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Theatre Life of Prešov. From the Beginnings to the Mid-20th Century

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Peter Himič. *Divadelný život Prešova. Od počiatkov do polovice 20. storočia* [Theatre Life in Prešov from the Beginning to the Mid-20th Century]. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav, 2014. 281pp.

[reviews]

When it comes to the issue of examining the history of theatre in eastern Slovakia, it is clear that literature reflecting the status of theatrical activities in this area is insufficient despite some valuable works having been put forward. The absence of continuous and synthetic research of theatrical life in eastern Slovakia is surprising, as cities such as Košice and Prešov have always concentrated the intellectual potential of the area and have been kept at the ‘crossroads’ of linguistic, religious and cultural paths. This diversity has become a natural prerequisite for the development of theatre life in the area.

One of the first publications on the birth of theatre in eastern Slovakia was Milena Cesnaková-Michalcová’s *Theatre Beginnings in Slovakia (Z divadelných počiatkov na Slovensku, 1977)*. The book partly studied theatre in Prešov. *Theatre Transformations (Premeny divadla [Inonárodné divadlá na Slovensku do roku 1918], 1981)* by the same author, mapped visits of touring theatre companies along with a depiction of German and Hungarian professional theatres in selected eastern Slovak cities. In the case of amateur theatre, we find valuable information in the work *The Slovak Amateur Theatre 1830–1980 (Slovenské ochotnícke divadlo 1830–1980, 1983)* by Ladislav Čavojský and Vladimír Štefko, and in a separate book by Vladimír Štefko

– *Amateur Theatre Transformations (Premeny ochotníckeho divadla, 1984)*. Insofar as the concept of these publications being broad, eastern Slovakia is represented in them in mere fragments. *The Theatre Life of Prešov from the Beginning to the Mid-20th Century* (2014) turned its attention primarily to the analysis of theatre in one of the largest cities in Eastern Slovakia – Prešov.

The author, Peter Himič, is best known as the director of the Košice State Theatre, where he has worked for more than 15 years, and as a university lecturer at Prešov University, Faculty of Arts. The monograph *The Theatre Life of Prešov from the Beginning to the Mid-20th Century* was published by the Bratislava Theatre Institute in 2014, under the supervision of theatreologists Karol Horak and Vladimír Štefko.

As the author points out, the main motivation behind exploring the history of theatrical life in the town of Prešov was the statement by writer Ján L. Kalina¹ regarding the cultural conditions in Prešov in the period between World War I and II, namely: ‘In the twenties, the population of the city was divided into two groups: those who performed amateur theatre, and those who attended it. The third group

1 Ján Ladislav Kalina, nee Schwartz (1913, Košice – 1981, Munich), Slovak writer, screenwriter, translator and humourist.

did not exist.' The aim of the monograph was to record the most significant events and milestones in Prešov theatre activities from the outset up until the creation of the first professional theatre in 1950. As comprehensive research on the issue in Slovak theatre studies has been notable by its absence, the monograph is an undeniable asset, not only in terms of regional context, but also in terms of mapping the context of the history of Slovak theatre. The publication, intended for professionals and the general public, offers a 231 page analysis of the most significant theatrical activities in Prešov and its surrounding area in order to contribute to the continued and thorough research into the theatrical history of the city. Attention is paid predominantly to several significant projects, which exceeded the regional context in particular in the first half of the 20th century, relying on material from varying sources; e.g. period journalism, memoirs, historical documents and administrative records. The publication consists of a total of four major chronologically ordered chapters, and visual documentation.

The first chapter, 'Before the coup' – dedicated to the early theatrical life of Prešov up to 1918 – describes the initial theatrical events in the region, accentuating the effect of Evangelicals², who played an important historical role in central European education and theatre. Although the author provides a fairly comprehensive view of the expansion of theatre in schools, as well as original dramatic literature (not to mention the contribution of the activities of the Jesuit order in this regard), the complexity of the interpretation undermines the lack of mention of Bardejov, in which

the town school was the foremost venue for the creation of school plays in the 16th century, and was subsequently to replace in the 17th century by Prešov. An overview of these beginnings, or an attempt to clarify these developments would have brought about greater integrity. In the case of the analysis of the origins of Prešov theatre, a significant role was played by itinerant activities that shaped the theatre culture of the city and its surroundings. In Himič's publication however, this research is missing. The first performances by German theatre companies in Prešov are noted by Germanist Ervin Lazar in *The Beginnings of Bourgeois Theatre in Prešov (Začiatky meštianskeho divadla v Prešove)*. This information provides a hint that Prešov professional theatre was launched by the Barbara Göttersdorf travelling theatre company in 1787 (LAZAR 1967: 15–9). The chapter in question would undoubtedly be beneficial and comparative with the theatre culture in a nearby Spiš which in the given context was represented mainly by Levoča.³ The first travelling theatre company emerged at the end of the 18th century, while in the 1820s, rival German and Hungarian companies struggled to establish themselves in the region. Whether or not a similar situation took place in the Prešov region is not clear from Himič's publication. Since the Šariš towns were visited by a travelling troupe – especially Prešov and Bardejov (which most often came there from Košice, when the City Theatre season had ended) and the local population had the chance to see performances by several companies

2 Established in 1667.

3 In Levoča theatre performed in Slovak did not have a rich tradition. Theatre culture of the city was shaped by the German and Hungarian nomadic societies that stopped off during their tours through Abov, Šariš and Spiš.

