The Waning Politics in Slovak Theatre

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Abstract

After the political changes in 1989 endowed Slovakia with the prospect of a successful and effective economic transition, the country’s theatre scene boldly reflected the euphoria, which drove the society to a path where it could experiment, criticize and shift paradigms. Nonetheless, the artistic revolution of the 1990s (witnessing the advent of such innovative theatre ensembles as Stoka or GuNaGu) soon waned and gave way to a more commercial and politically benign theatre in the 21st century, trailed by the state-funded network of national theatres. This paper endeavors to examine how the dialectical relationship between state-funded national theatres and the fringe scene in Slovakia brought about a state in which political discourse and artistic originality became an inherent part of the independent theatre scene. While very few plays directly addressed the country’s political development after 1989, or the dynamically changing social power structures, many productions were intrinsically political in the way they challenged the specifically delineated system of art funding. For example, the aesthetic of the Stoka theatre (and its artistic successor SkRAT), bearing traces of the devised method reminiscent of the American radical theatres of the 1960s and 1970s (such as the Open Theater or the Living Theater), became an artistic channel used to subvert not only traditional ways of theatremaking, but also the long-established torpid system of art funding. This paper aims to trace the development of political theatre in Slovakia after 1989 and speculate about why the political engagement through theatre seems to be losing its sting.

Keywords: Slovak theatre, politics, aesthetics

[Mankind] can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.

– Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (242)

Political theatre has had a bad reputation in Slovakia. The tendency to politicize art, aptly recognized by Walter Benjamin since as early as 1936, remained an integral part of cultural policy in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989. After the democratic changes in 1989, politics in the theatre underwent a turbulent transformation with varied results. In the 21st century, Slovak critics recognized that political theatre could include more than explicitly political themes, and deal with various power relations in society. The view that “although the theatre is no longer a discussion forum about the state of the society, it outlines issues about how individuals and subcultures act in a time of crisis” (Knopová 37–38),¹ presented a shift in the

¹All of the citations from Slovak texts were translated into English by the author.
critical approach to theatre. Such a view takes into account the idea that politics is in fact much more than the actions performed by politicians—a concept suggested, among others, by Stefan Collini, who argued that politics can be best defined as “the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space” (67). In Czechoslovakia, and later on in its successor state of Slovakia, one of the most relevant sets of power relations manifested itself in the area of state funding. The political compromising of art and artists that started during the communist era has continued in the opaque form of state-controlled funding of theatres, which at first stifled the origination of new aesthetics, but later on brought about a boom in experimental expressivity.

In this paper, I will attempt to prove that there is an inherent link between the direct funding of theatre by the state and the political engagement of theatremakers. I will examine three aspects of this issue that are relevant for the development of theatre and drama in Slovakia in the 21st century. The first aspect is the historical, political, and social legacy of the totalitarian communist regime in Czechoslovakia before 1989, which manipulated theatre into a politically benign, state-funded form of entertainment. The second is the explosion of liberated, experimental and dynamic theatre after 1989, and the subsequent burning out of the unrestrained energy that accompanied it. The third is the recent (post-2008) return to political expressivity, which presents a challenge to the established—and still dominant—system of centralized funding.

Beyond Ideological Definition

In his article Why Theater? Jeffrey Goldfarb recounts his experience with political theatre in Poland in the 1980s, particularly regarding ideological control and restrictions of specific modes of expression. Goldfarb arrives at the conclusion that artistic and cultural freedom “is a structural feature of modern social orders that has a relative autonomy from the other structures in the social order, particularly from […] the state and the economy” (57), and claims that it constitutes “a base for political freedom” (57). In the final decade of the Cold War, this relative autonomy gained significant momentum in the theatre. Even though theatres in socialist political systems were expected to uphold the regime and confirm its validity and importance, their very artistic nature (creative, performative, and social) often lay outside the control of the government. In Goldfarb’s words, theatre art had “an identity beyond [the theatres’] ideological definition” (58).

