

THE HERITAGE OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT¹

DAGMAR PODMAKOVÁ



A notable book entitled *Theatre Architecture in Slovakia* by Henrieta Moravčíková and Viera Dlháňová² contains comprehensive information on the historical development, spatial and typological specificities of theatre architecture in Slovakia from the mid 15th century up to the present. It devotes special attention to 23 examples of theatre architecture still in use today (from a small aristocratic Empire Theatre in Hlohovec (1802), through municipal theatres, national and cultural centres, down to new theatre buildings). The book

is enriched by colour pictures illustrating the external appearance of the theatre buildings, along with their interior layouts, auditoriums, stage portals and stage technology. These are accompanied by graphic design drawings with pertinent descriptions included in the text so that the reader is able to compare the written word against the image.

It should be noted that two books were published in 1996 and 1998, covering much of theatre architecture entitled *Historical Theatre Architecture in Slovakia/Historische Theaterarchitektur in der Slowakei* and *Contemporary Slovak Theatrical Architecture/Slowakische Theaterarchitektur der Gegenwart*.³ They were written from the point of view of theatre theorists and theatre architects. The former provides an overview of valuable

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² Moravčíková, H., Dlháňová, V. (2011). *Divadelná architektúra na Slovensku* Bratislava: Divadelný ústav.

³ Lacika, I., Dlouhý, O. (Eds.). (1996). *Historical Theatre Architecture in Slovakia/Historische Theaterarchitektur in der Slowakei*. Bratislava: Národné divadelné centrum. Dlouhý, O., Lacika, I. (Eds.). (1998). *Contemporary Slovak Theatrical Architecture/Slowakische Theaterarchitektur der Gegenwart*. Bratislava: Národné divadelné centrum. http://www.hcregion.sk/hcregion.php?lng=sk&docid=201&adr=_ed.

historical theatre buildings including reconstruction and refurbishment, while the latter contains facts on new buildings. It comes with technical specifications and both the books in English and German are targetted at foreign specialist reader, especially theatre architects and stage designers. Both the publications are currently out of stock.

Prior to the publication of these books, two international conferences on co-operation with OISTAT (International Organization of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians), were held, which were attended by practitioners from all over the world (theatre architects, theatre theorists and scenographers).

In addition, there is a comprehensive book in both Slovak and English entitled *Slovenská divadelná scénografia /Slovak Stage Design 1920 – 2000* containing a separate chapter on *Theatre Architecture in Slovakia* by Ivan Lacika.⁴

It is apparent that after 1989, interest was reawakened in theatre architecture in Slovakia. This was due not only to a socio-political and economic turnaround in what was then Czechoslovakia and, hence, also Slovakia, but also to the construction of three new theatre buildings at that time. In fact, they were the earliest new purpose-built theatres to have been eagerly awaited by both theatre professionals and towns and cities since the beginning of professional theatre in Slovakia. In the first half of the 20th century, there had been several attempts to build specialized theatre buildings in several Slovak towns. However, from the 1930s to the 1980s, existing buildings were simply converted to serve theatre's needs. In the early 1970s, the ministry of culture took the decision to construct three large stand-alone buildings with several auditoriums and several years later, the first foundation stones were laid. All three architectural designs (in Prešov, Nitra and Bratislava) were in keeping with the requirements of the era. A shortage in construction materials and funding delayed their completion (to 1990/1992). The plan to build new premises of the Slovak National Theatre including three auditoriums on the banks of the Danube encountered difficulties after November 1989.

Several other theatre buildings, or, acting spaces, had also been reconstructed and refurbished prior to 1989. These were converted/refurbished due to the need to improve the conditions in which theatre performances were conducted. Not only were the buildings in a dilapidated state (safety issues, etc.), but performers' quarters (greenrooms, rehearsal areas), hygienic and social areas had to be upgraded, even at the cost of encroaching upon the purity of the architectural design of the building including the interior. Theatre practitioners and theatre theorists, as opposed to "non-theatre" architects, would consider the modifications in terms of the versatility of the theatre space, technological potential and their suitability for any kind of stage design. Managers would consider the modifications both from the artists'/actors' point of view (e.g. whether there would be room for a sufficient number of greenrooms for musical production artists as well and whether the orchestra pit would accommodate the orchestra's needs) and particularly from the audiences' point of view (good visibility, etc.).