(in the 1797/1798 season for example, the theatre director Franz Neubauer's drama and opera company appeared there), the lack of this information in the first chapter of Himič's publication must be noted.

Equally significant in this context is a report published in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Theaterzeitung*⁴ newspaper, stating that the said company played on the tenth day of February, 1798 in Prešov, with the performance⁵ staged in Slovak. Something undoubtedly worthy of consideration would be to research the statement (in the report) that the performance took place in the new Prešov theatre. Milena Cesnaková-Michalcová also highlights the seriousness of the fact that the respective performance featured Slovak actors from the professional German theatre company, and that it was an isolated case (CESNAKOVÁ-MICHALCOVÁ 1981: 75). It is most unfortunate that Peter Himič makes no mention of these circumstances in his monograph.

The author opens the chapter on the breakthrough year of 1918 with 'From national-revivalist functions to artistic expression'. After the initial familiarisation with the then political situation, the author devotes more than 50 pages of text to amateur activities, including those by the local branch of Matica Slovenska and the Orel movement. The city of Prešov and its surroundings in the period after the First World War represented a diverse and varied cultural space. The enforcement of the Hungarian language and a pressure on non-Hungarian intelligentsia and businessmen, all hindered cultural development. These were the methods by which pro-

Hungarian forces tried to achieve their objectives. In the interwar period, Prešov became the administrative, political and cultural centre for the entire the north-east of Slovakia, but after years of stagnation and oppression, the Slovak element very slowly resurged into viability. The author – citing Ladislav Čavojský – states: 'Slovak theatre had it hard. For years there was none, and if there was, it was not because of Prešov dwellers, but thanks to students who came here, performed, many even wrote, and then left' (HIMIČ 2014: 29).

In the subchapter 'Soldiers', the author reflects the rich social life of Prešov, which was one of the main signifiers of the period. The Czechoslovak sergeants' union of the time provided residents with regular theatre plays in the form of almost exclusively Czech drama and the author gives an example. In the case of the subchapter dedicated to national minorities and suburban areas, it would perhaps have been worth paying more attention to the status of ethnic minorities in the context of the city, or their contribution in the context of social and cultural life. As mentioned earlier, the diversity of inhabitants, religions and ultimately individual cultures was distinctive for Prešov, and undoubtedly played an important role in the development of city life. Special attention is also given to stage speeches by local amateurs, and 'The Eastern Slovak region differed from the rest of Slovakia particularly with its strongly rooted dialect' (HIMIČ 2014: 76). The impact of Šariš (as a specific dialect) on the final theatrical form of amateur dramatics is not given much space by Himič in the subchapter, although 'Šariš was probably the first Slavic dialect heard on the professional stage' (ČAVOJSKÝ and ŠTEFKO 1983: 15) as evidenced by the

4 Published by J. M. Landererom in Bratislava at the end of the 18th Century.

5 A *Der Nachtwächter von Sovár* performance (*Hlásnik zo Solivaru*).

staging of the one-act farce *The Salt Refinery Watchman* in Prešov in 1798, which was performed exclusively in the Šariš dialect. The author deals with this marginally in the subchapter ‘Aesthetic divisions and reserves’, along with the other components of theatre synthesis – acting, directing and stage design. It is necessary to appreciate the author’s efforts to approach the issue by displaying a few examples, but on the other hand, there is the absence of the aim to bring the facts into a broader context.

In the chapter titled ‘School theatre’, Himič relies primarily on rich historical material, which is represented by several *College Annual Reports*⁶ and a contribution from Július Žilka – ‘Two decades’ in *Prešov College Eastern District Evangelical College Antology Professors’ Papers (Zbornik prác profesorov ev. kol. slov. gymnázia v Prešove, 1940)*. The twenty-two-page text includes the activities of pupils, students and teachers who, through their activities, contributed to the development of (interalia) school theatre. The development of theatre in Prešov in Czechoslovakia’s ‘First Republic’ (1918–1938) is covered by the author in the chapter named ‘Professional theatres’. Attention is paid to the hosting of visiting professional theatres companies in the city Prešov – the Slovak National Theatre, The East Slovak National Theatre and the Otakar Novak theatre company. At the beginning of the chapter the author also mentions foreign language performances by professional theatre companies – namely Hungarian, Jewish and German. Another part of Himič’s book consists of a chapter named ‘From amateurism to professionalism’, covering 1939–1944. After a brief introduction in which the author provides

