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Understanding Ethnicity and Culture through Theatre:

A Look at Contemporary Slovak Theatre

The Bratislava Castle and Parliament buildings can be seen from a distance as person approaches the capital of the Slovak Republic [aka Slovakia]; yet before a person can reach these places of power on the hill that overlooks the city, the traveler usually passes through at least one town square—Hviezdoslava. Named after one of the most well-known Slovak poets who was also a playwright, this famously common stop in the Old Town is a place where creativity still abounds. On any given day a photographer can be found trying to capture moments of profound beauty or hints into the culture of the Slovak people. Writers sit with notepads and pencils, soaking in their surroundings before letting the deluge of imaginings flow onto the paper before them. Some days this square is filled with souvenir booths for the tourists; but even then those booths contain homemade items from around the country—carved walking sticks, handmade lace doilies, roasted chestnuts, and intricately designed honey cookies. Children can be found playing with chess pieces as tall as they are on a sidewalk chess board near several abstract sculptures. Music can be heard from performers, whether individually on the street or on a stage that is constructed in the square several times of year. The U.S. embassy is tucked away on the side of the square, as well as two of the city's grandest hotels. But the most prominent building in this square, the end focus to which it all leads, is the Historic Slovak National Theatre.



*Figure 1. Historic Slovak National Theatre*

Without even knowing the history behind this building, one can feel the importance of it. The faces of the children sculpted into Ganymede's Fountain welcome people to ask of all they have seen since they were added in 1888. The busts of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johann Goethe, Franz Liszt, Józef Katona, and the distinguished playwright William Shakespeare stare down at the pedestrians all waiting for another tour guide to share a bit of the glorious days of Slovakia's theatrical significance. This structure is more than a building for tourists to photo, it points to the strength that the arts, especially the theatrical arts, have in expressing the heart of the Slovak people and shaping a country in which theatres can be found easily in every major city. "Each of these magnificent structures is an outlet of cultural expression that has triumphed and adapted and never ceased to soothe the heart of a rapidly changing nation" (Hogan 43). No

matter who ruled over the Slovak nation, theatrical performances were a crucial part of maintaining the Slovak culture and still contains the key to understanding the Slovak ethnicities and cultural differences.

In an article written by Olga Chtiguel a year after the Velvet Revolution that put an end to the Communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia, she posed these questions:

“What are the prospects for Czech theatre? Can the banned drama of the 1960s satisfy the spectators of the 1980s? Will unrestricted travel and acquaintance with the Western artistic trends change the aesthetics of Czech theatre artists? What will be the theatre’s function in society now that the media has been restored to its proper democratic role?” (94-95)

Since the publication of Chtiguel’s article, Czechoslovakia split into two nations. Therefore, to answer these questions in regards to the Slovak aspects of theatre, one must look to the past and see the political changes and unity theatre brought to the region before looking at the current projects that enhance the future of Slovak theatre nationally and internationally through embracing their culture and assisting others in understanding that culture.

### **Theatrical History of the Slovak People**

The first national theatre opened in Slovakia in September 1886 while it was a part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, but it was not completely turned over to Slovakia until Bratislava became a part of Czechoslovakia in 1919 (Hogan 40). There was a major problem for the theatrical arts during the turn over. Though Slovakia had several playwrights, there were no professional Slovak actors or directors (Kobišková). There were several amateur troupes. Count Csaky had started one in 1776 which had established the City Theatre close to where the first

national theatre opened (Hogan 40). But Slovaks, in a zealous move from the Austrian-Hungarian's 1000-years reign, strove to embrace patriotism and nationalism in the 1920s.

“The founders of national theatres tried to cultivate national consciousness. They strove to create a national repertoire as opposed to the internationally dominant French comedy and Italian opera, a national audience (or at least a public) as opposed to an aristocratic coterie, and a stable public institution in a capital or would-be capital city, as opposed to itinerant troupes” (Kruger 1).

