

WILL WE MEET IN NITRA? STRETNEME SA V NITRE?

The struggle for the festival's character or a game of alternatives

The International Theatre Festival Divadelná Nitra started in the autumn 1992, one year before the split of Czechoslovakia, during a time full of political battles and group conflicts. Back then, no one had a clear idea about the country's prospects. No one knew whether the mainstream in Europe would pull us in and we would become EU members, or whether we would float somewhere on the side and maintain the problematic sovereignty of only a national state. Nobody thought of a third way, namely that we could head in the opposite direction and swim against the current. Paradoxically, in the time of the Slovak presidency of the Council of the European Union (second half of 2016), many heads are breeding much more chaotic visions of our place in Europe and of our potential position in it than twenty-five years ago when the fall of the totalitarian regime still gave us enough positive energy. The fact that there is still much confusion in the air about our identity and affiliation became apparent in the production presented at the festival last year: Viliam Klimáček's opus *Mojmír II. or the Twilight of an Empire*, directed by Rastislav Ballek and using our early history to pose the question whether we belong more to the East or to the West.

When the Divadelná Nitra International Festival was established in 1992, our country had just had a universal totalitarian experience. It affected also such areas of culture as the organization of festivals and showcases. The communist regime used various types of "leverage" to enforce the ideological interests of the state and the communist party. This included, for example, the obligation to present productions commemorating official anniversaries of events from the history of the socialist bloc, or nepotistic pressure by authorities in favour of one or another "meritorious" minion of the communist power, for example, a progovernment playwright. The microscope of censorship was aimed also at productions that – shortly before the fall of the regime – encouraged what was already a markedly anti-totalitarian attitude of theatre audiences. It was difficult even for Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* directed by Lubomír Vajdička at the Drama Department of the Slovak National Theatre to be included in the all-national showcase *Theatre of Today* in Ostrava that took place just before the revolutionary events in autumn 1989. This was ironic because it was literally a few days after this showcase when people filled the squares in cities and the race was run for the totalitarian regime.

But even the time after the political change was far from idyllic. If before the revolution, festivals and art in general needed "purity guardians" among ideologists of the communist party and art associations, after 1989 the role of "the supervisory board" was taken over by some of the theatre critics. The infamous fight over what the National Theatre should be about began and its alleged cosmopolitan

and anti-national nature was contested. The fighting arena around the National Theatre extended to the newly established Divadelná Nitra festival whose character was also at stake.

From the very beginning the founders wished the festival to be free from party politics, to be pluralist and open, in short, to be anti-totalitarian. In the spirit of the ethos of the Velvet Revolution, it aimed to connect, not divide. However, it turned out that it was impossible to prevent a differentiation in opinion and taste. All kinds of small and even smaller camps were formed, each with its own interest and ideas about what productions and theatre trends should be presented. But it was mostly about how the festival should represent the country in the eyes of international visitors.

Despite critical contributions at festival discussion forums, a few dedicated festival writers published very opposing views in the media and, by presenting the festival's organizers as having anti-national intentions, "put the festival through hell". In the Mečiar period (named after Vladimír Mečiar, the authoritarian prime minister of the Slovak Republic in the 1990s), the festival's existence was threatened as its funding almost entirely lost state support.

The festival's "captain" Darina Kárová started sending S.O.S. signals and in the editorials of the festival programme tried to send messages in one bottle after another. At first, she was factual and patient: "At a time when organizers of similar events never had to doubt that they would receive generous support from the state budget, we learned how to look for other sources of funding. We made sure that the festival would continue thanks to the contributions from many, mostly international funds and institutions, but also from the city and from businesses, and thanks to co-organizers who provided us their services free of charge, just like our many volunteers."¹

"A cold wind is blowing and now there are counter waves," said the editorial the following year. "Ironically enough, along with the growing credit of the festival abroad, many official domestic organizations have expressed their deliberate disinterest in the event. One of the ways in which they show this disinterest is a reduction or total elimination of their funding." And then emotions entered the scene: "And so now there is a leak in the lower deck of Divadelná Nitra. ... Will the festival's ship reach next year's event or will it drown

in debt?"² But the festival did not get shipwrecked. The director manoeuvred out of the reefs of hostility and from the following year on more favourable winds hit the sails.

After the establishment of Divadelná Nitra, several other festivals were founded in Slovakia. At first, it looked like a competitive threat. In particular, the FISH festival – a festival of original Slovak drama supported by certain power groups – thrived financially. Nonetheless, in the end it survived for only three years (1991, 1994 and 1995) before it came to an end. And who was to blame for it? Was it Divadelná Nitra perhaps? There was another "top-down" attempt to push Divadelná Nitra out of the spotlight by reviving the original showcase of Slovak theatres that existed in the 1970s and 1980s under the name "Divadelná Nitra in May". Had it not been for the political changeover after the elections in 1998, the sole two events of the "Divadelná Nitra in May" showcase (1997 and 1998) would not have been the last.

Today it is clear that the plurality of festivals is normal. In some countries this plurality is truly astounding. In France, for example, there are over 300 regional festivals. People have realized that it is not a showdown, or a matter of "who is the only one on the market", but rather about who will be able to establish their own profile, win supporters among sponsors and attract spectators. This is how festival director Darina Kárová has understood it. In reaction to domestic, as well as international festivals around Slovakia, Divadelná Nitra has become the greatest and most prestigious international theatre festival in the country. Despite much effort to eliminate it.

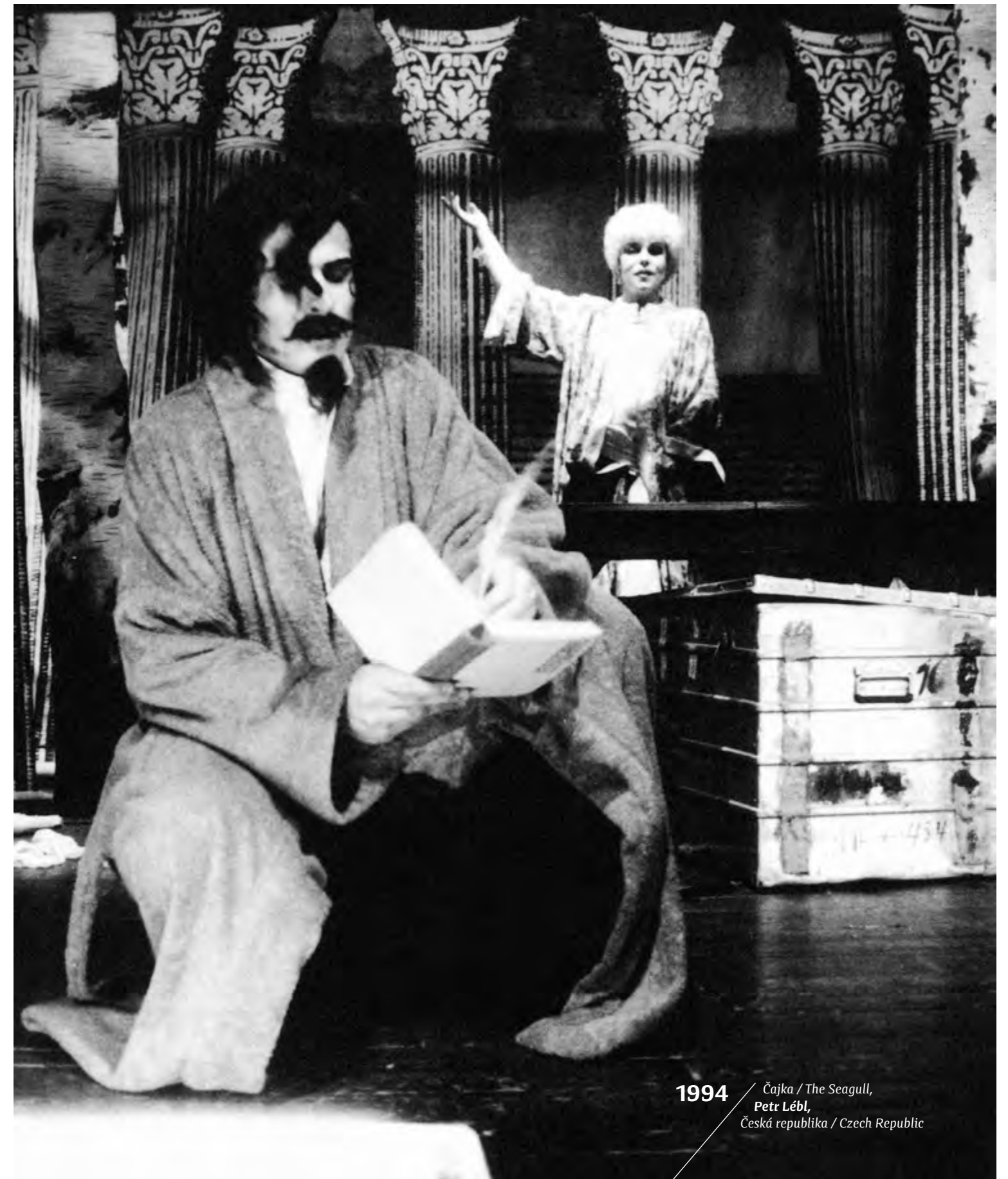
Disintegration and division vs. connection

Initially, the festival's spirit was filled with nostalgia for the broken-up Czechoslovakia. Many Czech theatremakers closely followed Slovak productions and, what is more, reacted to some of them with moving emotion.

For example, in Gogol's *The Marriage* produced by the minority Alexander Dukhnovich Theatre in Prešov, directed

¹ KÁROVÁ, Darina: *Bulletin of the Divadelná Nitra International Festival*, 1996. Nitra : Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 1996, p. 1.

