

## Contemporary Theater in Slovakia: Concept of Studying the Phenomenon and Initial Observation Results<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This review article presents a novel approach to exploring contemporary Slovak theater, focusing on the cultural and artistic dialogue. The research timeframe spans from 2004, when Slovakia joined the European Union, to the present. The selected institutions for this study are involved in producing performances, providing education in stagecraft professions, and preserving specialized archives of theatrical art. The observational method collected empirical data from the field, selecting individual performances from Bratislava, Nitra, Banská Bystrica, and Prešov centers that vividly showcase the country's theatrical culture.

### Keywords

Performance, theatre art, contemporary theatre, cultural diplomacy, cultural dialogue, SAIA, Slovakia.

### Introduction

The ongoing moscow-Ukrainian war, which began in the spring of 2014 and essentially represented a national liberation struggle of Ukrainians against centuries of moscow's subjugation, clearly illustrates that good neighborly relations between states can be ambiguous and unstable. In this context, countries that genuinely strive to strengthen friendship stand out. Slovakia holds a special place among Central European countries eager to expand international cultural dialogue with Ukraine, mainly through cultural diplomacy. Programs facilitating the exchange of experience, scientific and artistic achievements, and cultural traditions serve as a unique international bridge for fostering good neighborly relations.

In 2005, the Slovak Republic's government established the National Scholarship Programme – SAIA, which aims to support students, teachers, and artists from various countries, including Ukraine. Funding for this ongoing program is provided by the Slovak state budget, with additional financial support from NextGenerationEU within the framework of the Investment: "Support of internationalization of the academic environment" Component: "Attracting and retaining talent" of the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Web (6)

Thanks to the National Program of Slovakia, numerous international projects are being implemented, including Ukrainian projects focused on studying theatrical art. For instance, the National Scholarship Program supported two individual projects proposed by the author of this article: "Fairy Tale in Theatrical Space – Artistic Educational Art without Age Restrictions" and "Contemporary stage practices: the experience of Slovak theaters" The latter project is especially intriguing, as it investigates the latest theatrical works of Slovakia and the Ukrainian-Slovak cultural dialogue within the realm of theatrical art for the first time.

## State of Research

It is well-known that art is one of the significant markers reflecting contemporary trends in creating a particular culture, mutual influences, and borrowings from other cultures. Stage art, primarily theater, along with literature and other art forms, is a sensitive, emotional indicator of moods in society and a reflection of contemporary events in general and each individual's worldview. This explains the significant interest in studying theatrical and stage art<sup>3</sup>.

There still needs to be more scientific research on contemporary stage practices of Slovak theaters to understand this expressive phenomenon fully. However, in the country, there is quite a noticeable research activity in studying the cultural and stage phenomena of the 21st century. Among Slovak theater scholars, art historians, and cultural scientists, valuable works by M. Ballay<sup>4</sup>, E. Knopová<sup>5</sup>, P. Himič<sup>6</sup>, M. Pukan<sup>7</sup>, V. Štefko<sup>8</sup>, and other researchers<sup>9</sup> are noted. Particular attention should be paid to the dissertation research on local theatrical centers, cultural and artistic events, etc.<sup>10</sup> Collective works on theater studies illustrate the accents of the issues

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<sup>3</sup> СЕНДЕЦЬКИЙ, А. Національні оперні театри України в українсько-польському культурному діалозі початку XXI ст.: аналіз офіційних сайтів [National opera theaters of Ukraine in the Ukrainian-Polish cultural dialogue of the beginning of the 21st century: analysis of official websites], 2022, с. 25-28; СЕНДЕЦЬКИЙ, А.: Українсько-польська театральна діяльність початку XXI ст.: осмислення діалогу культур сусідів і стратегія його вивчення [The Ukrainian-Polish theatrical activity of the beginning of the 21st century: understanding the dialogue of neighboring cultures and the strategy of its study], 2021, с. 26-28.

<sup>4</sup> BALLAY, M.: Intervencia vo verejnom priestore ako performatívna akcia. In *Umenie vo verejnom priestore : zborník abstraktov účastníkov medzinárodného seminára, ktorý sa konal v Bratislave 25. mája 2017*. Bratislava : UK, 2017, s. 24-26.

BALLAY, M.: *Kontinuita Študentského divadla VYDI*. Nitra: Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2012, s. 198.