They turned to their sister nation for help. Czech sent people to train Slovak actors and directors (Kobišková). With proper funding and training, the head of Slovenske narodne divadlo [aka SND or the Slovak National Theatre] Oskar Nedbal was able to take a group of Slovaks on an opera tour, performing in Spain (Hogan 41).

Then the Second World War hit Europe. Though the First World War had brought their freedom from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the second war cracked open a door to which other issues would eventually arise...Slovakia's connection to Russia. The influence in the artistic world started to be seen in 1948 and the official style was to be that of “Stalinist Social Realism” (Kobišková). The law demanded Slovak nationalism. “All operas were ordered translated into Slovak...a search began for a composer to write a national Slovak opera” (Hogan 41). By 1949, Eugen Suchoň's *Krútnava / The Whirlpool* appeared. He blended Slovak texts and folk music to the harmonies and structures found in twentieth century music creating a form that was “like the mindset of the country (Hogan 41). Other original works began to follow, not only from Suchoň. A Golden Age of actors and directors spread through Slovakia from 1956-1962 (Kobišková). Graduates from Bratislava's College of the Music Arts started to be used as the

majority of performers (Hogan 41). But there were several artists who saw the undercurrent of what was happening across the Czechoslovak dual-nation.

One such artist was Václav Havel, a playwright from the Czech side of Czechoslovakia but whose work is preserved in theatre institutes and studied in theatre classes in both sides of the former dual-nation. Only three of his plays were produced before the government banned them, *The Garden Party* (1963), *The Memorandum* (1965), and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (1968) (Stoppard, v). Out of these three, *The Memorandum* has been the one most often performed. The resonating message behind the play could make any government uncomfortable, but to the Communist regime that took over Czechoslovakia in 1968, the theme was not acceptable. In *The Memorandum*, the managing director of an organization Jozef Gross receives a memo written in a new scientifically based language known as “Ptydepe,” which his deputy manager, Ján Ballas, has begun incorporating in all business communications. Through a series of absurd situations, Gross learns that he cannot get a translation of his message because of rules that have been set in place to improve the company. After Ballas tricks him into feeling guilty over the simple matters of a rubber stamp and a record book, Gross demotes himself to deputy placing Ballas in charge. Then after being wrongfully accused by Ballas, he ends up further demoted to be the Staff Watcher from a small room in the middle of several offices. The only one who seems to try to help Gross is a young woman named Maria. In scene nine of the play, she rouses Gross by saying:

“If your conscious is clear, you’ve nothing to worry about. Your innocence will be proved, but you have to fight for it! I believe that if one doesn’t give way, truth must always come out in the end” (Havel, *The Memorandum* 68).

Then she translates the memo he received, which indeed proved his innocence to all the things of which Ballas had made him feel guilty. He returns to confront Ballas, who gladly turns the position of managing director back to him and slyly convinces Gross to let him stay as deputy. Gross once again submits.

What is extremely significant in this piece is the convincing flattery and word twisting done by Ballas and those immediately within his control. When one turns on him, as his first sidekick Pillard does, Ballas finds a way to turn everything against Pillard, making him the scapegoat. Ballas gets a new assistant, Column, and starts the process again with a new language called "Chorukor." This time he has thoroughly convinced Gross to follow the idea because Chorukor is much easier for people to understand than the elite Ptydepe, making it supposedly the language for everyone. Sadly, when Maria is fired by Ballas for helping Gross, Gross uses the same sort of flattery that Ballas has been using throughout the play. Maria leaves but feels relieved because "Nobody ever talked to me so nicely before" (Havel, *The Memorandum* 86).

Czechoslovakia was facing this same situation as the political powers allowed the Communist regime to infiltrate the nation. The government that had first spoken out against Nazism but had quietly allowed certain aspects into their nation was repeating the action with the Communists, and Havel was calling them on it. "Havel's method is to employ drama techniques to make situations and characters appear ridiculous" (Cravens 130). He wanted his fellow countrymen to see how ridiculous the situation was with the government. Between his plays and his connections with the Charter 77 (a petition that asked the Czech government to abide by its laws) and the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted, he ended up incarcerated twice. His longest time of imprisonment was four and a half years, for which he found himself in a situation much like Gross in being accused without proper evidence. While in prison *The*

*Memorandum* continued to be printed. An English copy was published in America and spread across the U.S.

