

One hundred years of Hungarian professional theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia
Doctoral dissertation - Theses

The subject of my dissertation is the history of a hundred years of Hungarian professional theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia. The topic is rather broad and due to research possibilities of the individual periods, the arising methodological problems are not coherent either. These one hundred years comprise the story of the same community, yet are divided into three parts. This fragmentation is also reflected by the labels Hungarians in Upper Hungary used for defining themselves in three historical periods: “Slovenskoan” (1918-1938) - Czechoslovakian (1945-1989) - Slovakian (1989-2019). As I was trying to follow the history of these one hundred years, the structure of the dissertation is also adapted to this fragmentation.

I based my work on the history and development of institutions operating in a theatrical structure. I tried to keep to the chronological order as I felt it was important to have a comprehensive analysis of Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia as a whole so as to reveal not only periodic dilemmas, but those constant, fundamental issues and recurring problems as well which have not been resolved to date. I believe that the presentation of this development history can help the Hungarian theatre community in Slovakia find its way, and create an own independent and unique character.

Within the historically well-defined periods, I have further broken down the chapters according to current directors, because in the history of Hungarian theatres in Slovakia a change of director meant a change of approach as well. After compiling the repertory, I sought out those performances which best represented the artistic endeavours of the given season. I often quote the reviews of these shows, on the basis of which I try to reconstruct the artistic state of affairs at the time. I tried to compare local reviews with articles published in the Hungarian and Slovak press and when I had found suitable pieces of writing, some interesting contradictions did emerge. Unfortunately, I was not able to make these comparisons for all shows, because with time not only the number of Hungarian or Slovak reviews decreased but the amount of Hungarian reviews published in Slovakia also dropped.

Throughout the dissertation, I had to deal with problems that made reconstruction rather difficult. Apart from the quantity and quality of professional criticism (their often questionable standard and objectivity), distortions of collective memory or even memory loss, there were other hindering factors, such as the lack of resources in the first period, ideological decoding in the second period and the lack of professional criticism in the third era. Moreover, when analysing the last two

decades, I also had to face the question of personal involvement. I tried to counteract the latter by introducing a personal narrative that does not want to appear objective at all costs, but instead reflects the synchronous dilemmas of the creative process.

One of the most important drives and principles of the history of Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia was the intention to preserve the Hungarian identity. This aspect, of course, was somewhat overshadowed by the regime change, however, it has not completely disappeared to this day, merely its political content has changed. As a result, the development history of the Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia cannot be separated from the events of minority history, nor can it be analysed purely from an artistic point of view, because it has changed and changes together with the self-definition of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. For this reason, in my doctoral thesis I examined the political and cultural context of the period in parallel with the history of Hungarian theatres in Slovakia.

During their one hundred years' history, Hungarian theatres in (Czecho)Slovakia have never succeeded in distancing themselves from the prevailing politics. This was mainly due to the fact that the birth of Hungarian theatre abroad did not take place with the intention of presenting otherness but rather as a consequence of a political gesture. Consequently, politics is an integral part of the minority theatre scene. It is another question, of course, whether theatre creators had ever shown the intention to dissociate from politics and thus gain intellectual authority, even if the chief maintainer had always remained an institution of political power.

Instead of establishing intellectual independence, theatre leaders, realizing their vulnerable situation, tried to please the maintaining political body. Attempts to win the favour of politics ranged on a wide scale, including discrediting the rival theatre, reinforcing the business character of the institution, emphasising loyalty and submission, excluding political and social criticism, or selflessly serving the ideology of the given age. Unfortunately, very few had recognized that distinct peculiarity of cultural policy that gestures made by theatre directors are of no value; the ruling power takes advantage of the existential fears of theatre artists and created an internal strife; remaining aloof while the community is being destroyed in petty, self-absorbing wars.

The Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia is based on the Hungarian theatre tradition and thinking, since it had already been part of this system and culture for about a century before the establishment of the minority theatre. As a result, it tries to position itself in the system of Hungarian theatres, which is its only tangible point of reference.

Prague theatres or the Czech theatre trends could never gain grounds, so although the conversion of the Czech theatrical language into Hungarian theatre did appear in some performances, basically it remained a missed opportunity. Relationship with Slovak theatre

professionals in the first period could not be established since the Slovak professional theatre was also born and formed at the same time as the minority theatre, and besides, after the change of state power, cooperation with representatives of the majority nation would have also provoked some dislike from the community. During the state-socialist period, this relationship took place within a controlled, ideological framework of a socialist friendship. After the change of regime, cultural interaction is observable mainly in the career and professional experience of Hungarian students graduating in Bratislava or in the work of Slovak guest directors in the institutions. (It is important to note that the situation of Košice and Komárno is completely different in this respect.)

