and enjoyment – in short, with life.

Live dramaturgy cultivates lifelong education about and through theatre (theatre pedagogy), and initiates various workshops (with authors). Theatre pedagogy has a great potential in Slovakia and it is not focused merely on working with schools and teachers. It can reach much further to affect various segments of a potential audience and foster its knowledge and skills, and thereby also its interest in theatre: e.g. communication skills training, family workshops, educational projects engaging different communities and social groups, digital education (audio and video materials or various educational texts available online). In its entire breadth theatre pedagogy is a component of nearly every German or English theatre. In Slovakia,

3 Brook, P.: *Empty Space* [Prázdný prostor]. Prague: Panorama, 1988. p. 53.

4 This system is perhaps best applied by the English Royal Court Theatre in London. For over 50 years (since 1956) it has systematically supported original writing. The theatre actively searches for new texts every year. The Literary Office of the Royal Court Theatre reads and assesses over 3,500 plays annually.

5 The Goethe Institute in Bratislava can annually support three translations to which it has dedicated an extra budget. Nearly every institute has a similar funding system aimed at supporting the dissemination of its culture abroad.

6 The Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin systematically revives old texts and authors in order to represent the contemporary world – most recently as part of the theatre sitcom series project titled www.narodnyncintorin.sk by Róbert Mankovecký and Dodo Gombár.

7 In 1996, Jens Hillje and Thomas Ostermeier initiated a series of discussions held in the Baracke, a theatre studio within the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. When they left the Baracke for the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, a space was created in 2000 for monthly discussions under the name Streitraum. As part of the project, the theatre invites leading names from the humanities, and cultural and social sciences. Many took part in the public discussions, including Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, Naomi Klein, Richard Rorty, Benjamin Barber, Joseph Stiglitz, Judith Butler, Eric Hobsbawn, and Ryszard Kapuski.

the National Theatre uses theatre pedagogy to some extent, running two educational projects: Let's Talk about Theatre – Don't Be Afraid of a Debate and From Text to Production. Both involve lectures by dramaturge Miriam Kičiňová. Some Slovak theatres are engaged in the international project Platform 11+ (creative writing workshops for youth aged 11–25) run in Slovakia under the auspices of the Theatre Institute.

Live dramaturgy nourishes emotional education, sensual experience, intellectual enlightenment, and unconventional thinking.

Looking at the current dramaturgy in Slovak bricks-and-mortar theatres, it is obvious that it is rather vegetating, if it exists at all (why should dramaturgy be live if it does not have to; moreover, it even seems that it has gone completely missing in some theatres). Still, there are exceptions, however fragmented. Worth mentioning are several interestingly live dramaturgical projects run by Slovak bricks-and-mortar theatres. The Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra was awarded for the originality and courage of its dramaturgy of the cycle known as *The Family Silver*. It won the DOSKY prize in the Discovery of the 2008 Season category. Quite naturally, dramaturgical intentions were projected into convincing artistic forms and so a single stage, during a single season, produced a unique picture of our contemporary world through titles based on solely Slovak classics. In 2010, the Andrej Bagar Theatre started a more broadly conceived project titled *TY ROKSO!* Its productions deal with challenges faced by contemporary teenagers. The project also involves a discussion between a psychologist and the young audience following each performance. As part of the *TY ROKSO!* project, the Andrej Bagar Theatre has so far staged three contemporary texts, all directed by Svetozár Sprušanský: Britain's Dennis Kelly's play

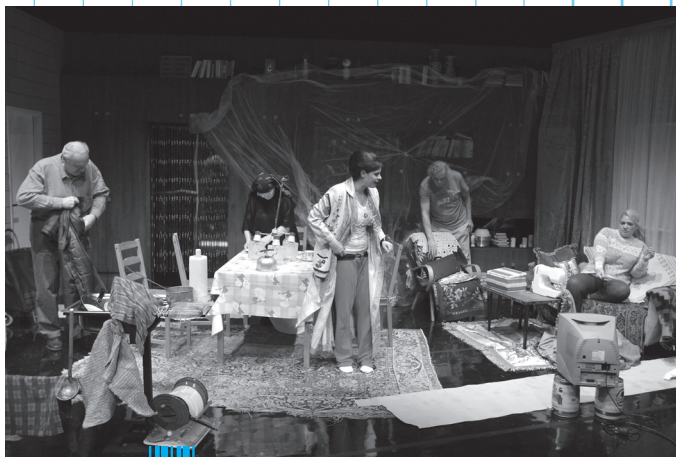


Michaela Zakuťanská: *Hlavaj*, director Zoja Zupková, Alexander Duchnovič Theatre, Prešov, 2011, photo P. Zakuťanský

DNA (2013), American Carlos Murillo's *Dark Play* (2012), and Swedish Stefan Lindberg's *Lavn* (2010).

As part of the so-called Civic Cycle, the Arena Theatre in Bratislava initiated commissioning of texts which would be connected through a political theme and the ambition to use theatre to spur historical self-reflection, and a current social discussion. After Viliam Klimáček wrote *Dr. Gustáv Húsák – A Prisoner of Presidents, A President of Prisoners and Communism* for the Civic Cycle at the Arena, the theatre commissioned a third play within the cycle, the *Holocaust*. The cycle began with the production of Rastislav Ballek's *Tiso* in 2004. In addition to *Tiso* and the three plays by Klimáček, the cycle includes Martin Čičvák's *Rukura*.

The first Slovak theatre studio TWIGA (Theater-Women-Improvisation-Gender-Action) has been working for ten years with the intent to sensitise gender issues under the leadership of author and director Iveta Škripková at the Puppet Theatre on the Crossroads in Banská Bystrica. With the issues she puts forward, TWIGA has become a vibrant and searching



Anna Jablonská: **Pagans**, director Marián Amsler, Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, 2012, photo D. Veselský

theatre which grasps men and women, shaking them out of their traditional social norms, cultural roles and behavioural models.

The number of productions created using contemporary Slovak or international texts is very limited. The productions seem to have failed to find fans among Slovak dramaturges, as they are time-tested with no production tradition, and often merely react to a momentary situation (the so-called *Zeitstücke*). Very few productions of the kind appear in Slovakia. It is always difficult to find quality in the very few. The prevalent opinion is that they are flat, lacking invention and quality, their topics are uninteresting. What is thus the point to choose and stage them? As if Slovak dramaturgy needed to find trust in the dramatic language of contemporary texts.

On the contrary, some theatres and particularly some authors seem to be attracted by new texts (and not only dramatic ones). What appeals to them is a well thought-out formal structure (textual fabric, the language, composition, montage of lines, intertextuality),

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the issues presented, the method of processing and perception of the world, as well as a space for encrypted, ephemeral and subconscious content.

The dramaturgy of the City Theatre in Žilina has enough trust in contemporary drama (both international and national). The recent seasons have proved that the theatre has lost the label of a regional theatre as a result of the bold decision to experiment with contemporary texts. In a televised interview at TA3, the artistic director of the City Theatre in Žilina Eduard Kudláč said: "Theatres outside Bratislava are not interesting for the critics; they are not in the centre of attention. The only way we can draw attention to what we do is to walk a very fine line. We decided that our fine line was to be contemporary texts."⁸

Even though the City Theatre in Žilina recently celebrated its 20th birthday (2012), it had been long chased by the shadows of its discontinuous past during which it had been repeatedly established and closed down. It seems that the theatre in Žilina existed more as the result of an external will than an internal need. More radical changes came under the management of director Martina Jesenská (2007–2012) and artistic director Eduard Kudláč (until 2008). It was the staging of Sergi Belbel's play *Mobile* directed by Eduard Kudláč in 2008 that showed which direction the theatre dramaturgy could take. At the 2009 *Nová dráma*/New drama festival, the play received the Award for Best Production of a Contemporary International Play. The lead actress Jana Ol'hová won Special Prize of the Jury for an exceptional performance, as well as the 2009 *Dosky* prize for best female performance of the 2008–2009 season. The City Theatre gradually managed to shed the sediments of its difficult past, to leave the territory of tried-and-true drama and focus on contemporary texts premiered in Slovakia, and on new

- 8 Eduard Kudláč in a televised interview for TA3, *The Week in Culture*, 10 March 2013.
- 9 The producers of Michaela Zakuťanská's play *Jánošík 007*, directed by Mariana Ďurčeková and Ján Luterán, were awarded the Special Prize of the Jury at the 2013 *Nová dráma*/New Drama Festival, for the exceptional work of a young team of authors and producers which, taking a playful approach to the myth of *Jánošík*.

10 The text of *Peoplemeter* is currently used by director Júlia Rázusová who is planning to stage it next season.

11 Recently, director Blaho Uhlár cooperated with the City Theatre in Žilina and produced a play called *Expand* using the method of collective creation. Blaho Uhlár is known for his uncompromising opinion on the operation of state-funded theatres.

“Culture should be created by the people”, not by the state, or local government. This is a fundamental problem. Once culture becomes institutionalised, it has to exist regardless of what art it creates, for it is important for it to stay alive. And it has a tendency to expand.

The aspect of artistic creativity ceases to be crucial and becomes secondary. This is not a way to create art.

12 Brook, P.: *Empty Space* [Prázdný prostor]. Prague: Panorama, 1988. p. 195.

dramatisations and original Slovak contemporary drama. It is also the intent of new director Anton Šulík (since November 2012) to support the contemporary dramaturgy of the theatre.

The live dramaturgical plan of the City Theatre culminated in the 20th season (2011–2012) which presented a single-theme programme. The theatre commissioned three new texts by two renowned playwrights: *Stalin in Žilina* by Ľubomír Feldek, *Beat* (*Everyone's Got Their Own Rhythm*) by Viliam Klimáček, and *Jánošík 007* by young author Michaela Zakuťanská.⁹ None of the three texts is flat, formally or thematically dull, or lacking in invention. What all share is that they were written for a specific theatre and offer a jigsaw of our private and “the other” history – starting with the Second World War until the present. In addition, *Stalin in Žilina* and *Beat* are also autobiographical.

During a single season, the City Theatre in Žilina reopened its (experi)Mental Studio having presented four new texts from the Visegrad countries: *Such a Nice Girl Like You* by Ingmar Villquist¹⁰ (Poland); *Stairs for the Cat* by Katalina Thuróczy (Hungary), *Like the Rustle of Leaves in the Sistrums* by Iva Klestilová (Czech Republic) and *Babyboom* by Zuza Ferenczová (Slovakia). These were all simple theatre projects, originally staged presentations which, given the commitment of the actors and popularity among audiences, eventually became regular productions, now part of the repertory.

The theatre started a series of seasonal residential stays for young Slovak authors. The result is always a new dramatic text type-written for the young ensemble. The theatre wants to use the residential stays to support original writing. Michaela Zakuťanská was the first writer-in-residence in the 2011–2012 season, and wrote the play *Peoplemeter*, that reveals the background of deceitful reality shows.¹⁰ Zuza Ferenczová is the

current writer in residence and is working on a text *Killers*. Both texts will become the basis of the dramaturgical plan for 2013–2014; the forthcoming residential season will be called *RESIDENT EVIL*.

A state-funded theatre deserves a subsidy only if its dramaturgy is live. Its privileged position can only be defended if it does not allow the market to dictate its conditions. Since state-funded theatres spend public funds, they should be obliged to run projects which could not be done otherwise. Naturally, this should be done in a way that appeals to the audiences.¹¹ One of the peculiarities of theatre is that it can always be started from scratch. In life, however, one cannot go back, or, as Peter Brook puts it: “New leaves never turn, clocks never go back, we can never have a second chance. In the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time. In everyday life, ‘if’ is a fiction, in the theatre ‘if’ is an experiment.”¹² Therefore, even 45 years after Brook, we can again and again look for and try to find live, immediate theatre with live dramaturgy. ♣

ZUZANA PALENČIKOVÁ graduated in Cultural Studies at Comenius University in Bratislava and has had several semesters of theater studies at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. Between 2004 - 2009 she worked in the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin as manager of projects and relationships as well as public relations. In Martin She collaborated dramaturgically on many productions mainly directed by Dodo Gombár and Rastislav Ballek. She collaborated as an author With Kamil on the concept of production *A budeme si šepkať* (2009), which won the 2009 Boards in the category of Discovery of the season 2009. Since April 2009, She is the dramaturg at City Theatre Žilina.

Sins and Genetic Engineering

Do we need repertory theatres? YES, we do, because they are among the few places that care about cultural continuity, development of local community, and a contact with anything more than a flat flickering screen. NO, we don't, because they are all too often administratively and artistically complacent, slow to respond to change and they generate excessively high costs (who can afford culture these days?). Finding equilibrium between these two responses is only possible if we first identify the operational framework of this kind of institution. We will then be able to make the most of what there is and minimise any risks.

The golden source

Repertory theatre is like our little stabiliser. It means predictability – we know well what, who and where to expect: a set team, fixed venue, and manageable number of performances in the repertoire.. Obviously, there is a temptation to get involved in these types of institutions as their very structure renders them dependent on regular funding. Yet, wherever there is a source of stability there is also danger.

The question regarding the contemporary role of repertory theatre has at least two threads. The first seems to be shared by all countries with economy based on free market rules : what should art be like in the age of consumption, pop culture and in a cultural industry that is above all intended to supply viewers/ consumers with entertainment? The second thread seems to be peculiar to East Central Europe and is connected with the continued public distrust in state-

run institutions: does art produced and funded through authority structures have a chance to offer any of room for freedom? Can it be an outlet for opposition and give an opportunity to renegotiate the current rules? On the one hand, there is the rather merciless market (that propagates a vision of human nature searching for little more than stupefaction and an escape from the need to ask questions). On the other hand, there is public funds, the use of which means conforming to the state or local powers that are sometimes resoundingly referred to as those 'who pull strings' of a given institution.

The first of these scenarios results, as we can observe elsewhere in the world, in farces, musicals and an endless stream of comedies that offer the middle class at least some escape from the difficult and merciless everyday reality. Of course, laughter alone is not the sole measure. It has more to do with laughter that has no deeper meaning, doesn't provoke or questions, but rather conserves, solidifies and cements whatever already exists.

Can a different type of theatre emerge when the guarantee for its continued operation comes not from ticket sales but from public funds? Can a state-funded theatre challenge the state rule? This is not referring to temporary political game-playing, to performances that "whitewash" historical stains or to journalism conducted on stage and in costume. This is in reference to a theatre as a space for real discussion about the conditions under which we all have to live. It would seem that this is what theatre is for. Yet the boundaries of freedom are drawn not by the artists but by civil servants who can modify the funding anytime (as they do in times of crisis), replace the management and even prevent some plays from being staged.

Becoming dependent from authority, however, seems to be the original sin of repertory theatre. In fact, it is less a sin than a condition of its existence. Only authority (most often the state or local, though increasingly the influence of the capital city) is capable to ensure stable revenue when the operating costs significantly exceed possible income. Only the authorities can afford such an extravagance. So, face-to-face the accusations of excessive dependency, a lack of criticism and an easily-digestible repertoire that appeases the local elite, repertory theatres are really being asked to conduct a critical examination of the foundations of our reality. This is an expectation that runs contrary to the very core of repertory theatre.

Genetic error

Do we mean that this is just how repertory theatres are; end of discussion? No, it is quite on the contrary. Becoming aware of this genetic deformity which largely means a necessity to enter into various arrangements and pacts with the authorities – this is just the starting point. Looking at the situation, this approach may enable possibly shift the focus of the discussion from accusing directors of particular institutions of weakness and of failing to provide an ambitious repertoire to addressing the systemic problem that marks most of East Central Europe.

The current situation consists of several processes, both historical and contemporary. First, as a legacy of the communist system, we inherited a relatively expansive infrastructure –in an absence of an actual theatre, in every city with more than 5 streets to its name has at least a culture centre with a theatre stage. Second, we also inherited an expansive administration (how many administrators still remember the former system?) with, most significantly, a specific mentality that can be termed a *homo sovieticus* mentality if we allow the oversimplification. This mentality is marked with a lack of critical thinking, fear of authority, and a tendency towards conformity

and opportunism. Somehow we are not surprised when local party officials are more eager than their superiors at the headquarters to impose restrictions. We are attached to our right to culture, but we altogether fail to exercise our right to quality culture. It is important to have a stage (preferably rotating), velvet-upholstered seats and a grand chandelier, while what is being performed is of less importance. This aspect is also reflected on the macro scale of infrastructure investment. Lately we read a lot in Poland that “investment in culture infrastructure is not the same as investment in culture,” (Ireneusz Janiszewski), or “Regardless of whether we are talking about private or public money, increasing the number of theatres seems like the worst possible idea. A shiny new building often creates more problems than it solves,” (Joanna Derkaczew) and, indeed, “Each złoty invested in culture is good. The only question is whether the intensive construction and deep digging are accompanied by an equally intensive and deep reflection on the aim, function, strategy, management and use of the particular monuments to the government’s generosity towards culture.” (Michał Centowski)

Such questions are not unfounded, especially as they concern not so much the current state but the future of all of the shiny new buildings which, in most cases, have been erected with European money and for the upkeep of which someone will have to pay. Will there be enough funds left for a programme? What kind of programme will it be? Patched together from budget scraps, mended by a desperate search for sponsors, prepared by poorly-paid employees? Do we really need a theatre in every city? Would it not be better to invest in programmes, artists and plays instead of buildings? These may be naive questions because art is something ephemeral and a building will continue to stand, even if it stands empty and eventually turns into a local supermarket.

The genetic error at the source of the existence of repertory theatre, certain organisational unit of cultural

life, can be treated in two ways. We can keep silent and push ahead with its expansion and aggregation in the near future, or we can examine it, do the math and try to work it out. We can try to understand what repertory theatre is for, check whether there is a need for it everywhere, reinvent it in its specific, local context and, above all, capitalise on its building community potential. After all, is it not genetic errors that drive evolution?