As Communism took over the nation, Slovakia (as a part of Czechoslovakia) received a generous amount of funding toward the arts. Fifteen state repertory theatres, which included seventeen drama, five puppet, four opera, two ballet, and two musical ensembles, developed under the funding. Musical and dramatic festivals started; the oldest being the “May Theatre Festival” in Nitra which started in 1973. Yet it was also the theatre artists who found ways to “get around bureaucratic censorship by staging classical texts with new theatre poetics—the style of production becoming highly metaphorical, and often containing coded political messages, both appreciated and desired by the audience (Inštorisová 164). A revival of Shakespearean productions hit the stages. E.F. Burian who had been held in a Nazi concentration camp came back to direct *Romeo and Juliet* where the “love scenes appeared to be the dream of a disheveled prisoner in a camp.” *Macbeth* was done with costumes that had a striking resemblance to the uniform of the Soviet soldier. A 1981 stage adaptation of *Hamlet* ended with the image of a “military mass grave” (Stříbrný 2).

“The harshest times of the normalization process in the 70s produced the ‘Gold Age’ of Czech off-stream theatre” (Chtiguel 89). Theatre groups were determined to find a way to be creative while being suppressed. One such avenue was *Theatre of the Absurd*. Like Havel’s *The Memorandum*, this style became common place during the time of censorship of the arts. Productions would “subvert the surface meaning of the plays and...highlight the otherwise ‘unspeakable’ truths about the feelings and existential anxieties of the audiences” (Inštorisová 164).

“Theatre of the Absurd was seen as primarily apolitical, especially in comparison with theatre as practiced by the followers of Brecht” (Cravens 129). Yet in so many absurd pieces there is an underlying level of the political and societal issues that were prevalent at the time of the origin of the works. This was not only seen in the works of Havel, but in that of Beckett and Ionesco. *Waiting for Godot* appeared in small houses because of its “portrayal of the frustration of life in a society which habitually explains away the hardships of the present” (Cravens 129).

The world of theatre was split into six key groups who later influenced the nation and had a hand in ending Communism. Kamenná divadla or “stone theatres” were the mainstream theatres that had government officials in key positions. These theatres were expected to follow the rules. Mala divadla or “small theatres” were off-mainstream and in smaller spaces where the audience could actually witness and be a part of the creation process. Text-appeal theatre groups emphasized poetic language and had the authors on stage with the other performers. Chamber drama groups (of which Havel became a part) appealed to the consciousness of the audience by using “humorous yet chillingly truthful pictures of Czech Communist society.” The auteur’s theatre was “anti-psychological, non-illustrative, and individualistic, deliberately playful, seeming unpolished, raw, and spontaneous.” Add to the mix, a group of amateur performers called Pražská Pětka or The Prague Five who did pantomime, ballet, rap, and other forms of visual theatre. Together these theatre groups slowly reminded their fellow countrymen of the need to act against the regime (Chtiguel 89-94).

In 1989, it all came to a head. Natália Mózerová who worked at the Slovenske narodne divadlo (SND) / Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava said, “Everyone could feel something was going to happen... There was a special feeling in the air” (Hogan 42). The SND was a stone theatre completely state funded at the time, but on a night where Bizet’s *Carmen* was to be

performed, the singers came out in costume, cancelled the show and had a political discussion with the audience. Mózzerová described the moment: “The whole SND community was very proud, and excited about the direction the nation was taking, but, at the same time, we were worried about how the government would respond” (Hogan 42).

An actor named Milan Kňažko, who was a member of People Against Violence, organized negotiations to be held at the SND. Along with Communist regime members, two other people of prominence attended: Alexander Dubček (“the reformer of 1968”) and Václav Havel (Hogan 42). Communism ended without bloodshed which was why it was named the “Velvet Revolution,” and the once banned and imprisoned playwright became Czechoslovakia’s first President.