<sup>5</sup> KNOPOVÁ, E.: *Reflexia európskych hodnôt v súčasnom slovenskom divadle*, 2017, s. 105-128; KNOPOVÁ, E.: *Rozpačitý XVI. ročník Európskej ceny za divadlo v starobydom, ale aj modernom Ríme*, 2018, s. 96-106.

<sup>6</sup> HIMIČ, P.: *Divadelný život Prešova. Od počiatkov do polovice 20. storočia*. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav, 2014, 283 s.

<sup>7</sup> PUKAN, M.: Adaptačné prístupy inscenátorov k románovému prototextu v súčasnom slovenskom divadle. In *Slavia - časopis pro slovanskou filologii*, 2019, roč. LXXXVIII (2), s. 146-161.

<sup>8</sup> ŠTEFKO, V.: *Slovenské činoherné divadlo 1938–1945*. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav, 2022, s. 280.

<sup>9</sup> PREDMERŠKÝ, V. a kolektív: *Dejiny slovenskej dramatiky bábkového divadla*. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav, 2020, s. 854.

<sup>10</sup> BURDOVÁ, K.: *Rozvíjanie tvorivosti v "Eldoráde" globálnej masovej kultúry*. [online]. [cit. 21. 05. 2023]. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10318/8871>.

and discourses of the latest research in this field. At the same time, published interviews show narratives prevailing in the contemporary artistic environment<sup>11</sup>.

Despite this, there still needs to be more scientific works that would provide an independent external assessment of the phenomenon of Slovak theatre life in today's realities. Analytical evaluation of contemporary Slovak theatrical art by an external specialist in this field will reveal new aspects of understanding this cultural phenomenon. An independent view from the outside is an indicator of each institution in particular or the cultural model of the country as a whole, for which successful development in the international environment is essential. Such considerations do not cast doubt on the relevance of this scientific exploration. This is the essence of the proposed research concept.

### **Research Concept**

The subject of research is the contemporary theatrical art of Slovakia over the past two decades of the 21st century. At this stage, the study focuses on cultural events involving Slovak theatrical groups and individual artists participating in art projects. The focus lies on the country's cultural institutions that actively engage in external cultural and creative dialogue, position themselves as institutions supporting the state's cultural diplomacy, and contribute to the development of international cultural dialogue.

The primary focus is on the past two decades, with the chronological boundaries of the phenomenon under study ranging from May 2004 to the 2020s (from Slovakia's accession to the European Union to the global pandemic and Covid-19-related restrictions on international relations). Post-Covid reflections in cultural dialogue are also considered.

*The research aims* to determine the activity and openness of the theater institutions in Slovakia to external cultural dialogue. Based on an individually developed strategy for studying contemporary theater in Slovakia, the results of this phenomenon investigation will be published.

The proposed review contains only individual empirical materials acquired through the observation method. To achieve the set goal, tasks are progressively carried out, including the analysis of the research source base, which is constantly supplemented with new, helpful information, primarily obtained from the Internet; the identification of main factors that caused stage cultural and artistic events during the researched chronological period; the determination of levels of mutual influence of cultural and artistic events, demonstrating the intensity of one theater center's influence on others; the tracing of the dynamics of cultural and artistic dialogue development between Slovakia's creative teams, while recording strong and weak aspects of the activity in this sphere; and the examination of the peculiarities of implementing cultural and artistic projects (cultural exchanges, guest visits, festivals, exhibitions, etc.) in Slovakia, as well as state and non-state enterprises, and artistic organizations.

Implementing this comprehensive study contains scientific novelty in several dimensions, covering artistic and scientific aspects - cultural studies, theater studies, art studies, political science, and territorial and temporal spaces. In this regard, the research requires an interdisciplinary approach. Based on a preliminary study, information sources, and an observer's

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<sup>11</sup> Pozri viac KNOPOVÁ, E.: *Súčasná teatrológia a divadlo. Vzťah divadelnej vedy, vzdelávania a scénického umenia v 21. storočí*. In *Divadlo a dráma v kontextoch nepokojnej Európy: Zborník vedeckých príspevkov z medzinárodnej Banskobystrickej teatrologickej konferencie 29. – 30. 11. 2019*. (Ed. Elena Knopová). Banská Bystrica: Fakulta dramatických umení Akadémie umení, 2019.

view from outside the country, the range of Slovak cultural and artistic activity in recent years and the intensity of theatrical dialogue with neighboring countries will be analyzed. The research results have practical value, as they will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this phenomenon in the country and the developed international cultural dialogue, especially with Ukraine. Based on the obtained results, it will be possible to predict and model the future development of theatrical art, particularly its place in cultural diplomacy.

