

MODERN SLOVAK HISTORY ON THE STAGE

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ABSTRACT: The paper discusses Slovak drama and theatre after 1989, especially plays that deal with significant historical moments and persons of 20th century Slovak history, such as the Holocaust, the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, Communism and partially the Velvet revolution of 1989. It mentions a shift in the interpretation of these events by the society, often related to historical research and journalism, as well as changes in theatre aesthetics after 1989. Besides historical research, performances often use elements of oral and family history to complement the collective memory. Whereas there are almost no living witnesses of the first Slovak Republic, several generations remember Communism; nevertheless, for younger spectators (and also playwrights) it already represents the remote past. Spectators of different generations therefore might have very different cognitive, emotional and moral responses to the messages communicated by plays. On the other hand, theatre still conveys some artistic quality, and the plays based on crucial moments in the 20th century Slovak history modify a traditional concept of heroism and conflict in the genres of historical drama and tragedy. The paper briefly characterizes the plot and dramatis personae, and discusses the changes in the form and genre of plays (especially biographical and documentary drama). The performances prove that intertextuality and intermediality, collective authorship, loose form or improvisation, as well as fixing the dramatic text during rehearsals and performances, along with the denial of illusive theatre, have become common approaches in contemporary Slovak drama and in professional repertoire theatres, whereas they were only used in alternative or amateur theatres before 1989. From the perspective of drama and theatre studies, post-1989 production used post-modernism, drama of coolness, as well as performative, multimedia and post-dramatic theatre.

KEYWORDS: contemporary Slovak drama, contemporary Slovak theatre, historical drama, biographical drama, post-modern drama and theatre, drama of coolness, performative theatre, multimedia in theatre, post-dramatic theatre

Theatre and reality intertwined in Czechoslovakia during the Velvet Revolution of November 1989: artists were among the organizers of street protests, and gatherings resembled theatre events with a set order of speeches, slogans and music (Šimko, 2011, p. 648). In spite of being on strike, theatres opened their buildings for public discussions. ‘Besides a new form of interaction in which the stage tried to establish a dialogue with the audience, in some cases even listened to stories from the audience the experience of “not acting” was important, especially for repertoire theatres. During the theatre strike, theatres fulfilled their social function by not performing. Instead of producing illusive reality there was silence, recognized by the society, and as an act, it had its significant meaning.’¹ (Ibid., p. 647). Thirty years later, the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava premiered the play *No Show Tonight (Dnes večer nehráme)*, by the Czech director Jiří Havelka (b. 1980). Referring to the strike of 1989, the play replaced illusive theatre by a concept of theatre as a social situation. The performance was a collective production largely based on documentary materials combined with fictive texts. Memory documents included recorded discussions from 1989, letters of support or criticism from spectators, as well as actors’ memories and re-enactments of their standpoint in 1989. Besides 1989, the play also recalled the centenary of the Slovak National Theatre (founded in 1919) and the theatre’s role in the national culture. Key nodes of time² in the history of the theatre underlined the overlaps between theatre and history, culture and politics. Another play staged to commemorate 1989 was a theatre adaptation of the 1975 essay *A Letter to Gustáv Husák (List Gustávovi Husákovi)* by the former president Václav Havel (1936 – 2011), directed by Martin Čičvák (b. 1975) in the State Theatre in Košice.³ Havel’s essay, a turning

¹ ‘Okrem novej formy interakcie, pri ktorej sa javisko usilovalo nadviazať dialóg s hľadiskom, v niektorých prípadoch dokonca načúvalo príbehom z hľadiska, najmä pre repertoárové divadlá bol dôležitý zážitok z „nehrania“. V čase divadelného štrajku plnili divadlá svoju spoločenskú funkciu tým, že nehrali. Namiesto produkcie iluzívnej reality nastúpilo mlčanie, ktoré bolo spoločensky rozpoznané a ako akt malo svoj zásadný význam.’

² For the foundation of the Slovak National Theatre in 1919 and the changes in the theatre after 1939, see Kročanová, 2019, pp. 465 – 473. Another node of time is 1949 when a new Theatre Law was adopted in Czechoslovakia after the Communist coup d’état.