Theatre Architecture in Slovakia by Henrieta Moravčíková (20th and 21st centuries theory and history of architecture) and Viera Dlháňová (theories of the history and architecture of

⁴ Mojžišová, I., Poláčková, D. (2004). *Slovenská divadelná scénografia /Slovak Stage Design 1920 – 2000*. Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria; Divadelný ústav.

visual arts), is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a paper bearing the book's title with the subheading *Od zložitých mestských budov k monofunkčným divadlám a späť/ From Complex Civic Buildings to Monofunctional Theatres and Back..* The authors begin by tracing the earliest records on staging Easter and Christmas plays in temples (it is worth mentioning the oldest preserved movable Holy Sepulchre from a Benedictine monastery at Hronský Beňadik, whose photograph is often featured on the title pages of foreign specialist magazines or in books). The movable Holy Sepulchre was a component part of Easter plays. They then document the process whereby theatre moved from temples to squares and from there, from the early 16th century onwards, to schools (school theatre). They provide very accurate information on early public theatre buildings and on theatres in the homes of aristocrats, notably in the Bratislava palaces of counts Ján Erdödy, Pálffy and Anton Grassalkovich. This last palace deserves a little of our attention and it seems an opportune moment to provide some additional information not found in the book. It is a Rococo palace (1760) and is currently the seat of the President of the Slovak Republic (and was the former summer residence of the Chairman of the Hungarian Royal Chamber). From the 1950s to the early 1990s, the building was the Klement Gottwald Central House of Pioneers and Youth (Klement Gottwald was the first communist president of Czechoslovakia) and was home to almost thirty interest groups and ensembles. For instance, puppet, dance and drama ensembles in which both young and older children (including secondary school students) rehearsed and acted on a small stage with modest lighting equipment (3 to 4 reflectors on a ramp) and portable stage spotlights placed at the sides. Several popular Slovak actors and other theatre professionals were trained in this tiny theatre.

The authors also refer to theatre halls in other Slovak towns, of which the best known is the Empire Theatre housed in the mansion of the Brunswick family (Brunszvik in Hungarian), in Dolná Krupá (1813–1822). It was the former headquarters of the Home of Slovak Composers and currently houses the Museum of Music of the Slovak National Museum). Converted several times, all that remains is the music hall. The theatre pavillion in Hlohovec owned by the Erdödy family, is located in the grounds of the mansion and is dealt with in the second part of the book. Built in 1802 (it is presumed to have been built by the Italian stage designer Pietro Travaglia), it was where Italian and other theatre companies gave performances. Since the most recent refurbishment funded by the ministry of culture, the Empire Theatre building has been used to put on concerts, lectures, balls, wedding parties, and only rarely theatre performances.

The introductory paper also covers municipal theatres and buildings known as “Reduta” in Slovakia. They were multipurpose buildings (housing a theatre hall, a hotel and a restaurant). The Reduta in Spišská Nová Ves is home to a professional theatre company, and similar buildings are located in the towns of Brezno and Kežmarok. It should be noted that the Bratislava Reduta is home to The Slovak Philharmonic, and it also houses a restaurant and casino. Prior to its reconstruction in 2009, it also had a small theatre hall, which was used for almost 40 years by the students of the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts for rehearsals and performances, and then for a limited period of time, it also housed the Chamber Opera. Municipal theatres, cultural and national centres played a crucial role at the time of the 19th century national revival movement and contributed to raising awareness of culture and architectural development.

The second part of the book is dedicated to individual municipal theatres in Trnava, Levoča, Prešov, Košice, and in other Slovak towns. The comprehensive entries follow the same pattern: name and location of the theatre, names of the architect and the builder, project year and additional information on the authors of interior design and the date of the first performances in each of the theatre building. The book deals with the building and the theatre in relation to its significance for the region in question. Furthermore, the authors discuss the characteristics of the buildings and their original interior zoning and zoning after architectural modifications. They often comment on the rather poor attitudes past generations have had towards architectural heritage (e.g. in Trnava). The sketches and photographs of theatre buildings, vestibules, auditoriums, stages have a rare documentary value. The oldest Slovak theatre building in Trnava (1831) is home to a permanent drama ensemble with a rich repertory. The authors do not give much detail on a small theatre studio in the basement of the theatre building (a semicircular area with a steep staircase and four rows of seats reminiscent of an ancient theatre with an amphitheatre-like auditorium and a small orchestra pit with a sturdy central support column).

The classical building of Prešov Theatre (1881) with its Neo-Renaissance interior design deserves special attention. The stage portal, the proscenium side walls and the columns dividing the boxes in the auditorium were designed using ancient motifs (Moravčíková, Dlháňová 2004, 67). The historical building of Jonáš Záborský Theatre in Prešov is one of the most treasured outstanding historical theatre buildings in Slovakia, as are the municipal theatres in Bratislava and Košice.

Bratislava Theatre, which looked very different in the 18th century, was designed by the renowned period architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer (who designed several notable theatre buildings in Europe). The building was built in 1886, in Eclectic style, taking just one year to complete. At that time, the building and its interiors were complemented by the most sophisticated of illumination systems (a grand electric chandelier and 800 gas lamps; *ibid.*, 77-79). Later on, the building was thoughtfully extended to include an annex with three underground floors accommodating rehearsal space, greenrooms and offices for opera and ballet ensembles (1970). The Košice State Theatre is a magnificent building designed by architects Adolf Lang and Antal Steinhardt (1899). The theatre was built along Eclectic lines, with Neo-baroque and Art Nouveau features. It is regarded as an architectural gem and is admired by experts throughout Europe.