Despite the fact that theatres in totalitarian Czechoslovakia had to comply with the state ideology and preferred to stage plays that were politically harmless, some theatremakers took chances in their approach to dramatic texts. In an analysis of Slovak theatre in the 1980s and 1990s, Daniela Bačová and Dagmar Inštilitorisová argue that before the democratic changes of 1989, theatres in Czechoslovakia would intentionally sit on the fence in order to avoid censorship (and consequent persecution):

[Theatres would] get around bureaucratic censorship by staging classical texts with a new theatre poetics – the style of production becoming highly metaphorical, and often containing coded political messages, both appreciated and desired by the audience. Thus, we witnessed a
paradoxical situation in which an authoritarian state regime officially financed a culture that was becoming increasingly subversive towards its sponsors. (164)

This deliberate metaphorization in Eastern European theatre has been recognized and studied by several Western scholars; Janelle Reinelt, for example, has written about the phenomenon of “double-codings” that appeared in theatres behind the Iron Curtain (366). Double coding allowed audiences to perceive productions on a new level—one that allowed for a free and independent interpretation of art, in an era when interpretation was not possible without using the appropriate ideological manual. The metaphor became the most expressive theatrical tool:

Until 1989, [metaphorical imagery] was the most common means of expression to portray a state, an opinion, or an image. Using dramaturgy, acting skills (for example, the brilliant ability of some actors in the Slovak National Theatre to work with the intonation in classic dialogue), and semiotic stage design, enabled the audience to understand the meaning of the message. Theatre acquired a new dimension of “social” function. (Podmaková 212)

However, despite the fact that some Slovak theatres could respond “with sensitivity to the political and social changes in the country” (Inštitorišová and Bačová 163), at least within the limits of their artistic production, the official ideological line still demanded that the role of theatre be primarily “educational and entertaining” and not “artistic and aesthetic” (Podmaková 211). Consequently, this shaped much of the further development of Slovak theatre, particularly regarding its political sting: theatremakers were more prone to encoding and disguising their messages, and unwilling to take chances with direct political statements.

Part of the problem lay in the structure and system of art funding in Czechoslovakia (and after 1993 in Slovakia). The notion of state culture, dating back to the exclusivity of ideologically controlled art institutions before 1989, survived the political changes, and is perpetuated even in today’s neoliberal system of arts funding. As a result, while “state theatres” are the chosen few that can always rely on state funding, non-state theatres are considered independent market players that have to compete for funds. In a system based on an irrational combination of free-market forces and exclusive subsidizing, state culture naturally assumes a superior position which not only renders its institutions elitist and luxurious, but also shapes the form and content of theatre art.

However, in the late 1980s, while most state-funded art was concentrated in bricks-and-mortar institutions (e.g. national theatres and galleries), a measured shift was taking place that became apparent in two significant events: the emergence of improvisation as a mode of artistic expression and the publication of two Slovak theatre manifestos.

The New Aesthetics

In an environment where ideological regulation was imperative and where psychological realism and method of acting dominated nearly all Slovak stages, the rise of improvisation as a creative practice contributed to the process of liberating theatre in Slovakia. The first occurrences of improvisation, performed on large stages, coincided with the emergence of Mikhail
Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union. The parallels between improvisation in theatre and the subsequent political thawing were obvious:

Improvisation disrupted the established system, the stereotypical existence of the 1980s and its uniformity. Improvisation introduced new modes to the adventure of clashing with the unexpected. In an impro contest, no one knew what was going to happen next. [...] The spectators had the right to participate in the decision-making; they knew that their opinion was important and they spontaneously expressed it. In ordinary life, the situation was reversed – people could not decide about anything and chose not to express their opinion. Improvisation meant free creation and free people – it created a new, unconventional relationship with the audience. It was a victory of the spontaneity of human action [and] challenged the pre-programmed and clichéd character of life and art at that time. (Lindovská 193)