³ Dr. Gustáv Husák (1913 – 1991) was the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in the 1970s and 1980s. Husák’s turbulent political career has

point in the dissident movement of the 1970s and the 1980s, was divided among nine young actors who developed their characters around text fragments. The scenes, as well as music, props and stage design reproduced the Communist era on stage; however, the acting and side comments created an alienating effect. After an interval, the performance continued by a round table with activists of 1989 intended as the second ‘act’ of the play. These recent performances prove that intertextuality and intermediality, collective authorship, loose form or improvisation, as well as fixing the dramatic text during rehearsals and performances, along with the denial of illusive theatre, have become common approaches in contemporary Slovak drama and in the professional repertoire theatres, whereas they were only used in alternative or amateur theatres before 1989. As was the case before 1989, contemporary Slovak culture shows a predilection for anniversaries, commemorations and projects, and theatre repertoires often copy topics of public discourse in media. Whereas in 2019 and 2020, theatres celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution and the centenary of professional theatre in Slovakia, in 2018 they commemorated the Prague Spring and Alexander Dubček (1921 – 1992). In 2017, some theatres returned to the controversial figure of the President of the first Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945) Jozef Tiso (1887 – 1947), and in 2015, they joined celebrations of the Year of Ľudovít Štúr proclaimed by the Slovak government.⁴ Deportations of Jewish citizens from Slovakia were remembered in 2012, seventy years from the first transports. Some theatres built their repertoire around a series of performances on some themes (Morals), on classical Slovak literature (Family Silver), or on traumatic moments of Slovak history (Civic Cycle, Endlösung, We Do Not Forget)⁵. Political, historical and biographical plays in the repertoire filled in lacunae caused by removing some themes from public circulation during the Communist era. Regarding the 20th century totalitarian regimes, Communism and the period of the first Slovak Republic seemed to be equally present as themes for theatre in the new millennium. For example, the Aréna Theatre in Bratislava premiered several plays related to the post-1948 period, such as *Dr. Gustáv Husák: Prisoner of Presidents, President of Prisoners* (Dr. Gustáv Husák: väzeň prezidentov, prezident väzňov, 2006), *Communism* (2008), and *#dubček* (2018)⁶. All of them written by Viliam Klimáček (b. 1958) of the alternative theatre GuNaGu, whose approach in both types of theatres is close to post-modern poetics of allusions, irony, intertextuality and multimedia.⁷ The Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava, in a cycle on intellectual elites in history, staged Peter Pavlac’s (b. 1976) play *Válek’s Word* (Slovo Válkovo, 2015).

The monodrama *Dr. Gustáv Husák* focuses on three turbulent periods in his life – his participation in the resistance movement in the 1940s; his imprisonment in the 1950s after the Communist coup d’état, based on a false accusation of ‘bourgeois nationalism’; and eventually his rising political career in the 1970s and 1980s, in the period of the ‘normalization’ that followed the suppression of the Prague Spring. Two actors, in two parallel monologues, play young Husák, whereas the third actor plays him as a mature man. The protagonist, a lawyer, politician and Communist, comments on some historical and personal events, raising questions and answering them. According to the review by Jozef Haľko (2007): ‘The authors intentionally reduced emotions. The entire performance is a cold-blooded monologue of a Communist who, seeing things with detachment, perspective and irony narrates his life story’.⁸ The performance communicates Husák’s trust in the idea of Communism in spite of experience, as well as his pragmatism and opportunism in politics. Signs to imply the era are very transparent: a choir of pioneers singing optimistic songs, and few symbolic objects on the stage,

recently been widely researched by Czech and Slovak historians. Among bestselling academic publications, one can mention the biographical monograph *Gustáv Husák* (2017) by the Czech scholar Michal Macháček (b. 1986).

⁴ Ľudovít Štúr (1815 – 1856) was a leading figure of the Slovak national movement, author of the normative grammar of Slovak (1843), journalist and politician (a member of the Hungarian diet, one of authors of Slovak nation’s political claims in 1842 and 1848, and one of leaders of the uprising of 1849).

⁵ The Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava prepared seasons with the headlines *Morals*, *Endlösung* and *Family Silver*. The Arena theatre in Bratislava ran a Civic Cycle for several seasons, whereas the Theatre of J. Záborský in Prešov had the cycle *We Do Not Forget* in the 2014/15 season.

⁶ *Dr. Gustáv Husák and Communism* were directed by Martin Čičvák (b. 1975), *#dubček* by the Czech director Michal Skočovský (b. 1984).