² KÁROVÁ, Darina: *Message in a Bottle*. In: *Bulletin of the Divadelná Nitra International Festival* 1997. Nitra : Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 1997, p. 1.



1994 Čajka / The Seagull,
Petr Lébl,
Česká republika / Czech Republic

1997 / Les / The Forest,
Roman Polák, Slovensko / Slovakia



by Valentin Kozmenko-Delinde (1994), the critical reaction admired the gracefulness of the acting and the production's theatrical energy. The Ruthenian production was truly a multicultural artefact: the Slovak context, Ruthenian language and Ukrainian acting school were synthesized into a sparkingly live form. The production made visible the Ruthenian minority which, after years of hiding under the mask of a substitute, Ukrainian identity, claimed its original nationality. In the time of various kinds of compensation for the mistakes of the previous regime, this symbolized a similar restitution act. Looking at the Ruthenian destinies, our Czech colleagues nostalgically envisioned the first Czechoslovak Republic when the Zakarpattia Oblast was part of our country. And they realized that they lost something when the country split up and that it was more than just territory. They became a monocultural country.

But there were boiling emotions also on the other side, among the Slovak theatremakers. We realized that we were Slovakia minus the Czech culture, minus the magical Prague. But at that moment, paradoxically, that which we now call an above-standard neighbour relationship was born. In theatre, the bonds between the Slovak and Czech cultures were never broken. On the contrary, after the break-up of the country both nations became more authentic and started to cooperate on the basis of mutual interest. Without risking embarrassment, it can be claimed that it was at the Divadelná Nitra International Festival where the newest tradition of the Slovak-Czech theatre partnership began.

The festival would later return to the issue of disintegration of countries, as well as to inter-ethnic and inter-cultural clashes being the hot issues of the day, when the festival programme included productions from the countries of former Yugoslavia. For example, the production-performance by Oliver Frlič about how Slovenian citizens of Croatian origin were deprived of their citizenship, titled *25671*, became a testimony about a dramatically different process of a country's disintegration than was the case of Czechoslovakia

(performed at Divadelná Nitra in 2013). Similarly, the dramatization of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Platform* presented by theatremakers from Belgium dealt with the growing xenophobia and islamophobia (Divadelná Nitra 2006). Several productions from the most recent 24th festival also returned to some of the principal issues of modern history, for example *Hate Radio* directed by Milo Rau that dealt with ethnic cleansing in Rwanda.

The festival was initially dominated by domestic, Slovak theatre and featured only a small number of visiting artists. For several years Czech productions were leaders of the international representation at the festival. The first to join them from the West were French theatremakers, then artists from the Visegrad countries who reached the status of core participants. Then the festival's orchestra constantly grew and kept adding more and more instruments still so that it seemed that Nitra was experiencing a smaller version of the EU extension. The director welcomed each new country presented at the festival in her editorial of the event's bulletin as if it had been a new child born in her family. At first, the majority of ensembles were from postsocialist countries, from central and eastern Europe. Quite naturally, this created an East-West axis as a kind of profiling vector which the organizers turned into the event's permanent trademark.

The question about the festival's artistic profile, however, emerged at the very beginning. The principal issue was how to find a balance between the festival's specific focus on a theme and its overall openness. After thorough consultation with her advisors, festival director Darina Kárová opted for the second alternative. Back then, the open character of cultural events was a magical and magnetizing notion that was hard to resist. After years of being a closed and vigilant ideological selection, it was the only plausible option anyway. OPEN became the event's logo – after all, the first international foundation that offered funding for independent activities was called Open Society Foundation, George Soros's legendary life belt.



1998 / *Krik chameleóna / The Cry of the Chameleon,*
Josef Nadj, Francúzsko / France

And yet Darina Kárová suspected that over time openness might change into vagueness and that her effort could dissolve in shallow waters. This was why she formulated a subtitle for each year's festival in order to give the open nature of the programme at least some focus. If lined up in a time sequence these subtitles are very illustrative also of Slovakia's social development. Let us have a look at them: The first subtitles were Inspirations (1992), Perspectives/Perspectives? (1993), Disruption of Ties (1995), Regrouping of Values (1996), Message in a Bottle (1997), Island of Free Communication (1998), Individual on the Verge of Millennia (1999). From 2001, after systematic study of the work by young directors, the festival shifted

its focus on contemporary drama. It also acquired stronger thematic accents and subtexts. In 2002, contemporary drama was - in addition to the stable thematic interest - already a dominant feature of the event. After Slovakia's accession to the EU, the main issues changed - they included diversity as counterbalance to Skinned People (2003), then Value Charge (2004) and finally, the forefront was taken by shared important issues of the East and West: Approach the Truth (2005), Forever Young (2006) and Midentity (2007).

Eventually, the situation with the thematic accents developed in such a way that the festival's original openness became its polar opposite, namely a very specific thematic definition that was referred to as conceptuality.



1992 / *Dyp inaf (Heavy mental) / Deep Enough (Heavy Mental),*
Blaho Uhlár, Slovensko / Slovakia

The festival discovers the forms of contemporary theatre at home first

In 1989, the first freely organized festival in Slovakia confirmed a spontaneous orientation of its dramaturgy on the alternative scene. Before the revolution, such dramaturgy was only marginal, suffered, often suppressed. After the thaw, it received recognition. In the programme of the first year it was significantly represented.

Slovak alternative theatre - and Slovak productions made up a majority of festival productions - was represented by

emigrants from Cologne, Eduard Žlábek and Milan Sládek, a devised performance by Peter Scherhauser (long-standing director of the Brno-based Goose on a String Theatre, Stanislav Štepka's Radošina Naïve Theatre, the devised production *Gulp (Blasphemy in Motifs)* by the charismatic stage designer Aleš Votava and the GUnaGU Theatre, and Blaho Uhlár with his newly established, first independent Stoka Theatre.

Even the productions presented by repertory theatres were selected according to how much they transgressed the standard. These included works by recognized artists, be it the Slovak National Theatre's production directed by actor Martin Huba, an opera directed by globetrotter Jozef



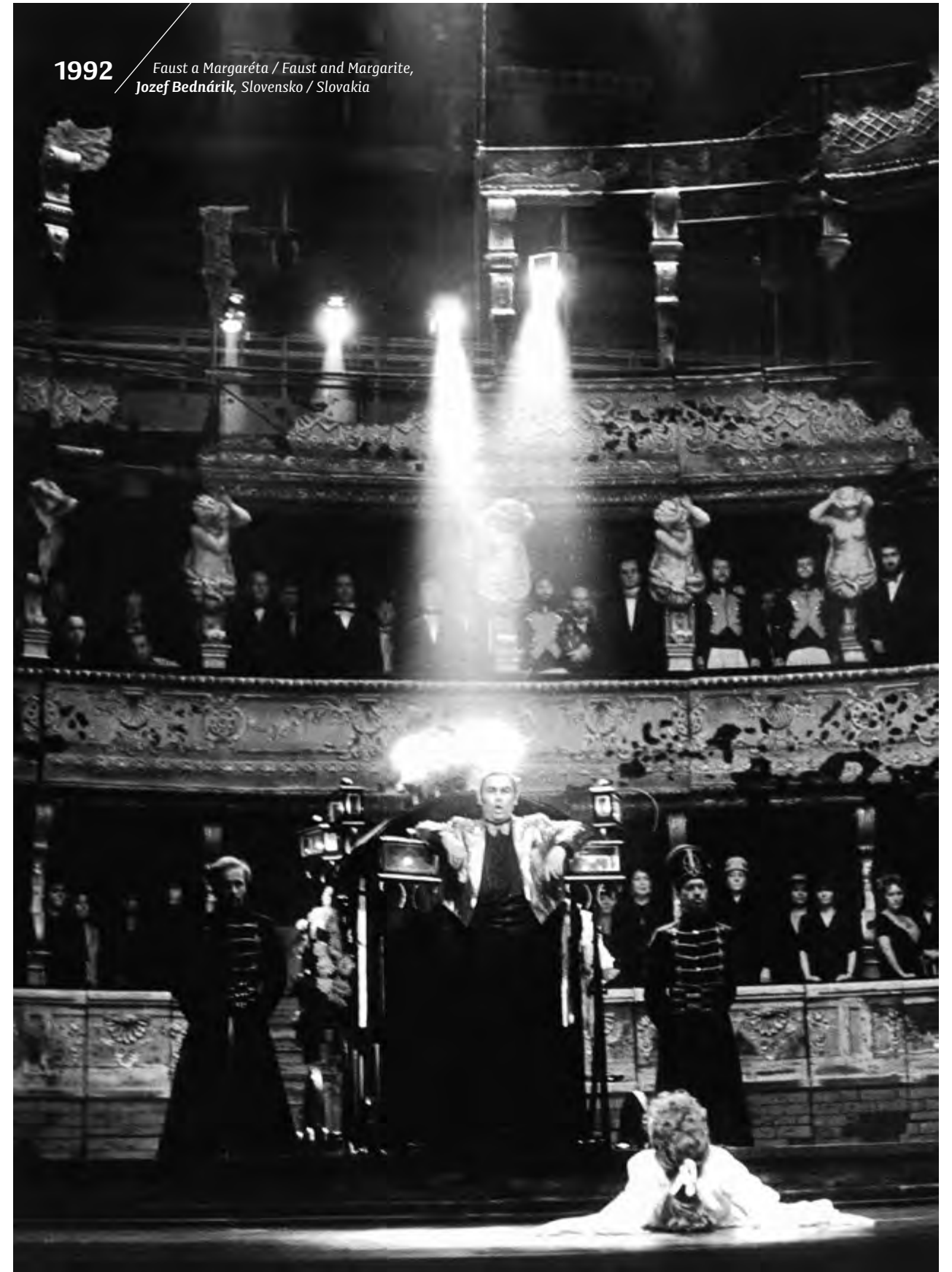
2008 / *Proces / The Trial,*
Dušan D. Pařízek, Česká republika / Czech Republic

Bednárik, or the production by charismatic musician and actor Jaro Filip with actors Milan Lasica and Július Satinský. Alongside these productions, works by very young directors were also presented, including Štefan Korenčí, Ondrej Spišák and the fresh theatre direction graduate Anton Šulík.