Unlike the theatre communities in other cross-border regions, the Hungarian theatre world in (Czecho)Slovakia could not benefit from the greatest potential of minority theatres: it could not get involved in the life of theatres of the motherland, nor could it incorporate the impulses of the majority culture. (It must be added that the young theatre culture of the young Slovak nation is not nearly as powerful as either Romanian or Serbian theatre).

At the same time, despite the intention to adapt to the Hungarian theatre culture, there is a phase delay in the Hungarian theatre world in (Czecho)Slovakia compared to the intellectual and cultural development in Hungary. What is noticeable is that a contemporary work will only appear in the repertoire when it has already been a hit in Budapest or at rural theatres and this phenomenon can also be observed in relation to the legal changes of the theatre structure (for example, the existence and role of alternative, off-structure theatres have only been the subject of discussion in the past few years).

Until the 1990s, the profile of the Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia was determined by its touring character and its role of preserving identity and mother tongue. In the post-communist era, these concepts lost their validity, while a new image has not yet been successfully developed and is still in progress.

The operation and professional character of Hungarian theatres in (Czecho)Slovakia is closest to rural theatres in Hungary. However, these exist in cooperation and interconnection, whereas Hungarians in Slovakia only have two theatres and even those exist four hundred kilometres apart. The options of the artists are limited and even the attempt of creating opportunities for cooperation is often hampered.

Despite all the complicating factors, the history of Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia has seen some "moments of grace", shows, seasons, creative teams which were able to get out of these trap situations, even if not for long. Proportionately, there were fewer of these moments, yet they show that the Hungarian theatre culture in Slovakia has a chance for renewal and a real theatrical presence. Unfortunately, every attempt was followed by a restoration, most of the

revolutions did not actually break out, and the revolutionaries were either quickly removed or they themselves gave up fighting the windmills. The perpetual internal conflicts and existential struggles led to "mental self-mutilation", consuming the community's intellectual reserves and the intention of "reinvention" by developing an own identity and character.

One of the main causes of the failed break-out attempts is disorganization and isolation. It occurred in the rarest of cases that the artists of the Hungarian theatre community in Slovakia were representing something in agreement. These rare moments were always the result of protesting against the rule of the majority power and most of the time they were just unsuccessful objections; the reconciliation of interests and common thinking always happened too late. As for professional cooperation during these one hundred years, there are even fewer examples. The career of Hungarian directors in Slovakia is also characterized by loneliness and isolation.

The Hungarian theatre community in (Czecho)Slovakia builds and is built on the actor. This is actually its most often highlighted virtue: it has talented, humble, hard-working actors. However, it does not provide for actors of the new generation and cannot keep its artists at home. The phenomenon of actor emigration, along with several other professional problems, is as old as minority theatre itself. The consequence is continuous re-start and contingency – a serious lack of awareness and continuity.

The Hungarian theatre culture in (Czecho)Slovakia is "centreless", has no professional base and has raised very few directors, playwrights, dramaturgs or theatre critics; people who would consciously build and come up with concepts have always been and are still missing. This theatre community has had neither a professional organization nor representation for eighty years. At the same time, the leading actors of the Hungarian minority theatre have constantly been at war with theatre critics, as a result of which the Hungarian theatre criticism in Slovakia is nearing its end. Hungarian playwriting in Slovakia has also come to a dead end for similar reasons.

Thus, the history of Hungarian theatre in (Czecho)Slovakia is not a success story. It is rather the chronicle of the struggle for survival, lonely revolutions, failed break-out attempts – the everyday life of a provincial theatre. Throughout my work, I have strived for objectivity at all times, but in the last two decades, due to my personal involvement, it may not have been successful, which is why I have disconnected parts of the text which are not based on research results but on personal experience. In these reflections, the critical tone is more dominant. I do not intend my remarks as a judgment - since over the last twenty years I have been part of this process myself -, but rather as a warning. I feel that after a century this community has to face its sham solutions, because only this can provide a chance to move on. Anecdotal theatre storytelling is simply not enough for renewal.