⁷ Klimáček began as a playwright, actor and director in Bratislava in the late 1980s. As a winner of several drama competitions, he gradually reached established ‘brick and mortar’ theatres.

⁸ ‘[...] tvorcovia cieľavedome zredukovali emócie. Celé predstavenie je chladnokrvným monológom komunistu, ktorý s odstupom, nadhľadom i iróniou rozpráva svoj životný príbeh’.

such as a speaker's desk, a miniature tank on a writing desk, red stars and scarves; perhaps the only ambiguous motif are apples that actors were peeling, slicing and eating during the performance. The play finishes with a film montage of Husák's notoriously remembered New Year's addresses. Klimáček's second play, *Communism*, complements the statement on the era by showing everyday family life in the 1970s and 1980s, compromised, however, by the collaboration with the State Security. Pavlac's play *Válek's Word* shows a disturbing real episode from March 1989 when the poet and then-Slovak Minister of Culture Miroslav Válek (1927 – 1991) was watching from a hotel window in Bratislava how the police suppressed a 'candlelight' protest calling for religious freedom in Czechoslovakia. This also confirms that Válek's long poem *Word* (*Slovo*, 1976), dedicated to the Communist Party, was as authentic as was his innovative 'poetry of restlessness' from the late 1950s and the 1960s. The last of Klimáček's three plays, *#dubček*, uses a principle of theatre in theatre: it begins as a discussion of young actors about the era, develops as scenes from Dubček's life, and finishes by actors' statements about the meaning and consequences of 1968 for their parents and grandparents. Dubček's political biography includes his childhood in the Soviet Union, party membership and coping with Stalinism, his role in the reform processes and eventually their suppression. The performance evokes the era by a display of paintings and caricatures from the 1960s on the stage, projecting documentary films, sharing memories related to the Czech student Jan Palach's (1948 – 1969) self-immolation, as well as speaking about the atmosphere of hope and despair. In his review, Martin Timko (2020) noticed that the performance that started a dialogue on the role of Dubček in modern history could also serve as a social therapy for the lost historical chance. In spite of educative and didactic simplifications, it portrays Dubček and his politics as an attempt to introduce a new concept of authority that contrasted not only with hard-core Communism but also with the flaws of today's democracy.

Regarding the period of the first Slovak Republic, plays frequently discussed two decisive moments in its history: the deportations of Jewish citizens from Slovakia between 1942 and 1945, and the resistance movement that resulted in the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 and partisan war of 1944 – 1945. Some plays also dealt with public figures of this German satellite, such as the President Jozef Tiso (1887 – 1947) or the renowned writer Milo Urban (1904 – 1982). Tiso (2005) opened the 'Civic Cycle' in the Arena theatre in Bratislava.⁹ Set in a prison before Tiso's death sentence for treason, the play narrates his activities as a priest, minister of health and sports, Member of Parliament, President, and eventually prisoner refusing to plead guilty. The text is a collage of Tiso's sermons, articles and speeches, combined with the parts of the memorandum of Slovak rabbis addressed to him, and an epilogue based on memories of Tiso's secretary.¹⁰ The authors use facts and documents to maintain a detached approach, and characterize Jozef Tiso in a bulletin as a tragic and controversial figure. However, the projection of documentary films, along with props, music and images on the stage evoke the tragic consequences of his presidency. In 2017, one hundred and thirty years after Tiso's birth and seventy years after his execution, when the play was staged again, Juliana Beňová (2018) wrote that it did not provide any explicit judgement on Tiso as a person or politician. 'It is a pity that in Arena they did not go further and add some "superstructure" to the play – the opinions of historians or a public discussion. The art of removing strata of myths and dogmas from personalities is namely the calling card of our civic and cultural maturing.'¹¹ In spite of the interest in Tiso's life in Slovakia, the first modern monograph about him, was written by the American historian James Mace Ward, and appeared in Slovak and Czech translations in 2018.¹²

⁹ The play was directed by Rastislav Ballek (b. 1971), who also wrote the script together with dramaturg Martin Kubran. The play won several Slovak theatre awards of the season - for the best performance of the season 2004/2005, for the new talent of the season (for the team of R. Ballek and M. Kubran), for music and for best actor.

¹⁰ Two volumes of Tiso's speeches and articles were edited by *Miroslav Fabricius, Ladislav Suško, and Katarína Hradská*, *Jozef Tiso: Prejavy a články (1913 – 1938), Prejavy a články 1938 – 1944*. Bratislava : AEPRESS, 2002 and 2007.