The Czech Republic was represented by several ensembles. A prime example was the exotic Russian group Derevo headed by Anton Adasinsky who got established in Prague. It was the first swallow signalling the return of another, non-mimetic art with an emphasis on form, style and non-verbalism. The performance was inspired by the Japanese butoh dance and was deliberately non-political (*A Man Kissing the Bottom of a Boat*). Following Adasinsky's footsteps, a wave of movement and dance theatre would hit Nitra – a wave that started rising in Western Europe already in the 1980s.

In addition to Derevo, there was a whole series of Czech ensembles already known from the period before 1989: Theatre on the Balustrade, Goose on a String Theatre and the Non-children's Studio of the Goose on a String Theatre.

The leitmotif of the festival discussions was the question where we ended up after four decades of totalitarianism (of which two decades were the time of so-called normalization) in comparison with our colleagues from behind the Iron Curtain or from the free world. For almost existential reasons, a need arose for a more intensive international dialogue. The festival had to extend its focus on international productions. The first festival was attended only by artists from Yugoslavia (today Serbia and Montenegro), a Slovak theatre from Stara Pazova and a Slovenian theatre from Ljubljana.



1992 / *Faust a Margaréta / Faust and Margarete,*
Jozef Bednárik, Slovensko / Slovakia

The festival sails to international waters

At first, the festival was open to all forms, genres, styles, touches, to big and small ensembles, to state-funded and independent theatres. However, it was inevitable that questions arose about whether the event should not have a specialized focus. In the course of several years the festival put more emphasis on the issue of staging and introduced the following motto: *The rising stars of theatre direction*.

In the 20th century, theatre direction became a matter of choice and a new art profession – that of a theatre director – was established. Modern approaches to directing introduced ways how texts could be read and interpreted individually and how the creativity of actors could be boosted. This programme was best applied to classical texts. A tradition of infinite re-interpretations was born. In our totalitarian times, “staged rewrites of classics” also offered a chance to avoid censorship. Classical texts were “a mask” behind which topical messages were hidden.

In the post-totalitarian period, the art of theatre direction still remained an important element in theatremaking. After all, statements about the state of the world and its people (expressed in the language of the theatre and seen as the effort to re-shape acting stereotypes) have remained the objectives of theatremakers until today. In the words of an international critic: at present, any media starlet is able to draw attention to himself or herself and diminish the serious work of a whole ensemble. The director – a demiurge – will always be needed as the guardian of “a higher principle” even though his concept might not be ostentatiously visible onstage. For this reason the festival’s intent to monitor young directors and the nature of their work was relevant and followed the path of the artistic focus in Europe. Eventually though, this particular emphasis was replaced by other current theatre trends.

But the festival kept searching for original personalities of new theatre direction. In the following years, dramaturgs would invite the productions of several dozens of artists from numerous countries to come to Nitra and I will yet have a chance to say how foresighted and successful decisions they made. To mention just a few names and without a claim to be exhaustive, let me start with Slovak artists: Matúš Olha, Soňa Ferancová, Jozef Gombár, Viera Dubačová, Ján Štrbák, Rastislav Ballek, Svetozár Sprušanský, Martin Čičvák, and a whole number of fresh graduates in direction and dramaturgy from the Academy of Performing Arts, for example Juraj Šulík, Vladislava Fekete, Marián Amsler, Michal Vajdička, Maja Hriešik, Roman Olekšák, or Alena Lelková.

From the Czech Republic, the following names stood out: Petr Lébl, Vladimír Morávek and Jan Antonín Pitínský. From France: Stéphane Braunschweig and Josef Nadj. Enikő Eszenyi, Róbert Alföldi, Árpád Schilling and Sándor Zsótér from Hungary; Grzegorz Jarzyna, Piotr Cieplak, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Maja Kleczewska and Jan Klata from Poland; Eimuntas Nekrošius, Rimas Tuminas, Gintaras Varnas and Oskaras Koršunovas from Lithuania; Alvis Hermanis from Latvia; the duo of choreographers Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak from Israel; Rodrigo García from Spain; Constanza Macras and Nicolas Stemann from Germany; Andreas Kriegenburg from Switzerland. From Russia, a country with a strong theatre tradition before the democratic changes, but hard to match after: Andrey Moguchyi and Kirill Serebrennikov, and later the famous, though older Nikolai Kolyada.

Several international names, new and unknown then, who literally had their international premiere in Nitra, have by now been awarded European prizes or nominated for future awards and European theatre has recognized them as great talents. Let me point out (again without trying to be comprehensive), for example, who won the prestigious New Theatre Realities Award given simultaneously with the Europe Theatre Prize (since 1993 – in Taormina, then in Turin, Thessaloniki, St. Petersburg and finally in Romanian Craiova): Eimuntas Nekrošius (Divadelná

1997 / *Tropické opojenie / Tropical Elation,*
Grzegorz Horst d'Albertis (Grzegorz Jarzyna), Poľsko / Poland



Nitra in 1995), Oskaras Koršunovas (Divadelná Nitra in 2000 and 2011), Josef Nadj (Divadelná Nitra in 1998), Alvis Hermanis (Divadelná Nitra in 2003 and 2006) and Krzysztof Warlikowski (Divadelná Nitra in 2000 and 2002). The list of those nominated for awards includes the following: Viktor Bodó (Divadelná Nitra in 2012), Nigel Charnock (Divadelná Nitra in 1999 and 2003), Declan Donnellan (Divadelná Nitra in 1999), Rodrigo García (Divadelná Nitra in 2004), Grzegorz Jarzyna (Divadelná Nitra in 1997, 1998 and 2011), Andreas

Kriegenburg (Divadelná Nitra in 1999), Eric Lacascade (Divadelná Nitra in 2001), Petr Lébl in memoriam (Divadelná Nitra in 1993, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2000), Arpád Schilling (Divadelná Nitra in 2000, 2004, 2005), Rimas Tuminas (Divadelná Nitra in 1997), Sándor Zsóter (Divadelná Nitra in 2003, 2006), Stéphane Braunschweig (Divadelná Nitra in 1996), Gintaras Varnas (Divadelná Nitra in 1999 and 2001), Tamás Ascher (Divadelná Nitra in 2001), and Andrey Moguchyi (Divadelná Nitra in 1999).

2003

Frank / Frank,
Nigel Charnock, Spojené kráľovstvo / United Kingdom



Directing the classics, or Shakespeare and Chekhov

In most of the events, the festival's dramaturgical dominants were William Shakespeare and Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. It is a fact that the theatre language of the English genius is universal and the impact of his play is global. It is not unusual to see him performed in Asian style and fashion, as if he had been a Japanese or Korean author. Divadelná Nitra introduced a great number of variations of Shakespeare. Commemorating the festival's tenth anniversary, teatrologist Ladislav Čavojský wrote a short essay in the bulletin where he stated the following: "Six productions of plays written by the greatest playwright of all time - among them *Hamlet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* staged four times, *The Tempest* three times and *The Merchant of Venice* twice - define the festival as an almost Shakespearian showcase."³

A similar essay could be written about various stagings of Chekhov. Some of the festival events even seemed to be dedicated to the Russian genius. Only later there were two editions that could be called "Divadelná Nitra - surprisingly without Chekhov!". This was because the two festival events in question focused on political and documentary theatre.

When doing the math, it turns out that *Three Sisters* and *The Seagull* enjoyed the most stagings (5 and 6), followed by *Ivanov*, *Platonov*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya* (2). It is because of the dramaturgical focus on young and younger directors that, when producing Chekhov, preference was given to plays about youth and its prospects, that is, about the scepticism of young women and the suffering of young artists. As far as style and method were concerned, psychological realism was visibly on the decline, while the language of metaphors, ritual and performance were getting stronger, and playing games was becoming the main principle of our lives.

Next to the two pillars of Shakespeare and Chekhov, on which the festival relied for a long time, other classical authors also looked refreshingly good. Heinrich von Kleist, for example: his *Penthesilea* directed by Sándor Zsóter from the National Theatre in Budapest was inspiring particularly

in the context of the new use of text and words in theatre. Or the equally forgotten playwright Friedrich Hebbel: Andreas Kriegenburg's presentation of his *Maria Magdalena* suddenly emerged before the eyes of the unprepared spectators as if the play had been written by a contemporary author.

New drama

Under the totalitarian regime, a dramatic text could be censored and ideologically manipulated. That was why theatres eschewed, most of all, ideologically schematic original Slovak drama. Today, the drama from the normalization period is - quite understandably - not staged. Contemporary Western plays were barely produced. It was not until the onset of freedom that the paths to modern and postmodern world drama were opened.

Looking more closely at the line-ups at Divadelná Nitra, it becomes clear that contemporary plays, including Slovak ones, of course, were never really absent. It was only that - overshadowed by the geniuses of classical and modern drama - they somewhat disappeared for a while. The presented new texts, and this was a novelty, were usually written by directors, stage designers, visual artists, choreographers or actors and became a kind of "trampoline" of the production. But there were, naturally, also plays written by Slovak playwrights: Eva Maliti Fraňová, Iveta Škripková, Karol Horák, Stanislav Štepka, or the brilliant dramatization of Božena Slančíková-Timrava's novella *The Death of Paľo Ročko* directed by Matúš Olha.