a general picture of the political situation, accentuating the growing importance of the city of Prešov during the existence of the Slovak Republic.⁷ The ‘Záborský Theatre Group’ states that after the acquiescence of Košice, Hungary ‘have recorded complaints about the decline of cultural life in Prešov and the lack of facilities for cultural events. We have found that performances by amateurs are ceasing’ (HIMIČ 2014: 122). The lack of statistics fails to provide a clearer idea about the state of theatre activities. The author devotes thirteen pages to the importance and activities of the Záborský theatre troupe, which was created in late October 1940. The personnel foundations of the ensemble, the repertoire in which the permanent dramaturgical base remains the bedrock of Slovak provenance, participation in state-wide theatre events in Turčiansky St. Martin (now Martin). These are all topics that Himič has handled deftly, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of theatrical life in the early forties in Prešov. In respect of the Záborský troupe, we must not forget the creation of the permanent theatre scene, which is the subject of interest in the next chapter – ‘The struggle for a permanent stage’. Due to the amount of information on the pitfalls of conceptions by each individual stakeholder, the technical, organisational as well as financial and legislative issues, the text unfortunately becomes quite unclear, but loaded with valuable secondary evidence which would, I believe, have a more appropriate use in the footnotes. One matter worth noting

6 The Prešov College Eastern District EVAC annual reports are stored in the State Archives in Prešov.

7 As a result of the Vienna arbitration Prešov became the largest settlement in the East and the second largest city in the republic. In addition to this Prešov also became an important church administration centre.

would have been the process behind the establishment of the permanent theatre scene in a wider context, in that since the 1940s, the establishment of so-called regional theatres on a cooperative basis has become a trend, not only in Slovakia, but also in the areas of Bohemia and Moravia – literally a phenomenon typical for to given period of time.

The first six years of the newly established Slovak Theatre in Prešov is covered in the chapter titled 'From professionalization to professionalism'. The author turns his attention primarily to the dramaturgy of individual seasons, and reiterates that the dramaturgical profile of the first period theatre (1944–1945) followed the intentions outlined by Ján Borodáč. In interpreting the various productions of the first season, Himič draws from bulletins from the Slovak Theatre (Prešov) in particular (CHMELKO 1971), but also relies on the contemporary reviewers' (E.S. 1944) texts published in national newspapers. In the introduction to the chapter, the author also mentions subscription sales, but the main text and footnotes do not provide further details (the number of subscribers, revenues etc.). This is something which would have given the subject more complexity. In the subchapter 'The Building Years' the author presents education, construction, aesthetics and of course artistry, as the main objectives of the newly established Prešov theatre management. Whether this intention was achieved or not is not entirely clear. The author compares the Prešov Slovak Theatre with the Slovak Chamber Theatre (Turčiansky St. Martin) in terms of dramaturgy, different theatre traditions and qualitatively different audiences. It should be noted that the comparisons were not chosen randomly by

Himič – the year the Slovak National Theatre was founded (1944) also saw the establishment of the Slovak Chamber Theatre and the SD artistic ensemble of the Slovak Theatre mainly consisted of experienced amateur Martin actors in the first years of its existence. Attention is also paid to the organisational, operational and artistic issues of the theatre itself. Despite the logically coherent structure, this chapter lacks complexity in the information provided. It is evident that in spite of the rendered dramaturgy and artistic background of the theatre, for the reader to grasp the complexity and integrity of the issue, more information is required regarding; the organisational and economic character of the theatre, the conditions in which artists worked, management and audience numbers in different seasons. These are not insignificant issues that often tend to be underestimated by authors. When set in contemporary contexts, information regarding the issues provide a clearer picture of the times, and have a greater scope than just a regional one. The depiction of the period from 1945 to 1950 is provided without a constant reference to politics, relying more on the introductory text of respective chapters to outline the general political situation. The history of Theatre in Prešov thereby extends primarily in terms of dramaturgical and directorial twists, namely through writers, plays, casts and directors. There is a lack of deeper reflection about the artistic activities of Slovak theatre makers in Prešov after May 1945 which would provide comparison with the new conditions for artistic work in the 1945–48 period and, lastly – an attempt to illustrate how, in the given circumstances, the theatre dealt with the political crisis of 1948. Clarification of these new political

and social conditions in relation to the activities of Slovak theatre in Prešov would have brought the publication considerable added value. It should also be noted that the author primarily focuses on the development and production of Slovak theatre, and the complex history of non-national theatre in Prešov is set aside.

Peter Himič's *Theatre Life in Prešov. From the Beginning to the Mid-20th Century* records the theatre activities in different periods of time in which the content is dominated by the most significant events, personalities and plays, and in some cases attempts to interpret and respond to their introduction. If the author aimed to synthetically portray the history, culture, social and political conditions of the theatre created in the country under the specific conditions of the politically turbulent 1940s, it is clear that this effort has only partly paid off. Neither dominant facts nor the hierarchy of values are highlighted by Himič, he strictly follows the chronological framework of the wider context of the facts, and the seriousness of some events is thus lost. For ease of reference it would have also helped readers if footnotes had been included. Despite these shortcomings, this monograph by Peter Himič is unquestionably of benefit to Slovak theatre studies.

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