Education, dummy

Since the bond between repertory theatre and authority is inevitable, while limiting the number of these institutions it may be worthwhile to –dedicate a portion of them to education. Staging well-produced and conscientiously prepared performances of school reading material does not automatically mean an easy way out. Moreover, it ensures a steady audience and even benefits social education. Perhaps by designating such “dedicated school material theatres,” there would be no need for the remaining theatres to dutifully stage such material, allowing them to focus on formal and artistic experiments.

An arrangement like this is obviously premised on an active role of the state in shaping cultural life. Meanwhile, it seems that left-wing and centre governments readily retreat from such responsibility citing the necessity of action on the part of the society (assuming it is civic-minded) instead of the politicians.

Any grass-root educational action would not bring the same benefits as compulsory general education. It is such education that can ensure that those beautiful glass-clad buildings still smelling of fresh paint will in the future continue to be bathed in stage lights instead of sitting idle and empty. If we insist of investing in “hard” infrastructure, we cannot neglect its “soft” people-based counterpart. This entails educating audiences as well as artists, and especially management.

The Polish theatre environment engages lately in a discussion about the criteria and guidelines for

appointing theatre directors. Officially, for a few years there has been a law regulating the process though it is only in 2013 that we have seen an abundance of public calls to determine candidates for the posts (yes, competitive bids to determine candidates!). In this discussion – unfolding mainly in specialist literature – a lot of voices have emerged to complain that, shockingly often, the procedures have been tailored to fit the profile of a favoured candidate. It seems that the theatre environment has awoken from its lethargy and is beginning to look over the shoulder of the authorities. Let’s hope that soon we can also arrive at a democratic procedure to influence the decisions of local legislators. We might be able then to change those even slightly ossified institutions into places that can serve as real meeting points for local communities. This, however, does not free the authorities from the need to introduce structural changes by at least minimising the number of repertory theatres. Perhaps at least some of them do not need to fulfil such a function at all. They might serve well as experimental theatres or those hosting touring productions. It is difficult to elaborate on all cases collectively because each instance should be decided on the basis of the needs of the local public, and it is their education that can safeguard us against a transformation of repertory theatres into local centres of undemanding, low-brow amusement. ♣

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Public theatres against the independents?

Repertory theatres and the effect of recent structural changes in Hungary

According to the reports of the Performing Arts Office in 2013 there are 206 institutions registered as theatres of some kind. Of these, 69 are registered as production theatres (41 in Budapest), 21 receiving venues (15 in Budapest), 14 open-air theatres (7 in Budapest), 11 theatres of the Slovak, German, Serbian, Roma, and Romanian ethnic groups (4 in Budapest), 17 puppet and youth theatres (of which 1 is in Budapest, 4 are listed as independent). As the other significant layer of the system, there are altogether 141 independent theatres registered, of which 98 have a seat in Budapest.

The Performing Arts Act (Act XCIX of 2008), 'On the support and special employment rules of performing arts organisations' besides regulating the specific labour law pertaining to performing arts institutions and prescribing the selection process of managing directors of public institutions, also regulates the structure of state subsidies. By supplementing the Corporate Tax Act of 1996, the Performing Arts Act allows for theatres to receive additional tax funding from private corporations up to 80% of their annual ticket income, which would otherwise be paid by companies to the national treasury in form of Corporate Tax (Társasági Adó – TAÓ). This measure, basically a tax deduction scheme from the companies' point of view, was supposed to stimulate theatres to increase their ticket incomes and be a less bureaucratic, target oriented division principle of state support. However, it has been fiercely criticised for disregard to artistic quality. These concerns seem to have been proven by practice, when greater repertory theatres

with large halls – thus capable of generating higher ticket income – could claim more corporate support to the detriment of smaller, more experimental or niche venues. Moreover, the theatres who gained the most from this scheme were originally the wealthier musical theatres able to run longer series with full house and to sell tickets at a triple or quadruple price compared to arts theatres. Many argue that this created further imbalance in the structure of subsidies, which was originally criticised for favouring repertory theatres to independent companies.

The original Performing Arts Act required the registration of performing arts institutions into six categories that also defined their access to state subsidies: Category I included art organisations that specialised in theatre or dance and had their own building and ensemble, provided they performed at least 180 times a year and staged 2 new performances. Category II consisted of production theatres and receiving venues with the required number of performances ranging from 100 to 140 a year. Ballet and dance companies in Category III had to perform at least 50 times a year. Category IV included theatres with a minimum of 100 performances a year, while Category V consisted of theatres of national and ethnic minorities, along with street theatres, provided they either gave at least 50 performances a year, or sold 50 thousand tickets for shows (50 thousand spectators a year). Category VI, however, was the most critical point in the system. According to the law, "Category VI should include those independent theatres that have been operating for at least 2 years, and which

do not qualify for Categories I-V.” Funding allocation in Category V and VI was not automatic, but was based on annual competitions evaluated by a special committee. In 2008 the Performing Arts Act initially provided for 10% of all state theatre subsidies to be saved for the independent sector, which was reduced to 8% at the first amendment, followed by a deletion of this percentile provision entirely. This, coupled by repeated instances of unannounced freezing and delayed payments of the subsidies to the independent theatres, led to serious outcry by the independent theatres that felt that the government was demanding disproportional sacrifice from them, which brought many to the verge of or beyond bankruptcy.

The 2011 amendment to the Act changed the six categories to three groups: 'national', 'featured' – the only two categories which can expect guaranteed subsidies – and the 'application-based category', members of which have to apply for subsidies each year. The amendment also introduced a training requirement for artists: 70% of the members of theatres in the 'national' category must have a university or academy degree required for that artistic activity. The percentage for the 'featured' theatres is 60%. The already quite heterogeneous Category VI has become even broader with the amendment, comprising a wide array of independent theatres, amateur groups, youth and university theatre groups, competing over the same, yearly defined budget. The public theatres, supported traditionally both from the local (city or district) budgets and the state, have to fight, at their own turn, with the delicately changing proportions of subsidies they can expect from the cities and the state: with the introduction of corporate tax (TAÓ) subsidies some city governments decided to lower their subsidies to the theatres or to 'compensate' the imbalance caused by the extra income of the TAÓ by asking for rental fees from the theatres for the venues, which are traditionally owned by the city governments.

Therefore, the unavoidable but somewhat always biased structural changes, the backbone of which is the fair or unfair division of subsidies, constitute the

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main topics of any theatre debate at the moment in Hungary, as will be seen in the following discussion, while the questions of genres and changing aesthetics emerge only collaterally to of these vital issues, situated at the crossroads of politics, cultural economy, national identity and conflicting artistic ideologies.

HTMI: What are the aspects to be considered during the programming of a season at a repertory theatre? What are the crucial points the manager and artistic director have to keep in mind?

Csaba Kiss (director and manager of the Miskolc National Theatre): Our repertory is considerably broad, we have several halls to use. In many respects the Miskolc National Theatre is in an exceptional situation as we can use four halls continuously, which is instrumental to a broad repertory. We mainly use the large hall for more

Marius von Mayenburg: **The Cold Child**, director Artúr Szőcs, National Theatre Miskolc, 2012, photo K. Bocsi



representative plays, the same stands for the chamber hall but keeping in mind the limitations of a smaller stage. The two smaller studio halls the prominence is for experimental performances. We have about 17-18 premieres in a season, which shows that there are many ways a repertory can be put together. No matter how strange it might sound, the audience in Miskolc is both conservative and open-minded. They are willing to try many things but they have a strong opinion about them all. They do not reject outright an offer of more unusual theatre forms, but they rather watch carefully, and then decide whether they are satisfied or not. Part of the audience, about one or two hundred, frequently visits the theatres in Eger and Debrecen too; they are truly more curious and more open to the new experiments. When we draw up a programme for a season we make sure that 70% of shows are based on well-known plays that are easily received by the audience, what does not necessarily mean comedy or the light genres. We did play *Chicago*, the musical, and *George Dandin* on the large stage but neither of them was staged only as entertainment, but we tried to assure high-quality acting and musical performance. My predecessor tried to give over the Chamber Hall mainly to the burlesque, while we try to present weightier shows there. I believe that such a repertory reaches the standards of a studio theatre of a larger European city. The audience seemed to be quite grateful for this and they are not sorry for not having Feydeau or the well-known Hungarian operettas. Our most experimental show was Mayenbourg's *The Cold Child* at the small studio hall in Artúr Szócs's exciting and novel directing. The average age of the spectators was sixty, grey haired people were sitting and watching the 'perversities' on the stage. We were terrified before the premiere and expected a great scandal when the VIP guest, with the mayor in front, took their seats in the auditorium. There was no scandal, however, they took it well. Our impression is that the audience is receptive enough and we do not feel the need to give them any concessions, to look for their favours. And there is another thing I ought to add: we founded the



István Örkény: *The Tót Family*, director Pál Mácsai, Örkény István Theatre, 2013, photo E. Gordon

Miskolc Ballet, demanded by many, which has become a very important layer of our theatre programme.

Bence Mattyasovsky (administrative director of the Katona József Theatre, Budapest): I believe that the repertory of a theatre is defined by its mission. In the case of Katona the mission is to reflect on the issues of society and to look for the new artistic trends which enable us to get closer to the bloodstream of the European culture. So these are basically the two aspects that define the shape of our seasons.

Attila Vidnyánszky (director and manager of the National Theatre, former manager of the Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen): I would rather talk about the Csokonai Theatre than about the National Theatre. Like every theatre in the provinces, the one in Debrecen has to struggle with similar problems. Moreover, the Performing Arts Act, amended in 2011, created the category of national theatres and also defined specific tasks for them. This also applies to the Csokonai Theatre, where a dance company is being thus set up. In 2006 I arrived to the theatre in Debrecen from a theatre which worked along quite different principles and I was worried that it would be very difficult to address the audience. I must add that the audience in Debrecen is also quite conservative. Yet following a shorter or longer period of transition we managed to gather in the city a large audience base. So it is a cowardly thing to say – which defines a large part of the theatres in the provinces – that it is the taste

of the audience that dictates the programme and that the audience is only open to comedy and dance shows. In the provinces there is an audience which is seriously interested and they can be addressed. They are regular theatregoers; they watch our performances. And also the DESZKA Festival found home in Debrecen. I am leaving the Csokonai Theatre with entirely positive experience, also being aware, however, of the fact that we need to meet so many expectations. We also stage performances for children, and not only for one but for two age groups. We also need youth theatre performances. We need a variety of genres and several performances are also being born that look for new form of languages. What really matters is that these are also watched by people.

Ildikó Gáspár (dramaturg, Örkény István Theatre, Budapest): Our theatre only has one hall. This seriously defines our programme. Because of the architectural features of our stage we cannot use really spectacular set design or breath-taking scenic effects. During the past twelve years we have been trying to find the tone which is specific to the Örkény Theatre. For us the absurd, grotesque style is important, but most of all it is the desire to reflect on societal issues, the topical events of our public life and to put on performances that mobilise viewers' fantasy. Generally, these shows are mostly text-based. Lately we opened up towards young people, launched a youth programme, put on shows for children too. We have two or three meetings with high-school students almost every week. These are led by Juli Neudold, young actress who had learned the methodology in Berlin. And naturally, as every theatre, we stage classical and contemporary, foreign and Hungarian plays. Yet we try to do all this in a new approach. A good example would be the comedy *Liliomfi* voiced in a contemporary language made possible by the adaptation of the Mohácsi brothers, with a novel approach to directing and acting. Yet we can also mention the adaptation of István Örkény's *The Tóth Family*, which, using the artistic possibilities given by the narration,

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different acting style from the one to which the Hungarian actors are accustomed to. We also work with independent theatres. This is how the performance *Merlin* by Tankred Dorst came to life, together with HoppArt, which was invited to Karlsruhe for the festival of young directors.

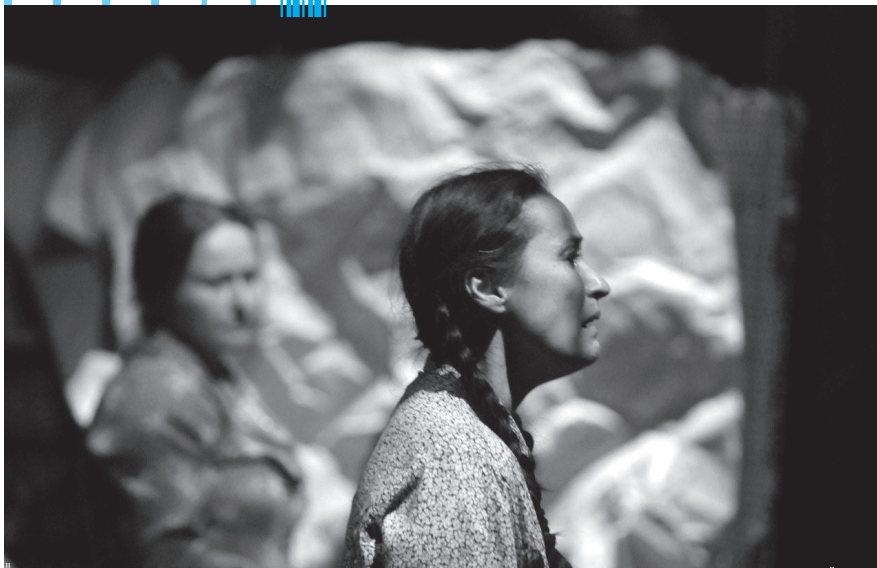
Károly Eperjes (actor and artistic consultant of the Petőfi Színház in Veszprém): In every city in the provinces, a theatre should be able to reach the widest audience strata, from kindergarten children to adults. In Veszprém there is a special season ticket for kindergarten children, for high-school students, and we also have the so-called family performances. However, the backbone of the season still consists of the one or two classics premiered in the large auditorium. There is a great demand among the audience for this and also for a lighter show or a musical at the end of the season. The contemporary plays are usually put on in the studio hall. Yet this season we also had one on the big stage, moreover, it was the first performance. Generally though, the contemporary plays are presented in the studio hall, because we would be unable to fill the large hall, and we cannot afford that. Our experience is that we need the large-stage productions running full house to generate a large TAÓ (corporate tax) income, and then use it to finance the studio performances. We design the programme of each season around a given topic. This year we had a Hungarian season but we used to have a Kálmán Mikszáth, Dickens or István Örkény season. These usually have to be well advertised to have people come in. The audience in Veszprém is composed of three strata: youth, middle class audience and a mixed one that is broad enough to include several types of viewers, from youngsters to retired.

HTMI: Based on the amended Performing Arts Act what specific tasks do the national theatres have?

Attila Vidnyánszky: The amended Act is trying to protect the theatre structure, the repertory system, which led to the birth of new categories. Five theatres in provincial

cities have received the rank of national theatres, and many more are listed as featured theatres. Both categories emphasize the importance of the ensemble. The law makes it mandatory for all national theatres, in the name of variety – and I don't know whether it is a blessing or a curse – to stage drama, opera and dance performances alike. In the provinces the opera as a genre has suffered shattering decline. I don't want to bore anyone with the numbers, but one can clearly see that the situation is much worse than twenty years ago. The featured theatres are not obliged to perform all genres, but of course, they are allowed to do opera if they wish. The national theatres must have three departments: prose, opera and dance. I can tell that in the past one or two years we could experience a positive change, an increase of opera performances. The Performing Arts Act also prescribes that the national theatres must have 70% of the artists with a degree in the ensemble and 60% for the featured category. This is also important because there were theatres in the provinces where the ratio of degree holders was only 30%. And yet another condition of the national theatre status is that they have to organise some sort of festival and must have a youth programme. When we started to work at the Csokonai

Miklós Szénási-Oleg Zsukovszki-Ödön Lénárd: **Fabulous Winged Men**, director Attila Vidnyánszky, Csokonai Theatre Debrecen, National Theatre, 2010, photo A. Máthé



Theatre in 2006 we did not do any youth performances or those for children. Today this cannot be done anymore.

Csaba Kiss (Miskolc National Theatre): The Miskolc National Theatre is the first national theatre in Hungary. When I applied for the position of its managing director I took the word of the Performing Arts Act literally, that is to make it obvious to the people why the theatre is more national than before. The key to me is the variety of genres: reading performances, classroom theatre, prose, opera and dance. All this allowed us to have a range of alternative programmes and to invite guest productions. We have also received additional funding for this, about Forints 50 million (EUR 168,000), which was immediately taken by the city, but at least we did not have to start from the ground. More importantly, however, we started to take opera and dance more seriously. For instance, in the next season we will have two operas, *Don Giovanni* and a contemporary piece by János Vajda, which we put on in co-production with the Csokonai Theatre. The fact that the theatre in Miskolc has three departments now is also beneficial for the entire county and the region. What concerns the organisation of festivals – according to the requirements of the Performing Arts Act – is also very advantageous to us. In February we organised the SZEM Festival (Festival of Theatre Universities), to which we invited arts universities from five European countries. Our only requirement was that each participant should stay until the end. The topic of the festival this year was physical theatre. We invited specialised teachers from the two Hungarian acting universities to lead workshops for the festival participants. We are also going to have a festival next year, the focus of which will be contemporary opera performance. Without the status of national theatre we would have to be apologetic all the time for spending taxpayers' money on such luxuries.