At a certain moment it even seemed that a breaking point occurred in how authors approached the texts. The festival's programme was composed of in-yer-face plays, or "new drama" that was also known as "cool drama". It was the most pronounced group movement after the wave of the so-called absurd drama.

From this category, the festival presented the productions of the following plays (once again without claiming that the list is complete): *Faust (Faust is Dead)* by Mark Ravenhill, directed by Jiří Pokorný at the HaDivadlo in Brno (2001) as well as

3 ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav: The Classics as the Present. In: *The Festival on Its Way to Europe*. Nitra : Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 2001, pp. 31-34.

Mark Ravenhill himself in his own monologic *The Product* in 2006. Sarah Kane's play *Cleansed* directed by the brilliant Krzysztof Warlikowski (2002), or *Closer* by Patrick Marber that was superbly directed by visiting Jan-Willem van den Bosch and performed by the actors of the State Theatre in Košice (2002). The Russian contribution to the "in-er-face" approach came in the plays by Vasily Sigarev (2002) and Ivan Vyrypayev (2004, 2008). The much awarded and maybe overly kind-hearted production *Arabian Night* by Roland Schimmelpfenig was directed by Martin Čičvák (2004) and staged by the Drama Department of the Slovak National Theatre; *Innocence* by Dea Loher was presented by the Old Theatre from Krakow (2004); Neil LaBute's short play *Bash* was directed by Jan-Willem van den Bosch at the Astorka Korzo '90 Theatre (2003), and another short piece *The Shape of Things* was produced by the young duo of directors Maja Hriješik and Roman Olešák at the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra (2006). Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* were seen by audiences at the State Theatre in Košice (2005) and the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra (2007). Both were directed by Michal Vajdička.

Divadelná Nitra also featured the play *The History of Ronald, the Clown of McDonald's* (2004) by provocative Argentinian Rodrigo García who resides in Spain. France was represented by Bernard-Marie Koltès's *Black Battles with Dogs*, brilliantly directed by Dimiter Gottscheff (2004). The festival presented the engaged play *Norway Today* by Igor Bauersima, directed by Vladislava Fekete and rehearsed by the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra (2005) as well as the excellent production of the Belgian NTGent based on Michel Houellebecq's novel *Platform* (2006). But the festival saw also productions of some of the plays by the predecessors of this controversial movement: Heiner Müller's *Quartett* directed by Soňa Ferancová at the Astorka Korzo '90 Theatre (2001), or *Before Retirement* by Thomas Bernhard, directed by Juraj Nvota and also staged at the Astorka Korzo '90 (2006).

The "new drama" movement presents art that is accusatory, engaged and confessional. It is not art that would be entertaining, relaxing or comforting. It is often beyond being bearable and transgresses the sensitive boundaries of taste and ethical prudishness. In a time of growing ignorance,

such drama searches for the truth and in the process, it worries and irritates. It often causes outraged reactions by people from conservative circles. In addition to just fun and pleasure, Divadelná Nitra always wanted to introduce intellectual challenges. "New drama" plays thus always had a place at the festival. Consequently, a new, relevant question was posed: can direction, that is, interpretation of the world by means of theatre, be applied more meaningfully to contemporary texts than to classics? (See, for example, the contribution by French critic Chantal Boiron in the publication commemorating the 10th anniversary of the festival).⁴

And indeed, some unforgettable productions of the young generation of directors were created using both classics and new drama. Let me mention, for example, the production of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* in the poetically strong staging of Krzysztof Warlikowski (2002). This Polish director was already known for his excellently merciless production of classical works (e.g. *Hamlet* by TR Warsaw, 1999; the participation of this extraordinary director at Divadelná Nitra 2000 is considered to be a breaking point in his international career). In a similar fashion, Árpád Schilling came to the festival to stage not only Chekhov's *The Seagull*, but also a documentary political production created from newspaper articles and titled *BLACKland (FEKETEország)*. Martin Čičvák is another example: besides Schimmelpfenig's *Arabian Night*, he produced Georg Büchner's play *Leonce and Lena* applying such poetics to make it feel as a contemporary play. After all, theorists have already agreed that classics and contemporary plays are staged using identical approaches and techniques. The experience from Divadelná Nitra has confirmed this.

Political and documentary theatre

"Theatre as a medium pointing out social problems can never keep up with other, much faster more urgent media, the news, magazines or newspapers," Hans-Thies Lehmann

writes in a chapter on politics and theatre.⁵ Besides "political conflicts increasingly elude intuitive perception and cognition and consequently scenic representation," Lehmann posits in the same chapter.⁶

Political theatre is alive, after all. The question about its purport and methods, however, is being addressed anew and also appears to be different in new contexts. It also makes sense to ask who actually likes political theatre. Immediately, there will be two camps – those who are for and those against. We know about countries where this type of theatre has a high status. Germany, in particular. Even in our country, in the totalitarian times, politics was incorporated into the subtext, put between the lines in most productions that were worth seeing.

When politics became part of the forums where it rightfully belongs, it left the theatre stages. Even though the

most effective viewing of politics is to watch live broadcasts from the parliament, Divadelná Nitra showed productions – from the very beginning of the festival – that were related to political issues in one way or another.

But it is important to discuss the question of what is political and what is political theatre. "Issues that we call 'political', have to do with social power," is the fairly traditional response that Lehmann himself gave to this question.⁷ We saw a great number of productions at the festival that dealt with social power.

These included *opuses* that reacted to big historical events. Sometimes they did it in an entertaining way – reminiscing what once was and what we can now view with a humorous detachment. Other times, history was addressed dramatically and with a dose of grotesque pathos. The former included a funny and yet emotional

2008 / *Náhle spřšky ticha / Sudden Showers of Silence, Jozef Fruček, Linda Kapetanea, Grécko / Greece*



5 Translated from the Slovak translation of LEHMANN, Hans-Thies: *Postdramatické divadlo*. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2007, p. 297.

6 Quoted from LEHMANN, Hans-Thies: *Postdramatic Theatre*. New York : Routledge, 2006, p. 175.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

1993

Dojímate ma veľmi / You Move Me so Much,
 Marián Pecko, Slovensko / Slovakia



overview of the events from the Prague Spring (1968) until the normalization period as perceived by young people. The showcase was titled *Stars in the Willow* by Karel David and Co. performed by the HaDivadlo from Brno (1993). The latter category included biographical works about writers, poets, politicians and their role in the midst of history, for example, Iveta Škripková's *You Move Me So Much* about the life of writer Dominik Tatarka, directed by Marián Pecko with the Puppet Theatre at the Crossroads in Banská Bystrica (1993), or Karol Horák's play about the life dramas of poet Janko Kráľ titled *Strange Johnny*, directed by Roman Polák at the Slovak National Uprising Theatre in Martin (today the Slovak Chamber Theatre) in 1994.

An original approach to biographical material became the working method of the Aréna Theatre in Bratislava. Their plays were created either by using only authentic political speeches, for example, speeches by Jozef Tiso, the infamous Slovak wartime president in Rastislav Ballek's production *Tiso* (2005), or they combined actual occasional speeches by Czechoslovakia's normalization president with the text of playwright Viliam Klimáček in the play *Dr. Gustáv Husák, (Prisoner of presidents - President of prisoners)*.

We also saw productions about high politics in classical plays. Among the most interesting ones were the different forms in which theatres staged *Hamlet* (1995, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001) and *Macbeth* (twice in 1999, 2000). Director Warlikowski even updated Shakespeare in his production of *Hamlet* (2000) in which he boldly opened the issue of the church that, after the fall of communism in Poland, started to play a controversial role. Similarly, Vladimír Morávek also updated Shakespeare in his perception of *Macbeth* staged with the ensemble of the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra (1999). In the production, the director intertwined the high and low in an original way when the protagonist was first presented as an ordinary village man drinking beer and watching TV and then visualized his dream of greatness by showing him, in the second part, as the historical murderous Scottish king.

The legendary Deutsches Theater Berlin produced a great performance of Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*, directed by Nicolas Stemmann (2007), a play about the meaning of the conflict between the personal and public in the world of courtly violence. A high royal tragedy was attempted also by the production of Viliam Klimáček's play *Mojmír II. or the Twilight of an Empire* that connected local history (or rather non-history) with the archetypal story of King Lear (2015).

Many productions openly accused protuberant social problems as resulting from poor administration of public matters. These included, among others, environmental disasters, mafia-like practice, everyday racism, drug addiction, disintegration of the family, or the marginalization of whole social groups. At the same time, it is remarkable that it was clear how the two halves of Europe got closer to each other and became more similar - this was visible in how these issues were universally relevant for festival visitors from both East and West. An example that confirms this assumption is the production *English is Easy, Csaba is Dead* by Viliam Klimáček and Karol Vosátka from the GUnaGU Theatre in Bratislava (2001) that dealt with the issue of anglomania among members of the mafia. Another example might be István and János Mohácsi from the Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kapošvár and their production *We Bombed Nitra* based on Joseph Heller's texts about the meaninglessness of war (2002). Or even contemporary Russian plays about the devastation of humanity in today's post-Soviet society (e.g. Vasiliy Sigarev's *Plasticine*, directed by Kirill Serebrennikov, 2002), or the Hungarian tragically grotesque adaptation of Béla Pintér's text about the impact of political violence on a family titled *The Queen of the Cookies* performed by Béla Pintér and Company from Budapest (2007).

In this respect, a special mention should be made of some of the productions from the later years of the festival that brought a discussion about the most current issues of today. These productions introduced such issues as the clash of civilizations, intercultural and interconfessional animosity being



2005 / Slávnym v Bombaji / Big in Bombay,
Constanza Macras, Nemecko / Germany

a new and very flammable aspect of the 21st century. This particular aspect constituted some of the discourse of Belgian theatremakers from Ghent and their excellent dramatization of the novel *Platform*.