Something as simple and natural as improvisation thus acquired a political charge and opened the gate for a more radical and subversive creative approach – the method known as collective creation. This method, though widely known in the West, was unfamiliar to audiences and theatremakers in Central Europe until the late 1980s. Devised theatre, popularized by such American ensembles as the Open Theatre, the Living Theatre and the Wooster Group, was first introduced to Slovak audiences only a few years before the political changes in 1989. It is considered to be one of the co-agents—if not a catalyst—of the democratization process, as it enabled artists “to dramatize the degradation of daily life [...] [and] undo standards through exaggerated negative examples” (Quinn 99).

In 1988, director Blahoslav Uhlár and designer Miloš Karásek published two Slovak Theatre Manifestos in which they not only “openly presented their seditious ideas in both politics and art” (Mistrík 218), but also presented “one of the most revolutionary expressions in Slovak theatre in the late 20th century” (Mistrík 219). The text of the manifestos, translated by Michael L. Quinn, contains declarations about how the causality and plot-dependence of new drama prevents it from being able to “reflect the complicated interpersonal relations and permanent variability of reality,” how “[t]he new aesthetics of dramatic creation [ought to be] formed by decompositions, by motivational diffusion, and polythematization,” and how the “[d]ecomposition of theatrical characters is a qualitatively new phase of creation” (Quinn 100).

The subversive nature of the manifestos—well identified by Miloš Mistrík—extended well beyond just rebelling against the stale and inflexible theatre scene. The attack on causality and the reliance on plot (as well as the existence and finality of an unchangeable and easily controlled text) openly paralleled the theatrical expressivity of the 1980s to the social and political structure in Eastern Europe. The necessity of allowing theatres to express the complex relationships between people and the ever-changing social reality indicated the importance of a re-evaluation of the organization of political and public forces. In other words, not only were theatres requested to change their ways, but the entire political setup was also criticized.

Improvisation provided a new and powerful tool to transform the latent and highly metaphorized aesthetics of Slovak theatres into a more public and radical political statement. Uhlár and Karásek shifted the critical discourse about theatre and took it out into the open. This
reflects the Polish experience presented by Goldfarb, who argued that one of the most blatant expressions of opposition to the cultural system was when the critically disposed artists stopped playing by the rules, by leaving the controlled interiors of bricks-and-mortar theatres and writing their own scripts (Goldfarb 60). Theatres in buildings and scripts could be controlled, even censored, but ensembles improvising in the streets and freely devising their performances escaped the ideological regulators. This established a direct link between the personal, political and theatrical experience of people—a link that proved essential for the subsequent social change. At the same time, it proved Tony Kushner’s point that “[a]ll psychology has its origins in the public sphere; the world outside is experienced, introjected, becomes the stuff of which we are made, our private selves, and is then reinserted into the public sphere as we interact with the world around us” (20).

**Devising Freedom**

The theatres’ social interaction became most prominent in the 1990s. Slovakia was undergoing immense political, social and economic changes, and the society reacted to them with a varying degree of engagement. The theatre reflected this reaction and witnessed a visible shift, “mostly in the poetics and aesthetics of drama and theatre […] [which were] to some extent the consequence of the social and political development after 1989” (Knopová 8). Devising performances rather than working with finished scripts, a method introduced and perfected by Uhlár and his Stoka Theatre,2 carried a strong political charge defying the hierarchy of power according to which art was funded. The devising process empowered a group of creators—an artistic team and often an entire community—to express themselves in a manner liberated from the ideologically restraining hegemony of state culture. Just like earlier in Western countries, devised theatre unleashed the creative potential of “those members of the theatre ensemble who have been disenfranchised by the concentration of power of decision in the hands of a few key members,” and challenged the rigid traditional system of staging a play which “has been strong on control and wasteful on imagination” with the aim of “supplant[ing] oligarchic, or even dictatorial, control by a more democratic way of working” (Baldwin and Bicât 6).

