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Opera Directing in Slovenia between the Two Wars: Between the Aesthetics of the Drama Theatre and Opera Aesthetics*

Operna režija na Slovenskem med obema vojnama: med estetiko gledališča in estetiko opere

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IZVLEČEK

Prispevek obravnava razvoj operne režije na Slovenskem med obema svetovnima vojnama, s poudarkom na opernih predstavah ljubljanske Opere. Avtorica predstavi profil opernega režiserja, povezuje z gledališko režijo ter vplive pomembnih evropskih gledališč in šol. Sledi prepletanju zakonitosti estetike gledaliških in opernih predstav, ki so nastajale pod vodstvom vidnejših režiserjev ljubljanske Drame, kot so bili Osip Šest, Bratko Kreft in Ciril Debevec.

ABSTRACT

The article deals with opera directing in Slovenia between the two wars, with the emphasis on opera performances of the National Theatre in Ljubljana. The author introduces a profile of an opera director in relation to theatre directing as well as some important European theatres and schools, and assesses the interactions between theatre and opera performances that were directed by some of the most notable stage directors of the Ljubljana Drama Theatre, such as Osip Šest, Bratko Kreft, and Ciril Debevec.

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Theatre and music theatre performances of Slovenian theatre have coexisted in certain synergy at least from the second half of the 19th century from the establishment of the Dramatično društvo (Dramatic Society Theatre) in 1867. Such symbiosis continued between 1892 and 1914, in the time of the Deželno gledališče (Regional Theatre), as the consequence of various factors. The Slovenian stages were preparing both the theatre and musical theatre performances, therefore many of them required the casts equally accomplished in acting and singing. Hence, the appearance of the same performers on both stages, that of Drama and that of Opera which remained a common practice for quite a long period since the performers were bound by contract to perform on both stages. Such practice continued until the beginning of the World War I. Similar and very intense combinations can also be observed through the development of stage directors' professional profiles as they used to operate in both spheres.¹ The director also used to work as an actor or/and singer what remained a common practice until the World War I, and to a certain degree even longer. More defined profile of the stage director appeared on the territory, which is today Slovenia, as late as between the two wars. Constant and intense exchanges between both casts as well as stage directors' parallel operations also resulted in intertwining of the aesthetic ideals. Such outcome was correlated to the lack of personnel and furthermore, their sufficient and, most of all, comprehensive education. Finally yet importantly, such synergy or awareness of the mutual features of drama and music was also present in the development of the European theatre scene.

After the World War I, stage directing saw more varieties in style which reflected on both stages. The most important European influences affected the Slovenian stage performances as well. Ljubljana and Maribor, for example, hosted theatre people of various nationalities belonging to different theatre schools and having manifold experiences. The most prominent of them were the great names of Muscovite artistic theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovič-Dančenko, also the members of Národní divadlo in Prague, La petite Scène in Paris, various Viennese theatres; and many others. The stage directors working in Slovenia often travelled to most important European cultural centres to perfect their professional skills, whereas the migration contributed its share as well. The Russian theatre emigration remarkably marked the 20's in Ljubljana.²

Among the Russian influences we should mention the Moscow musical theatre studio inclined to abstraction, established in 1919 by Vladimir Ivanovič Nemirovič-Dančenko. Vsevolod Meyerhold also had a notable influence with his experimental, psychological and symbolical approach, becoming an example to many opera and theatre directors.³ The most important among Germans was Max Reinhardt, who worked in Berlin, then in Vienna and is considered a founder of the modern stage directing. The most significant move in Reinhardt's development was the inclusion of various elements, from traditionally realistic ones, to symbolism and expressionism, which brought about both approval

¹ Compare Darja Koter, "Glasbeno-gledališka režija na Slovenskem: od diletantizma Dramatičnega društva do (poskusov) profesionalizacije v Deželnem gledališču / Music Theatre Directing in Slovenia: From Dilettantism of the Dramatic Society to (the Attempts of) Professionalism in the Regional Theatre," *Muzikološki zbornik / Musicological Annual* 46/1 (2010): 57–72. The author also cites the extensive literature.