Another issue addressed by several productions was the question of identity, a serious current problem. Identity is portrayed as something uncertain, fluctuating or forced because the personal lives of people have been constantly gripped by political power which decides about people's appearance and reputation. This "identity in motion" phenomenon ultimately led philosophers and anthropologists to the new knowledge that a person's identity is a construct and that it is nothing inherent or genetic. In this sense, the staging of Bernard-Marie Koltès's play *Black Battles With Dogs*, directed by Dimitër Gotscheff, expressed the opinion that the fixed idea that black people are different than white people is really

prejudice and therefore deserves to be strongly deconstructed. Also, the mentioned production 25 671 by Frjič dealt with the identity issue – and did so in the primary significance of it, the aspect of a citizen's legitimate identity presented in its literal meaning in the form of a personal ID card.

Another type of tracing political issues became evident in the works by Blaho Uhlár and the Stoka Theatre that would not accuse explicitly, but in a fashion that was encoded in feelings and screams. The effect of state power was expressed in fragments of events and experiences, concealed in the folds of narration, in the depths of the artistic statement. Just like Lehmann posits, politics operated very much undercover and was almost untouchable.

After all, our hereditary bond with politics – which is understandable as it seems that culture, if not anything else, has had to be regularly rescued over and over again – led

Divadelná Nitra in 2005 to shift the focus of its main programme to political theatre. In the same year, however, another significant category of contemporary theatre appeared: documentary theatre. Using authentic newspaper articles became the source of the texts for Jan Antonín Pitínský's *Renata Kalenská, Lidové noviny* (2005) and Árpád Schilling's production *BLACKland*. Actual political speeches were also used to devise Ballek's production *Tiso*.

But the most original documentary theatre of today is characteristic for the participation of real protagonists onstage. This particular criterion was met by the Polish production of Jan Klata's *Transfer!* (2007) about the displacement of minorities – German, Polish and Ukrainian – after the end of World War II as a punishment for the fascist aggression. It is now evident that it was an act of unjust retribution on innocent common people. It was very common people who found themselves on the stage of the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra talking about their experiences, oral history style. While television can use the authentic testimony genre to create a strong and stunning experience, owing to the work of the camera (see also the opinion of philosopher Jacques Rancière)⁸, a stage presentation on a deliberately chosen large podium (the centre of the stage was reserved for a tall tower on top of which the audience could see presidents of superpowers – Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt – deciding from "Olympian" heights about the fate of the world at the Yalta Conference) made it much more difficult to communicate the ideas across the proscenium to the audience. Even then, Klatov's *Transfer!* was a rare, original production.

The repeatedly raised issue of identity eventually led festival organizers to choose this issue as a new type of activity – a co-produced project. In 2007, a common project by Central European countries would weave itself into the tissue of the festival's main programme. It was given the name *midentity – identify.middle.eu*. It was focused on how the inhabitants of this unique region – rich in small nations and ethnicities – define their identity. The festival team devising the programme took much inspiration from this project for the future. Particularly when creating their next theme-based project *Parallel Lives – 20th Century Through the Eyes of the Secret Police*.

The most suggestive and avantgarde work in the entire history of the festival was certainly the documentary opera *Tomorrow There Will Be...* Based on historical archive materials about the political trial of Dr. Milada Horáková in the 1950s, Aleš Březina and Jiří Nekvasil wrote the libretto and Aleš Březina composed the music. It was a musical intermedia performance starring the internationally renowned opera diva Soňa Červená (2008).

From productions to performances

At present, the standard continental interpretation productions (a coherent statement) faced the opposite pole in the form of performances coming predominantly from the Anglo-American environment (see Patrice Pavis, Josette Féral).⁹ The result was that productions extended the scope of their meaning, became polythematic and more open and, using performative practices, acquired a whole new arsenal of codes, methods and approaches. Many of the productions presented at Divadelná Nitra reflected this trend. Besides standard text-based productions, audiences got to see a lavish mix of media, multimedia and intermediality. People witnessed art at the crossroads of forms, at the frontier of art and life, in the generating process, in collective creation, in performances where the primary goal was no longer the presentation of meaning, but the showing of events where theatre was both full of action and physicality as well as technological sophistication.

The boom and almost limitless popularity of physical and dance theatre was represented at the festival by several traditions, movements and tendencies in what was a fairly representative sample. Compagnie Philippe Genty from Paris (1994), charismatic performer Joseph Nadj (1998), the Israeli duo Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak (2002), the London-based ensemble CandoCo Dance Company (1998), Constanza Macras (2005), productions by great choreographers such as Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (2007) or Alain Platel (2010), but also Slovak participants with such

8 "But when the voice ceases, it is the image of the suffering face that becomes visible evidence of what the witnesses' eyes have seen, the visible image of the horror of the extermination," one reads about how details of faces work in Claude Lanzmann's film documentary *Shoah* (1985). In: RANCIÈRE, Jacques: *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2015, p. 93.

9 PAVIS, Patrice: *La mise en scène contemporaine*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2007; FÉRAL, Josette: *Théorie et pratique du théâtre. Au-delà des limites*. Montpellier: L'Entretemps, 2011.

productions as *Canto Hondo* (elledanse, 2008), *Hexen* (Debris Company, 2009), or *Dead Souls* (the SkRAT Theatre, 2010).

There were also productions by the so-called new circus, the acrobatic *Hic Hoc* performed by the Compagnie Jérôme Thomas from Cluny (1997), or *La Putyka* of the Czech ensemble Cirk La Putyka (2010). Audiences were captivated by visual and object-based performances *Orlando Furioso* of the Formal Theatre in St. Petersburg (1995) using Leonardo da Vinci's moving automatons, or *The Catalogue of Such Ordinary Happiness*, a video installation by the French ensemble Alis (1995), or the Portuguese computer dance show *SWAP* (2006) from Porto. New media were effectively employed in *Fragile!*, a production directed by Slovenian director Matjaž Pograjc (2007) as well as in *The Frankenstein Project*, a production written and directed by Kornél Mundruczó (2008). The film version of the production represented Hungary at the Cannes Film Festival. Various street shows took the performances to the public space, for example, *Face to Face* by the Malabar group from France (1996), or *Le Grand Théâtre Mécanique Deninoz* by Les Ateliers Denino (2010). Among the unforgettable events were performances generated during collective improvisations, such as the Estonian production *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (2009) or the Russian performance titled *Opus No. 7* (2010). These shows radiated with the joy of theatre and were very interactive.

Besides such rich theatrical works, audiences experienced a whole series of quasi Dadaist activities representing postdramatic theatre and its tendency to settle right inside the spectator's body. In *Box with Holes* by Norwegian author Heine Rosdal Avdal (2006), which takes place in a claustrophobic space, the performer would hide behind a sheet and take the spectators' hands to induce fear of an unknown body. In the production by Italian Alessandro Panzavolta, *Flying Attempts* (2008), the creators tried to use images and sounds to make the spectators levitate.

On the other hand, the more traditional genres such as opera or musical were less frequently presented. Jozef Bednárík's *Faust and Margarete* (1992) or *Blood Brothers* (1994) delighted all lovers of musical theatre at the very beginning of the festival's history. One of the most recent festivals presented the brilliant production of the Slovak National Theatre's Opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* (2010) directed by Polish director Mariusz Trelński and using the stage design of Slovak artist Boris Kudlíčka.

Festival and its conceptual reversal

In hindsight, it is clear how the gap between the general situation in Slovak society and the focus of the Divadelná Nitra International Festival grew bigger in recent years. To put it simply: the national economy is doing increasingly better, culture is dominated by an inflation of television entertainment, the consumerism of society – measured by the number of car manufacturing plants and shopping centres – has reached a high level in the relevant regions. In GDP per capita, Slovakia's capital city has ranked among the top five cities in the world! But in other areas it is different and the optimistic mood of the ruling elites is not vindicated and "misery" has descended on people in many places. The term "hunger valley" will yet come to reach its full destructive potential, but it will be too late. When this is projected against spiritual parameters it means that people's intellectual demands continually decline and, consequently, cultural elites are less significant.

During the period in question, the trend of mental dilapidation became visible through the longest strike in post-1989 Slovakia – the strike of teachers at all levels of education in 2016. The education sector – whose social role it is to teach new generations of people who would be capable of meeting the requirements of the future civilization – has collapsed and its ordinary members demonstrated it loudly by chanting: Wake up, Slovakia!

After the March 2016 general elections, Slovakia *did* wake up but the morning was painful – a party was elected into the Parliament whose leader had to face a petition signed against him during the most recent Divadelná Nitra because he did not approve of a ministry subsidy for a dance festival to be organized in the town where he holds the position of regional governor. What will be formulated in the year of the 25th anniversary of the festival – an event which, looking back and particularly in the current context, fully corroborates the meaningfulness of its programme preferences focused against all antihumanist and antidemocratic phenomena? "Only" that politicians should not abruptly end theatre performances like the one staged by amateurs in Brezno that was stopped on orders



2008 Projekt Frankenstein /
The Frankenstein Project,
Kornél Mundruczó
Maďarsko / Hungary

by the same regional governor? Or will it be something even stronger?¹⁰

From the very outset, the festival was shaped as an artistically and intellectually independent project. In the last five years, it radically defined itself as a counter movement to the above-mentioned social trend. The festival defined itself as a rebel with various accompanying features.

As far as subsidies are concerned, the festival was less successful in receiving Slovak funds in the past few years because of a constant growth in prices. In 2014, it even had to shorten its duration by two days. The management of Divadelná Nitra compared its own financial crisis with the possible scenario when critically low funding for continuous operation of art programmes would become an all-Slovak problem. This hypothesis was developed across the board in the event titled *A Day Without Art* – a series of events that illustrated the possibility of an art “outage”. *A Day Without Art* concluded the festival’s 23rd year.