¹¹ 'Škoda, že v Aréne sa neposunuli ďalej a nedodali k hre ešte nejakú „nadstavbu“ – hodnotenia historikov či verejnú diskusiu. Umenie snímať z osobností nánosy mýtov a dogiem je totiž vizitkou nášho občianskeho a kultúrneho dozrievania.'

¹² *James Mace Ward, Priest, Politician, Collaborator (Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia)*, 2013), Slovak translation Jozef Tiso. *Kňaz, politik, kolaborant*. Bratislava : Slovart, 2018.

The prominent Slovak feminist writer Jana Juráňová¹³ (b. 1957) has written ‘parallel’, ‘invisible’ and ‘silent’ (often female) histories in her prose and drama, noticing also the influence of politics and history on moral choices. She raised the question of responsibility and potential guilt of the interwar Slovak prose writer Milo Urban (1904 – 1982) in her play *Silent Whip* (*Tichý bič*, 2015).¹⁴ The title alludes to Urban’s well-known novel *The Living Whip* (*Živý bič*, 1927) but also implies a punishment carried out by public opinions or by one’s consciousness. Urban, as the editor-in-chief of the *Guardsman* (*Gardista*, 1939 - 1945), wrote ideologically and politically biased articles, supporting the measures against Slovak Jewish citizens. After a brief period in emigration, Urban was sentenced to a ‘public reprimand’ for his journalism in 1948; he had to move to a village near Bratislava and made his living by translations that were published under pseudonyms. From the late 1950s, Urban’s novels, both reissued and newly published, became available again, and five volumes of his memoirs were published between 1970 and 1994. Urban’s activities as a journalist in the 1940s were forgotten during this period but his prose has remained compulsory secondary school reading. In 2014, the literary historian Karol Csiba (b. 1975) published a monograph *Private – Public – Autobiographical* (2014) on four interwar Slovak writers, including Milo Urban. Csiba’s concept of authorship, that took in consideration not only fiction but also journalism and memoirs, revealed discrepancies in the writing and life attitudes of these writers. In contrast to Tiso, Juráňová’s play *Silent Whip* is mostly based on fictive repartees with occasional quotations from Urban’s articles, memoirs and other documents, combined with (an inevitable) film projection emphasizing historical facts. Set in the 1970s, the play portrays Urban as an aged, rather quiet and shy man, shown in his home environment, trying to excuse his past for himself and for a young journalist who asked questions about his journalism, in order to cope with his family’s history but also to understand Urban’s motivation.¹⁵ Urban and also his wife argue that he himself had been a victim of the time and, in fact, had protected and saved many people from transports. The play neither criminalizes nor pardons Urban, but implies that one’s acts would not be forgotten. Juráňová shows Urban’s personal and literary isolation rather realistically, without the postmodern irony and sarcasm that she had used with other historical figures (for example, with Štúr and Hviezdoslav). Zuzana Uličianska (2016), in the title of her review, suggests that the whip was ‘too silent,’ considering the play to be ‘intelligent, although, from a theatre perspective, no breakthrough.’

Whereas Juráňová wrote a traditional conversational play focusing on the banality of Urban’s life, another female playwright, Anna Grusková (b. 1962), produced an experimental play about a brave woman, one of the victims of the Holocaust. The protagonist of *The Woman Rabbi* (*Rabínka*, 2012), a Jewish activist Gisela (Gisi) Genendel Fleischmann (1892 – 1944), was involved in organizing the emigration of Jews from the first Slovak Republic and in activities to stop the transports from Slovakia.¹⁶ She was deported to Auschwitz when her contacts with Slovak and German authorities were revealed. The Slovak historian Katarína Hradská (b. 1956) published her research on Gisi Fleischmann in 2003 and 2012, and her life story was mentioned in an American research on the Holocaust.¹⁷ In preparation for the play, Anna Grusková cooperated with historians in Slovakia and in Israel, made her

¹³ Juráňová has deconstructed myths about historical figures; for example, in the play *Silver Bowls Excellent Vessels* (*Misky strieborné nádoby výborné*, 2005) she ironized Ľudovít Štúr’s misogyny and misanthropy, and gave voice to wives and fiancées of his followers. In her novel *I Lived with Hviezdoslav* (*Žila som s Hviezdoslavom*, 2008, English trans. by Julia and Peter Sherwood, *My Life with the Bard*, 2014), she demythologized Slovakia’s quasi-official national poet. Another of Juráňová’s novels, *Women Interceders* (*Orodovnice*, 2006), showed the moral dilemmas of women whose husbands were politically active in various 20th century regimes.