² Filip Kalan, "Evropeizacija slovenske gledališke kulture," in Linhartovo izročilo, ed. L. Filipič (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1957), 66.

³ "Meyerhold Memoriam Museum," accessed April 22, 2012, www.meyerhold.org/.

and critical reactions. The most important Reinhardt's achievements were chamber and large-scale stagings, intimate scenes and mass performances, modern drama and silent spectacles, cooperation of actors and contemporary scene, the importance of the great theatre stars and ensemble, changing the theatre institutions and later also certain changes in film art. Opera performances were marked also by Bauhaus's work, inclined to the understanding of the art-work as a whole. He was very passionate about the experimental work and progressive ideas, which resulted in a number of novelties he realised, such as Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, Křenek's *Der Diktator*, Hidemith's *Cardillac*, and many others. Siegfried Wagner had also complemented a modern opera scene after the World War I, when he has revived Bayreuth festival in 1924. His ideas, based on massive three-dimensional stagings and more subtle innovations, more or less in accordance with the period, surpassed the traditional approaches by his last production – *Tannhäuser* in 1930.⁴

The new development in Slovenian drama rendition started in February 1919, when the curtain of the Drama Theatre of Ljubljana had risen again. This was a step towards the world of European theatre set as the objective of the Slovenian theatre and eventually reached between the two wars. The progress was the result of a great enthusiasm of all theatre people and most of all their wish to explore modern movements, which brought about certain risks in acting, different approaches to composition, up-to-date experiments, however, as they were going along, they never disregarded Slovenian drama pieces.⁵ The most important examples were set as the result of educational journeys undertaken by directors who worked on the territory of Slovenia, as well as by guest performances of avant-garde theatres on domestic stages. For instance, in 1922, a director Osip Šest and a scenographer Václav Skrušny produced a modern constructivist drama *RUR* by Karl Čapek on stage of the Drama Theatre of Ljubljana. Čapek wrote this text in 1921, introducing science fiction into literature. In this provocative and shocking staging, which saw raging reviews, Šest and Skrušny merged the compositions of Russian constructivism and Bauhaus.⁶ At the beginning of the 20's, expressionism finally appeared in Ljubljana, first in painting art by brothers Kralj and then with Avgust Černigoj, a great connoisseur of Bauhaus and Russian constructivism. In music, the expressionism appeared in the late 20's which was evident in creativeness as well as in musical scenography rendition. For the season of 1929, when the Opera in Ljubljana was planning to prepare a performance of Kogoj's *Črne maske*, no less than six authors applied for the post of scenographer and three of them, Avgust Černigoj, Ferdo Delak and Eduard Stepančič were considered the pronounced expressionists. Finally, Opera voted in favour of Vavpotič, and his scenography was declared as an example of fabulous expressionism.⁷

New art styles and movements had finally reached the Opera in Ljubljana, but there these developments seemed slower and less profound in comparison with those in the Drama. If in the 90's of the 19th century the Opera and its repertoire took the advantage

⁴ "Max Reinhardt Seminar," accessed March 29, 2010, <http://www.maxreinhardtseminar.at/mrs.php?Sel=7>.

⁵ Kalan, "Evropeizacija slovenske gledališke kulture," 60–63.

⁶ "Pogled na Gledališko scenografijo," accessed April 16, 2010, www.rtvsl.si/.../gledalisko-scenografijo-konstruktivizma-in-ekspresionizma/.