Of course, Divadelná Nitra also enjoyed a period of prosperity when it had at its disposal a three-year grant from the European Commission (as part of the programme aimed at supporting European culture festivals) received in the stiff competition of nearly 700 festivals. Coincidentally, the grant was accumulated with several other grants – from the V4 or other international foundations.

Nevertheless, in addition to the unstable economic situation, a new, equally worrying phenomenon emerged. It is still waiting to be more thoroughly evaluated – as long as we do not want to blame it on the widening gap between the dramaturgical intention when creating the festival’s programme and the taste of the audiences.

Paradoxically, there was no decrease in the number of spectators visiting performances that were more demanding because of civic and political themes, or at least not as far as statistical assessment of this parameter is concerned. What happened was rather a decline in the interest of domestic critics that resulted in fewer expert reactions in print media and sometimes in a rather controversial evaluation of individual productions, or even whole festival events.

As for the growing need to have a more specifically defined programme theme, another decline became obvious – the decrease in the number of international visitors,

including both writers and participants. Whatever were the reasons that this happened, one of the causes was certainly the limited funding to cover the stay at the festival for a large number of international critics. In comparison with the 50-70 international guests the festival was used to accommodate in the past, the number of international observers in the auditoriums and hallways was visibly lower.

An exceptional situation occurred: the final year of the *Parallel Lives* project when the results were presented was attended by a few critics from big European daily newspapers of record, e.g. the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Their assessment of the project was very positive. For the first time, the festival received strong international publicity in a country that, in the eyes of experts (including the Slovak ones) is the home of some of the best theatres and is unreservedly admired.

At the most recent festival, in 2015, a reversal took place in the expert reflection of the programme when residency at the festival was granted to ten young theatremakers, practitioners and critics from V4 countries and Ukraine. Under the leadership of famous and globally knowledgeable theatrologist Patrice Pavis, they observed the productions of the main programme and significantly contributed to its evaluation at regular morning meetings (V4@Theatre – Divadelná Nitra 2015 Residency project). They established a new framework and intensity in the way critics react to productions, which is an important stage of the productions’ artistic effect and intellectual treatment. Most of all, they formulated standpoints that are valuable especially for the Slovak sample of productions, thus helping fulfil the festival’s long-term strategy to start a dialogue between what is foreign and what is “ours” with the aim to check Slovak theatre against more general European trends.

From 2011, the above-mentioned comparison strategy was given new technical support when the position of curator of the programme of Slovak theatre was established. The festival’s management chose the curator from among young Slovak theatre practitioners (deliberately not theatrologists or critics) with the intention to make selections of domestic productions on the basis of a thorough overview of every year’s “yield” of productions. Besides, the curator would have to justify the choices in the festival bulletin – this always



2004 / *Kyslík / Oxygen,*
Viktor Ryžakov / Viktor Ryzhakov, Rusko / Russia

required a very personalized analysis of the current status of Slovak theatre art. The individual subtle diagnoses of Rastislav Ballek, Marián Amsler, Svetozár Sprušanský, Peter Pavlac and the duo of Michal Ditte and Iveta Ditte Jurčová will remain an important trace for future historians of Slovak theatre.

Their monitoring of the Slovak theatre scene was mostly very critical. It seemed very hard to find competitive artefacts on Slovak stages. One of the curators pointed out that our theatre lacks “an agenda”, another said that Slovak theatre is “a tired horse loaded with too much weight”, yet

another claimed that there was hope on our independent scene but not in the theatre establishment, and others still regretted the lack of theatre criticism that was unable to offer more than a vote in the annual poll. There was also the opinion that Slovak theatre could use more authenticity and depth, and less routine and megalomania.

Taking into account the above-mentioned mental state of Slovak society I tend to believe that the flagship of all recent Slovak productions was the Aréna Theatre’s play *Kukura*, an ironic quasi-biographical play written by the theatre’s in-house director Martin Čičvák and directed by

¹⁰ Ludová strana – Naše Slovensko (People’s Party – Our Slovakia) is a far right, extremist, nationalist Slovak political party that won 11 mandates in the National Council of the Slovak Republic in the March 2016 general elections. The success in the elections shocked the Slovak public and started a discussion in society as well as many public protests. The leader of the party, Marián Kotlaeba, also elected as the Governor of the Banská Bystrica self-governing region, disconcerted the theatre and broader culture community by his inappropriate interferences in the funding of theatres and theatre festivals, and by censoring performances when he ordered an amateur theatre production to be stopped in the middle of the performance.

Rastislav Ballek. Marián Amsler, who suggested that *Kukura* be included in the programme of Divadelná Nitra 2012, wrote the following prophetic words into the festival bulletin: "The lobotomy caused by too much commercialization of the public space might just be irreversible."¹¹ The fact that the Slovak streets and squares, as well as the Parliament, have turned "brown" only confirms that he was right.

But the curators were not always lucky when choosing Slovak productions. However, many of them managed to intertwine urgent civic messages with artistic power. Whether these were productions of the Slovak National Theatre's Drama Department featuring excellent actors, for example

in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (directed by Michal Vajdička), or *Rechnitz – The Exterminating Angel* by Elfriede Jelinek (directed by David Jařab), of the productions of the Aréna Theatre (*Kukura, Holocaust*), the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra (*Kitchen* directed by Zoltán Balázs, or *The Notebook* directed by Ján Luterán), the Martin-based Slovak Chamber Theatre's *Seven Days to the Funeral* (directed by Ľubomír Vajdička), or independent productions by such theatres as SkRAT (*Bugger and Suckers*), STOKA (*Uncertain Ground*), Pôtoň (*Misery*), or the great discovery of last year, Andrej Kalinka and Ivan Martinka's performance-installation *Home Eros Faith* by the independent group Med a prach (Honey and Dust).

2012 / Sedem dní do pohrebu / Seven Days to Funeral,
Ľubomír Vajdička, Slovensko / Slovakia



11 AMSLER, Marián: *Kukura* (a dissertation on the state of culture). In: *Programme Catalogue of the Divadelná Nitra International Festival 2012*. Nitra : Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 2012, p. 55.

The crème de la crème of each Slovak selection for the festival was made with the aim to represent, as truly as possible, Slovak theatre beside the international selection and in the eyes of the expert public. Unfortunately, this traditionally covers only a limited number of Slovak theatremakers, not allowing the comparison to go beyond a few "chosen ones". A question arises whether the diagnoses of the experts also reach the ears of "the patients".

As for the organizers' expectations, there would gradually be less and less fulfilment of the desire to ensure that a Slovak theatremaker would get invited to an international festival or to perform as a guest abroad. Even though organizers of various European festivals have repeatedly attended Divadelná Nitra, they have mostly "purchased" only non-Slovak productions. And they have had a lot to choose from, after all; the earlier events presented numerous productions by such rising stars as Krzysztof Warlikowski, Árpád Schilling, Oskaras Koršunovas, Róbert Alföldi, Rimas Tuminas, Alvis Hermanis, Andrey Moguchyi, Kirill Serebrennikov, among others. The role of being a showcase event focused on the export of Slovak art would gradually be excluded from the festival's agenda. This was also because a new festival was established in Slovakia – the national showcase *Touches and Connections* that has been organized by the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin since 2005.

On the other hand, a new ambition was born to transform the festival to an event with functional production and coproduction. The logical outcome of the dramaturgical delineation of some of the festival events in the past twenty years that mirrored European trends and focused on political and documentary theatre was a new project titled *Parallel Lives – the 20th Century Through the Eyes of the Secret Police* that ran between 2012 and 2015. A publication of the same title explains the background of the project's theme as follows: "Cold cases, facts that have become taboo, injustice felt by those who are still alive, absence of satisfaction or, conversely, punishment for those who are no longer alive – all of this interconnects these issues with the present and calls for a discussion about them."¹²

The project reacted to the opening of the records of political secret police corps in post-socialist countries and attempted to transform inspiring cases into diverse theatri-

cal forms. Six countries participated in the project and each creative team performed the product of their own approach to the theme at the 2013 festival: the results ranged from documentary factuality, through the pathos of opera, visual and movement-based stylized grotesque forms, all the way to a kind of *danse macabre* trying to activate the memory and bring about catharsis. There were six core productions in the main programme. The following year, the co-production partners held six mini festivals: in Bratislava, Dresden, Prague, Bucharest, Budapest and Krakow. Subsequently, in collaboration with the German publishing house *Theater der Zeit*, a book titled *Parallele Leben / Parallel Lives* was published.¹³ The creative potential of the Divadelná Nitra Association project is confirmed also by the fact that six documentary films were made for the cooperation of the project's dramaturg Ján Šimko and filmmaker Adam Hanuljak (co-production of DogDocs, Mandala Pictures and RTVS) dealing with the issue of secret police in six countries. The films premiered on Slovak Television on the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution (November 2014).

The project was praised as very original. However, there were differences in the quality of the result that could not be ignored. In Poland, the Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej) even dissociated itself from the final product because it considered the film to have only little relevance to the topic. Some of the other outputs were better than standard, though.

For example, the Czech opera *Toufar – The Torture Games* about a priest murdered by State Security agents, went down as part of the avantgarde trend of documentary opera, mostly owing to the work of music composer Aleš Březina whose opera of the same genre *Tomorrow There Will Be...* was presented at the festival before and was received enthusiastically. The Hungarian contribution – the production *Reflex* based on Péter Závada's text and directed by Dániel D. Kovács – appealed to the viewers owing to its artistic stylization and the choice of material (the case of a hospitalized psychiatrist). It was comparable with the best of the recent productions of Hungarian modern theatre.