A methodology for studying contemporary Slovak theater has been developed using comparative, informational, cultural, and formal-analytical methods. At the empirical level, an essential method is the survey of respondents involved in cultural and artistic activities.

However, the initial method in the study is observation. To achieve an objective assessment of the phenomenon of contemporary theater in Slovakia, it is crucial to capture the opinion of an observer who is not directly involved in this process but can analyze it remotely, i.e., independently, relying only on the source base and interviews with respondents.

The stated concept of studying contemporary Slovak theatre is a project with structurally branched research vectors. Therefore, only the initial informative information about getting acquainted with the peculiarities of stage activity in the country is provided in the proposed review.

Among the Slovak institutions that possess valuable archival sources, literary collections, and scientific and specialized teaching resources closely related to theatre and stage activities, and serve as the institutional foundation for research include: Institute of Theatre and Film Research at the Center for Art Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences; the Department of Culturology at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra; the Centre of Languages and Cultures of National Minorities at University of Prešov; Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica; the Slovak National Library; the Slovak national theatre; the Shevchenko Amateur Ukrainian Theatre (Bratislava); Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra; and Alexander Duchnovič Theatre in Prešov.

The "Contemporary Theatre in Slovakia" project encompasses a strategy that examines this stage art in several main directions – *scientific research, cultural and artistic, as well as educational and cognitive-tourist*.

It is noteworthy that during the initial phase of the program implementation, it was possible to familiarize oneself with Slovak culture more broadly, such as attending various theatrical productions, appreciating the melody of the local language, observing the colorful folk costumes, and admiring the creativity of stage costumes in the country's theaters.

As part of my individual scientific research and cultural and artistic program, studying the repertoire of theatrical ensembles from Bratislava, Nitra, Prešov, and Banská Bystrica was valuable, based on performances by both professional and educational institutions and showcasing various theatrical formats.

**Scientific research.** The project involves processing archival materials from the Theater Institute and the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava. Materials from the "Puppet theatre at the Crossroads " and the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica will also be considered. The collection of theoretical materials for research will also be carried out in the library of Prešov University in Prešov. Working with archival collections will help accumulate specific statistics on the activities of Slovak theatres, and original and photocopies of stage designs will illustrate the development of theatrical set design art. The results of studying the mentioned source materials

will require a separate analytical publication, with the systematization of the collected information.

Significant importance is given to the processing of specialized internet sources. Among them, the periodic specialized publications on theatrical life in Slovakia are essential information sources. Reviewing periodicals, for example, "Kód – konkrétne o divadle"<sup>12</sup> and "Slovenské Divadlo,"<sup>13</sup> provides a better understanding of the dynamics of the evolution of theatrical culture in the country, and published reviews of innovative products or the activities of theatre companies generally indicate directions for development.

**Cultural and Artistic Dialogue.** The capital of Slovakia, Bratislava, is home to a wide range of centers dedicated to creating theatrical productions catering to young audiences and adults. Fairy-tale performances without age restrictions are significant for this research, as they serve as an optimal platform for fostering successful international cultural dialogue. For instance, not all, but the main audience of the Bratislava Puppet Theatre (Bratislavské bábkové divadlo) is children, and their repertoire includes original performances like "Porky & Oaky" (Budkáčik a Dubkáčik), "The Little Water Sprite" (Vodníček), and "RoundAround" (Okololo).

The Theater GUnaGU (Divadlo GUnaGU) primarily targets adult viewers<sup>14</sup> in its cultural dialogue. Several of this theater's productions were observed, including noteworthy performances like "Men have passed" (Muži sa minuli), and "Oops!" (Hups!). These performances address societal issues and the nuances of modern communication forms while employing a comedic interpretation of contemporary individuals as actors in a globalized, marginal world to provide a relaxed perception of the plot.

The Ludus Theatre (Divadlo Ludus) offers thought-provoking, educational productions for younger audiences<sup>15</sup>. To better understand the philosophy of creation and originality of the theatre's stage works, it is worth watching performances such as "Stano and bad leg" (Stano a zlá noha), and "Peter and Lucia" (Peter a Lucia).