¹⁴ The play, directed by Alena Lelková (b. 1971), in collaboration with the playwright Darina Abrahámová (b. 1959), premiered in 2015 at the Slovak National Theatre, as a part of a cycle dealing with the failure of elites. This cycle also included Roman Olekšák’s (b. 1978) play *Leni* (2014) on Leni Riefenstahl (1902 – 2003), and Peter Pavlac’s play *Válek’s Word* (2015).

¹⁵ The journalist’s father was among the Jews deported from Slovakia. Since the young man admires Urban as an excellent writer and perceives him as a sensitive and gentle person, he does not understand how he was able to write some editorials for the *Guardsman*.

¹⁶ The play was directed by Czech director Viktorie Čermáková (b. 1966). I discussed this play (along with Viliam Klimáček’s *Holocaust*) in the context of the Slovak drama on the Holocaust, see *Kročánová*, 2017, pp. 197 – 210.

¹⁷ For details, see <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/gisi-fleischmann>>

own research in the archives in both countries, and interviewed members of Fleischmann's family. She first wrote a radio play, then a theatre play (which was completely rewritten for the Slovak National Theatre in 2011–2012), made a photo exhibition, a documentary film, and supported the project of placing a Stolperstein (commemorative stone) outside Fleischmann's house in Bratislava. Whereas the original version of the theatre play was biographical¹⁸, the more recent one tried, besides Fleischmann's life, to evoke the disturbing complexity of the Holocaust by experimenting with form.

The *Woman Rabbi* combines fiction with documents, narrative parts with symbolic images, realism with irrational and dream-like reality, and acting with film projection. 'Considering grotesque costumes, frequent changes of costumes, utterances in a microphone or songs of various genres, it would be the most appropriate to call a form of the performance a documentary cabaret'¹⁹ (Mihálová, 2018, s. 182). Spectators are exposed to various visual and acoustic stimuli that enhanced the feeling of confusion and incomprehension. The form of the play might reflect Grusková's theoretical background as a theatre researcher and recently a film director.²⁰ She was also one of the translators of Hans-Thies Lehmann's (b. 1944) influential Post-dramatic theatre (1999) into Slovak.²¹ Lehmann states that contemporary theatre should be non-literary, based on little or no drama, go beyond dialogue, be experimental; and influenced by media, it should offer simultaneous and multiple perspectives. In this type of theatre, spectators and their responses to situations also become observed and researched. This approach enhances their involvement and awareness of themes of societal and historical relevance.

The plot of Viliam Klimáček's play *Holocaust* (2012) alternates between the interwar and war periods and post-1989 reality, relating them through a family history.²² When the Jewish codex is adopted, the aspiring Slovak poet and politician Ambróz Králik becomes the owner of Rosa Rosenfeld's café.²³ After 1989, Králik's daughter returns from emigration to claim the confiscated property. The play, subtitled 'a story that Slovakia would rather forget' addresses not only 'parallel' stories and 'conflicting' histories but also economic and financial aspects of the 'aryanization', as well as a totalitarian blemish on post-1989 democracies and capitalism. Klimáček alludes to well-known stories and images, creating recognizable, puppet-like characters and stories, freely combining citations and rewriting texts. For example, he uses the myths about a happy cohabitation of various nationalities in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period and about the Slovak prosperity during the war. In Králik's plot line, Klimáček reverses the myth about a poet voicing the nation's 'conscience'.²⁴ The play imitates the fashion, music, film and poetry of the era, combining them with documentary materials. According to Jana Wild, 'The stories of Klimáček's characters are deeply woven in the culture of the era [...] They are also related to newspapers, calendars, the literature they read, the radio they listen to. Culture – this is also sociocultural regulations [...] namely in moments of breaking points, these regulations loosen and fall apart. This is exactly what Klimáček shows [...] The Holocaust on the level of everyday human

¹⁸ This version of the play emphasized Fleischmann's courage and heroism, yet, it also raised a question about her ambition inappropriate for a woman (the perspective of Fleischmann's mother). The play was also staged also in Teatro Reon, Bologna, Italy in 2010.