István Ugrai (critic and editor-in-chief of the *7óra7* portal): As a theatre critic, I watch quite a few performances, both in Budapest and all over the country. Based on what was said here about the programme of the repertory theatres, I am not sure one can get a full

picture of what is going on in the Hungarian theatre life. I believe that the theatres presented in this discussion are rather representatives of one or another model. Going around the country, however, I get the experience that the programme is rather shaped by the slogan: 'get the people inside somehow'. And I must add that it is illusory to talk about repertory, authors and plays. There are plays which simply storm through the Hungarian theatres. And a show which is a great success and a good show in one city can be a total disaster in another, almost impossible to watch. Such pieces include, for instance the *Man of La Mancha*, *Rumours* [by Neil Simon], *Black Comedy* [by Peter Shaffer] or *The Lovers of Ancona* [by Katalin Vajda]. I have seen very embarrassing versions of the latter, but also an ingenious staging, like the one by the Hungarian Theatre in Komárno (Slovakia). Even a very impressive, fancy repertory can lead to very bad results. The theatres in Miskolc or Debrecen are the more progressive examples, but let's look at Veszprém. They could also have the possibility to break free from the practice of having the audience define the repertory. It is very important to what extent a performance is willing to and is able to communicate with the audience. For the last one let me bring as a positive example the accompanying events in Miskolc, which enable a connection with the audience on many levels and in various forms. And they do all this from the theatre vantage point. A good example of addressing the youth is the *Moonlight Boatman* by Sándor Weöres in Debrecen. As a negative example I could mention *Iphigenia in Aulis* of the theatre in Veszprém. This is a clumsy, 'didactic' performance with a slight old-school taste. In terms of the national theatres, it is impossible to compare the one in Miskolc or Debrecen to the one in Győr, for instance. I am not talking only about the quality of the productions, the operation of the theatre or the artistic level of the directors' work. The National Theatre in Győr is nearly invisible. Based on what I have seen there I have the impression that their main aim is to fill the auditorium somehow, what sometimes leads to very bad results. (...) Some changes in a company's

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life just show in a matter of months their results. The Gárdonyi Géza Theatre was instantly changed after the replacement of the manager, it fell apart, whereas we are experiencing just the opposite in Miskolc.

Attila Vidnyánszky: The question is whether the law makers will have the courage to evaluate, for instance by looking at the past season of the theatre in Győr, if there were the required amount of text-based, musical and dance performances presented, and whether they will have the courage to decrease the subsidies of the theatre, as a result. We will soon see that. What concerns addressing of the audience, on the other hand, one has to see that the largest number of season ticket owners nationwide are in Veszprém (...).

Tibor Csizmadia (director and chair of the Hungarian Theatre Association): I would like to throw in yet another aspect. We started from the question of how a theatre constructs its repertory. Definitely, the experience shows, and I believe that the people here can back me up, that one must get to know the audience, which is a lengthy process. Obviously, in the case of Budapest theatres, where there is more or less a stable audience, the situation is slightly different. In the country theatres the new management has to 'get to know' its audience. It takes two to three years for a new manager to be able to really address the audience with the programme he had designed. In this process – I cannot stress it more – the directors play the key role. I find it extremely important for a theatre to have a permanent board of directors. After the eighties a trend started according to which directors were invited to a theatre only as guests. My experience is, however, that an ensemble can only be built with some directors invited again and again, and only this way can a gainful programme be realized.

Bence Mattyasovsky: We had an audience research at the Katona József Theatre which showed that 67% of the audience were women.

Károly Eperjes: The ratio is the same in the countryside as well. 70–80 are women.

András Kozma (literary translator, dramaturg,

Csokonai Theatre): Going back to what Csizmadia just said, based on my experience in Debrecen I can only support his argument that the audience must be studied, knowing that there is no such thing as a homogenous audience. And getting to know the audience means to realize what directions of interest exist and what are the strata of people we can address. New leadership always needs to face the dilemma of what to emphasise, whether they want more an entertainment or more an arts theatre, and balance the two. A countryside theatre has to fulfil the needs of the widest possible strata of people. My experience in Debrecen has thought me that we must strive to found certain theatre centres in the country, following the decentralisation example in France or Poland. We have to also think within some sort of international context.

HTMI: We would like to give the floor now to the independent theatres. Compared to the repertory theatres, they seem to have greater opportunity of mobility in the selection of plays and venues. They also seem more mobile within an international context.

Balázs Erős (manager of MU Theatre): MU Theatre is a receiving venue which operates in Budapest's 11th district, which has 140 thousand inhabitants. Weren't it part of the capital, the district could be the fifth largest city in Hungary. We also have to consider the aspect of locality, local culture, similarly to the repertory theatres, which means that we cannot only work as a receiving venue. In 2013 one must see the work of a receiving venue in a more complex way, its activities have to be a lot broader than before. In case of MU we follow four different directions: the first one is to invite performances, since we are primarily a receiving venue of the independent scene, hosting dance and theatre performances. This has been so in the past 21-22 years. Since 2009, when I became the manager of the theatre, we are more exclusive in the selection, we invite less productions but we managed to widen our audience. We



Júlia Róbert, Viktor Bodó: *Anamnesis*, director Viktor Bodó, coproduction of Katona József Theatre and the Sputnik Shipping Company, Katona József Theatre, 2012, photo S. Kékes

are able to offer performances to children from five to nine years old. Our other line is to host theatre workshops and, by this, we can also invite their regular audiences. For example, during three or four years we had the Sputnik Shipping Company led by Viktor Bodó work in our venue. Now we are hosting the KÁVA Cultural Project, which is not by chance, but we have realized that theatre education is increasingly important in our days. MU has an own theatre education programme, which is also taken to the countryside. We are open also towards dance, within the dance workshop titled MU Terminal two groups are active. The third line is the so-called community theatre, which offers different programmes to the local audiences which are directly targeting them. These are not exclusively theatre shows but we wish to encourage the people attending these events also to visit our theatre productions. And finally, the fourth line is our own theatre activity. We wish to bring to life theatre productions which are not performed in our venue but somewhere else in the city. As a result of our broadened activity, the attendance of our theatre has considerably increased during the past four years. And not because we had spent

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on large posters but because we were present in more and more places and in very different fields which also made the theatre more and more popular. I took the liberty to reinterpret the name of MU Theatre into 'Magyar Underground', since we primarily work with Hungarian artists. There is a minimal international presence in our theatre. True, that by today a tradition has been formed for us to invite an international dancer at the beginning of each season, but this is pretty much all we can spend on international exchange. I must say that I do not see many reasons for us to step out on the international market and we don't really have such plans. There is, however, one point where I think it would be important for us establish connections with the international theatre life: abroad in the big established theatres there is a lot of experience in different projects targeting the local inhabitants. Through these I feel that we could find partners and could connect to the international stream.

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Project, which is not by chance, but we have realised that theatre education is increasingly important today. The MU has its own theatre education programme which is also taken to the countryside. We are also open to dance: two groups are active within the dance workshop entitled the MU Terminal. The third line is the so-called community theatre that offers different programmes which directly target local audiences. These are not exclusively theatre shows, but we want to encourage the people attending these events also to attend our theatre productions. And finally, the fourth line is our own theatre activity. We want to bring to life theatre productions not performed in our venue, but elsewhere in the city. As a result of the broadened activity the attendance of our theatre has considerably increased during the past four years. This is not because we had spent on large posters, but because we were present in more and more places and in very different fields which also made the theatre increasingly popular. I took the liberty to reinterpret the name of the MU Theatre into 'Magyar Underground', since we primarily work with Hungarian artists. There is a minimum international presence in our theatre. True, that by today we developed a tradition to invite an international dancer at the beginning of each season, but this is pretty much all we can spend on international exchanges. I do not see many reasons for us to step out to the international market and we don't really have such plans. There is, however, one point where I think it would be important for us establish connections with the international theatre life: abroad in the large established theatres have a lot of experience in targeting local inhabitants through different projects. Through these we might find partners and connect internationally.

Vince Zrínyi Gál (actor and founder of KOMA): I have a somewhat awkward feeling because I have the impression that there is an atmosphere in the theatre profession at the moment which implies that the repertory and the independent theatres would be so far from each other and would very much hate each other. On the contrary, I believe that the two have a lot in common

and to me these meeting points are the most interesting. An independent theatre must not pay attention to serve its ten, twenty or one hundred thousand member audience and must not worry about what the owner, the state thinks. I only need to pay attention to do what I like, conscientiously and on a high professional level. KOMA works very similarly to what Bence Máttyasovsky said: we, too, are working on performances which reflect on the present-day Hungary, constantly looking for topics that reflect the problems of our contemporaries, or dare to discuss issues that other theatres don't. We had a show *The Last Roma – The Last Gypsy* focusing on the issues of the Gypsies. We had a production which elaborated on the local legends of the 15th District, where our venue is. We put on Edna Mazya's play *Games in the Backyard*, which speaks about sexual abuse by adolescents. In *Burn* and *The Tenth Gene* we discuss the issues of Hungarian identity, heroism and the relationship between an individual and the system. In what we differ from the others is that we are trying to 'decentralise' the capital: we say that a theatre should be built around a community. And we are not driven by the urge to make performances, but we think: "Dear inhabitants of District 15 (80 thousand people live here of which 40 thousand in socialist blocks of flats) we come to you, do help us stay alive. We will pay a lot of attention to you in return." It is obvious that we mainly address the youth, high-schoolers, primary school kids, but even kindergarten children: we organise events and happenings for them. Of course, one can argue whether or not this is theatre, but I believe it is. This is what accounts for half of our theatre activity. To get back to the initial question whether independent theatres are more mobile or not, I think they are, because they are not tied to a single place. They do not own a venue, a stage of a given size, etc.. They can decide to put on a show in front of a kindergarten if they want. If they wish to play in a fitness club, they can; we had such an example. Foreigners are very happy about these kinds of events. It is very important to us to be able to travel, and not to live in fancy hotels but to gather experiences. We spent

a year by visiting a different location every weekend, with 80 per cent of the population being Gypsy. We used to play with the children, the grown-ups, we organised skills-building and problem-solving sessions. In such cases you cannot turn up with large sets and a van. You get instantly kicked out by the village people the if they see two vans in which I bring the set, and there is no hall in the village large enough for you to build it. **György Szabó** (theatre manager, founder of TRAFÓ): I must say that TRAFÓ is somewhere in between. We are a receiving venue, just finishing the planning of next year programme and are already working on the 2014–2015 season. Communication is the most important issue to me. According to experts, the age limit of people communicating on the internet is already as high as 29. My main question is how to address them, how to make the traditional performing arts heritage available to them. Their thinking is radically different from what we have known and used until now. How does all this appear in the theatre? I know of quite a few breath-taking and serious, sometimes even anti-theatrical attempts from abroad. One of them will be invited by TRAFÓ as well, the first robot puppet theatre from Japan. And one year later we will host a robot theatre, coming also from Japan, performing a Beckett play. TRAFÓ is a good place, because it can afford to ask questions. These productions might sound funny from here, but they are still very useful to surprise and make us think where to go forward. Another fundamental question is how the relationship of repertory theatres and independent theatres changed during the past fifteen years. It has been said earlier that in the independent theatres it is possible to try out things on a smaller scale what would be too risky for the large theatres, especially now because of the TAÓ funding, since the house must always be sold out. I believe that the TAÓ is very detrimental and both theatre acts are especially bad, as I will explain in more detail in an article I am preparing. I find it very damaging that the theatres which take their call to be active parts of the formation of society with innovative artistic means seriously are



Csaba Székely: *Mine Blindness*, director Tibor Csizmadia, Szkéné Theatre, 2012, photo G. Róde

also under the TAÓ regime. It means they also have to struggle for more income from ticket sales. The focus on the maximisation of ticket sales, and consequently the maximisation of the TAÓ income inevitably leads to mental distortion and artistic opportunism that can be seen in everyday life. Theatre professionals should finally start thinking about how it would be possible to remove these theatres from the TAÓ regime. There is a negative tendency emerging: the independent theatres and the artists who can afford it have started to escape the country. I don't want to go into much detail in analysing the many reasons behind this, but I am convinced that there are also strong financial motivations at stake. TRAFÓ tries to offer some help to those we can. We want to be partners to one or another production, since there are Hungarian values at stake here and we want to keep them at home, produce the shows here in Hungary. All these refer to theatre. Dance faces a problem which has been developing for decades. There are different generations of dancers fighting against each other. Members of the younger generation start to work abroad, sometimes even settling in a different country, getting the citizenship. A question then arises how we can bring

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them back home. But back to mobility: why are these companies mobile? I remember when we first took the Krétakör and Béla Pintér's Company to the Lincoln Center and the programmer was astonished how these companies could work with such large cast. This is an important observation: only those companies are really mobile that have a small cast and are much easier to take abroad. For the large ensembles and the regular theatre groups there is an entirely different mechanism at work. Therefore the latter moves on a very different market, and according to very different principles. We should stop sending messages against each other through the media and fight each other, but everyone should work instead, build their network of connections. This is the most important tasks, since both structures have strong values. The anger against each other could only diminish if we have a professional debate, if the theatre profession realises that the two fields are mutually complementary. **József Balogh** (director of the THEALTER Festival, Szeged): I would like to mention only two practical examples, which are true metaphors for mobility: internationalism and long time. Theatre mobility means that I can travel to Temesvár (Romania) and watch an eight-hour *Seagull* directed by a Slovene artist performed by the Serbian ensemble of the Novi Sad theatre. That I am there from Hungary is also part of mobility. Yet it is an impediment to mobility that I do not have Euro 10,000 to bring them over to Szeged for our 23rd festival, to perform for 100-120 spectators. There was money for them in Temesvár. All this can be entirely rewritten as a metaphor. And something is happening that says a lot about the Hungarian theatre. We are at a theatre in Temesvár, which has an opera company, a German, Romanian and Hungarian ensemble. Out of these four the German and the Hungarian communicate with each other, the Romanian one communicates with the opera company within the theatre, but not with the German or the Hungarian counterparts. Let this be their problem, but on a smaller scale this was quite like the multi-ethnic Hungary with the difference that not everyone there is

1 The FOGI Theatre, according to their website, was founded in 2002 mainly to specialise in performances for children. Under the name of Budapest Bulvárszínház it put on comedies, low comedies and operettas for adults, touring them around the country.

Hungarian, while here everyone is. This is not too much of a complex issue, but it also isn't simple either. Not being able to invite the show to my festival may be due to my budget of 22-years has no marketing value. Or perhaps the 22-year history of the festival is more of an obstacle, if I take a look at the results of the applications for subsidies given to festivals. Here I find that the festivals organised for the first or second time receive proportionally much greater subsidies. When planning a festival programme, applying for subsidies is a special task as it gives one a lot of experience, but does not compare with the process when a repertory theatre plans its season and targets its audience. Gyuri talks about the 21st century. The theatre law is from the 20th century while I am balance between the 19th and the 21st centuries. From a private perspective this could even be fun, but from a theatrical perspective it is not very efficient. Every theatre seems to be more troubled by their local problems. It is very hard to put our artistic and financial efforts together and bring to life an international and inter-regional coproduction which would then tour each theatre.

Attila Vidnyánszky: I would like to reflect on two issues. First, it was claimed that the Theatre Act is not from the 21st century. Repertory theatres may represent a 20th century model but this did not stop me at the Csokonai Theatre to create the *Fabulous Winged Man*, in which an actor born in Saint Petersburg, now living in Düsseldorf, plays alongside a painter from London. So, if there's will, such things can be done also within a repertory theatre. The repertory theatre itself is no obstacle for a production of such a show. Second, I am glad that Gyuri Szabó is writing an article, but I really hope that the Teátrumi Társaság was the only organisation that did not sign the TAÓ act, while everyone else did, even Gyuri.

György Szabó: No, I did not sign it.

Attila Vidnyánszky: Yes, you did. When the first Performing Arts Act was discussed the Teátrumi Társaság cried out loud: "Let's not make this move with the TAÓ." I think that there is nothing more detrimental than this. We were the only ones who did not sign. Everyone else did, saying that it was a fabulous law. The entire theatre community. When we amended the Act there was another outcry that we should not touch the TAÓ, since it had already become an integral part of the national budget. What is the result of the TAÓ? Let me just say a 'terrible' thing. Never had the independent theatre sector receive such a large amount of subsidy than now for the 2013–2014 season. Never! It was more than in 2009 when a lot of money was thrown around because of the TAÓ. Only an awful thing happened that, for instance the FOGI Theatre receives about hundred million forints due to the TAÓ.

Balázs Erős: They have nothing to do with the independent theatre. Not even in their theatre aesthetic.

Károly Eperjes: But the law says that they belong to this category.

Attila Vidnyánszky: Yet they have been part of this category even during the first Theatre Act. If only the theatre professionals would finally sit down with each other and discuss the issue: if there is an increase of one billion forints in theatre subsidies (ten billions entered the system since last year), then let us just invite the thirty theatres that should receive this extra money. I am sure that the Operetta Theatre would not fall in this list of thirty. But it was the Operetta Theatre which has received the one billion extra. It was because of the TAÓ law, against which we were fighting with all our might. I stood up a hundred times: ten billion forints entered the subsidy system and the division is devastating. But if do not look at the TAÓ income, I am sure there are several reasons

why the artists go abroad – though I am sure that the lack of money is not one of them. Something must be done for sure, because this is a disaster.

György Szabó: What I was saying that the TAÓ definitely has a negative effect, and I was not talking about figures. Probably the Achilles heel of the TAÓ system is that the independent sector has been diluted. It would be essential to define which companies can be listed in the independent category. This should be also done because the so-called entrepreneur theatres emerged and are also listed among the independent theatres. That is very dangerous because some ‘cunning managers’ can artificially boost their TAÓ claims what can sooner or later lead to a disaster.

Balázs Erős: I don’t know what the FOGI Theatre is, but I would like to add, only as an example, that the MU Theatre, which has been working for 22 years, received 76 million forints in 2009 when there was no TAÓ yet. Now there is. The TAÓ of the MU theatre is 8 million, and it gets an additional 33 million forints from the central budget. Altogether that is 41 million. So, what Attila says, is not true for the MU Theatre. And I am sure that the same applies to great many independent theatres. There might be some newcomers who call themselves quasi-independent theatres that manage to increase their TAÓ claims with or without tricks. I’m saying this only because it gives some new angles to this discussion. It is not the real independent theatres that receive more.