Performances like "Jánošík" and "Sex for Advanced" (Sex Pre Pokročilých) at the New Stage Theater (Divadlo Nová scéna)<sup>16</sup> demonstrate that incorporating national flavor into productions is always a successful decision. The direction, acting, and relevant scenography of such performances attract audiences of all ages, as refined ethno-aesthetics are eagerly perceived by theatergoers from different generations and ethnic backgrounds. These performances enable audiences to experience the traditional national culture, which not all theaters in Slovakia promote.

In The Slovak National Theatre (Slovenské Národné Divadlo)<sup>17</sup>, the performance "Theatre Novel" (Divadelný román) stands out. The seemingly absurd visualization of the performance is not initially perceived, but the exciting work of the actors encourages the viewer to explore the director's unique concept. The artistic expressiveness of each character interacting with the audience gradually invites viewers to a relaxed analytical perception of the unfolding events on stage. One of the features of the National Theater is the significant number of foreign authors'

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<sup>12</sup> Web (5)

<sup>13</sup> Web (7)

<sup>14</sup> Web (2)

<sup>15</sup> Web (3)

<sup>16</sup> Web (4)

<sup>17</sup> Web (8)

performances, which results in a relatively small percentage of Slovak artists' productions. The repertoire table's offering of performances showcasing Slovak ethnoscapes' traditional-national flavor seems exceptionally modest.

At the State opera in Banská Bystrica (Štátna opera v Banskej Bystrici)<sup>18</sup>, along with the viewed performances "Paganini" and "The Bartered Bride" (Predaná nevesta), the performance "The Little Prince" (Malý Princ) for young viewers is worth watching. The performance can be interpreted as an artistic product that provides vivid aesthetic pleasure based on the audience's reactions, particularly children. Undoubtedly, "The Little Prince" is a highlight of this theatre's repertoire, though it is not performed frequently enough during the theatre season.

Banská Bystrica's The Puppet theatre at the Crossroads (Bábkové divadlo na Rázcestí) distinguishes itself among other puppet theatres with its unique aesthetics and philosophy of presenting creative ideas.<sup>19</sup> Notable performances in this theater include children's shows like "Two tales on the tummy: Tale Jurko with a goat and Tale About the Good-one and the Lazy-one" (Dve rozprávky na brušku: O Jurkovi s kozou a O Dobromilovi a Lenimírovi), "Bon appetit, Wolf!" (Dobrá chuť, Vlk!), and "About chicken that never gave up" (O sliepke, ktorá sa nevzdala); as well as performances for adults like "T. V. Recipes" (T.V. Recepty), "Don't cry Anna" (Neplač, Anna), "The Theatre at the End of the World" (Divadlo na konci sveta), and "Variations on love" (Variácie lásky).

The activity of the Alexander Duchnovič Theatre (Divadlo Alexandra Duchnoviča) is of great importance for studying cultural dialogue in the field of theatrical art, as a significant part of its performances presents a Ukrainian-Slovak cultural dialogue.

Additionally, performances like "The King's Speech" (Kráľova reč), "The Tapaks" (Ťapákovci), and "Night of Fools" (Noc bláznov) at the Jonáš Záborský Theatre (Divadlo Jonáša Záborského in Prešov) are quite successful productions.

**Festivals, exhibitions, and events.** To properly carry out tasks of comprehensive research of various stage art forms, separate attention was paid to festivals, thematic exhibitions where artistic ideas for scenography can be found, and other cultural and artistic events. Thus, the observation focused on the Slovak stage, fine, and applied arts.

At the International Theatre Festival "Divadelná Nitra" 2022, representatives from ten countries participated, performing 15 theatrical acts. Over several days, festival guests enjoyed classical and experimental theater, lectures on theatrical art issues, physical theater and dance, puppet theater, new circus, performances for targeted audiences, and one-actor shows. This event provided an opportunity to illustrate the understanding of active theater processes in Slovakia. Despite Russia's criminal war of aggression in Ukraine, the festival also featured the work of a Ukrainian creative initiative group.

