

MASK ARCHETYPE IN CONTEMPORARY SCENIC IMAGE¹

JOZEF OVEČKA

Abstract: The author takes the contemporary theatre performance of *Mátohy* [The Spooks] and maps out the use of original folk theatre masks in a new theatrical context. He describes and characterizes the changes that occur as a consequence of transposing folk masks from their traditional environment to the contemporary stage.

Key words: mask; folk theatre; theatre performance *Mátohy* [The Spooks]; Kamil Žiška; transposition.

In the region that is now occupied by Slovakia, folk theatre is much older than professional theatre² and it draws on its own diverse and rich history. The concept of “folk theatre” is characterized in a variety of ways depending on the country in which it is being defined. Slovak folklore tradition, as well as that of Bohemia and Moravia, differs from the traditions of western countries.

Therefore, to accommodate our needs, folk theatre should not be understood as theatre that stages productions like those of Freie Volksbühne in Berlin, Maurice Pottecher’s Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang or Volkstheater in Vienna. In his book *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, Patrice Pavis, a French theatre theorist, characterizes folk theatre as theatre where directors and playwrights seek a repertory and style accessible to a large number of audiences, thus identifying a *populus* element in the folk audience.³ He correctly contrasts folk theatre with elite, court, bourgeois theatre, *théâtre à l’italienne*, with its hierarchized and unchangeable architecture, which separates the audience from the action. However, he ignores folklore participation, the element of collectivity and anonymity and discounts the calendar and lifecycle. Pavis refers to the literature from most of the twentieth century (up until 1975).

¹ This paper is part of a project funded by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport and of the Slovak Academy of Sciences VEGA No. 2/0164/09.

² The origins of Slovak professional theatre date back to the founding of the Slovak National Theatre and its first première (1920).

³ See “folk theatre” in the French *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Pavis1987). *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. Paris: Messidor/Ed. sociales. Several revised editions of the *Dictionnaire du théâtre* have been produced since the first edition was published in 1987. The dictionary has also been published in Slovak (2004).

Since then, perceptions of folk theatre have dramatically changed. In what is now Slovakia, folk theatre has always been understood as a specific kind of amateur theatre, involving folk art, folk customs and games expressed as drama. Typically, theatre professionals were not involved in this kind of production; instead, it is theatre created by the local inhabitants of the region, or by individuals of various civil professions.

Folk theatre not only comes under theatre studies, but also ethnography, since it is deeply rooted in the customs and ways of local populations. It is a special form of dramatic expression which is part of the accumulated spiritual and material values of human activity, preserved and handed down from generation to generation. It is distinct from professional theatre and it dates back to the early stages of human evolution, to the need for community playfulness and (magic) rituals. As thinking evolved and religious concepts developed, so too did dramatic performance and individual characters begin to emerge. At the same time the mask evolved as part of theatrical scenery.

The mask is a typical element in all folk theatre cultures. The earliest preserved mask to be used in theatre that was found in what is now Slovakia is a cult mask made of part of a human skull dating from the Hallstatt period, i.e. 700–400 B.C. (Čavojský 1997, 5).⁴ In his book *Ludové masky* [Folk Masks], Slovak theatre theorist and ethnographer Martin Slivka, states that:

The fundamental stratum of our folk theatre is rooted in the rites, culture and religion of old Slavs. Archaeological and written sources contain little information on theatre and masks; however, direct and indirect evidence, analogies and preserved folklore materials provide us with at least a basic idea as to the ritual and dramatic acts of our forefathers, the types of characters and the styles of masking (Slivka 1990, 10).

There is a wide variety of types and kinds of masks in Slovak folk theatre. Masks were organized hierarchically and structurally over time and according to the purpose they served. In terms of time and place, individual masks are strictly tied to a certain context; in folk theatre, certain masks should not appear together within a certain time period and/or place. This is not simply because the regions were largely disparate and so masks differed, but also largely by the usage of masks in different calendar and lifecycle time periods.⁵

However, other more recent uses have emerged regardless of the rules governing stages in human life and celebrations of specific days or geographic ties. One such use refers to the incorporation of elements of folk culture within theatre.

In 2010, director Kamil Žiška and dramaturg Daniel Majling staged a performance entitled *Mátohy* [The Spooks] at the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra.⁶ The story centres around

⁴ This mask was found in a Hallstatt cave close to the village of Silica in 1953.