András Kozma: There is one thing that I would like to point out. When earlier the Hungarian theatre profession tried to define who the independent theatres are, they were un successful. They did not manage to define which companies should belong to this group based on their aesthetics or on their organisational or budgetary features. In the original law they were named the ‘sixth category’, now they are called the ‘application-funded category’. More precisely, there is a layer of national theatres, featured theatres and the rest, artistic organisations which receive funding on an application basis. In this last group, if

I remember right, 195 organisations wanted to register. I think we cannot postpone any longer the definition of how these 195 could be further structured.

József Balogh: Everybody knows which are the alternative theatres and which are the ones that tour the country with 600 fairy tale shows just to receive 150 million from the TAÓ. This truly is a trick. But the circle of companies that truly represent the independent sector, are internationally recognised, have extensive international relations and are able to implement aesthetic values, are a group of no more than 40-50 companies or venues in Hungary today. There is also a very young generation, who are extremely exciting, amateur and student theatre troupes, mostly affiliated to universities. Yet they are unable to enter the structure because there is an array of criteria which they cannot comply with. And sooner or later they stop working.

Károly Eperjes: I would like to say a few words about responsibility. An independent theatre has no financial obligation towards its operator, while a repertory theatre has. They have to lead an institution responsibly. There is the operator, an artist and a spectator that hold together like a three-legged chair. If I remove any of the legs, there is trouble. While I am against the TAÓ system, but as it is here, the repertory theatres must live with it and my operator does it, saying: “Make a theatre in a way that you would not cost me more.”

Attila Vidnyánszky: This is awful.

Károly Eperjes: Such is the situation. Together with the theatres in Veszprém and Kaposvár we decided to invite a good independent production. But the money required has to be somehow generated. For us to get the funding in order to invite Béla Pintér and the Company we also need a good musical performance in the large hall. The city does not give us money for such guest performance. At the same time I also wish to bring in an audience that is always looking for entertainment in a value system different from the traditional one. The responsibility of the independent theatre is to create such good quality performances which I can then lift into my programme. 



Contemporary drama

MARTA LJUBKOVÁ

Czech Drama in the New Millennium

Any discussion of Czech drama today requires that we first specify what types of plays we are talking about. The current Czech theatre scene is highly diverse and with a great many playwrights. This text shall be devoted solely to regular plays, i.e. plays that are fixed in time and space, which, however, are more than just a script or even a libretto to base a production on, plays that exist as an autonomous literary form which can be interpreted freely and repeatedly on the stage in different spaces, even by artists who were not directly involved in their creation.

In the 1990s, Czech drama was still finding its feet in the new political circumstances: it sought subjects and new expressive techniques that would give it the same intense appeal to audiences as it had in the 1980s. In the nineties the hero of the drama – in rather simplified terms – was a vacillating figure, anchorless, groping in an unfamiliar world. The degree of a work's abstraction (particularly as regards plot) influenced its performance rate; many plays from this period were performed on stage just once, and it was rare for a play to be produced by more than one theatre. From the end of the 1990s, however, a noticeable attempt emerged to break away from notions of incomprehensibility and lyricism to grasp the immediate world of the individual in very concrete terms. This tendency progressed in tandem with a stronger interest among dramaturges and theatres in original work. At the turn of the millennium, the Drama Studio (Činoherní studio) in Ústí nad Labem organised a Czech season (staging plays by Jiří Pokorný, Markéta Bláhová, Lenka Havlíková, Zdeněk

Jecelín, Miroslav Bambušek, and Egon Tobiáš). Sooner or later this kind of declared focus began to surface in various other Czech theatres (e.g. Czech seasons were organised at the Theatre of West Bohemia/Západočeské divadlo in Cheb and at the Šumperk Theatre in the town of Šumperk, etc., and not every title put on was necessarily the work's domestic premiere). Staging a new Czech play became a prestigious occasion, albeit a somewhat double-edged one, as in most cases it entailed a considerable risk with audiences.

Today contemporary works are staged by various types of theatres. It is hard to tell where they are most common. While a decade ago such works were primarily the domain of smaller studio-type stages, they are now appearing more and more often in the independent theatres. Many of the plays mentioned below were created as part of a project in connection with a specific group of artists not tied to a permanent theatre. Czech plays can be seen today in a former mine in Ostrava, in a former factory, or in a circus tent. Now more than ever plays are being created on commission, in close conjunction with a specific team. The National Theatre (Národní divadlo) has remained a kind of pillar in the staging of domestic premieres of original Czech plays. In the past decade its companies (especially Kolowrat Theatre) have produced fourteen new Czech plays.

The stage debut of screenwriter and director Petr Zelenka marked a striking turning point in terms of its success. He wrote his *Tales of Common 'Insanity* [Příběhy obyčejného šílenství] for the company at Prague's Dejvice Theatre (Dejvické divadlo), where the play premiered in 2001, moreover, with the author directing. There were several reasons for the enormous success of Zelenka's play. He has already written

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a number of screenplays. He is therefore an experienced and polished writer with some erudition, unlike most other writers who have tried to write for the stage. His background in film has been a benefit to him as the current stage work is strongly drawn to the methods of writing for the screen: cuts between scenes, quick setting changes, the video-clip-like quality of situations – these are no longer indicators of an inability to create consistent classically structured drama, but are rather almost a contemporary must. Zelenka's comedy is about the crisis of the contemporary thirty-somethings facing problems in their personal lives and at work. In this respect he responded to a theme that was already surging in literature and film. Yet it was notably absent from the domestic stage. Furthermore, he managed to avoid the constraints posed by the realist concept of a play set in the present day and inserted several refreshing surrealistic motifs in the text. The central character, a likeable commonplace 'loser' who experiences extraordinary things, was imbued with a degree of self-irony that was unprecedented in the 1990s. This was partly why *Tales of Common Insanity* was such a big hit: Zelenka adapted the play for the big screen (2005); it was staged at five different theatres in the Czech Republic; it has been translated into fourteen languages (Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Dutch, Romanian, Welsh, as well as the major world languages). It has been presented in various stage readings and even on the stage, with Hungarian, Belgian (Pact theatre) and French premiers (Le Granit theatre). Zelenka is now a fixture in the Czech theatre (and also has strong ties to Polish theatre), and there is even interest in his writings in social criticism: *The Purge* [Očištění, 2007] and *Endangered Species* [Ohrožené druhy, 2011], in which he reflects on the influence of the mass media, virtual reality and advertising on our everyday lives.

David Drábek also made a name for himself with a play about the crisis faced by thirty-somethings – rendered with considerable comic exaggeration.

In *Aquabelles* [Akvabely, 2004] he works with the principle of surprising ironic contrasts, a feature that also characterises his other plays. In it we watch a group of ageing men devoting themselves to a wholly 'unmanly' sport. Drábek multiplies the comic contradictions on several levels; occasional moments of pathos are offset by the final transformation of one hero into an otter – rejecting contemporary life by morphing into an entirely different animal species. Drábek applies similar principle in his other plays, which often draw on pop culture as a source of inspiration. *Lizards* [Ještěři, 2006] is a retro musical, *Sherlock Holmes: The Bearded Women Murders* [Vraždy vousatých žen, 2010] is an allusion to the famous detective, etc. His most famous play *The Ball* [Koule, 2010], originally created for radio, and inspired by the life and doping career of the Czech communist-era athlete and later member of the Czech Television Board Helena Fibingerová, is alternately touching and parodying. Personal heroism is the theme of the prizewinning play *Mašín Brothers Square* [Náměstí bratří Mašínů, 2007], in which the playwright again abandons a realist frame and, retaining his typical obsession with word humour, attempts to capture the traumatic sense of the absence of heroes. Drábek's most successful play – *Aquabelles* – has been translated into English, German, Polish, Spanish, Russian, Romanian, and Slovenian.

Roman Sikora is a strong figure who belongs to the middle generation of playwrights. He won a domestic theatre award for his dramatic debut *Antigone Routed* [Smetení Antigony, 1997], the play has been staged repeatedly, and it is mentioned whenever talk turns to the reinjection of political themes into Czech plays. He based his work on the famous Classical tragedy, but its shift into the present day involved more than just an easy update: the fragmented style of rapidly alternating and literally aggressive, decadent scenes brutally outlines the most current reality of today and high politics. A present-day tone also characterises his successfully staged work *Confessions of a Masochist*

[Zpověď masochisty, 2011], in part about how as citizens of this country we allow ourselves to be tortured. We can also find a political theme in the yet to be staged play *Yesterday It Started* [Včera to spustili]. The little telephone drama takes place on 17 November 1989 in the flat of an opposition leader in an unnamed country, in the central committee of the Communist Party (also in an unnamed country) and in the Cardinal's residence. Sikora also maintains a sharp and dynamic style as a theatre critic in the press (Deník *Referendum*, ČRo 3 *Vltava* etc..).

Petr Kolečko, a playwright from the young generation, also shows a fascination with pop culture and its icons. Originally a dramaturge by profession, Kolečko has probably taken the biggest steps outside the limiting framework of the Czech theatre and is increasingly making his mark in television and film (thus moving in the opposite direction of Zelenka). Kolečko first caught attention with his play *Britney Goes to Heaven* (2006), in which he explicitly deals with contemporary idols. While *Britney* is situated in a world between heaven and earth, his other works, dominated by sports, are wholly terrestrial (*The Gods Don't Play Hockey*/*Bohové hokej nehrají*, 2006; *Twilight of the Spots*/*Soumrak bodů*, 2008). Profane themes comically collide with language – *Twilight of the Spots* is structured according to a Classical trilogy, *The Hive* [Úl, 2010] is written in blank verse. A postmodern balance between the awkward, the vulgar, and the comic combined with the adulation of great heroes or at least the longing to find a great hero is found, for instance, in his biographic play *Jaromír Jágr – The Boy from Kladno* [Jaromír Jágr, Kladeňák, 2009]. Kolečko's *Britney Goes to Heaven* has been translated into English and Polish and was formed in the latter as a stage reading (2007).

What Kolečko only implies or captures as outright parody or at least in a light-hearted manner is the hallmark of another group of playwrights in the opposite way. The absence of strong, positive heroes on the stage since the

mid-Naughts has seen their introduction of the hero, individual or collective, vetted by history.

Miroslav Bambušek, who emerged on the Czech theatre scene at the start of the millennium, wrote *Porta apostolorum* in 2004, a play that deals with the expulsion of the German population from Czechoslovakia after the Second World War. A death march is also the theme of *The Consolations of a Dirt Road* [Útěcha polní cesty]. He also works with traumatic points in Czech history in a number of his subsequent plays, the most recent one, *The Czech War* [Česká válka], dealing with heroes of the anti-communist resistance. Bambušek, whose plays are often inconsistent, heavy on themes, but raw, and with the right presentation in a non-theatrical space best approximate the idea of 'engaged theatre', often stages his own work.

Other playwrights have in recent years also focused on specific figures from Czech history. Karel Steigerwald's *Horáková x Gottwald* (2006) is a kind of cabaret programme from the last days of Dr. Milada Horáková. The Brechtian guide through the story, E. F. Burian, moves the plot forward, but also comments on the actions of the characters who step outside real time as though they know their fates beforehand. A range of dramatic techniques is mixed together in the collage of scenes. Yet the text demolishes in every respect the Classic form of dramatic structure. This is typical of plays with this type of focus: the principles of documentary theatre are finally beginning to appear in Czech drama, drawing primarily on non-theatre materials from the relevant period dealt with. Steigerwald returned to a historical theme in the play *She Kissed Dubček* [Políbila Dubčeka, 2008] and most recently in the drama *My Distant Homeland* [Má vzdálená vlast, 2011], which is inspired by the life and fate of political prisoner Dagmar Šimková. Three levels of time and space intertwine in the text: former imprisonment during the 1950s, present-day love in

Australia, and an attempt to attain truth and justice through judicial means in the Czech Republic.

There are other plays based on authentic period material that have an epic (or cabaret) structure. Similar trends are emerging in drama across Europe. In the Czech Republic this is a clear attempt at objectivity, a return to drama (or theatre) as an art form that enables a complex statement. It is also as though art were searching for a more plausible, reliable hero.

Tomáš Vůjtek's play *With Hope and Without It* [S nadějí i bez ní, 2009] about Josefa Slánská, the widow of the politician Slánský executed by the communist regime, is inspired by her biography. In the play, Slánská ends up in a kind of permanent interrogation – recollections alternate with sections illustrating authoritarian despotism, regardless of the period.

Jiří Havelka went even further in his text *Spring Man* [Pérák, 2011]. His action-history fiction centres on a legendary hero who is the spitting image of the American Superman-type saviours. The comic-book poetics are reflected in the narrative method and the structure of the play. Havelka is primarily a director, but he releases his scripts in the end as a regular play, as in the case of *I, Hero* [Já, hrdina, 2011], in the preparation of which he drew on authentic materials (including online debates and transcripts of political protocols) related to the case of the Mašín brothers.

Anti-communist resistance heroes are also subject of a work by Jan Jirků, who worked with oral history documents gathered by the civic association Post bellum. The overriding experience here is that life can sometimes be very dramatic – Jirků brought to the stage the fates of heroes fleeing the country and contending with despotic acts of Communist power (*Hunt for the Unicorn/ Hon na Jednorožce*, 2009, *Fag End/Vajgl*, 2010).

Plays centred on a hero theme seem to be replacing engaged theatre: drama for the present is reflecting on the past (previously not reflected in drama). The search for – often positive – heroes of the past represents

perhaps the most productive dramatic line in Czech theatre today. Its connection to prose is immediately obvious. The combination of authentic material and documentary methods predominates as these heroes are often chosen by author-directors (that is, directors who write the scripts for their own productions). It is also possible to find plays, however, in which the authors have proceeded in the very opposite direction – writing a text that only later finds someone to stage it. Arnošt Goldflam stands out not just for his success but also for his choice of 'anti-heroes': *In the Kitchen with the Hitlers* [Doma u Hitlerů, 2007] received several different stagings across the country. *Stars over Baltimore* [Hvězdy nad Baltimore, 2003] by Luboš Balák lies somewhere between documentary (based on a piece of journalism) and an attempt at a grand dramatic construction examining the fate of famous actor Vlasta Burian, whose life was wholly destroyed by Communist despotism after 1948. Balák's play raises the important issue of document versus fiction in contemporary Czech theatre.

Contemporary attempts at satire are much rarer. The trilogy *My Hometown* [Má vlast, 2006] by Iva Klestilová (formerly Volánková) was a ground-breaker. The text, comprised of authentic statements by politicians in Prague and at the national level at the time the play was created, captures the alternations in office of three prime ministers – Zeman, Špidla, and Paroubek – and frames them with the love-story of Stanislav Gross and the beautiful canteen-worker Šárka. Criticism at that time denounced the play as too short-breathed, but Klestilová nevertheless marked the path that political cabaret (mostly the circle of theatre artists around director Tomáš Svoboda) follows today: the source is the absurd statements of current politicians, which often need only be reproduced on stage without further embellishment.

Three authors from the older generation represent the endeavour to capture the life of contemporary society, but do so within a traditional dramatic

framework. In the past decade the base of domestic drama in the period before 1989 has moved back to the fore – Pavel Kohout, Václav Havel and Milan Uhde. All three remained faithful to their own style of writing, so these are plays of a somewhat older cut. The consistency and density of the texts by the last two produced theatrical hits. Pavel Kohout's *Zeroes* [Nuly, 2002] recapitulates the tragicomedy of the post-1989 developments. The play with a socio-critical point is situated in a public toilet as a metaphor for where we've all ended up. Its free structure redolent of a kind of retrospective series of memories alludes to the small stage forms of the 1960s. Elements of defamiliarisation – albeit of a different time – are also used in *Leaving* [Odcházení, 2008] by Václav Havel, a play about the end of a political career (that can be elevated from the individual level to a society-wide scale) that intertextually ties in with the pillars of world drama staged in the twentieth century – Shakespeare and Chekhov. Of all current Czech drama this play was the most successful internationally and was translated into Latvian, Catalan, Turkish, Dutch, Bulgarian, and other languages, as well as all the major world languages. It has been staged in the United States and the United Kingdom and in 2011 Havel directed its film version.

Milan Uhde returned to the field of drama after a long pause, and he too in a certain way is coming to terms with the past: *Miracle in the Black House* [Zázrak v černém domě, 2007] is the ironic title for the airing of family history. Uhde's play thoroughly exposes the fate of members of one family (individuals that are also members of a society) who, in the turbulent twentieth century, each set out on a different path. An inability to forgive and find understanding serves as the basic metaphor for all of the Czech society and how it deals with the past. The play has been translated into Russian and English.

An altogether different variety of Czech drama, one with roots stretching back to the nineteenth century, yet weak in the present day, is village drama:

works thematically associated with rural life. It is worth mentioning as because of one playwright who is among the few who has seen his work staged at the National Theatre (Národní divadlo) on more than one occasion. Martin Františák made his debut with a short story for the stage back in 2003, but his most important work was the drama *At Home* [Doma, 2005], in which the author – following a very traditional structure – explores the fateful conundrum faced by young people in contemporary villages: to stay or to leave. The contrast between the city as a corrupt place and the purity of the village no longer works, and the author steers clear of any sentimentality. Yet his statements are not black and white and his faith in elementary values, both represented and denied by rural life today, render his plays opuses charged with dramatic conflict. He is moreover always interested in family ties, especially between mother and daughter (*The Bride/Nevěsta*, 2009; *Karla/Karla*, 2010). Františák's writing is characterised by poetic language full of metaphors and dialectics.