The devising method, popularly referred to as “collective creation” in Slovakia, became a guarantee of diversity and a new form of expressivity, often contrasted with the polished acting and obsessive psychological realism of productions staged at the National Theatre. Theatres like Stoka and its successor SkRAT never worked with written dramatic texts, direction and dramaturgy blended into one, and actors did not play roles but rather themselves, similarly to the performers in the American devising theatres of the 1960s (Auslander 109), thus moving away from what was recognized as “dramatic character” (Grusková 222). After Stoka’s establishment in 1991, performances such as *Collapse, Impasse (Sentimental Journey)*, or *Deep Enough (Heavy Mental)* pioneered this new approach, which decomposed and de-dramatized the theatrical structure familiar to Slovak audiences. Performing humanity, actions and emotions

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2 The word “Stoka” means “sewer” in Slovak. Stoka was the first independently established theatre in Slovakia (1991).
replaced plots and stories. Though not explicitly political at first, this type of devised theatre (peaking in Stoka’s subsequent productions, most notably Eolpso and Bottom: Ode to McWorld) soon acquired a political dimension, one that was not far from Antonin Artaud’s ideas about the theatre of cruelty “whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times” (84).

In the 1990s, the newly discovered potential of devised theatre resonated strongly with audiences. This resulted in a visible progress in the aesthetics of theatrical productions as well as in civic engagement, which was one of the side effects of the unfettered experimentation in theatre. Not only did Stoka’s plays “demonstratively react to the political situation in Slovakia [in the 1990s]” (Knopová 19), but they also attracted diverse audiences looking for a place where they could express their political views:

[The people] gathering in front of Stoka Theatre after 1991 were not only non-conformist theatre makers, but also students, intellectuals, liberal politicians, university teachers, writers, visual artists, musicians, translators as well as common people (the “normal audience”): theatre lovers with different levels of education and profession. The diversity of the audience was truly incredible and unforgettable. (Bakošová-Hlavenková 66)

Part of Stoka’s appeal in the 1990s lay in the theatre’s willingness to present itself as both an artistic entity and a political institution. Stoka directly opposed the corrupt and manipulating government of Vladimír Mečiar by offering its premises for debates and projects aimed at raising awareness about civil society and the rule of law. At the same time, being the first self-established theatre and using a method which subverted the conventional ways of creation and performance, Stoka challenged and criticized the system of financial support and control of theatres in Slovakia. For example, in its 2002 production titled Commission, Stoka satirized and challenged the omnipotent and often sinister role of funding committees and commissions. Stoka’s political stance influenced the attitude of Slovak theatremakers towards the system of funding and management.

Nonetheless, Stoka’s political appeal started to fade when the ensemble broke up and the SkRAT Theatre was established in 2004. Stoka’s building was demolished in 2006 to make way —ironically enough—for a shopping centre. But while most of the political engagement in Slovak theatre waned before the first decade of the 21st century entered its second half, its legacy has remained present, most prominently in the SkRAT Theatre, which has produced a handful of plays with political content, such as Central Europe Loves You; The Trial, of the Trial, by the Trial (You'll Go to Jail? Asshole!) and most recently The Interior of the Interior. SkRAT has worked with secret police reports, court decisions and historical sources to document and personalize the political issues that underlie the current social and cultural intricacies in Slovakia.

**The Future and Funding**

In the last 10 years, Slovak theatre has undergone changes nearly as radical as those that took place immediately after 1989. The Slovak critical reflection of this development rather
Ivan Lacko generalizes the tendencies that became manifest in this period during which “three notable tendencies can be distinguished: a decrease in the number of productions of Slovak drama, an extension of genre diversity, and a decline in the productions of the bourgeois type of drama relying on the methods of psychological realism” (Šimko 651).