¹⁹ 'Vzhľadom na použitie groteskných kostýmov, časté preoblečenia, prehovory do mikrofónov či interpretáciu piesní rôznych žánrov by bolo najpríhodnejšie pomenovať inscenačný tvar dokumentárnym kabaretom'.

²⁰ Grusková's research on biographies of women resulted in several other works, such as *Almtraum* (2004), a play on Alma Mahler (1879 – 1964), as well as in the films *Returning to a Burning House* (*Návrat do horiaceho domu*, 2014), on Slovak-born Zionist parachutist Haviva Reick (1914 – 1944) as well as *Professional Foreigner* (*Profesionálna cudzinka*, 2016), on Slovak-Swiss writer Irena Brežná (b. 1950).

²¹ English translation in 2006, Slovak translation in 2007.

²² Premiered in the Arena theatre in Bratislava as a part of the Civic Cycle, directed by Rastislav Ballek and staged in collaboration with a dramaturg Martin Kubran.

²³ The play was originally inspired by memoirs of Holocaust survivor *Hilda Hrabovcová* (whose story is vaguely echoed in the character of Rosa Rosenfeld), *Ruka s vytetovaným číslom* (*Arm with a Tattooed Number*), Bratislava: Albert Marenčin, 1998.

²⁴ This character might also allude to the protagonist of the Oscar-winning Czechoslovak film *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965) by Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, based on the novella by Ladislav Grosman, in which a simple-minded but aspiring new Slovak owner of a Jewish shop eventually murders its original holder. There were two Slovak theatre adaptations of Grosman's novel staged in 2014: one at the Jonáš Záborský Theatre in Prešov, and a translation of the American playwright Bernard Spiro's musical (originally performed Off-Off Broadway in New York in 1986) at the Nová scéna theatre in Bratislava.

behaviour'²⁵ (Wild, 2015, p. 484). The atmosphere of nostalgia changes into a sudden shock when spectators face the atrocity of the war and the Holocaust; changing places between the auditorium and the stage after the interval enhances the feeling. Another important wartime event, the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, inspired hundreds of literary works before 1989, whereas writers tended to avoid it after 1989. Viliam Klimáček's play *Fiery Fires* (*Ohne ohnivé*, 1996), staged in the theatre GuNagu in Bratislava, was a rare and ironical postmodern reinterpretation of the Uprising. This rather surreal and nonsensical play mixed 'high' with 'low': heroism with sexual fantasies, French partisans with Andy Warhol and the established iconography of the Uprising with Salvador Dalí.²⁶

The anniversaries of the Slovak National Uprising in the new millennium were commemorated by staging older plays, such as Peter Karvaš's (1920 – 1999) *Midnight Mass* (*Polnočná omša*, 1959), as well as Ivan Bukovčan's (1921 – 1975) *Before the Rooster Crows* (*Kým kohút nezaspieva*, 1969) and *Snow Above a Pine Tree* (*Sneh nad limbou*, 1974).²⁷ In spite of being written in the Communist era, these plays rank among the best dramatic works on the Slovak National Uprising. Both authors revived Existentialism in theatre, Karvaš in the period of the 'thaw', whereas Bukovčan in the late 1960s and in the 'normalization' in the 1970s.²⁸ Karvaš uses the motif of a family dissent and fratricide to show the reality of the Uprising. Bukovčan's earlier play creates a model situation in which ten hostages locked in a cellar had to choose one who would get sacrificed for the death of a German soldier. The plot develops as a series of sudden changes that contrast with the insistence on rules and regulations. Characters faced unpredictable situations and the threat of their own death. Bukovčan's latter play abandons the black-and-white concept of characters, usual in plays on the Uprising, and is an attempt to establish a dialogue with an enemy; but its subdued, anti-heroic tone is replaced by pathos and the monumentalisation of death in the end. The collective play *Uprising* (*Povstanie*, 2014) which premiered in the Arena Theatre, was a rare instance of a new piece on the Slovak National Uprising. The ambition of the experimental project by eight authors was to provide audiences with a plurality of perspectives, interpretations and incentives.²⁹ A collage of scenes and episodes used a vast and only somewhat organized material, expressing the nature of collective memory. The performance was directed by Sláva Daubnerová (b. 1980), whose productions creatively mix dramatic theatre, opera and dance theatre with other media, such as radio and film. The visually strong performance reproduced iconographic characters, motifs, images, art works and monuments, as well as documentary materials related to the Uprising. Spectators, familiar with them, recognized conventions and controversies but had to cope with conflicting messages themselves. Several texts (and episodes) used motifs of family and gender conflicts in relation with the Uprising (fratricide, father and son conflict, and male versus female perception of events). To avoid the established conceptualization of history, the adjectives 'Slovak' and 'National' were crossed out from the title. Although the performance wished to offer a shared experience rather than some knowledge or message, it communicated the 'rise' and 'freeze' as a central idea.³⁰