Lenka Lagronová, one of the most important and frequently staged playwrights today, also often sets her plays in a rural setting. To her the rural setting is not as an important a place as it is for Františák, who often treats it almost as a character in its own right – signifying a kind of seclusion, isolation, often involuntary. Lagronová writes almost exclusively about women, male characters tend to be fathers, burdens on their daughters even after death (*Kingdom/Království*, 2006). Her characters are firmly rooted in their family environment from which they are trying to break free, but despite the flight they return as though they are unable to live anywhere, even there (*Tears/Pláč*, 2009). Mother-daughter relationships are usually highly traumatic, lacerating, edging on self-destruction – even murder. The characters often set off on a pilgrimage of metaphorical significance, representing both a move across space and a journey to one's inner core and often even to forgiveness.

Younger by two generations, Magdalena Frydrychová ties in many respects with Lagronová. She too taps the tragicomic tone of human relations and her heroines often possess a kind of poetic purity that, however, can become tainted anytime. Her most cohesive play is *Czech Gems* [Vltavínky, 2009], charting the dreams of Czech women of the twentieth century. Her play *Dorothy* [Dorotka, 2006] has been translated into English.

Radmila Adamová also focuses on the specific situation of women. Her heroines are women who find themselves in extreme situations, subjected to heartless trials and confronted with ordinary life, whereby the author lays bare the monstrosity of such existence. In *Little Sister* (2005), Anna, a participant in a reality show, is a twisted character who refuses to leave the contest and won't even attend her sister's funeral; Max (from *Czech Wonder-Women/České kuchty – super buchty*, 2010), is a chilling character, who, rather than the brutal violence he is witness to, is interested in his wife's infidelity. The author's heroines fail at key moments, usually the victims of an over-technicised and ethically vacuous society. Adamová's most often staged play *Elle Girls* [Holky Elky, 2005] is set in the tough and superficial modern-day world of modelling. The play has been translated into English and a stage reading of the piece was performed in New York.

A separate chapter in contemporary Czech drama is made of poets and prose writers who at the start of the millennium began writing plays for the stage. The most prolific (and frequently staged) example is Jaroslav Rudiš, who made his dramatic debut (in collaboration with Petr Pýcha) with the play *Summer in Lapland* [Léto v Laponsku, 2006]. Later they wrote together *Strange Love* (2007) about the last Czech fan of the group Depeche Mode. Jáchym Topol has created a single play, *Journey to Bugulma* [Cesta do Bugulmy, 2006] that was first staged in Germany and only afterwards in the Czech Republic. Miloš Urban also writes drama; a production of his play *Knives and Roses*

[*Nože a růže*, 2005] has been staged. Poet Kateřina Rudčenková won the Alfréd Radok Award for her play *Někud* (2006), and she has written several other plays; her *The Time of the Cherry Smoke* [Čas třešňového dýmu, (2007)] has been translated into English.

Most prose writers write plays which they are commissioned to do – experience with writing seems to inspire the theatre to commission work. Yet the rules of prose prove to be very different from those of drama and most authors hold onto their typical style while the situations on stage require drama. ❖

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MARTA LJUBKOVÁ studied Czech Language and Literature at the Philosophical Faculty and Dramaturgy at the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre, DAMU. Since her studies, she has been working as a dramaturg and a literary critic; she co-operates with several theatres in the Czech Republic, and with various periodicals. She lectures about Czech drama and literature in Czech Republic and abroad; she also does edition work. She was a co-curator of the Czech National Exposition for PQ 2011.

Waiting for the Golden Age

Brief survey of Slovak new drama after 2000

While the European theatre in the 1990s witnessed a lively discussion about new drama as a contemporary phenomenon, in Slovakia the term was just starting to replace what was known as “original drama” – a sad and sickly orphan produced on the stages of Slovak bricks-and-mortar theatres. While the tempestuous 1990s endowed the European theatre culture with an unstoppable boom in new writing, Slovakia was only to experience new creativity in writing for the theatre at the beginning of the new millennium. In the rest of Europe, both coy and confident authors with strong marketing skills, most aged between twenty and thirty, suddenly became new stars of theatre and presented a collective opinion or poetics. A number of them became the most significant export item of their culture. Slovak writers of this period were a generational mix, mostly solitary and only of local prominence.

The export and import of major director-focused theatre in Europe was forced to give way to distribution of contemporary texts and their mostly studio-based interpretations in the style of poor theatre. The cornerstones and causes of the acceleration of new drama in individual countries vary. Yet they are mutually related through the time period and the generation involved. The content and form of individual national drama is similarly diverse, though the individual pieces also share urgency, harshness, insolence of expression, and formal departure from the tradition of psychological

realism of drama. Naturally, there are considerable differences between the western (mostly German, British, and French) and eastern, post-communist drama (primarily in the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union). The disillusion of artists and their difficult confrontation with current political and social phenomena found its expression in the characteristic in-*yer-face* drama in the UK (Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, David Harrower, Martin McDonagh, Patrick Marber, Phyllis Nagy, Enda Walsh), in Germany *Blut und Sperm* works (Marius von Mayenburg, Roland Schimmelpfening), in Serbian new brutalism (Biljana Srbljanović, Milena Marković, Uglješa Šajtinac), in French drama (Yasmina Reza, Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt, Bernad-Marie Koltés), as well as in Polish (Janusz Głowacki, Michał Walczak, Tadeusz Słobodzianek, Dorota Masłowska), Czech (Iva Klestilová, David Jařab, Roman Sikora) and Romanian (Gianina Cărbunariu, Alina Nelega, Peca Stefan) new drama.

The belated arrival of new drama in Slovakia has its roots in the post-1989 cultural and social events. Theatremakers in Slovakia were directly involved in the revolutionary events of November 1989. Prior to 1989, theatre was for a number of decades a space to expose the communist regime to between-the-lines criticism. Theatre subsequently became, albeit briefly, a platform and an open stage for new opinions at the onset of democracy. Later, in the first half of the 1990s, theatre lost its sense in a way. Time came to redefine its mission and the way to seek and address audiences.

“[The] change of attitude forced theatremakers, in particular those working in

the so-called bricks-and-mortar theatres, to find a new role and social place for theatre.

In the first months of 1989, the change became apparent mostly in the radical drop at the box office in bricks-and-mortar theatres.“ (Šimko, p. 39) A natural result of the search for the new meaning was an essential change in theatre dramaturgy. Alas, no space was found for contemporary Slovak drama. “The declining interest in theatre after 1989 was not the only reason why bricks-and-mortar theatres turned away from contemporary Slovak drama. The forced gaps in their repertoires were another significant reason. Dramaturges now tried to introduce plays that were either banned outright, or whose productions were limited pre- 1989.“ (Šimko, p. 40) In a new country that emerged from the separation of Czecho-Slovakia, the second half of the 1990s proved to be quite a difficult period particularly to theatremakers and the entire theatre culture. It might seem that at a time when the national interest was explicitly enforced, the creation of the original Slovak works should have been roses all along. In reality, the era of the Mečiar governments was the toughest of all for most theatres, artists and projects, most of which scraped along, devoid of subsidies and totally ignored by state institutions. And so it was that a clear trend in the new drama emerged, coupled with a sound confrontation with Slovakia's history, a reflection of Slovak mentality and identity. Though it came symptomatically too late, it did come.

Mapping the recent history, tendencies and leaders of contemporary Slovak drama, has to take into account both individual playwrights, as well as the development in alternative devising theatres, in particular Stoka, SkRAT and GUnaGU. The Stoka Theatre, led by director Blaho Uhlár, has shaped the cultural development in Slovakia since 1991. Stoka is often referred to as a “cult theatre” – a phenomenon Slovakia had no experience with and most likely will not have again anytime soon (in a reduced form, Stoka continues to be active). In the new millennium, there were two breaking points for Stoka – the year 2000, when a part of the ensemble left

the theatre, and 2006 when its building was demolished. Stoka's productions typically use a mixture of scenes, and clip-like sequencing of fragments which appear, at least at first sight, quite absurd. All productions (the most famous ones including *Εο Τρσο*, *Collapse*, *Impasse*, *Faces*) were created using collective improvisation. The resulting drama units are thus created by all those involved. The SkRAT Theatre (founded by some of the former members of Stoka), led by artistic directors Ľubomír Burgr and Dušan Vicen, use a similar method as Stoka, the so-called collective improvisation (also known in Anglo-American theatre studies as devised theatre). Nevertheless, their productions are different in form and topic. GUnaGU, established in 1985, is the oldest of these three theatres. It is the home scene of playwright Viliam Klimáček and director Karol Vosátko. In the 1980s and 1990s GUnaGU was a theatre with unique and original poetics, reminiscent of the 20th century European avant-garde, either Czech or Polish (e.g. the *Mária Sabína* production). In the recent years GUnaGU has shown a strong tendency to topics that are easy for audiences to digest – with genre diversity, references to pop culture, and mainstream content – even though, paradoxically, they are often enough parodied and ironized (e.g. *Models*; *English is Easy*, *Csaba is Dead*; *Dealers*; *Sharon Stone Let Me Go*).

Coexistence of solitary authors is a typical feature of contemporary Slovak drama. There is no movement or artistic group that would be consciously inter-related through a generational statement, thematic choice, or creative method. There is also an absence of theatre space that would have any significant impact on theatre activity or would systematically work with contemporary playwrights and produce their plays. The closest to such space seems to be Studio 12 in Bratislava. Yet it sometimes wavers between the positions of a new writing lab, the second stage for students and graduates of the Academy of Performing Arts, and a presentation platform for projects and activities of the Theatre Institute. Despite strong authors in written drama, the fact that individual playwrights don't work with their

own director or in their own space, has been the main reason why Slovak drama has not quite become an integral part of Slovak theatre. “Contemporary Slovak drama is going through transformation that has not yet been theoretically grasped and identified. There are no homogenous unifying elements to be summarized under a specific ‘-ism’. Playwrights have not yet managed to fully adapt to the new conditions. Those who have, are merely a small group (e.g. Viliam Klimáček, Miloš Karásek or Silvester Lavrík). After 1990 Slovak drama entered a phase of experimenting, when authors set off on a creative quest to find new concepts and strategies to communicate their work to audiences.” (Knopová, p. 384)

An important starting and turning point for new drama came in 2000 when the competition Drama was launched. A contest of original drama texts, Drama has since been an annual event. The list of shortlisted and winning texts provides an overview when navigating across the map of new drama authors and works. Nonetheless, Drama failed to help some significant playwrights to establish themselves (e.g. Karol Horák, well-known author and founder of the so-called small forms theatre in the 1980s). Its help to enhance their greater publicity also proved rather limited. Viliam Klimáček, two-time Drama (with plays *Axes in Flower* and *Old Loves*) wrote plays already back in the 1980s. Visual artist and playwright Miloš Karásek, shortlisted for the 2002 prize with *The Platform*, was long before an author and co-founder of the Stoka Theatre. As Slovakia seriously lacked this type of competition, the first years provided an opportunity for authors to revive older texts they kept in drawers. The competition also discovered new names from the younger and middle-aged generation, and inspired authors from other literary genres to engage in playwriting (e.g. Eva Maliti-Fraňová). It also inspired authors who already worked for theatres to take part with texts, the poetics of which transgressed their known work (e.g. Silvester Lavrík, Viliam Klimáček, Miloš Karásek, Jana Bodnárová) and to also try and appeal to the dramaturgy of other theatres. The early

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Viliam Klimáček, K. Vosátko: *English is easy, Csaba is dead*, director Karol Vosátko, GUnaGU Theatre, Bratislava, 2001
photo C. Bachratý

years of Drama were dominated by known authors. Even today, many leaders of the Slovak theatre enter the competition, albeit sporadically. Recent years saw an increase of hitherto unknown and very young authors.

As previously mentioned, there is no categorization of authors of the new Slovak drama. Some kind of classification might help create a system in the range of poetics, styles, forms and themes. However, even the small-scale theatre culture in Slovakia can be viewed through a geographic lens. Surprisingly enough, Slovak new drama is not Bratislava-centric and a lot of authors are often thematically interconnected with their home region. This applies mostly to those who come from the eastern part of the country. The east is specific for its artistic tradition with numerous references to Greek Catholicism, the Ruthenian culture, the ethnic mix, a range of dialects, or the legacy of artists who were regionally isolated after World War II and during the “normalisation” phase of the totalitarian regime in the 1970s. Artists often express a dreamy visualisation,

and a kind of roughness and straightforwardness that comes from the harsh social conditions and existential background of the rough country. Karol Horák is indisputably the leader of theatre making in Eastern Slovakia. His own dramatic work, as along with his teaching and noteworthy activities in student theatre have become a source code for analysis and understanding of the wider context. Horák's first plays from the late 1970s and early 1980s are highly visual, using a lot of movement, playing with Kantorian grotesqueness, and expressing ideas in metaphors and allegories (*The Hole*, *Live Furniture*, *Tip-Top-Biotop* or *the Flea-pit*, *Elementaristique*). The nature of the texts is typical for the alternative conditions of student theatre, and for the options of expression in the 1970s. A strong message is communicated in Horák's textual collages that are created through montage and inspired by a particular historical character or event (*Man Between the Wars*, *Gospel According to Jonáš (Záborský)*, *Apocalypse According to Janko (Král)*, *Blood Witness*). As the author of the Ruthenian Alexander Dukhnovich Theatre Horák found a unique harmony of poetics. The production of his tragicomedy *La Musica*, directed by Rastislav Ballek, was particularly successful. The story of a woman in the monodrama *The Rear-view Mirror* uses authentic facts about life in eastern Slovakia (issues include, inter alia, social problems, economic instability, racism and the Roma issue, emigration abroad in search for work). Similar theme appears in the play *Havaj* by young playwright Michaela Zakuťanská. It is located in a village in eastern Slovakia called Havaj where a young girl dreams about leaving for a big city. Zakuťanská has a knack for humorous situations and funny dialogue. While in *Havaj* this, quite unfortunately, banalised and linearised the story, characters and relationships, her subsequent play *Jánošík 007* proved to be an original theatre cabaret that uses contemporary language to demystify Slovak history. Jana Bodnárová is another important name in postmodern Slovak literature and women's writing. She has enriched new drama

with genre and form experiments, balancing on the edge between theatre, film, performance and visual happening. Bodnárová's subjective mythology and archetypal vision create works that appear to be closed within themselves, but which also often surprise viewers with a lot of precision when pinpointing contemporary phenomena, and the human sensitivities at the turn of the millennium (*The Oriental Dance Class*, *Saturday Night*).

In the work of Silvester Lavrík, who is a positively "genre-loose" author, offers a different form of visual theatre. Lavrík works with a characteristic strong imagery on the threshold between dream and reality. His plays are set in what first appears to be irrational, or even absurd stories. Lavrík mixes the high and the low, as along with plain documentary and elaborately lyrical tones, through idiosyncratic language and speech of characters (close to magical realism) in plays such as *Katarina*, *The Last Summer Day*, *Worlds Behind the Village*, or *Villa Lola*.

Bratislava is a city full of contradictions – it is hectically sleepy, recklessly neurotic, lacking principles. Although at the same time it can be uncompromisingly political, uncivilised, chaotic, yet still transparent like a small town. To what extent are these features reflected in the work of Zuzana Ferenczová, Eva Maliti-Fraňová, Anna Grusková, and Roman Olekšák? Zuzana Ferenczová and Roman Olekšák, both in their thirties, understand their generation well. They write about its lostness, problems and traumas, superficiality, estrangement, missing identity, and its deep sensitivity. Olekšák's snippy language, candour, a penchant for decadent and mentally unstable characters, as along with an inclination to model plays enhance his generational statement with a degree of universality, even uniformity – such as the group of junkies in *Negativists*, the dysfunctional family in *Silence* or the schizophrenic person in *Something More, Something Less*. Ferenczová, on the other hand, is more specific, true and emotional. Her language is more expressive, at times deliberately imperfect and colloquial. She opts for simple stories and more complex characters presented in peculiar clip-like scenes, often

using a retrospective view. In *Babyboom*, she captures the egoism of contemporary parents, while in *Going Spare* she exposes the taboo of teenage sexuality and pregnancy. In collaboration with Anton Medowits, Ferenczová wrote plays (*solitaire.sk* and *Idle Talks*) with a strong message about the looseness, and the relationship and communication crisis among young people of our day. While Olekšák took a break from writing and directing several years ago, Ferenczová remains successful author regularly staged in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Eva Maliti-Fraňová's debut and a winning entry in the 2001 Drama competition *Krčeň, the Immortal*, has been produced in several theatres and has become a success in Slovakia and abroad. Even though it is not an explicitly political play, Maliti-Fraňová was one of the first playwrights to artistically reflect and discuss Slovakia's communist period. *Krčeň, the Immortal* takes place just before the fall of the regime and exposes total disintegration of moral values within the society. Her next play *The Cave Virgin* is an urban fantasy based in Bratislava right after the revolutionary year 1989. The hypothetical trilogy entitled *A Visionary's Dream* concludes with a futuristic vision of the globalised world without identity. Maliti-Fraňová's work is distinctive for its grotesque charge, absurd and dreamy scenes, and mythological elements that allude to magical realism. The *genius loci* of Bratislava is linked with the work of playwright and theatre theorist Anna Grusková. Her documentary drama *The Woman Rabbi* was a result of thorough research of archives and authentic testimonies of those who remembered Gisi Fleischman from Bratislava who saved Jews from deportations during WW2. Grusková lets her raw material – documentation and correspondence – speak for itself. Her commentary and unique author input rest on the way in which she sequences and confronts the raw material.

Theatre outside the centre can acquire different forms. Two playwrights in Slovakia have been developing their own message in very specific conditions. Playwright

ss Ivetta Horváthová (working also as theatre director under

the name Ivetta Škripková) founded in Banská Bystrica a platform for feminist and gynocritical theatre, the Puppet Theatre on the Crossroads which is one of the kind in Slovakia. Playwright and dramaturge Michal Ditte (along with director Ivetta Ditte Jurčová) works in a community culture centre and theatre based in a small village of Bátovce. Ditte has written strongly poetic texts often inspired by literary works (*Two Words of Belisa the Crepuscular... the story of Eva Luna* based on the short story *Two Words* by Isabel Allende, *Venus in a Net* based on *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe). Two plays, however, defy the system: *Terra Granus* uses field research in rural areas of central Slovakia and deals with such issues as home and identity. *Misery* builds on the results of research on poverty in Slovakia.