⁷ "Rado Pregarc," accessed April 16, 2010, www.rtvsl.si/.../gledalisko-scenografijo-konstruktivizma-in-ekspresionizma/.

by following the European movements, then the Drama took the lead after the World War I. After the National Theatre had been taken over by the state, the art director's post in the Opera was occupied by Friderik Rukavina, a sophisticated, cosmopolitan man. In five years of his tenure in the Opera, he included into the programme some important works of French, Italian and Slavonic literature. However, none of these works was in vogue as much as those performed by the Drama. In addition, the approach to the directing of the Opera did not exceed the level reached before the World War I, and the director's professional profile remained unchanged since the director still appeared on stage as actor. The scenography remained on the level of "house-painting" and had no regard for the scenographer's artistic ideas. Similar situation could be observed in costume design. Even in 1928, the director Osip Šest noted, that "in Drama, the Prince takes off his tights in the afternoon so that a wardrobe attendant takes it with a swift pace to the Opera, where the Duke of Mantua puts it on."⁸ Therefore, a mediocre scenography and an improvised costume design met the common expectations; similar situation occurred in stage direction as well, as the Opera performances were carried out without a proficient opera director.

Between the two wars, the Opera saw a real pleiad of directors. Some of them were of Slovenian nationality and represented various methods and schools. Among them were directors, such as Franjo Bučar (1861–1926) and Josip Povhe⁹, both distinguished themselves even before the World War I and were very successful as directors of prewar school, but they had never tried to introduce the avant-garde to their stages. Povhe was more of an operetta director right from the beginning. After the war he reappeared on the Ljubljana stage, where he directed a number of operettas, such as 1920 *Ksenija* by Viktor Parma, in 1931 a novelty by Pavel Šivic *Oj, ta prešmentana ljubezen*, and in 1938 Parma's operetta *Nečak*. During Mirko Polič's management, Povhe was the most important director distinguished for his classical approach to operetta directing.¹⁰

It would seem that directing operas and operettas did not represent a professional challenge for all drama directors, as could be deduced from their remarks. Some of them reluctantly accepted the directing of musical performances. Yet, by proving their versatile proficiency, they could reach a commensurate or higher salary range.¹¹ In the first postwar years, the directing was for the most part designed upon traditional principles of realistic performances, attempting to create an illusion of a real life. However, within such approach it was still possible to insert the baroque virtuosity of the first soloists singing the great arias in any chosen language; that was also Rukavina's viewpoint implemented in the performances under his direction.¹² Osip Šest was the most prominent in the Opera in the 20's of the 20th century. He was the first profiled opera director in Slovenia and maintained his primacy until 1930 when has started the new era of directors in the Opera Theatre of Ljubljana. Šest attended a renowned Otto's school in Vienna, where he graduated even before the World War I. He spent the wartime in

⁸ Resumed after Dušan Moravec, *Slovensko gledališče od vojne do vojne* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1980), 232.

⁹ Josip Povhe was mentioned by various sources, but his biography has not been published yet.

¹⁰ Compare *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč 1867–1967*. Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki muzej, 1967.

¹¹ Dušan Moravec, *Slovenski režiserski kvartet (z gostom)* (Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki in filmski muzej, 1996), 50.

¹² Compare *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč*, 209–214.

Russian captivity where he was introduced to the already famous Stanislavsky's work that without any doubt affected Šest's later work. He noted rather ironically, that he did not understand much about music, that he could not count the bars, and that he lacked musicality necessary for a "musical director", emphasizing that he was "a man of drama". Despite such opinion about himself, he was considered a successful opera director. Apparently, "he had good fortune in creating some original types", among other things he improved the scenography, which gained a greater importance under his leadership.¹³ In the Opera, he staged a great number of works from world literature as well as many works of domestic authors, such as a remake of Anton Foerster's *Gorenjski slavček*, a premiere of *Gospodsvetski sen* and *Matija Gubec* by Risto Savin, Hugolin Sattner's *Tajda* and Slavko Osterc's minute opera *Iz komične opere*.