The production by the Dresden-based Staats-schauspiel titled *My File and I* directed by Clemens Bechtel made use of the creative method practiced by the renowned Rimini Protokoll

12 VANNAYOVÁ, Martina, KÁROVÁ, Darina: *Parallel Stories: A Reader*. (part of the project *Parallel Lives – The 20th Century Through the Eyes of the Secret Police*). Nitra : Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 2014, p. 3.

13 *Parallele Leben / Parallel Lives. Ein Dokumentartheaterprojekt zum Geheimdienst in Europa / A Documentary Theatre Project on Secret Police in Eastern Europe*. Eds. Martina Vannayová, Ján Šimko. Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2014. *Police*. Nitra : Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 2014, p. 3.

whose postdramatic approach, as recorded by Hans-Thies Lehmann, represents the most original documentary technique in theatre. Clemens Bechtel, theatre studies graduate from Justus-Liebig Universität in Giessen, the birthplace of the founders of the Rimini Protokoll, put authentic actors of parallel lives on the stage, including a Stasi member who talked – in a civil and trustworthy manner – about their own dramas in a Kafkaesque stage design consisting of piles of state police files.

The *Parallel Lives – 20th Century Through the Eyes of the Secret Police* project drew on the previous co-production about central European identities titled *midentity – identify.middle.eu*, but this time involving much more creative potential and documentary material. The project played an exceptional role in making the festival more visible internationally because of its politically penetrating concept and touring character.

Given the existing selection criteria, the main programme of Divadelná Nitra always consists of more international than domestic productions. Because of this, the festival cannot keep its international status unless there is an asymmetrical ratio of Slovak and international performances. At the same time, there is an ever stronger element, namely intercultural and multicultural productions, in which the polarity of “that which is ours vs. that which is not ours” is annulled in favour of “that which we share”. An example of such a “multi-culti” project funded by several European grants was the performance *Open to Everything* (2012) done by Roma participants from several countries. The casting took place also in the infamously known ghetto Luník IX in Košice. The performance was directed and choreographed by Constanza Macras, former colleague of the famous German director Thomas Ostermeier, known in Nitra from the 2005 festival when she presented the remarkable production *Big in Bombay*. This time, the mixed accounts told about the authentic lives of Roma and their dance performances did not result in a successful and impressive form. Also, the final impression of “a variety show” overshadowed the respectable intent to unite the scattered ethnic group through the common denominator of a minority issue.

The French ensemble L'Encyclopédie de la Parole also presented an intercultural production titled *Suite No. 1 “ABC” for 22 Performers and a Conductor* (2013). It focused on the paralinguistic quality of spoken language from several European nations – on phenomena that exist beyond the fundamental meaning of words, on cadence, musicality, emphasis, melody, timbre, speech rhythm and so on. The production also involved

several local participants who showed interest in the project and who enriched the original project by examples of Slovak speech. Being the opening act of the festival, though, when compared with the opening performances of the previous years, it was less attractive. A question arose whether co-production projects were capable of achieving their declared goals.

On the other hand, the bilateral Hungarian-Slovak co-operation on the production titled *Kitchen* and presented by the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra was very enriching. The Hungarian artists who participated in the production were director Zoltán Balázs (known in Nitra already thanks to his contribution to the *midentity – identify.middle.eu* project) and stage and costume designer Péter Polgár who won the annual DOSKY 2011 Award in the Slovak critics' poll for his work on the production.

Just like the action-packed *Kitchen*, or the French voice-band *Suite No. 1*, the playful German production *Untitled No. 1 // Opera by Herbert Fritsch* from the legendary Volksbühne in Berlin was considered a part of an ever stronger section of performative theatre. The production, with stage design and direction by the enfant terrible of the German scene Herbert Fritsch, used a large blood-red sofa which comfortably seated all fifteen of the inventive performers. In the words of the festival's dramaturg Ján Šimko, Fritsch's productions – including the above-mentioned one – are typical for various sources of inspiration, from Dadaism and futurism, through happening to videoart.¹⁴ Fritsch's *Untitled No. 1* was not only an entertaining showcase of historical sources of today's performance art but also – particularly for spectators who were open to sheer playfulness and unfolding imagination – a piece offering a wonderful experience of acting freedom.

From among the international contributions, the most prestigious have been the German productions, mostly because their theatre art offers the most attractive performances all over Europe. However, German productions came to the festival only rarely because they were financially the most demanding. But even then, in its twenty-five-year history, the festival has been able to take pride in presenting at least a small sample of great names of German theatre such as Andreas Kriegenburg (*Maria Magdalena*), Dimiter Gotscheff (*Black Battles With Dogs*), Nicolas Stemann (*Don Carlos*) and, of course, Herbert Fritsch.

France, that was once a theatre superpower, shifted its innovative energy into physical theatre (dance, new circus)



2015

*Sobota s rozhlasom / Samedi détente,
Dorothee Munyaneza, Francúzsko / France*

that enchanted the festival's audiences in the earlier years. Lately, French theatre presented rather small productions, if any at all. Most recently, it was the dance production created by Dorothee Munyaneza, *Samedi Détente*, reacting to the fratricidal war in Rwanda and the interactive project by Ivana Müller titled *We are Still Watching*.

One of the main trends of today, intermedia theatre, was presented at a recent Divadelná Nitra festival in the independent French ensemble Les Lucioles z Nantes (2011). The play *Paranoia* by Argentine author Rafael Spregelburd was directed by Argentine immigrant Marcial Di Fonzo Bo in collaboration with actress Elise Vigier. It was a parody of sci-fi literature and movies that was playfully projected

(literally) into the space onstage from a video camera while the self-parodying actors and actresses were making comments.

In the recent period, Divadelná Nitra continued with its long-declared aim and presented to its audiences always new, uncharted regions of Europe. That was why the programme more frequently included productions by Slovenian, Serbian or Croatian artists. From among these, Bob Jelčič and the Zagreb Youth Theatre's production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* enchanted the audience with primordial theatricality and confirmed that innovative directorial approach to classical texts still has its significance in the symphony of contemporary theatre.

The performance *The More of Us There Are, The Faster We Will Reach the Goal* (2012) by the Slovenian group Maska from Ljubljana was also very intriguing for the audience. It was a kind of film documentary about the humorous solution of a true political case that extended the scope of known artistic approaches by so much wished-for diversity. The following year, the festival audiences were told by the management of Divadelná Nitra that the all-national happening which the film recording referred to (namely that hundreds of Slovenian citizens changed their name to the name of the then controversial prime minister Janez Janša) was actually effective and led to his political rejection. The effect of political theatre on a change of reality thus became more than just a desired hypothesis.

A similarly interactive approach was taken also by the Slovenian-devised project by the Prešern Theatre in Kranj,

directed by the internationally more and more famous Oliver Frljič. The idea to collect people's ID cards when they enter the theatre and prompting the actors to destroy the IDs at the end of the performance was supposed to be an analogy to how 25,671 Slovenian citizens of Croatian nationality (the production-performance was also titled *25 671*) were deprived of their citizenship rights. Such a stage act, however, seemed inappropriate to many and many more were shocked when the director ended the show by exhibiting on the proscenium four of the actual victims of the civil war as mere objects.

In addition to making discoveries, the festival's dramaturgy never stopped its focus on tried-and-true areas of theatre. Hungary brought very attractive productions and defended its reputation with three excellent shows. The National Theatre from Budapest presented Róbert Alföldi's

staging of an older play by Martin Sperr called *Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria* in which it frontally hit the xenophobic trends in current Hungarian politics. At the same time, it touched the audience's emotions in an artistically innovative way (Divadelná Nitra 2011). The production *Anamnesis* was also very powerful. It was symbiotically performed in 2012 by two Budapest based theatres, Katona József Színház and Szputnik. It was created under the leadership of well-known director Viktor Bodó and took a documentary approach (field research conducted by the group's members) while also using principles of collective improvisation. The production painted a picture about the current state of health care in Hungary which seemed to be almost identical with the situation in Slovakia. Similarly engaging was Dániel D. Kovács's imaginative production *Reflex* under the *Parallel Lives* project.

Polish theatre was also very prominently represented and the brilliant productions by Grzegorz Jarzyna (*No Matter How Hard We Tried*) and Michał Borczuch (*Apocalypse*) that were brought to Nitra (the latter even opening the 2015 festival) were visionary commentaries on the current life feeling of Europeans who have found themselves on a civilizational crossroads. The production endowed the theme of the 2015 festival (*Empathy - Sharing and Giving*) with an outstanding introductory accent.

The Czech selection defended the reputation of having many small and alternative scenes by bringing over productions by the Komédie Theatre (*Weissenstein*, 2011), Handa Gote (*Clouds*, 2012) and the Theatre on the Balustrade (*Golden Sixties*, 2014).

The festival's dramaturgy was gradually losing its ambition to primarily make geographical discoveries of cultures, as it was explicitly stated in the programme a few years before. The interest in regional activities gave way to the monitoring of transnational tendencies. Concepts, ideas and themes became the guidelines for the festival dramaturgy. It can be said that content-wise, the festival experienced a conceptual turning point. In this regard, it is understandable (even though not always justifiable) that the festival would choose smaller productions, even one-man shows, based on an interesting point of view of an issue, for example how to get rid of taboos in history

or present an intimate confession (a Belgian project *Book Burning; It's Going to Get Worse and Worse and Worse, My Friend* by Belgian choreographer Lisbeth Gruwez; *Tomorrow's Parties* of the British troupe Forced Entertainment; *Lost Antarctica* by Latvian performer Valters Silis; or the Russian documentary drama *Vyatlag* by Boris Pavlovich).