It seems that new Slovak drama has become a natural component of the theatre scene in Slovakia. This has been particularly facilitated by the systematic activities of the Theatre Institute after 2000. Projects such as the Drama competition (2000), *New Drama* (2003) and the *New Drama Festival* (2005) were introduced not only to raise awareness of the new world drama, to stimulate literary translators and Slovak authors, inspire dramaturges, but perhaps most importantly, to remove the mistrust, often even disrespect among theatre professionals towards contemporary drama. Statistics about the ratio between the original Slovak plays and the rest of the drama in the repertoires of Slovak theatres are only a limited and not necessarily relevant indicators of the success of the above projects. How can they be relevant? How can they show the quantitative and qualitative changes in the perception of contemporary Slovak drama over the recent years? Comparison of the statistics about professional theatres in Slovakia over the past three years shows that the state-funded professional theatres represent an average of about 40% of premieres of original Slovak plays. Professional non-state theatres produce more premieres of original plays, over 50%. In 2009, state-funded theatres premiered 132 plays

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(of which 56 were original Slovak plays). In 2010 the number of premieres dropped to 122 (47 original Slovak plays) and in 2011 to a mere 113 (34 original Slovak plays). Non-state theatres premiered considerably more plays – owing to the dominance of original projects and a natural inclination to new dramaturgy of original works compared with the international works. 2009 saw 43 out of a total of 75 premieres; in 2010 brought 45 premieres out of 73, and while 35 out of 74 were premiered in 2011). Interestingly, the state-run theatres do not account for a steady total number of premieres and original drama – particularly when considering that the number of state-run theatres has not significantly changed. In non-state theatres, ensembles tend to be founded and dissolved more frequently. Nevertheless, their performance indicators, such as the annual number of premieres has remained unchanged. Although the data are relevant to some degree, it is still something of a grey area. The term “original writing” includes Slovak drama regardless the time of its writing; that is, not only contemporary, but also the classical and modern plays by Slovak authors. The methodology of statistical reporting shows that original works mean literary works (theatre plays and stage adaptations of other literary genres) by authors writing in Slovak, or those who lived or live in Slovakia and write in one of the languages of ethnic minorities.

It might be more interesting to ignore the mere numbers and focus on the transformation of the dramaturgy of a particular theatre. The drama section at the Slovak National Theatre offers a good case study as it is not only one of the key cultural institutions in Slovakia, but also an organisation supported by public funds. As such, it should present and support the original Slovak art. The 2006–2007 season proved, organisation-wise, quite a demanding year as the ensembles of the National Theatre were moving to new premises. The drama section premiered two contemporary Slovak plays (out of a three premieres). The staging of Táňa Kusá's *With Mother* was homage to actress Mária Kraľovičová. Its emotional topic and sensitive production won the hearts



Karol Horák: *La Musica*, director Rastislav Ballek, Alexander Duchnovič Theatre, 2001
photo C. Bachratý

of mostly female the middle-aged and older audiences. Peter Pavlac's *Partybr(e)akers* was a greater risk and an attempt to appeal to the young intellectual spectators (the author toys with pop culture phenomena, but his language is intellectually challenging and uses unusual text form). The next season only brought a single only representative of contemporary Slovak drama: Iveta Horváthová's *Fetishists*. Horváthová is generally seen to be a representative of feminist drama. The backdrop of the world of show business, complicated relationships between women, and a light direction made it commercially one of the most successful plays that remained in the repertory for over four years. Possibly because of the success of these titles and their permanent place in the repertory, the National Theatre did not premiere any contemporary play in 2008–2009 (Ján Uličiansky's fairy tale *Puss in Inline Skates* does not fit the definition of new drama). The 2009–2010 season proved interesting particularly for its new dramaturgy. Although no contemporary Slovak plays were staged, the theatre produced two excellent adaptations. *HOLLYWOOD*, or Robert Roth sings Jan Hlollý's *Uglies*

and *Observations* is a monodrama loosely inspired by the collection of poems by Vojtech Mihálik about life and work of priest and writer Ján Hollý. *It Happened on the First of September (or some other time)* is a dramatization of the successful novel by a contemporary writer Pavol Rankov. The subsequent season did not produce any Slovak contemporary or classical play. The evident dramaturgical objective was a repertory build on the tradition of strong international playwrights – Chekhov, Goethe, Kleist, Williams, Beckett, Shakespeare. New writing is represented in the first Slovak production of a young American playwright Sarah Ruhl. The 2011–2012 season relied on contemporary drama again: out of eleven titles, seven were contemporary and one was Slovak – Anna Grusková’s documentary play *The Woman Rabbi*. The last monitored period, the current theatre season 2012–2013, circumnavigates contemporary texts. Yet it manages to emphasise the continuation of the tendency to dramatize Slovak prose. This time the dramaturgy includes five novellas by Ivan Horváth *The Jurga Brothers*, adapted for the theatre by playwright and dramaturge Peter Pavlac. In a total of eight seasons, the drama section of the National Theatre produced four contemporary Slovak plays and three contemporary dramatizations and/or adaptations of older Slovak fiction or poetry. However, the current repertory (June 2013) lists only one contemporary Slovak play – Anna Grusková’s *The Woman Rabbi* that is not only highly challenging in terms of the audience’s emotions and morality, but it is staged in an equally demanding way, which is quite experimental for the standard of the National Theatre. Two stage adaptations and dramatizations are still on the programme – Robert Roth’s acting spectacle *HOLLYROTĚ*, or *Robert Roth sings Jan Hollý’s Ugliers and Observations*, and the recently premiered *The Jurga Brothers*. Interestingly, the contemporary drama (Slovak and international) is sufficiently represented in the repertory in comparison with modern and classical plays (the ratio is 13 to 32). Nonetheless, it is also symptomatic that, with the exception of just one title,

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contemporary drama is produced only in the studio theatre. The Slovak National Theatre is not the only theatre in Slovakia where the dominant opinion is that contemporary drama (and Slovak drama in particular) does not belong to large stage because it will never appeal to wider audiences. Is less than one title of contemporary Slovak drama per season enough, or is it critically insufficient? To what extent is there a long-term system in the selection of contemporary Slovak drama? It is obvious that the highest number of titles – two in the first monitored season – was a coincidence and perhaps also a necessity because the theatre was getting used to its new premises. Horváthová’s *Fetishists* might have been a discovery: in addition to being an artistically valuable production, it proved that a contemporary Slovak play can become popular with audiences. Grusková’s *The Woman Rabbi* was not listed in the original plan of premiers: the art directors of the theatre included it later to mark the 70th anniversary of the first Jewish transports from Slovakia. Sadly, it has to be said that the production of contemporary Slovak texts in the National Theatre is haphazard and insufficient. The counter-argument might be that the primary stage in the country, in contrast regional or independent theatres elsewhere, has to meet different dramaturgical objectives, such as the current interpretations of classical and modern drama. A question, however, arises about the necessity of such an approach?

In the recent years, contemporary Slovak texts have been produced by three particular theatres: the Arena Theatre in Bratislava, the City Theatre in Žilina, and the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin. They seem to be running a system according to which they stage contemporary Slovak plays; one might even speak of a methodical artistic intent. Though there are different reasons behind staging the original Slovak plays. The artistic directors and management of the Arena Theatre try to set themselves apart from the theatre scene, and more generally from the cultural scene of the capital city. Apart from its programme, Arena runs

live broadcasts from international opera scenes, jazz concerts, and, for eleven years now, has been organising the Children's University (in collaboration with the Comenius University). Alongside the differentiation is Arena's proclivity to political and socially critical theatre. As part of its "civic cycle", the theatre has produced since 2005 five original projects that reflect Slovak history and leaders. Three of the plays were written by Viliam Klimáček: *Dr. Gustáv Husák – A Prisoner of Presidents*, *A President of Prisoners* (2006), *Communism* (2008), and *Holocaust* (2012). The initial project titled *Tiso* (2005) by author and director Rastislav Ballek presented the story of Roman Catholic priest and President of the wartime Slovak Republic who was responsible for the deportations of Slovak Jews. The play deservedly became the production of the year. The five-play "civic cycle" also includes Martin Čičvák's play *Kukura* (2011) inspired by the actor and director of the Arena Theatre Juraj Kukura. It brazenly criticizes the state of culture in Slovakia. The civic cycle at Arena has had a significant effect on a wider social and cultural discourse through the medium of theatre. Furthermore, the effect has been coupled with the dramaturgical method that other Slovak theatres seem to neglect, the commissioning of new texts from a specific playwright on a given theme. The current repertory of the City Theatre in Žilina lists 18 productions of which as many as 13 are contemporary plays, and 7 are come from Slovak authors. These positive numbers are the result of the preferences of artistic director Eduard Kudláč and his very young acting group. This is also why the productions appear to primarily aimed at young audiences (e.g. Michaela Zakuťanská's *Jánošík 007*, parodying a Slovak folk hero, or the fragile text in *Going Spare* by Zuza Ferenczová about intimacy among children and teenagers). Production of Slovak drama in the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin draws from the city's long cultural tradition, and from the demands by the local audience. Director Dodo Gombár's own authorship projects – theatre sitcom www.narodnycintorin.sk, a music happening

The Štúrs (Concert Cancelled), or the current rewrite of the emblematic classic by Jozef Hollý *Kubo* entitled *Kubo (Remake)* explore Slovak identity and mentality, and challenge stereotypes about Slovak history and present.

Why does Slovak new drama today remain at the bottom of European new drama? Does it have any real chance to influence the wider context of theatre in Europe? What are the challenges when globalised Europe witnesses universalization of art and fading interest in the "exotic" theatre coming from the former communist countries? What should the Slovak drama be like at times when the meaning of classical dramatic text (hero-antihero) is being defied? Is there any need in Slovak theatre to be confronted with European theatre, or is it more important to reflect our own history and the present? ♣

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ROMANA MALITI graduated from Theatre Studies at VŠMU (Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts) and cultural anthropology at the Philosophy Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. From 2001 she worked as project manager for different institutions and projects in the field of theatre (The Theatre Institute Bratislava, Košice – ECOC 2013, International Theatre Festival Divadelná Nitra). She also acts as theatre critic, translator of contemporary theatre plays from Russian (Mukhina, Vyrypaev, Klavdiev etc.) and theatre dramaturgy. As actress she performed in theatre productions at the AMDA, in the Studio 12, Theatre YSTFUD and theatre SkRAT.

In Search of a Radical Language

How do you create a language that describes modern-day reality and write a text that can reflect the complexity of this reality on stage? This is likely the major challenge faced by every playwright in recent years. Of course, this doesn't refer to those playwrights who still believe in the old tried and tested formula for what a good play should be like. It is about the ones who choose a dramatic form and seek a radical language to talk about a world bursting at the seams and rife with nuanced complexity.

The intention of this contribution is not to find an umbrella term for the generation of writers working in Polish theatre today. Just a few playwrights shall be mentioned and an attempt will be to describe their strategies for working in theatre. No doubt certain names and titles will be omitted while focus will be put on the ones subjectively selected by the author. After all, it shall leave the reader with a sense of wanting more and with a desire to dig deeper rather than giving them a simplified overview of what is happening in Polish dramaturgy in the 21st century.

But before moving on to a description of the status quo, it is worthwhile to take a quick look back at how things were 24 years ago. Shortly after 4 June 1989, the day of the first democratic elections in Poland, the country saw the beginnings of a process in which the political system changed and which drastically shook the stature of the theatre as a medium. Decades of Communism produced certain complacency on both sides of the footlights. Utilising Polish Romantic dramas,

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that ran over the heads of censors and went straight to the hearts of audiences. National texts that spoke of years of subjugation and of the road to freedom provided a perfect canvas for discussion of the issues that affected the society at the time. A conviction was growing from year to year that an immense shift was imminent. Actors on stage sent indicative winks towards the audiences, who in turn nodded their heads knowingly from comfortable seats. "We have a common enemy – take your pick: the authorities, the system, the ideology. Cross out the ones that don't apply." Meanwhile, the language of the Polish Romantic drama, so full of poetics and metaphor, offered abundant room for interpretation. And it was this very thicket of allusions and double entendres that confounded the censors and led them astray much to the delight of both parties.

The blissful state of knowing looks and suggestive winks was halted by the change of political systems. Audiences rose from their seats and left the theatre. They headed to the shops, which were suddenly full of goods to buy. Either that or to pick up their passports and set off for the much-longed-for West. Or to set up a business and finally be their own boss. The actors and directors remained on stage. They were surprised to discover that the knowing looks and winks were no longer working and that fewer and fewer people were coming to the theatre. The result was the dawn of new dramas that searched for a new enemy in bloodthirsty capitalism. They showed the world through the convention of realism; they offered well-crafted comedies; and they were able to accurately depict the shift in customs. Yet, what they lacked was an effective tool for criticism in the period of transformation; a tool that could only arise through analysis from the perspective of Communism



Dorota Maslowska: **No matter how hard we tried**,
director Grzegorz Jarzyna, TR Warszawa, 2009
photo K. Dabrowski

and socialism. But how do you make use of tools from a system that had been abolished just recently and 44 years after the end of the Second World War?

Theatre artists were faced with a crisis of language. The arrival of free speech meant that winking at the audience was no longer necessary. Polish dramas from the 19th century struggled with being able to comment on the current state of things. It was a little better for the 20th century literature, especially the works which the more astute censors had kept under lock and key. Yet the plays of Witold Gombrowicz and Stanisław Witkiewicz were still unable to provide an answer that would lead to the revival of theatre in Poland.

It was only in the late 1990s that something new began to take shape in theatre. Thanks to the availability

of quality translations, young directors finally gained access to contemporary dramas from Germany, Austria and the UK. The “Brutalists,” as they were dubbed by the Polish media, brought new subjects to the theatre and staged plays that addressed current taboos. Mark Ravenhill offers a picture of young Brits warped by consumption and living to the beat of techno music. Sarah Kane delves into the territory of extreme love that lies well past the border of what we consider homosexual identity. It is an identity that is poorly grasped by a society of which 95% claim to be members of the (Roman) Catholic Church. Even more outrageous is the writing of Marius von Mayenburg, who, as if focussing on dysfunctional families weren’t enough, has a brother and sister entering into an incestuous criminal partnership. And how do you stage the plays of Werner Schwab and Elfriede Jelinek, who parody the language of capitalist advertising to poke fun at Austrians (equally ardent Catholics)?

As the subject matter alone becomes harder to swallow by a consumption-hungry palate, the change in the artistic language becomes an even greater barrier (especially to the older segment of the theatre community). Harsh curse words? Video clip aesthetics? Nudity on stage? That is not right, they say. Yet, all of the difficulties of staying true to creative decisions paid off. Theatres began to attract a new, young audience for whom the theatre was a place for discourse about the issues affecting the modern world.

Inevitably, the question arose of why we still look to plays written outside of Poland? Roman Pawłowski, theatre critic for Poland's leading daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, appealed for more drama writing in Poland. Like the ancient senator Marcus Porcius Cato calling for the destruction of Carthage in each of his addresses, Roman Pawłowski beseeched playwrights to write about their reality. The result was a new wave of Polish theatre that came around 2002.

New competitions sprung up – Brave Radom, the Wrocław Contemporary Drama Competition, the Gdynia Dramaturgy Award – and brought recognition to outstanding theatres and playwrights. There were also new workshops for playwrights and directors gathered annually near Lake Wigry in the summer months. Stary Teatr in Krakow and the National Theatre in Warsaw – the two oldest stages in the country – opened up their repertoires to new plays.

The directors of theatres in small and large cities alike began to commission new dramas from young authors. The Competition for Staging Contemporary Polish Play (up to its 19th edition in 2013) was also encouraging new productions. Theatre companies (institutions, fringe theatres, associations) can nominate premieres for the competition, which are then viewed by the judging committee for a spot in the finals. In addition to the awards to theatre artists (writers, directors, set designers, actors), the competition offers theatres an opportunity to receive reimbursements for a portion of the costs associated with the production (costs of

sets and costumes, promotion, artist fees, etc.). And what is the level of interest in the competition among theatres? In the 2012–2013 season, over 100 pre-premiere productions were nominated. That accounts for a majority of the 142 total pre-premieres that took place in Poland in 2012. There were 629 theatre companies and 1,274 premieres in Poland at the time, with a total of 5 million spectators attending 31,000 performances (statistics from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw for the year 2012). One out of every seven theatre premieres was also the world premiere of a new text and nearly one tenth of all productions were based on Polish texts. Statistically, it all looks promising.

However, those who don't entirely believe in statistics but favour quality and the merits of the writing as a measuring stick, should read a few of the dramas recently written in Poland. They constitute some of the best evidence of what is on the minds of the people of the Land on the Vistula. The government likes to boast about economic numbers (Poland was the only country in the European Union to avoid falling into recession; the GDP has increased every year since the political transformation) and ministers eagerly cut ribbons on stadiums and highways which built with EU funds. Yet, in the shadow of this impressive progress there is a society divided. On the one side are those who profited from the political transformation and are pleased with the changes that took place. The other side consists of those who maintain that the transformation was a great detriment and the course of events ought to change. Though an oversimplification, it still serves to portray the two extremes of the discussion on the state of Poland.