From 1929 to 1938, Šest produced 55 musical stagings. He also travelled more frequently than any other domestic stage director. Through his journeys, he became acquainted with the latest renowned stagings in Berlin, Paris and Prague, where he regularly took active part in theatre conferences and congresses.¹⁴ He tried to implement these novelties in the domestic production too, but his attempts met certain reproaches for his imitations of the European production. His resuming of European trends was considered inconsistent and his style too heterogeneous and insufficiently profiled. His younger colleague, Ciril Debevec commented that Šest was a master of fantasy and external effects, but his directing lacked profoundness as well as consistency in the introduction of modern trends.¹⁵ Šest admitted his inclination to Russian and Viennese examples. As mentioned earlier, he modelled himself after Russian directors - the consequence of his captivity during the World War I. Among other things, he frequently mentioned Max Reinhardt's stagings in his articles that were a sort of reviews published in *Gledališki listi*. However, we have to admit that Šest's contribution was very important for the development of drama theatre and opera directing. He exerted himself upon Europeanization of Slovenian theatre, fought against dilettantism; he introduced a systematic work in production, harmonized the concept of the play and at the same time tried to restrain from psychological analysing. His greatest success was the production of Sergej Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges* (1927), which met good reviews both by the opera audience and reviewers; it reached not less than 22 stagings, which represented a record in number of performances at the time. In this period, Šest preferred the texts containing the expressionist elements which were in opposition with the fact that he proved himself in the Drama as an excellent stage director of modernized Shakespeare's works.¹⁶ Osip Šest was the first among more sophisticated Slovenian directors to pave the way for a modern stage directing, which was realized after 1930 by Ciril Debevec, Bratko Kreft and Bojan Stupica. Šest was at first operating as a stage director in the Drama as well as in the Opera; however, for two seasons (1936–1938), he was appointed "merely" as opera director which represented a turning point in the history of opera directing. Already in this period, he realized that he could not compete

¹³ Moravec, *Slovenski režiserski kvartet*, 50–51.

¹⁴ Moravec, *Slovenski režiserski kvartet*, 48.

¹⁵ Ciril Debevec, "Vprašanja režiserjev v ljubljanski Drami," *Mladina* 1 (1925/26): 172; resumed after Moravec, *Slovensko gledališče*, 121.

¹⁶ Moravec, *Slovenski režiserski kvartet*, 37–42; *ibid.*, *Slovensko gledališče*, 217–221.

with younger successors. Despite his profound inclination towards drama directing, he remained faithful to the opera after the war as well.

The second development period in the Opera Theatre of Ljubljana started in 1925 with Polič. In comparison with Friderik Rukavina, Polič's artistic leadership became noticeable by the staging of updated musical works by Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Křenek, Kogoj, Shostakovich, and others. Such selection of authors eventually brought the Opera repertoire to the level of progressive European centres. Polič's time was marked also by the intense fluctuation of stage directors who were still obliged to operate in the opera sphere as well. The directing methods still lingered upon a stereotyped approach evident in the arrangement of the actors who had not assumed neither impersonation nor staging qualities. Similar characteristics could be observed in the work of Boris Krivecki, who directed *Črne maske* during his short stay in Ljubljana.¹⁷