⁵ In traditional folk theatre there is little variation in which mask can be used at a particular time and in a particular place. Thus individual masks are closely linked to specific days in the year or stages in people's lives, and certain geographic areas. For instance, certain folk theatre masks from eastern Slovakia would not be found in western Slovakia. Equally, door-to-door Christmas carol singing in August would be just as unthinkable as vintage celebrations in the middle of winter.

⁶ Kamil Žiška: Mátohy. Dramaturgy: Daniel Majling, Music by Kamil Žiška and Ján Kružliak, Choreography: Marián Hlavatý, Costumes: Barbora Rajčanová, Stage design: František Lipták, Directed by: Kamil Žiška. Premiered on 4 June, 2010, in the Grand Hall of the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra.



Photo 1. Spooks -An example of masks and costumes used in theatre performance of Mátohy. Photo Collavino. The archive of Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra.

a deal between a country boy called Matej and Death, which means that in order to postpone the death of his father, he has to find himself a hardworking, decent, rich wife, who is also devout and pretty.

Set against the backdrop of a fairytale, the performance also borrows from the use of masks in folk theatre repertory, but reworked to make it acceptable and understandable to both children and adults. Furthermore, audiences were given the opportunity to experience folk theatre outside its traditional setting (i.e. the street, the backyard, a room, an inn, etc). However, Kamil Žiška did not incorporate folk theatre elements into his production in a comprehensive manner. He took elements from folk theatre and incorporated them into the production so that a number of them assumed new meaning.⁷ On the one hand, these elements took on new meanings unprompted and automatically, as a natural consequence of their being lifted from one context to another. On the other hand, others were the result of deliberate intervention on the part of the director.

⁷ Anna Hlaváčová describes a similar phenomenon in her book on African theatre, *Homo ludens Africanus*. "When transferred from the open air onto a stage, a horizontally carried vertex mask poses a problem for theatre space due to its height, resulting in a deteriorated reception on the audiences' part. For that reason, this kind of mask would not be used in a more premeditated performance." (Hlaváčová 1997, 124).

A)

Automatic (unintentional) modifications occur regularly when folk theatre is transposed to a theatrical production, as transferring intact elements is a complex exercise and not entirely feasible for several reasons. Specific dramatic phenomena and scenes that take place in civic spaces, out on the streets, in houses or backyards, i.e. directly on the “stage of life”, were transferred to the stone building of the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra. It is extremely difficult to replicate the identical conditions of a particular performance in folk theatre in its original form. However, in *Mátohy* this (i.e. re-run of a complete theatrical production)⁸ presents very little difficulty (the cast is identical, and there is a permanent acting space regardless of the weather). The sacral element is common in folk theatre and a frequently pursued goal is to return to the archetype—to the traditional form in order to preserve and remember the past and return to the roots. However, *Mátohy* has commercial ambitions and it seeks to entertain and capture the audience’s attention.⁹

The modal aspect of the theatre is strongly present in folk theatre, i.e. the inner relationship between the narrator and the story in relation to the contents of the dramatic statement. However, the actors of the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra have a strictly professional approach to the play and they treat it as they would treat any other play staged by the theatre.

B)

Deliberate interventions on the author’s part: Kamil Žiška assigns new meanings to certain masks and, with the exception of their visual appearance, he ignores the common rules used to attribute roles to masks in folk theatre.

The production uses a mask called *Turoň*, which is a stylized bull’s head, indicated by the addition of stately horns. The use of *Turoň* in folk theatre is linked to farming cults and a reenactment of the fruit-bearing forces of nature. In *Mátohy* this mask is used to epitomize the villagers being bewitched into *hovado* (which means a draught animal, usually an ox or a cow, and it is also a swear word). The link between the production and folk theatre was thus simply visual. Another similar example is the character of Kráľ in *Mátohy*—the king. Again, Kamil Žiška was inspired by the folk mask of the king (one of the Magi) used in nativity plays, but he simplified the traditional idiom. In *Mátohy* the mask conceals the character of a classic fairy tale king and it has no particular connection to nativity plays, unlike its counterpart in folk theatre. Another example is that of actors being changed into haystacks. In *Mátohy*, the haystacks were stylized into military roles and they embodied the army, which

⁸ The number of repeats of a theatrical production is easily established. A repeat performance is every public performance of a dramatic work after it has premiered, i.e. each theatre performance. In traditional folk theatre it is difficult to establish which performance is a repeat. For instance, if a community organizes a regular annual walk of *The Magi*, it cannot be referred to as a repeat of last year’s walk. The peculiarity of folk theatre lies in this uniqueness and almost unattainable repeatability.