The kind of drama that can arise in such a fractured world is best exemplified by Dorota Mastowska's play *No Matter How Hard We Tried*. Its Polish title [which literally translates to *Things Are Good Between Us*] sounds like a naïve expression of bliss, but its stated nature raises eyebrows from the very outset and urges a closer examination of the characters. Mastowska wrote the play specifically for the TR WARSZAWA theatre, with



Małgorzata Sikorska Mischczuk: **Popietuszeko**, director Paweł Łysak,
Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz 2012
photo M. Hueckel

the resulting production, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, taking home the main awards at the leading theatre festivals in Poland. A flat in the Warsaw district of Praga is occupied by three women of three different generations: an ageing grandmother, an overworked mother and a young girl. The eldest one recalls the war and Warsaw of the 1930s with vivid emotion while her granddaughter refuses to believe in such a romanticised picture. To her, Poland means poverty, deficiency and unfulfilled dreams. Once she even declares that she is not Polish and that she learned the language from records and tapes left behind by a Polish cleaning lady. This is a bitter truth about the Poles' dreams of joining the West – since the accession of Poland into the EU, roughly 2.5 million Poles have gone West to work in bars, on construction sites and as cleaning staff. While the audience often reacts in laughter thanks to Masłowska's strong comedic sensibility, it is

a bitter laughter holding back tears. Seeing the mother and her friend reading a magazine entitled *Not For You* and lamenting that this year they won't be going to Egypt and that next year they won't be going to Tunisia, it is easy to imagine a number of Polish families facing in the same predicament. Heads are full of dreams from glossy magazines but the reality in Poland severely limits the ability to fulfil them. All people can do is to live in the sweet dream – the quasi-reality – that the mass media and the smug politicians concoct for them.

The play ends with a discussion between the girl and her grandmother who reveals in one of her last monologues that she in fact died during the bombing of Warsaw in 1939. So, is the whole play really just a dream? Are the grandmother's descendants just the projections of the dead woman? Or perhaps of the audience, who watches the action unfold from safe distance?

Another subject that interests writers is the relationship that Poles have with their painful past. The chapter in the country's history that addresses

their relationship with the Jews is full of instances of glory as well as of deplorable actions driven by base instincts. As each generation grapples with the problem, questions by Holocaust witnesses related to moral responsibility resurface periodically like a cry of the Erinyes. So, what do we do with stories in which the blame lies on the side of our forefathers? How would we react if the injustice were being done here and now? Such puzzles are addressed by Tadeusz Słobodzianek in his play *Our Class*. The drama is based on events in the town of Jedwabne, where, upon the outbreak of war, its Polish residents corralled their Jewish neighbours into a barn and set fire to it. Słobodzianek begins the story in an elementary school classroom – simple episodes in the lives of children of both sexes and both ethnicities introduce a story which eventually escalates to a dramatic conclusion. To this day, the smoke from the barn makes eyes burn and leads to tears. For the descendants of the victims, the tears are for the lost loved ones. For the descendants of the perpetrators, they are the tears of empathy and remorse. This tragic event, exposed by Jan Gross in a highly prominent publication, examined the nuances of the violator-victim relationship and questioned the erstwhile image of Poles during the Second World War. An event as all-encompassing as the Second World War unleashes the latent instincts inside us all, and there is no sense in deluding ourselves that deep down there is a good person in each of us. The same subject is examined from a modern perspective by the young Krakow-based playwright Mateusz Pakuła. His play *Księża Niezłom* has already been staged several times in Poland. The grotesque work is a comedy on the simplest mechanisms of human nature. Greed, the need to channel aggression and ordinary envy are the motivational forces for a simple family to keep Jews imprisoned in their dark cellar. They use simple deception to convince their prisoners that the war is still underway and that they must continue to pay their guardians for hiding them from the Nazis. Maintaining the deception and keeping

the exiles in the dark requires increasingly difficult efforts. The grotesque comedy is a playful variation on the hit German film *Good Bye, Lenin* made a few years ago. Readers are encouraged to read the bitter comedy.


Dorota Mastowska and Mateusz Pakuła are not the only ones to address the issue of the truth and of what can be defined as reality. Similar subject matter is confronted by Małgorzata Sikorska Mischuk in her play *Popiełuszko*. It was written for Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz and was lauded as the best drama written in Poland in 2012. The main character, referred to as the Anti-Pole, is a typical everyman with family problems. His life changes when his flat is visited by mysterious scientists and certain vague characters. They entangle the man in a game to reconstruct the events surrounding the murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko (who acted in support of the Solidarity movement as a member of the anti-Communist opposition) by Communist agents. As the initially detached main character goes further in the game, he starts to become an active participant. The game is so involving that the play ends with the main character making a phone call to the police to give his testimony. He identifies himself as a witness to the murder which took place over 30 years previously. He claims to have been a fish swimming in the Vistula when the priest's body was thrown into the river and that he can identify the murderers. Sikorska Mischuk's play is a perfect example of the functioning of the so-called politics of memory, which is a common tool of the conservative side of the political spectrum. A story from the past told repeatedly – at first having no connection to present life – enters the ears of the listener and eventually gets into their blood, changing their way of seeing the world. Continuously repeated like a mantra, a story that is faintly connected with our everyday reality can take hold of our emotions and change the way we think.

24 years since the first free elections, it is clear to everyone that the gap between Poland's satisfied citizens and the outraged ones is only going to grow.



Małgorzata Sikorska Miszczuk
photo AMI

Inequality has always existed within society. Yet in the past, Communist propaganda was able to easily cover it up with the use of messages sent through the tightly controlled and censored media. In the age of the internet and free speech, being free of a single sanctioned mode of thinking, theatre likewise searches for its place in society. Still – given the past experience – its closest function is like that of the ancient agora, where people could gather to collectively find solutions to a matter affecting them. When a prophet takes the stage to voice his answer to a given problem, directly behind him is a group of opponents who try to drown him out with shouts of criticism. It is rare for a single overriding voice to rule the agora. And rarer still is finding a speaker with a positive course of action or a great new idea. But is it not one of greatest human challenges to assemble in a group and take political action?

The very goal is laid out for spectators in the play *On Goodness* by the duo Paweł Demirski (playwright) and Monika Strzępka (director). Their drama, presented at Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych, is an attempt to find a positive course of action with the aid of left-wing criticism of the capitalist system. The story is set in 2016, at a group therapy session hosted by the local Municipal Social Welfare Centre. Its aim is to find a new language to express desire, ask for something, demand something. The group consists of individuals hurt by the banking crisis, a theatre director (a self-ironic portrait of Monika Strzępka), a resurrected Amy Winehouse and the duo of investigative reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. The workshop on learning to ask for something, to identify goals and to find a new language does not end with a single solution that unites everyone involved. The fractured ideological material has been torn apart and all that remains are pitiful shreds. All we can do is to labour in hopes of putting them back together and finding a language: a radical language of accord. The play ends with a scene of the group singing *You'll Never Walk Alone* around a bonfire outside the theatre building. Holding pieces of paper in their hands, the spectators join the actors around the bonfire as the place where community is first established. "Walk on with hope in your heart / And you'll never walk alone." 

SZYMON WRÓBLEWSKI a curator of theatre projects – currently works in the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. As dramaturg he used to work with Michał Borczuch, Rene Pollesch and Redbad Klynstra. Between 2007 and 2012 he was working in National Sztary Theatre in Krakow in Literary Department and was running international cooperation projects. Lives in Warsaw.

On Contemporary Hungarian Drama

In his book published in 1982 Tamás Koltai records the fact that during the 1970s in Budapest only almost one hundred and fifty Hungarian plays were premiered. Yet at the same time this remarkably high number also meant a lot of scrap, and he wondered: “what could have led to such a theatre atmosphere in which the staging of scrap is compulsory, or at least less hazardous than risking one or two seasons without good new Hungarian plays.”¹

And what do we have today? The electronic database of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute testifies that during the past five years more than one thousand Hungarian plays were staged. This includes classical and contemporary authors, plays for the youth and the operettas. This number shows an incredible blooming; it is worth, however, to look behind the numbers. Certain plays and authors literally sweep through the stages of the country, or one can spot a tendency for the contemporary plays to be excluded from the large stages, being mostly put on in the studio venues. Other voices say, on the other hand, that it is the negative consequence of the corporate tax subsidy scheme (TAÓ), which is very sensitive to attendance figures, what forces the contemporary plays on smaller stages. One thing is, however, clearly backed by statistics: the operettas, performances with music and the shows for young people receive the largest stages. Whereas the grand national

classics, an entirely different layer, including Imre Madách, Mihály Vörösmarty and József Katona, are also primarily staged in the larger halls.

The renewal of the contemporary Hungarian playwriting from the 1990s onwards

According to dramaturg and essayist Zsuzsa Radnóti “in the period of reprisals following the 1956 revolution, which very gradually settled down, in the course of a few decades (roughly by the mid-1980s) the second golden age of Hungarian twentieth-century drama took shape. The first had blossomed at the turn of the century. Reactions at the series of cataclysms of Hungarian history came thick and fast in the theatre.”² The playwrights who had begun their career in the 1960s or had a significant effect at the time, István Örkény, Gábor Görgey, Géza Páskándi, Endre Fejes, Ákos Kertész, Károly Szakonyi, Ferenc Karinthy, Gyula Hernádi, were called the generation of ‘the fathers’. “Those called the representatives of the fathers’ generation were the self-tormenting generation that had believed unreservedly after the war in the coming of a new, just, democratic world. Then, in the period of before and after the 1956 revolution, they came to the frustrating recognition of what had actually been lurking behind and beneath the publicly resounding populist slogans. The sons’ generation, however, looked with disgust on the fathers, because they had let themselves be deceived.”³ The new generation of rebellious writers arrived at the end of the 1970s: Géza

- 1 KOLTAI Tamás: *The Dramaturgy of the Lack* [Hiánydramaturgia], VINKÓ József (ed.), Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, Budapest, 1982, 9.
- 2 RADNÓTI Zsuzsa: ‘The Regime Change and Hungarian Contemporary Drama’, *Hungarian Theatre Bulletin*, Anna Lakos (ed.), Hungarian ITI Centre, Budapest, 2010, 3. (online at: www.eclap.eu/103092)
- 3 RADNÓTI, 4.

4 ELEK Tibor: *Kortárs magyar dráma és a rendszerváltozás, Bárka, ablak a kortárs magyar irodalomra*, 2009/3, online at: <http://www.barkaonline.hu/kritika/1029-et>

Bereményi, Mihály Kornis, Péter Nádas and György Spiró launched almost simultaneously. Though their vision and style differs greatly, we still see them as the generation which turned the Hungarian dramatic traditions upside down and renewed its language. This line was followed by the playwrights launching in the 1980s and 1990s-nineties: Pál Békés, András Nagy, András Forgách. After the change of the regime, however, the Hungarian theatre mostly, and somewhat also the Hungarian playwriting, suffered identity crisis in terms of both politics and aesthetics.

According to Zsuzsa Radnóti, the playwrights starting in this period were not so much interested in the major issues of the society but – disregarding a few counter-examples, who got down to the elaboration of historical topics – wrote about the conflicts of private life in a wide variety of tools and styles. Other theorists see this issue in a very different light. Tibor Elek, in a study *The Contemporary Hungarian Drama and the Change of the Regime* sees the reaction to novel social problems and phenomena as the prime trend of the new Hungarian playwriting.⁴ He refers not only to the works in which history and politics are overtly present but also to those which portray the situations, the lack of change, the peculiar human relations which can be seen as the consequences of the change.

Some examples can illustrate the case. In György Spiró's play, *Az elsötétítés* (The Dimming) history, past and present, are omnipresent. The play, written in 2002, is set in 1941 but it is neither a historical nor a psychological text but it rather shows what impossible solutions are born in a horrible age, of which there is no escape afterwards. Spiró's other plays are set more in contemporary times: *Kvartett* (Quartet, 2007) for instance in the kitchen of a small flat where an unexpected guest drops by, a man who had

fled the country in 1956 to the warning of the man who lives in the flat, who returns home from America and wishes to express his gratitude for the good deed. In *Koccanás* (Crash, 1998) the setting is given by a car crash in one of the busy roads of Budapest, an accident which leads into a kilometre-long chain of cars smashed into each other, which blocks the lives of various people for almost a day. *Príma környék* (Prime neighbourhood, 2012) is set in a provincial old people's home ironically called Home Sweet Home. Yet the play is not about the nice or ill-fated elderly, but about their relatives who are just visiting them for the first time after a long-long period. Spiró's bitter comedy portrays with sharp precision the petty life of his characters, their lies and futile attempts for self-validation.

Just as Spiró, other playwrights are also portraying failed lives, situations, destinies in decay as a consequence of the change of the regime, yet on the surface each story can be perceived as a simple, everyday row of events. Lajos Parti-Nagy's *Mausoleum* (1995) is set in the yard and hanging balconies of an old council-house, where small-time gangsters set on fire a small sweet-shop located there, they take the inhabitants hostage, many of whom try to solve the impossible situation by employing their different life strategies. István Tasnádi's *Rokainfutár* (Cocaine Runner) has the designated genre of 'tragic extravaganza': set in an apartment house, it deals with the failure of families and lives, vegetating in close proximity of each other. Of János Háry's socially sensitive, poetically inspired works *Gézagyerek* (The Stone Watcher, 2001) is set in a small village, the protagonist, Géza Boy, is honest investing a childish trusts in everybody – but the insulted and humiliated are waiting for redemption rather than a regime change. Háry's *Stone Watcher* and Zoltán Egressy's

Portugal (1997) are probably the most popular plays of the past decade, both translated to several languages and are permanently kept on schedule by different theatres throughout the country. *Portugal* shows the everyday life of the inhabitants of an imaginary village, or rather of the pub guests from that village; derailed, hopeless lives, personal tragedies, the impossibility of a breakout, in a grotesque play.

A long list of authors could be discussed here, from the dramatically prolific László Garaczi, of the middle generation, to Csaba Székely, a young playwright from Transylvania, who made his exuberant debut three years ago, followed by a series of successful premieres in different Hungarian speaking theatres. He manages to observe from a certain distance and a critical eye, and portray with black humour in a strongly elevated, partially artificial language the village people who live in deep poverty, without any perspectives for the future, those, who often escape into drinking or suicide.

The year 2006 – the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 revolution – brings a significant turn to the history of the Hungarian drama, namely that the inconvenient questions of coming to terms with the past start to be raised more directly on the stage. In the essay quoted above, Zsuzsa Radnóti regards János Térey, originally a poet later turning towards the drama, as a prime figure of this turn. In his plays “a central role is given to the common Hungarian historical present and past.” *Űzamaták* (*Dungeons*, 2006), which he wrote in cooperation with András Papp, is set in Budapest, at and around the headquarters of the Communist Party in Köztársaság tér, on October 30, 1956, during one of the bloodiest lynch-laws of the revolution. The authors do not wish to formulate an opinion about the events, nor do they make any judgements, they simply show the urge of revenge

against those trapped in the building of the party headquarters, who are unavoidably representing the tyrants. “In *Asztalizene* (*Table Music*, 2007) the cynical, hopeless attitude and bad mood of the nouveaux riches is given voice to. In the foreground of the story the global experience of the new cynical and self-assertive world order is presented, with apathy, ease, life lies, power and amorous schemes.”⁵ In this play the street riots against the left-wing government of the times also have their menacing marks. In a very similar way the performance signed by János Mohácsi, István Mohácsi and Márton Kovács in Kaposvár also show an anti-heroic attitude towards the 1956 revolution. *56 o6/Őrült lélek, vert hadak* (*56 o6/Crazy Soul, Broken Armies*) invites spectators to a time travel: the participants of the state celebrations enter a national memorial, from which they are unable to escape, and through their roaming in time and space they meet Imre Nagy, Neil Armstrong, James Bond, Nikita Khrushchev, János Kádár lost on the road to Damascus and several figures of the 1956 events who had become legends. The performance is “no memorial wrath nor documentary drama. It is far from being a historical remembering. Not a *tragoedia* nor a *comoedia*. Rather it is a four-hour cabaret ... The show in Kaposvár is no babbling anniversary bow. No commonplace parade built of chewed words. It is a bitter satire of the past fifty years of history.”⁶

The National Theatre launched a restricted application for playwrights: the invited authors were expected to write a play on one of the designated Commandments. Pál Závada was given the third: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” This is how *Magyar ünnep* (*Hungarian Feast*) was born, staged in 2010 at the National Theatre. In the plot of the play we can follow how the protagonist, Janka Weiner and her family and friends celebrate, or more precisely how

5 RADNÓTI,
HTB, *op.cit.*

6 MOLNÁR GÁL Péter:
56 o6 / örült lélek vert hadak, *Mozgó Világ*,
2007/4, 52., online at
<http://mozgovilag.com/?p=3067>

7 JÁKFALVI
Magdolna: Magyar –
Dráma – '90-es évek,
Jelenkor, 1999/12.

they live through the historical events starting from the forties: the re-annexing of Transylvania to Hungary in 1940, the Holocaust, etc..

Hungarian drama after the change of the regime is more connected to theatre workshops, communities of practitioners, according to Magdolna Jákfalvi, teatrologist and theatre historian. She brings as examples the Bárka Theatre in those days, the Szkéné Theatre, the Új Színház from that time, the Katona József Theatre, the Csiky Gergely Theatre from Kaposvár and the Kisfaludy Theatre from Győr.⁷ This trend can still be felt in our days, only the list of theatres needs to be somewhat refreshed. Everything seems to be going just fine, and still, the spectator has a feeling of lack for some reason. The major part of the plays listed above were written to the request of a given theatre, so they are not 'undesired children'. And the biggest part of them testify of a new dramaturgical vision, attempt a linguistic and stylistic renewal, which, however, is sometimes too challenging for the theatres. Sadly, most of the performances remain trapped in a realist tone, a tradition too well established in Hungary.

Attempts at renewing the language of theatre and the contemporary Hungarian drama

In the so-called second golden age the plays written in the period complied well with the realist traditions. During the 1990s the so-called psychological realism was blooming in the Hungarian theatres and was considered to be the general standard. Performances of outstanding strength and relevance came to life and the Hungarian plays born in this period were translated to this language, approached with these means. However, there were quite a few performances, actually in a constant increase,



János Térey: **Protocol**, director Péter Valló, Radnóti Theatre, 2012, photo Z. Koncz

which managed to transgress these boundaries. The plays of Péter Nádás were much earlier transgressing the dominant staging trends.