Bratko Kreft (1905–1996), an avant-garde enthusiast, came to the Ljubljana theatre in 1930. Prior to that, he had been working in the avant-garde theatre named Delavski oder which was considered a cradle of a modern "proletarian theatre". His work reflected the influences of the new Russian school. Besides, he was very impressed by the work of Slovenian stage director Milan Skrbinšek. In spite of his preference for modern Russian theatre, he remained faithful to his own point of view - some sort of "collective art". His friend, Matija Bravničar, put him on the path to the Opera sensing that musical environment of the period was going to be a better place for the realization of Kreft's avant-garde ideas. At the time, Kreft was in dispute with the authorities, therefore an employment in Drama was out of his reach. He claimed that musical Thalia in Ljubljana was a synonym of obsolescence, so he wanted to rejuvenate her. Polič supported Kreft's aspirations with the incentive words, suggesting he should carry out "something modern, somewhat new, exciting and arousing".¹⁸ Kreft's first production, otherwise a traditional musical comedy *La Mascotte* by Audran Edmond, was a real sensation; whereas his stagings of *Werther* by Massenet, and *Carmen* by Bizet, the latter arranged in the style of Bolshevism, raised a wave of disapproval and indignation of the audience and in reviews. Kreft sustained an equal status of all performers: singers, choir, ballet and orchestra. That was his vision of "collective stage directing" as opposed to status of the star performers, which he strongly disapproved. In his productions, he introduced the profundity and grotesqueness of stylized movements and figural compositions, as well as the situation comedy as the supplement to the rigidity of Viennese operetta; dancers' circus stunts, thus approaching the performance to "commedia dell' arte". By the spring 1932, he had staged three Osterc's novelties, one-act opera *Medeia*, a ballet pantomime *Maska rdeče smrti*, and a grotesque *Dandín v vica*; as the last, he produced *Rusalka* by Dvořák.¹⁹ Kreft especially enjoyed staging the first performances of Osterc's miniatures, seeing that they inherently enabled the modern approaches in directing. In his musical theatre productions, Kreft successfully employed satire, black humour and most of all constructivist accentuation, leaving the tradition behind.

¹⁷ Compare, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč*, 633.

¹⁸ Moravec, *Slovenski režiserski kvartet*, 184, 180.

¹⁹ Moravec, *Slovenski režiserski kvartet*, 177.

The next director to extend his drama proficiency into opera directing, was Ciril Debevec (1903–1973). He had received his education in a German oriented Prague academy. He first proved himself as an actor in the Drama, then he started working with Šest and Milan Skrbinšek as a third stage director. While Osterc's career as a theatre stage director reached its most intense phase, European stages were under the influence of Reinhardt, Meyerhold, Piscator, and others. Debevec ridiculed their achievements and methods and wrote some pungent comments about them. Debevec's approaches to staging came as a complete surprise, and his name became a synonym of "a profound, introverted 'literary' stage director, who ascetically persevered in simplicity on stage. He was considered serious, earnest, and sometimes even sombre in his interpretations of modern European texts, especially those dealing with horrible recent years; a stage directing magician, who managed to capture his audience into motionless silence. "Debevec was not keen on stage effects, whereas he was fond of exploring "horror, demonical and mysticism".²⁰

Polič entrusted Debevec a premiere staging of Bravničar's opera *Pohujšanje v dolini Šentflorjanski*. Some of the most important Debevec's productions were *Jenůfa* and *Katja Kabanova* by Leoš Janáček; among contemporary works we should mention the operetta *Der verlorene Walzer* by Robert Stolz and a modern opera *Der Günstling* by Rudolf Wagner-Régeny; in 1940 he directed *Kleopatra* by Danilo Švara and a year later *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* by Bravničar. In more than fifteen years of his work in the Drama Theatre of Ljubljana, he staged more than 40 performances.²¹ Though he had been admired for years, his glory gradually started to fade in the second half of the 30's; he was reproached with stagnation, repetitiveness, too much mysticism and inclination toward pathos. In the autumn of 1939, after fifteen years of operating on both Drama and Opera stages, he decided to convert to musical theatre. The new director of Opera, Vilko Ukmar appointed him as "chief-stage director" and promised him the autonomy in directing and repertoire selection. The autonomy had always been his unfulfilled wish while he had been working in Drama. With this appointment, the Opera Theatre of Ljubljana made a decisive step towards a more defined ensemble profile. Debevec persisted in the Drama, somehow contented but still unaccomplished, until the autumn 1943 when he took over the management of the Drama under the jurisdiction of German authorities. His decision about taking this position was often regarded as morally disputable. A singer and stage director Robert Primožič replaced him in the Opera, but died in a tragic accident shortly after he had assumed the post.