⁹ In conjunction with this it should be noted that even though individual folk masks constitute significant elements of the plot, if they were to be visually replaced by other made-up fairy tale characters it would not impact on the story to the extent that this would be unacceptable.



Photo 2. Spooks – Death standing above Matej's dying father. Matej standing in the background. Photo Collavino. The archive of Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra

has no model in folk theatre. Digressions from established and generally used characteristics, such as these, disrupt the way in which this mask is conventionally perceived.¹⁰ The only mask which, aside from its appearance, quite truthfully embodies the inner attributes of a folk theatre mask, is the mask of Death. The mask is commonly used in folk theatre in rituals such as “burying the bass” at Shrovetide, in wintertime ceremonial walks, or in *Hra o Herodesovi* [The Play About Herodes]. In *Mátohy*, Death is covered head to toe in a white sheet, carrying a scythe made out of a goose’s wing attached to a wooden stick. In this play, Death plays the same role and character and exhibits the same behaviour as in folk theatre. Kamil Žiška even borrowed lines from *Hra o Herodesovi* [The Play About Herodes], which is commonly performed in the villages of Jezersko and Reľov (North Slovakia)¹¹ and he incorporated it into his production:¹²

Herodes: Death, I plead for seven more years!
Smrf (Death): No!

¹⁰ Information on mask typology, use and characteristics is provided by Martin Slivka in his publication *Ludové masky* [Folk Masks].

¹¹ In Jezersko and Reľov the local inhabitants would speak the Goral dialect in the play. In Kamil Žiška’s production the actors speak in a western Slovak dialect.

¹² In *Hra o Herodesovi* the dialogue is between Death and a pleading Herodes; in *Mátohy*, it is Matej’s father who is begging.

Herodes: Give me one more year!
Smrť (Death): No!
Herodes: Give me one more month!
Smrť (Death): No!
Herodes: Give me one more day!
Smrť (Death): No!
Herodes: An hour!
Smrť (Death): No!
Herodes: A minute!
Smrť (Death): No!
Herodes: A second!
Smrť (Death): No! (Slivka, Slivková 1994, 186-187)

There is a reason for transposing folk theatre into the setting of contemporary professional drama theatre. Nitra audiences have limited opportunity to experience this folk theatre in its traditional environment, since the masks used are not found in the Nitra region and also the various masks are only used during brief periods of the year.¹³

In *Mátohy*, Kamil Žiška introduces the audiences to the archetypes of folk masks. Using visual and aural means, he presents folk theatre as a modern production which, unlike a book or film, means that live and immediate interaction can occur with the audience. Had the producers taken a more responsible approach to this creative process and had they not deprecated folk masks (by mixing and eliminating heterogenous elements rendering them meaningless, thus making them less effective, or, on the contrary, by adding their own elements which have no counterpart in folk theatre) then the production and individual scenic images would have been an appropriate alternative for the viewer who does not have the opportunity to experience folk theatre in its traditional environment.

References

Bogatyriov, P. (1973). *Ludové divadlo české a slovenské*. Bratislava: Tatran.

Čavojský, L. (1997). *Dejiny slovenského divadla I. Od Najstarších čias po začiatok 20. storočia*. Bratislava: Metodické centrum mesta Bratislav.

Hlaváčová, A. (2007). *Homo ludens Africanus*. Bratislava: Kaligram.

Pavis, P. (2004). *Divadelný slovník*. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav.

Pavis, P. (1998). *Dictionary of the Theatre*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Slivka, M. (1990). *Ludové masky*. Bratislava: Tatran.

Slivka, M. (2002). *Slovenské ľudové divadlo*. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav.

Slivka, M., Slivková, O. (1994). *Vianočné hry v Spišskej Magure*. Bratislava: Tália-press.

Institute of Theatre and Film Research, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Dúbravská cesta 9, 841 04 Bratislava, Slovakia
E-mail: jozef.ovecka@gmail.com

¹³ Folk theatre has always had its solid base in smaller villages and communities. It is rather rare in big cities. Therefore, whenever the drama ensemble of Andrej Bagar Theatre gives a guest performance of its play in other cities, the same situation occurs.