Among the diverse cultural and artistic events in Slovakia, several are worth noting: the Folklorný festival Východná, during which "Theater under the Balcony" (Divadlo pod balkónom) performed a play based on the folk tale "Janko Hraško"; Ružinovský folklórny festival (including the presentation-exhibition "Slovenská krása v ľudovom kroji," showcasing authentic costumes and parties of Slovaks living in Serbia); Medzinárodný folklórny festival

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<sup>18</sup> Web (9)

<sup>19</sup> Web (1)

"Myjava"; Folklore Festival "Trnava Gate". Also worth mentioning is the exhibition "A Year in the Customs of the Slovak People" at the Pohronské Museum Nová Baňa.

***Educational and training cooperation.*** To comprehensively understand contemporary creative processes in the field of theatrical art, employing not only observation methods but also empirical methods of experiment, classification, analysis, and initial generalization, I participated in acting, directing, stage movement, stage language, and theater history classes at the Academy of arts in Banská Bystrica (Akadémia umení v Banskej Bystrici). Specifically for students and teachers of the institution (2018), I conducted an open Author's School on the topic "Theater - Art without Borders." Within the school, a series of masterclasses in acting took place, as well as an overview presentation of the state of theater institutions in Lviv.

At the invitation of theaterologist and university teacher Miroslav Ballay, I conducted an open practical-theoretical lesson of the author's course "Drama Method" for students and teachers of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre). During the meeting, I held an artistic workshop on acting and stage movement, presenting fragments of the educational program of the theater arts department of the "SPIROGRAPH" School of Arts in Lviv.

### **Summary instead of conclusions**

The collected information is essential for researching the openness of Slovakia's theater institutions, administrative establishments, and representative centers to cultural dialogue, particularly in the context of Ukrainian-Slovak cultural diplomacy. Processing the obtained material will enable the commencement of extensive research work on analyzing the issues of cultural dialogue and the mechanisms for their resolution in current conditions typical for theaters and related associations. The activities of organizations, forms of communication, propaganda effects, and repertoire changes are of particular scientific interest.

A substantial and fundamental aspect of my research is also the opportunity to familiarize myself with and understand/feel/observe the degree of openness to dialogue, friendliness, and support for researchers from outside the country, especially participants of the Slovak National Program. For the sake of objectivity, I must note that not all selected institutions – theatres and scientific-educational art organizations – eagerly responded to the proposals for dialogue, seeking mutual understanding and friendly communication with researchers outside the institution's borders. These research findings will be published later.

Nevertheless, the acquired knowledge and contacts enable a comparative analysis, which will help represent Slovakia's theatres and educational institutions and their activities in the international cultural dialogue. The obtained results can be included in the Ukrainian-Slovak informational publication and used for in-depth scientific conclusions in the future. Individual materials obtained through observation will be incorporated into a series of lectures of the Theatre Art Department of the School of Arts "Spirograph" in Lviv. The experience gained in studying the peculiarities of contemporary Slovak theatre will be needed for the subsequent organization of the International Theatre Platform "Intermedia Curtain," planned to be held in 2024 at the Center for Cultural & Arts Initiatives, provided that the war between Ukraine and Russia ends successfully.

The initiated scientific research and cultural-artistic dialogue with the Slovak theatre environment contribute to both my expansion of knowledge and strengthening of experience

specifically and the growth of active cooperation within the framework of an international creative partnership between Slovakia and Ukraine

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## **Súčasn  divadlo na Slovensku: koncepcia sk mania fenom nu a po iatocn  v sledky pozorovania**

Prehľadov   lanok je inicia n m pr spevkom ku sk maniu s časn ho slovensk ho divadla. Zameriava sa na kult rny a umeleck  dial g z perspekt vy zahrani n ho pozorovateľa z Ukrajiny.  asov  r mec v skumu siaha od roku 2004, keď Slovensko vst pilo do Eur pskej  nie, a  po s časnosť. Autor v r mci svojho v skumu vyu ival preva ne zber dostupn ch inform ci  z vybran ch in titucii zaoberaj cich sa divadeln ch vzdel vanim v jednotliv ch javiskov ch form ch, umeleckou tvorbou, archivovanim divadeln ho umenia. Opieral sa v mnohom o metodu pozorovania vo vyselektovan ch kult rnych in tituci ch v Bratislave, Nitre, Banskej Bystrici a Pre ove, ktor  považoval za vhodné na reprezent ciu divadelnej kult ry krajiny zo  ir ieho aspektu kult rneho a umeleck ho dial gu.

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