International scholarship has acknowledged similar phenomena and indicated the importance of analogous economic factors. For example, the 2007 Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama, which covers nearly 150 years of drama, makes a reference to the change in aesthetics in the theatre in Slovakia and recognizes the conformity of state-funded institutions. The authors aptly recognized that, after 1989, plays in Slovakia “[were] less likely to be staged in the established repertory companies than in the past [and that because of] the changed social status of theatre in the post communist era, the major companies [were] afraid to run risks [while] [o]pportunities for new drama [were] greater in the fringe theatres” (Cody and Sprinchorn 1255). While Slovak audiences in the 21st century could experience political drama and performance in non-state theatres, the network of national theatres avoided sensitive issues altogether.

Besides devising their plays, fringe theatres also started producing plays that dealt with the public and political figures and personalities of Slovakia’s past (Rastislav Ballek: Tiso, Viliam Klimáček: Dr. Gustáv Husák, Sláva Daubnerová: M. H. L.), and used field research and the methods of verbatim theatre to point out the politically relevant issues of the day. In a “dramatised society” (Williams 5), documentary theatre, such as Ján Šimko’s Petřžalka Stories or Steel My Heart, assumed the position of critically reflecting Slovakia’s social development since the early 1990s. The latter of the two productions mentioned above deals with the consequences of the privatization of the country’s largest steelworks by a global corporation. In another example, the Pôtoň Theatre’s play Misery, making use of extensive field research about the social and economic conditions in one of the poorest regions of the country, shows people on the edge of what constitutes human behaviour. Their humanity gives way to animalistic and predatory instincts, not dissimilar to the neoliberal understanding of economic and social relations which ironically brought about their poverty in the first place. Most recently, Viliam Klimáček’s play Holocaust topically reacts to the ever-present role of myth, manipulation and political abuse of nationalist sentiments in Slovakia.3

And yet, apart from these few examples of both explicit and implicit political charge in theatrical productions, politics and theatre appear to be at odds with each other. Part of the disinclination to tackle political issues in theatre—at least those dealing with the power structures in Slovak society—lies in the system of funding; Slovakia still relies heavily on a network of directly subsidized national theatres, which constitute the foundation of a system that divides all art institutions in the country into two groups: those that are established and directly funded by the state, and those that are self-established and receive funding from various sources (including government grant schemes). As early as in 1969, Victor Corti considered the colossal institution of the National Theatre in the United Kingdom to be “a national (financial) drain” as

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3 The play deals with the conditions in the wartime Slovak Republic, where a large portion of its Jewish population was deported to concentration camps in Germany and Poland.
opposed to what its founders believed it to be: namely, “a national asset” (186). Furthermore, Corti was very critical of the National Theatre’s aesthetics when he posited that “its asset value was limited to an element in the culture market which emphasize[d] interpretation rather than creation and aim[ed] at impressing according to rigid social rules of behaviour” (186). To this very day, the Slovak National Theatre is similarly viewed as an institution of national importance, regardless of the fact that its contribution to the development and maintenance of social dialogue and political discourse has been minimal.

In addition, the division of artists into two categories—state and non-state—constitutes an anomaly in society; indeed an outright paradox. State-funded theatres reach out to the general public in a way that cannot be paralleled to the smaller fringe theatres, and yet (often because of their direct funding) they rarely attempt to tackle controversial, political and critical issues. Fringe theatres do this, but they are marginalized both in terms of the content and form of their performances. Again, this development is similar in other European countries. Sir David Hare, a well-known British director and theatremaker, has highlighted how the state of the theatre reflects the state of the society; in particular, how both theatre and society are becoming increasingly economically polarized:

> You have extremely prosperous boutique theatres, which are in public/private partnership in inner London, which are very successful at raising sponsorship. Then there’s economy-class theatre, which is finding it much tougher, and that’s mainly in the regions where people are not able to get that level of subsidy. (Needham)

In a situation like this, it is important to ensure “that state-subsidized theatres continue to stage work that is not going to find an audience […] [because] that’s what state subsidy is for […]. [It should] challenge or inspire debate but would not be popular enough for a commercial theatre to stage” (Needham).