Debevec was also an ardent essay writer. His articles published in *Gledališki listi* were about explaining and introducing his stage productions. Improvement of acting in musical performances was one of his most important contributions; thus, he educated a number of Slovenian singers requiring of them to study with a comprehensive approach to psychological features of their parts, which was otherwise characteristic of the actors. His leadership brought along the end of the stage effects' realm and consequently the improvement of the opera theatre directing, which had been neglected in former times. In this way, he built the foundations for the new era of the postwar generation of musi-

²⁰ Moravec, *Slovensko gledališče*, 353–355, 285, 286.

²¹ Compare *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč*, 224–252.

cal theatre directing. Ciril Debevec introduced the examples of modern theatre to the Opera, however, his approach was not as avant-garde as Bratko Kreft's, with whom he was working side by side for a certain period of time. Šest and Debevec, who staged a greater part of music performances played between the wars, confirmed the synergy of the drama theatre aesthetics and opera aesthetics. The importance of their work is comparable with Bratko Kreft's exertion, during his Opera period between 1930 and 1932, which marked musical Thalia with the European, most avant-garde movements.

POVZETEK

Čas po prvi svetovni vojni je na polje režije na Slovenskem prinesel večjo stilno raznolikost, ki se je vzporedno odražala v dramskih in glasbeno-gledaliških predstavah, med najvplivnejšimi pa so bili vzori iz Narodnega divadla iz Prage, pariškega La petite Scène, dunajskih in ruskih teatrov, Weimarja, šole Bauhausa ter drugi. V Ljubljani se je v 20. letih močno odražal val ruske gledališke emigracije. Opera takoj po prvi svetovni vojni ni imela profiliranega opernega režiserja. To delo so opravljali igralci oziroma pevci in priučeni režiserji, ki so se v veliki večini poglobljeno posvečali Drami. V Operi se je sprva zvrstila prava pleada režiserjev, Slovencev in drugih, ki so bili različnih metod in šol. Režija je bila večinoma zasnovana na tradicionalnih načelih realističnih predstav, kjer se je skušalo ustvarjati iluzijo stvarnega življenja. Opero je v 20. letih 20. stoletja najbolj zaznamoval Osip Šest (1893–1962), ki se je z leti profiliral v opernega režiserja in je imel na tem polju primat do leta 1930. Prizadeval si je za evropeizacijo slovenskega gledališča, se boril proti diletantizmu, uvedel je sistematično delo, harmonijo v konceptu predstave ter se izogibal psihološkemu analiziranju. Dvajseta leta so v ljubljanski Operi pod vodstvom Mirka Poliča zaznamovana z uprizoritvami najsodobnejših

evropskih in slovenskih opernih del (Prokofjev, Stravinski, Křenek, Kogoj, Šostakovič in drugi). Od leta 1930 do 1932 je operno režijo zaznamoval Bratko Kreft (1905–1996), ki je imel pomembne izkušnje iz avantgardnega Delavskega odra, kjer je deloval pod vplivom Tairova, Mejerholda in Erwina Piscatorja. V stilu tako imenovane »kolektivne režije« je zagovarjal enakopravnost vseh akterjev: pevcev, zbora, baleta in orkestra. Uvedel je poglobljenost in grotesknost s stiliziranimi gibi ter se tako približal sodobni »commedii dell'arte«. Ciril Debevec (1903–1973), tretji med najpomembnejšimi akterji razvoja profila opernega režiserja na Slovenskem, se je postavil nad vsakdanji realizem ter zagovarjal meditativnost in poetičnost predstav. Izbiral je tekste simbolistične dramatike, izraz njegovih predstav pa je odražal mistiko, patetičnost in demoničnost. Njegove režije z značilno stilizacijo ter stopnjevanjem ekspresionističnega in melodramatičnega vzdušja so razdvajale tako občinstvo kot gledališko kritiko. Prispeval je h kakovostnemu dvigu igre v glasbenih predstavah in v tem smislu vzgojil vrsto slovenskih pevcev, od katerih je zahteval tudi igralsko in psihološko poglobitev pri študiju vloge. Z njim se je raven dotlej premalo upošteevane operne režije strmo dvignila in pripravila temelje novi dobi povojne generacije režiserjev.