Another building of interest is The House of Confraternity in the town of Skalica (1905), which was designed by Dušan Samuel Jurkovič, founder of modern Slovak architecture. In designing the main vestibule as a rectangular space delineated by a row of columns, he drew inspiration from Japanese art (*ibid.*, 132). Although it is not strictly a theatre building, the hall was used for theatre performances and the building is noted for its historic and architectural value. We should not, of course, forget the most significant building: the National House in the town of Martin (designed by Blažej Bulla, 1889). Since 1944, it has been home to the Slovak Chamber Theatre. The building contains a theatre hall—its central space—in which regular performances were given from the outset, but also has a library, a museum and casino. The authors cover the National House, in some detail, however, there are some inaccuracies relating to the studio theatre attachment (dating from 1994). The book suggests that: “In the late 1980s, the idea was mooted to extend the original House”, and the

authors also note that “its appearance is not in keeping with the Neo-Renaissance aspects of the National House” (*ibid.*, 93). Theatre theorists would know that the annex was intended to provide premises for alternative theatrical productions and for TV productions. The actors based at Martin theatre had to travel either to Bratislava or to Košice, if they wished to shoot films, act in television productions or dub films, which was costly and demanding time-wise. Therefore, the architects concentrated on designing a multipurpose theatre space including equipment (for instance, mobile counterweight fly lines and lighting telescopes that may be lowered at any point in the studio). When the National House was refurbished, a loose seating arrangement used by directors and scenographers at the Martin theatre in the 1990s was replaced by fixed seating arranged on stepped levels which can easily be dismantled.

The information the book provides on other important buildings is particularly detailed in regard to architecture, external appearance and interior design. There is also a brief commentary placing buildings, such as the National House in Banská Bystrica (1930, home to the State Opera Banská Bystrica), Nová scéna [New Stage] in Bratislava (1930), Mestské divadlo [Municipal Theatre] in Žilina (1950) in their historical and social contexts. Digressions from reality are also found in the statement that: “Malá scéna [The Small Stage] of the Slovak National Theatre has been moved to the basement of the office building...” (*ibid.*, 31). In reality, there was nothing to be moved, as The Small Stage of the Slovak National Theatre was a new acting space for the SNT drama ensemble (1962), which had originally been intended for experimental theatre.

Another inaccuracy that indicates that theatre theoreticians were not involved in the writing of the book is the fact that: “Among the first to have abandoned the safe haven of the traditional stage was Divadlo na korze [Theatre on the Promenade]. Later on, Štúdio Novej scény [New Stage Studio] was moved to the basement of the former Astória café on Hodža Square” (*ibid.*, 31). Činoherný súbor—Divadlo na korze [Drama ensemble, Theatre on the Promenade] could not have abandoned its safe haven of the traditional stage, since it had never performed anywhere else. Immediately after it was created (in September 1968), it performed in this tiny basement. Štúdio Novej scény [New Stage Studio] could not have “occupied” any acting space either: it was simply a name given to the refurbished premises of the former Astória café, which were turned into yet another performance space of Činoherný súbor Novej scény [Drama ensemble, New Stage Theatre] in Bratislava.

Another notable building is Divadlo Aréna [Arena Theatre] in Bratislava (1900). For several years, the building was used for performances and it is where Max Reinhardt started his famous career. The building was refurbished in the 1990s and mime Milan Sládek (the Arena’s director from 1992 until 2002) performed there. It does not currently have its own artistic ensemble (the exception being the theatre management and dramaturgs), however, it has a regular repertory, with its own performances and actors contracted from other theatres. Since the 1970s, architects of new buildings have made state-of-the-art technology an essential part of their projects. Given the fact that the buildings were not commissioned or completed on time, many projects became outdated (in terms of the architectural design of buildings, stage technology, etc.).

This professionally compiled book with high quality photo printing includes summaries in English, German, and Hungarian. It also deals with examples of architecture where theatre is no longer performed, however, they are an integral part of our cultural heritage. There are

other interesting issues relating to Slovak theatre architecture in a Central European context (such as, for instance, stage design development). It would be better, though, if the authors of future publications could avoid inaccuracies, as these are automatically repeated elsewhere, distorting the history of (Slovak) theatre. There is, therefore, a need for a closer collaboration from the outset between architects and theatre historians on future monograph projects of similar kind.

Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Dúbravská cesta 9,
841 04 Bratislava,
Slovakia
E-mail: dagmar.podmakova@savba.sk