Regarding the poetics, most contemporary theatres integrated approaches and methods of pre-1989 alternative theatres, studio theatres and theatre labs. Along with post-modernism in drama and theatre, the 1990s brought 'in-your-face' and 'coolness' drama that were gradually replaced by performative, multimedia, and post-dramatic theatre in the new millennium. Experiments with form and dramatic categories (such as plot, space, time, and characters) as well as with the entire concept of

²⁵ „Príbehy Klimáčekových postáv sú hlboko vtkané do kultúry doby [...] súvisia aj s novinami, kalendármi, literatúrou, ktorú čítajú, rozhlasom, ktorý počúvajú. A kultúra – to sú aj sociokultúrne regulatívy [...] V dobe zlomov sa práve tieto regulatívy uvoľňujú a rozpadajú. Klimáček presne toto ukazuje: [...] Holokaust v rovine každodennosti ľudského správania“.

²⁶ Surrealism in Slovakia reached its pinnacle in the early to mid-1940s.

²⁷ The Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava staged *Before the Rooster Crows* in 1999 and *Midnight Mass* in 2014; Theatre of Andrej Bagar in Nitra staged the former play in 2017; and Spišské divadlo (Zips Theatre) in Spišská Nová Ves premiered *Snow Above a Pinetree* in 2019.

²⁸ Existential plays have a reduced number of characters, are set in a limited space, and show a situation in extremis. Characters feel anxiety and pressure but must make an important choice.

²⁹ The bulletin contained texts by writers of different generations (eight Slovak and one Czech) as well as essays by two historians who differed radically in their viewpoint on the Uprising.

³⁰ Through the performance, one of the characters, a female figure that might stand for Slovakia, was crawling on the floor, rising, making a series of movements, and freezing in a statue-like pose.

theatre illusion and its emotional impact on spectators have resulted in a new aesthetics of theatre. Plays with themes from modern Slovak history often use documentary and biographical drama combined with fiction, and introduce epic and narrative aspects in theatre. The ambition to cover multiple spaces and perspectives results in mixing genres and media.³¹ The popularity of documentary drama meets the desire to know more about the past but also to experience it. The ambition to reconstruct the past and its protagonists ‘faithfully’ to reality causes some performances to resemble holographic displays or reduce history to emblematic objects and images. Subtleties and even relevant differences might get erased if sensitivity to respective language of people and periods is missing. Theatre, standing in for history lessons at school, often works with simplifications and reductions. For example, the performances on Tiso, Husák and Dubček (as well as on Urban and Válek) might be placed under the umbrella term ‘the politician (or artist) and history’, whereas fascism and Communism under the umbrella ‘totalitarian regimes suppressing freedom’. In spite of the documentary elements, theatre interpretations of events from 20th century Slovak history seem to produce a grotesque image of reality, either with sinister or laughable qualities. Besides historical research, performances often use elements of oral and family history to complement the collective memory. Whereas there are almost no living witnesses of the first Slovak Republic, several generations remember Communism; nevertheless, for younger spectators (and also playwrights) it already represents the remote past. Spectators of different generations therefore might have very different cognitive, emotional and moral responses to messages communicated by plays. On the other hand, theatre still conveys some artistic quality, and the plays on crucial moments in 20th century Slovak history modify a traditional concept of heroism and conflict in genres of historical drama and tragedy.

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³¹ A recent example of a multigenre theatre is the ballet Milada Horáková, with a libretto written by Ondrej Šoth (b. 1960) and Zuzana Mistríková (b. 1967), which premiered in the State Theatre in Košice in February 2020. Milada Horáková (1901 – 1950) was a Czech politician and lawyer opposing the Communist regime after 1948. She was sentenced to death for an alleged treason.