The aforementioned project *Parallel Lives* turned out to be crucial in this regard. The most recent 24th festival was also very distinctly defined - its focus was on "the healthiest E there is, i.e. empathy" which intuitively named what was to become the hottest issue of the day in autumn 2015. Issues such as murderous wars, genocide, exclusion, migration or refugees were discussed to create the civically inevitable and, from the point of view of mental hygiene, also very much needed counterbalance to the anti-immigration hysteria that contaminated the air in preelection Slovakia and played a very xenophobic tune.

The hit production *Hate Radio* directed by Swiss director Milo Rau had already participated in several international festivals. A quasi reconstruction of how a radio programme within one week instigated the mass killings in Rwanda in 1994. The production revealed the mechanism of language manipulation that was essentially identical with how the Nazis managed to make the masses hate all Jews: it suffices to start naming people using animal names, particularly names of animals that cause disgust. As a result, the concept of a human being fades away and what follows is genocide. The intense experience was prolonged by a similarly breathtaking discussion with the creators of *Hate Radio* during the regular event *Breakfast With...* Rau's production became the artistic highlight of the most recent festival, along with the above-mentioned Polish production *Apocalypse* that was based on Tomasz Śpiewak's text in which statements by avantgarde Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini and the cult journalist Oriana Fallaci were cited, referring to the civilizational reversal of Europe.

The festival kept meeting the demand of the theatre elite to provide a sample of the most prestigious phenomena. Even though the selected productions sometimes faced controversial reactions, it should be appreciated that they included performances by well-known ensembles: Flemish Needcompany (*The Deer House*, 2011), British Forced

2012

Čím viac nás je, tým rýchlejšie dosiahneme cieľ /
The more of us there are, the faster we will reach the goal,
Janez Janša, Slovinsko / Slovenia



14 ŠIMKO, Ján: Untitled No. 1 // Herbert Fritsch's Opera. In: *Programme Catalogue of the Divadelná Nitra International Festival 2014*. Nitra: Asociácia Divadelná Nitra 2014, pp. 9-10.



Entertainment (*Tomorrow's Parties*, 2012), Moscow-based Teatr.doc and Drama Laboratory from Kirov (*Two in Your House*, 2012; *Vyatlag*, 2015). There were also famous individuals: in 2011, the doyen of Russian theatre Kama Ginkas came to the festival for the first time with *Medea*. The "chosen ones" Oskaras Koršunovas and Béla Pintér came in 2011 (*The Lower Depths*) and 2014 (*Kaisers TV, Ungarn*).

The programme of the latest festival brought a climax to the spirit of Divadelná Nitra as it made itself visible most strikingly during its conceptual transformation: namely, in a period when the festival started going against the mainstream of banal, tabloid and commercial culture. It seems that an additional confirmation of the festival's long-term focus came with the statement made by the management of the Slovak National Theatre following the general elections in March and reacting to the rise of extremism in Slovakia: "We expect the coming minister of culture to strongly support projects focused on fostering democracy, condemnation of fascism and communism, projects about the tragedy of the Holocaust, projects provoking critical thinking about authoritarian elements in society today. And, of course, projects focused on the condemnation of xenophobia."¹⁵

Looking back, we should not forget the other pole of the festival – its strong, life-celebrating dimension. Naming destructive mechanisms in an artistically complex code is, naturally, the high mission of art. At the same time, awakening sources of positive energy within the audience is equally meritorious and should be also expected from theatre.

The most recent festival was symbolically closed by the Belgian production titled *An Old Monk* (2015) using the music by Kris Defoort and the lyrics of Josse de Pauw who also sang, played and danced. It was an ode to the joy of life performed by a sixty-year-old man with a lot of humour and positive detachment. The performance evoked as much joy with the audience as the actor generated

onstage together with the trio of musicians. Joy is contagious and cleansing, just like tragic catharsis.

In the coming years, the festival is facing an important mission – similar to the one theatre had during the totalitarian regime – to fill in for something. In the old days, metaphors and indirect statements were used to comment on the political situation. This became a substitute for the lack of public political discussion. The challenge today is to substitute for the disastrous shortfalls in the education system. To awaken empathy and interpersonal sensitivity. In addition to this, Divadelná Nitra should follow up on the present flow of positive energy and remain true to its motto that "theatre is a festivity".

The festival is a driving force

It suffices to flick through the bulleting of any of the festival events and it becomes evident that the main programme branches out into a great number of accompanying activities. From among these, the serial event *How to Do Theatre* has been dedicated to the education of youth, in other words, to skilled instruction of the audience. This event takes place in specified intervals during the entire year, is offered all over Slovakia and connects to other Slovak events (e.g. the *Touces and Connections* festival). Every year, the project culminates at the *Divadelná Nitra* festival.

Very successful were also workshops for young theatre critics held under the auspices of the International Association of Theatre Critics (AICT-IATC) with lecturers Ian Herbert, Jeremy Kingston and Soňa Šimková (2000), or sponsored regionally (lecturer Nina Vangelli). Other similar events included *Death of Slovak Theatre Criticism* and *Meeting of Slovak Theatre Criticism* (2006 and 2008), or the

15 In: Press Release by the Slovak National Theatre About the Current Situation in Society. [Online.] [Cit. 18/03/2016] Available online: http://www.snd.sk/?tlacove-spravy&clanok=vyjadrenie-snd-k-sucasnej-spolocenskej-situacii&zmenit_zobrazenie=1

most recent residency of ten young critics from five countries under the guidance of Patrice Pavis. The connection made to the FIT – Festivals in Transition – network was also very beneficial as it enabled the operation of a travelling critical laboratory for young critics, the Mobile Lab (2007-2008). For the participants, the Mobile Lab provided a great opportunity to learn and get started with their profession – a unique bonus that the Lab graduates are still using in their careers as theatre critics.

Since 2007, a new segment in the festival have been international theme-based projects that premiere their productions at Divadelná Nitra. The festival's profile has thus acquired a new feature: it is no longer just a showcase event but also the producer and co-producer of art. The issue of identity, repeatedly raised in several productions, made the organizers choose that the first activity of this kind would focus on the identity of the countries of Central Europe (the abovementioned project *midentity – identify.middle.eu*). The project was continued in the collective work *Donaudrama* executed under the leadership of Austrian playwright Bernhard Stauder and dramaturg Wolfgang Stahl. It included organized joint writing inspired by the Danube River that connects as many as ten countries. In 2009, Divadelná Nitra then staged the reading of finished texts that could eventually also be produced on stage. In the same year, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, the Czecho-Slovak project *Chance '89 or Window of Opportunity* was born as a performed reconstruction of political events with live onstage commentaries by some of the active participants of the historical events, as well as historians, sociologists and students. The undertaking was part of the *Theme '89 – Nitra '89* project that was intertwined with the research and exhibition of original documents and educational activities for schools.

The pinnacle of the festival's co-production ambitions was the mentioned three-year project *Parallel Lives – The 20th Century Through the Eyes of the Secret Police* that brought together as many as six post-socialist countries (2012-2014).

The festival's rich variety of activities extends also to the following accompanying events: a great selection of the most recent European films thematically in line with the festival's focus, or events organized in collaboration with visual artists and art colleges that offer innovation in the space between visual art, new media and theatre (performances, videoart, street art and installations).

In the coming years the festival could reach a status that would be a match for other famous European showcases. Therefore, it seems to be in order to give it new content-based impulses and directions. One of the possible ways is to keep developing the already started international co-productions. But there will also be an opportunity to lift the showcase intellectually: the festival could make use of more expert reflection on the part of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and aestheticians, in short, to attract to Nitra a brain trust and initiate a discussion about the world – not only about how it is viewed and experienced every day by common citizens, but also how artists see it (in the festival productions and events). Several festival years already held issue-based roundtable discussions attended by foremost political scientists and sociologists (public discussions such as *Why Memory?, Why Art?* or *Empathy – Sharing and Giving*, 2013-2015). The summarizing output from the discussions could be published in printed form and used as knowledge resources to inspire thinking and provide a reservoir of art themes. Last, but not least, it could become the precious memory of the most significant theatre showcase in Slovakia.



2008

Baal / Baal,
Alize Zandwijk, Holandsko / The Netherlands



2009

*Ako vysvetliť obrázky mŕtvemu zajacovi /
How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare,
Tiit Ojasoo, Ene-Liis Semper, Estónsko / Estonia*

The platform today

Divadelná Nitra is a festival that – through the introduced themes, poetics, creative methods and techniques and new technologies – has found a connection to all current theatre trends. As far as the art programme is concerned, there is no provincial flaw to the festival at all. Ian Herbert wrote: “If you want to check the health of European theatre, just look around to see a lot of big festivals that present the hottest and most recent productions. However, if you want

be a few steps ahead, you have to come to the Slovak town of Nitra and witness one small and much richer event that has the reputation as a discoverer of talents.”¹⁶ Another commentator dubbed Nitra a small Avignon. Well, it seems that the good work has borne its fruits.

In the beginning, there were critical voices that reproached the festival for many things. Even the fact that it was an international event. As a result, some international productions, particularly the more demanding ones, experienced smaller audiences. Today, fortunately, this is different. Goal-oriented educational activities aimed at both theatre-

makers and schools, as well as many accompanying events, have succeeded in mediating a more challenging message and establishing a community of spectators. The festival has had stable Slovak audiences and has enjoyed permanent interest among international guests and experts. In the past twenty-five years, a respectable number of the latter (including some famous names) have visited Nitra. Another remarkable phenomenon that the festival started is the work of volunteers – students of high schools and universities both from Nitra and elsewhere.

Taking constant and patient steps, director Darina Kárová has captained the festival ship out of many dangerous reefs. Together with her programme team she gave the event its face and spine, its international name and prestige. Theatre is a meeting, Peter Brook used to say. In Nitra, such a meeting takes place every year.

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¹⁶ HERBERT, Ian: Can You Hear Me In Slovakia? In: Theatre Record, 2011