In Slovakia, the system of art funding inherently favours state-run theatres, by subsidizing them in accordance with the relevant legislation. At the same time, however, the Ministry of Culture has set up a neoliberal environment in which all subjects (including state-run institutions) compete to get funding. Goldfarb acknowledges a similar trend: “[This is similar to] market directed political economies. In these, culture must find financial support. The arts and sciences are under significant pressure to operate in some way that is related to the bottom line, as we say in the States” (58).

One thing completely missing in Slovakia is motivation for audiences to participate in the funding of art. Besides ticket prices and the 2% of income tax assigned to art activities, other forms of donation are not supported by legislation (e.g. by means of tax deductions). State support solely through direct subsidies and grant schemes is not enough:

> [S]tate support doesn’t mean just allowing art to be created and presented –it also means setting up conditions (in advance), in terms of taxes, legislation and infrastructure that would facilitate art to flourish among people. Naturally, there is an inherent paradox in expecting
state institutions to automatically support art that is by definition subversive of state culture – but the more important it is! (Goldfarb 58)

While Goldfarb relates this view to communist Poland in the 1980s, it remains relevant for many countries, including Slovakia today. Cultural institutions managed by the state still retain the power to make decisions about art productions and art subjects.  

A Realm of Harmony?

In conclusion, there are several aspects of the waning political appeal in Slovak theatre which may signal that there still is a lot of potential in this area. The first is the existence of historical, documentary and devised drama mentioned above. The freedom and flexibility of these theatrical forms are a guarantee that theatre will continue, albeit sporadically, to confront the legitimacy of the dominance of the aesthetic form and challenge what Herbert Marcuse termed Schein, “a fictitious realm of harmony” in art (162). The second is the current production and legacy of theatres like Stoka and SkRAT; theatres that are not only “free and liberating” (Šebesta 160), but also representative of “the cultural reality and standing of theatres [in Slovakia]” (Čiripová 1), thus becoming a memento of the imbalance in the system. And the third is the judicious voice of young authors and theatre critics, which shows that there is great awareness of the systemic imbalance. Zuzana Ferenczová, a playwright and dramaturge, openly declares that “[Slovak theatre] lacks diversity” and that “the cultural policy of the state is disastrous” (Čorná and Hubinák 49). Anna Grusková, a renowned theatre critic and author, criticizes the development of Slovak state-funded theatre and questions its cost-efficiency (Čorná and Hubinák 53).

In an environment where there is about the same number of independent theatres as theatres established and funded directly by the state, it is only natural to expect at least some balance in their funding. However, as 2010 figures show, state-established theatres receive approximately 100 times more public funds than independent theatres, even though the former only staged 2.5 more productions and premiered 1.7 times more plays than the latter. At the same time, state theatres in 2010 attracted roughly 4 times more spectators than independent theatres. This unevenness confirms that, despite the aesthetic traditionalism and political benignancy of most state theatres, audiences seek not only theatrically experimental performances, but also politically subversive and critical ones. Or, as Zuzana Ferenczová puts it, besides going to new productions as theatre connoisseurs to see the latest directorial take on Chekhov, audiences, and in particular young audiences, yearn to see plays “that will ‘kick them in the ass’” (Čorná and Hubinák 50).

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4There are a few examples of this. When Stoka’s rented premises were demolished in 2006, city authorities buckled under the financial interest and power of the investors. A4 – Zero Space (Contemporary Arts Centre in Bratislava, the home stage of SkRAT) was evicted from the premises it rented in 2011 as a consequence of political pressure. Also, in a manner reminiscent of authoritarian rulers, the 2006–2010 Minister of Culture Marek Maďarič produced and staged his theatre play A Wandering Heart while in office in a theatre which rents its premises in the building of the Ministry.