There were also pioneers among the theatre makers: in the 1970s first and foremost Péter Halász and András Jeles. Péter Halász and his company were forced to leave the country in the middle of the seventies, but his theatre, the SQUAT in New York, became world famous. Halász chose to return home after the change of the regime and continued with his theatre research. He partly created own productions, partly put on shows with his own actors, commissioned by the Katona József Theatre: heavily improvisation-based reactions on the daily news. These shows surely have made a deep and long-lasting impact on both the actors and the spectators. These effects can

for
Contemporary drama



Csaba Székely:
Mine Water,
 director Tibor Csizmadia,
 Szkéné Theatre, 2013,
 photo G. Róde

be traced, among others, to the activity of Vilmos Vajdai (actor, director, and musician) in the most conspicuous manner. The TÁP Theatre, founded by him, with their opening show *Minden Rossz Varieté* (All's Bad Variety, 2006) openly accepted its provocative stance. This is how they advertised their improvisation-based performance: "The Variety Show of the TÁP Theatre is held together by the passionate commitment to bad theatre. There is too much of good theatre around the world. There are too many good actors, too many good directors. Too many good plays, too many good performances. Who is not already bored to death by the splendid lighting, set and costumes? Who is not put to sleep by the genial stage music? Bad theatre is a rare treasure, getting more and more sparse. It is unrepeatable. We must cherish this treasure ... We, the members of TÁP feel pride if we forget our text or manage to sing out of tune"⁸

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András Jeles (unlike Péter Halász) founded his own troupe in Hungary, the Monteverdi bírkózókör (Monteverdi Wrestling Club), and their two shows, the *Dramai események* (Dramatic events, 1985) and *Mosoly birodalma* (The Kingdom of Laughter, 1986) are prime examples of a new theatre language. Both can be characterised by a conspicuous distance perceived by the director between the world of the text and the world of play, and both the text and the play are defined by a statement of a strong contrast. Jeles, the director was later invited to different repertory theatres to stage generally classics, often in his own adaptation. In 2012, with the third-year students of the acting university in Kaposvár, he staged a show titled *Auschwitz működik* (Auschwitz Works), the text of which was written by Jeles himself, or rather compiled by him, based on different documents from the era, while in his directorial approach he returns to the recreation of the theatricality of

⁸ Quote from the
 TÁP theatre webpage:
www.tapszinhasz.hu

text-movement-scenography, into which he had started his research with his own company years before, building once again on sharp and painful contrast effects.

The attempts of Jeles and Halász in the 1970s of finding a new theatrical language and a dramatic voice which would correspond to this remained in a vacuum and did not have an effect on the Hungarian theatre and drama as such. Decades later, in the 1990s, however, the traces of these attempts could still be seen in an indirect way, in the work of the new generation of theatre makers who had just started their careers. One common feature of the two artists is that they both came from the world of the theatre and were 'forced' to create a 'usable' text for their own theatres. Often they cooperate with a playwright and work out the stage text together. This is also characteristic of the biggest part of Árpád Schilling's work in the Krétakör, of which he was the founder. Schilling formed a tandem with István Tasnádi which gave birth to many unique productions. Such is, for instance, *NEXXT* (2000), which was inspired by *A Clockwork Orange*, or *Házámházám* (My Homeland, 2002), which was staged in the circus, a show reacting on the results of the regime change and the changes in the global economy, or *Feketeország* (Blackland, 2004), in which the company (according to their own statements) tried to create a satirical improvisation-based show, rather than a play in the traditional sense, about the missed opportunities of the past era, showing their disappointment and bitterness. After the disbanding of Krétakör, or its reorganisation, Tasnádi chose to be director himself of his play *Fédra fitness* (Phaedra Fitness, 2009), with an ad-hoc company, in which he rethinks the ancient legend as a contemporary story, employing post-dramatic means. The plot is set in a fitness club, with a dominance of youth and the cult of the body.

The intermingling of theatre and text is most overtly present in Béla Pintér's theatre. He is the author, the director and often the protagonist of his plays. Today his company already has a very significant oeuvre, consisting of fifteen shows, while a collection of his plays

was published in 2013. For a long time it was unthinkable for anyone else to put on his texts besides him, but lately *Parasztopera* (Peasant Opera) and *Sütemények királynője* (the Queen of Cookies) were staged, the first in Temesvár (Romania), the second in Poland. His play *Šzutyok* (Filth) was published as an appendix of the *Theater der Zeit* magazine (3/2011) and it is also going to be published in a Chinese language anthology. All these show that the text broke off of its first performance in such a manner that it became feasible and accessible for a very different cultural environment. In his performances, Pintér uses elements from the traditional culture, music and folklore, staging his absurd and grotesque stories with a very specific visual sense, strongly reflecting on the contemporary social phenomena.

Viktor Bodó started as an actor, memorable in the role of Baal, directed by Árpád Schilling. Later he took the training in direction at the University of Theatre and Film in Budapest. His first show was *Motel* (2003), this is when he first worked together with the playwright András Vinnai. This, and later the famous *Ledarálnakeltűntem* (Rattled and disappeared, 2005) was done at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest. The latter was also written in cooperation with Vinnai, a free adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*. In 2008 he founded his own company, the Szputnyik. In the *Kockavető* (Dice Man, 2010) several intertextual references, puns, gags are embedded into the show, while next to the text the music, the movement and the dance also receive great emphasis. Here the starting point was Luke Rhinehart's novel, which served as the basis for the provocative and sharp-humoured text written by Vinnai and others about fanaticism, fortune and freedom. *Érház történetek* (Council House Stories, 2008) has no author, just a dramaturg, a show presenting the life events, everyday scenes of people living next door to each other in an apartment house in Budapest, with outstanding actors. *Anamnesis* (2012) was also a co-production with the Katona József Theatre, presenting the state of the Hungarian health system based on the stories submitted by their spectators and the accounts

of some doctors of different specialisation. The starting point of the collective work was the director's concept and the improvisation of actors, just as in the case of their recent work, *Social Error* (2013). This latter looks for the answer to the question: "Why man cannot create a social structure in which the majority of people could live happily?" The production performed by six actors (five from abroad and one from Hungary) was premiered in Graz in 2013. The texts of the last two works mentioned make us wonder if these can still be considered plays or the theatre experiment questions the traditional form of drama and tries to dissolve its boundaries.

Kornél Mundruczó is a film and theatre director, scriptwriter and actor. He was the director of János Térey's *Nibelung lakópark* (Nibelung Residence), which was staged by the Krétakör in a site-specific location, at the Hospital in the Rock in the Buda Castle. The play is not only one of the most outstanding and challenging pieces of the Hungarian contemporary dramaturgy but also a play which re-interprets the notions of theatricality, acting and the relationship between actors and audiences, plays and space. In his tetralogy Térey forecasts the demise of a culture (Europe or Hungary), through the portrayal of the destruction of the fictive city of Worms, in a parodistic and ironic rewriting of Wagner's mythology. Later Mundruczó also filmed the performance with the actors of Krétakör. The world-renowned film theorist, critic and scriptwriter Yvette Bíró was the co-author of two pieces by Mundruczó. They wrote together *Frankenstein terv* (Frankenstein Plan, 2007) and *Nehéz istennek lenni* (It's Hard to Be a God, 2011). Both were productions of the Proton Theatre, founded by Mundruczó himself. The first was premiered in a shipping container placed next to the Bárka Theatre and then performed in different shops around the city. According to the plot a film casting in being conducted by a director when the protagonist, a strange out-of-this-world lad appears, who had never received any love and though strives hard to fulfil the expectations is unable to, and a series of murders take place around his

unbending character. None the less, he is the only person who could be a true counterpoint to the immoral beings desperately clinging to their lives. A strong punch in the stomach to the spectator, however the text is sometimes contradictory, some of the dialogues stretching out too long, and the longer scenes often fail to deliver the effect given by the short, flashy action sequences. The topic of *Hard to Be a God* is human trade and prostitution. "There are two vans standing at the side of the road. An exchange of goods take place: three young women. A grand plan is taking shape, if it comes true, everything would change. The key to the unmasking is the boy, who had so far been hidden from the world. They cannot make any mistakes, therefore new laws are set between the walls of the storage unit. If someone disobeys, they could never go home. Among them, however, there is a man who could intervene at any time, but does not do it – he was ordered not to. Like the God, having created the world, is watching its creatures silently. For a while. But how long can one stay only an observer?" – writes the Hungarian co-producer of the international theatre project, Trafó, House of the Contemporary Arts.

Regarding the creation of a new theatre language the Mohácsi brothers occupy a special place in the contemporary Hungarian theatre. János Mohácsi emerged as a director in the legendary company of the Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár. The texts of his best performances are written in cooperation with his younger brother, István Mohácsi. The genre of *Csak egy szög* (Just a Nail, 2003, Kaposvár) was sarcastically called 'prejudice in two noisy parts'. The performance elaborates on the history of Gypsy people, the absurdity of everyday racism, while the plot unfolds on two levels. Károly Kolompár is drinking coffee with God and tells him the history of the Gypsy people. The scenes he accounts come to life on the stage. At the crucifixion of Jesus a nail disappears, which (too) leads to the commencement of a century-long series of prejudices, stereotypes, social hypocrisy and racism present in every age, sometimes veiled, sometimes overt. Historical accuracy and anachronism,

Márton Kovács-István
 Mohácsi-János Mohácsi:
***We Live Once or the
 Sea Disappears Into
 Nothingness Thereafter***,
 director János Mohácsi,
 National Theatre, 2011,
 photo E. Gordon



reality and fiction, absurdity, burlesque and a bitter humour stemming from a distortion of language mix and mingle in the show. And here one must stress the unbreakable, organic unity of the text and the stage realization, which demands a new dramaturgy and acting style.

In *Egyszer élünk avagy a tenger azontúl tűnik a semmiségbe* (We Live Once or the Sea Disappears into Nothingness Thereafter, 2011, National Theatre Budapest) a small amateur theatre group in a Hungarian village is rehearsing John the Valiant the operetta in 1946, to raise money for the reconstruction of the protestant church destroyed by the Russian troops during the war. During the performance the Russian soldiers burst into the hall and start to assault everyone in the room, especially the women, when men from the village manage to disarm them. The other day sixty inhabitants from the village were packed on trucks and taken to Siberia. According to the critic István Nánay, the show is a painful and miraculous,

lyrical and elevated absurd tale. “The Mohácsi brothers developed their theme with several transpositions. They kept the real seed of the story but, stepping beyond reality, they also managed to reach a more metaphoric relevance. In the majority of their performances storytelling is not a precise rendering of a linear process but a cut-out and magnification of the key points of this process. These key situations are then broadened and/or deepened in a concentric structure. ... The folk tale reference system that defines the tone of the play is both surreal and ironically profane. In this world the dead wake up and toddle about among the living, smoking cigarettes.”⁹

One can conclude from what has been said so far that in many cases the theatrical vision is shaped first and this makes it necessary for a text to be born. This, however, in certain cases, for instance at Viktor Bodó – even if he works together with Vinnai, the playwright – remains incidental, unfinished and often only ‘accompanying’ the

9 NÁNAY István:
 Meghalni könnyű, élni
 nehéz, Revizor Kritikai
 Portál, 27/02/2011, online
 at: <http://revizoronline.com/hu/cikk/3064/kovacs-martonmohacsi-istvanmohacsi-janos-egyszer-elunk-avagy-a-tenger-azontul-tunik-semmisegbenemzeti-szinhaz/>

theatre forms, while in other cases (Béla Pintér or the Mohácsi brothers) the dialogues break off from the performance and become self-standing plays.

At the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen in the past few years there was an attempt of bringing to life a poetic theatre, the basis of which is never a written play, the text only works as a springboard. In *Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal* (Fabulous Winged Men, 2010) the theatrical vision is primordial and the text was adapted, compiled to the stage actions to suit the director, Attila Vidnyánszky's concept. In another show, *Halotti pompa* (Funeral Pomp) Szilárd Borbély's contemporary poems were used of a Baroque lyricism as a textual base for a very specific ritual theatre.

Compared to the artists discussed before Péter Kárpáti followed a very different, let us say inverse path. He came up as a young playwright at the end of the 1980s. "He also joined those generational attempts, which with a revolutionary or ironic attitude, more openly or wrapped in metaphors proclaimed the dead-end history of the eighties, its deep social unrest, the unsustainable macro processes."¹⁰ His career until now could be characterized by a restless search. The dream dramaturgy of the *Halhatatlan háború* (Deathless War), the socio-drama and the multi-layered fairy-tale world of the *Űilágevő* (World Eater) or later in *Országalma* (Orb) and *Tótféri* the tales and miracles become the organizing factors of the dramaturgy. "Is it a series of success or failure what has been going on between Péter Kárpáti and the Hungarian theatres? The answer: as we look at it, or as you like it. All of his plays were almost instantly staged ... yet the general picture – looking at the overall quality of the performances and the care given to the texts – is still very contradictory and of varying value."¹¹ The cooperation of director Eszter Novák and Péter Kárpáti seemed very fruitful after 2000, yet it stopped, and by the

end of the decade the playwright started new kinds of experiments. In 2009 he staged and directed *Szörpráziparti* (Surprise Party) with the independent HOPPArt company, which was performed in a 'secret' flat each time, revolving around the topic of coming together and breaking up. 'The authors invite the spectators for a joint play, who can switch between being observers and participants.' *A pitbull cselekedetei* (The Acts of the Pit Bull, 2011) was also staged by the author himself and an ad-hoc company; this time they performed in a cellar. According to the text of the leaflet "the angry prophet of the old legends, after years and years of wanderings has arrived this morning to Budapest. He got off the international train, left Keleti Railway Station, took a plunge into the bustle of the city, like a pit bull in a playground – and he is ready to meet us today ..."

Two new tendencies The apparition of the documentary drama

Earlier in Hungary one could only see verbatim productions as guests from abroad. Anna Lengyel, dramaturg and literary translator was the first one to produce such a show, with PanoDráma, a company founded by her, titled *Szóról szóra* (Word for Word, 2011). The starting point was the series of racist attacks against the Roma people between 2008-2009 and investigated the responsibility of the majority group, the Hungarians. The team of PanoDrama took interviews with the families affected by the attacks in the small villages, they took part at the court hearings, talked to the investigators. These all served as raw materials for the text of the performances. "Anna Lengyel, the initiator, dramaturg and co-author of the project wishes to make such theatre with her team, which deals with the most depressing problems of our public life, talks openly about the

10 RADNÓTI Zsuzsa: *Lázadó dramaturgiák: drámaíróportrék*, Palatinus, Budapest, 2003, 310.

11 RADNÓTI: *Lázadó dramaturgiák*, 326.

12 SISSO: Valami büzlük Pannóniában, *Revizor Kritikai Portál*, 17/03/2011, online at: <http://www.revizoronline.com/hu/cikk/3119/panodrama-szorol-szora-trafo/>

13 HONTI György: *Beavató színház Avagy mindannyian Ruszt József köpönyegéből bújtunk elő*, *Iskolakultúra*, 2009/7-8 melléklet, online at: <http://www.iskolakultura.hu/ikultura-folyoirat/documents/2009/2009-7-8.szepar.pdf>

social tragedies, wishing not to leave alone the people who survived them. This is a very important venture especially now, when soon enough it will be impossible, even officially, to convey the Hungarian reality on the stage. And it is worthless to deny that there are only a few who dare to risk to stage non-entertainment. Theatre, however, is not theatre without the minimal amount of fiction and abstraction. The spectator can only amplify the story in herself, can only react and come to terms with, if she receives a competent helping hand from a writer. With other words: it is not enough to compile a theatre play, it must be written. We seem to be in a lack of fast-shooting contemporary writers.”¹²

Theatre and education


Initiation theatre was first started in Kecskemét by József Ruszt in 1975. At first, they chose fragments from *Romeo and Juliet*, compiled a cross-section of the play, and took it to different schools so that the story and the problematic of the play could be shown to the students, with the help of actors, while also explaining the most important concepts of the stage and dramaturgy. That is, to initiate them in the secrets of theatre making. György Honti in his study, *Initiation Theatre or All of Us Came Out of József Ruszt's Coat* concludes that until the 1990s Ruszt was the only representative of the Theatre in Education methodology, which originated in England and has become since then world famous.¹³ However, after the change of the regime the situation started to change somewhat, and during the past ten years we could even experience an incredible boom in the area. And not only because more and more theatres realise that that it is worth building out a direct relationship with the schools, especially secondary schools, but they more often than not also organise discussions, debates, meetings with them after the shows. It seems that it is Árpád Schilling who is the most faithful follower of Ruszt's attempts, as in 2007 he toured *hamlet.ws* in different secondary schools. Shakespeare's play in his interpretation is a coming-of-age-story, the story of a strong father, a beautiful



Péter Kárpáti: *The Acts of the Pit Bull*, director Péter Kárpáti and the Company „Secret Society”, TRAFÓ, 2011

mother and a clever and healthy son. It is usually the gym of the schools where the students sit around the three actors who celebrate the show. This performance frees the play of traditional theatrical conventions, focusing rather on the true conflicts. The performance has been performed constantly since the premiere, 150 times by today, reaching ten thousand secondary school children.

Hamlet by Schilling and his actors started a new age, when theatres and schools meet each other. Since then, the repertory theatres also realize how important this age group could be for them.

These classroom theatre attempts not only bring a new audience layer for the contemporary Hungarian drama, but they could also propagate the birth of a more open dramaturgy, and a novel approach to theatricality. 

ANNA LAKOS works as a secretary responsible for research at the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, president of the Hungarian Center of ITI, translator.

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