It was a year later that Chtiguel’s questions came to light in her published article. What would be the future when the fight against Communism was no longer a part of the undertones portrayed on stage? Artists would be employed at larger theatres because of their talents and merit not because they fit with a political agenda (88). In less than four years, the nation would split in what has become known as the “Velvet Divorce”, and Slovakia found itself in a more difficult situation. The Czech Republic had the larger cities and population base so when funding was split, Czech got the larger portion. Slovakia had large cities, but the majority of the country was filled with vineyards, mountains and farms. The first ten years after the Velvet Revolution (which included roughly six years after the Velvet Divorce) were a challenge to the arts in Slovakia, yet Slovaks are a people who have learned how to survive and thrive in the midst of difficulty.

Theatres, directors, and dramaturgs started working with what they knew and could access. “Slovak theatremakers have enthusiastically worked with scripts that for various reasons

could not be staged in the Communist era” (Inštorisová 170). Being that they wanted to step away from the influence of Russia, they looked into western European dramas. They looked into classic pieces that had been written by Slovaks, whether already in play format or in literature, folk tales, and poems. They built “on the achievements of the Slovak theatre of the past while seeking their own style” (Inštorisová 170).

Martin Čičvák is a playwright who has emerged within the last twenty years. His play *Dom, kde sa to robí dobre / Frankie is Ok, Peggy is Fine, and the House is Cool!* was a “cabaret” directed toward a younger theatre audience (Inštorisová 171). The characters have individual scenes that deal with prostitution, drugs, and violence—all of which would never have been allowed on the stage during the Communist regime.

Some government funding, as well as funding from corporations, have given two of the major theatres in Slovakia new looks. Štátne Divadlo or the State Theatre in Košice, the second largest city in Slovakia, was already an “architectural masterpiece” (Hogan 43). It was once led by the first Slovak professional actor, Janko Borodáč. Work on the grounds surrounding the building finished in 1994, a year after the Velvet Divorce, creating a “peaceful oasis” (Hogan 43). But this could not compare to the work that was done for the SND. Though the beautiful historic building still stands, there is a new location for the majority of the productions of the SND. Near the Apollo Most’ / Apollo Bridge stands an area called the Eurovea. The new SND, with separate housing for traditional plays and musical productions like opera and ballet, was opened before the rest of the Eurovea construction was completed. The area is now complete with a mall, movie theater, apartments, major restaurants, a romantic walkway beside the Danube and a large town square in which performances can take place and sporting events, like

Slovakia's 2012 World Cup victory over Italy, can be watched by the community on a large public screen.



*Figure 2. New Building for the Slovak National Theatre*

Slovak theatre is also becoming known on an international scale. Three opera singers are laureates of the Lucian Pavarotti Singing Competition, while others have taken over the stage at the New York Metropolitan Opera House. In 2011, 36-year old Viliam Docolomanský was the youngest laureate to win the Europe Theatre Prize. Though his work is based in Prague, he is a Slovak. His Farm in the Cave Studio Theatre presented two pieces—*The Journey* and *The Theatre*—that captured attention across Europe. *The Journey* was a multimedia piece that combined “folkloric songs...collected from indigenous emigrant populations” with movement.

*The Theatre* was a wordless piece that consisted of a “bare stage rigged with traps” and based on the movements found in the “rhythms of Brazilian slaves” (O’Quinn 21).

Today, Slovakia stands apart from its sister nation, Czech Republic. It has become a strong and growing individual nation with the heart of theatre continuing to pulse strongly throughout the nation regardless of the downsizing of government funding. A distinct voice or style has not arisen in Slovakia since Czechoslovakia split in the Velvet Divorce of 1993, but voices are still there—embracing the past and pushing forward not only to maintain aspects of the Slovak culture but to share that culture with the rest of the world.

## **Ethnicity and Culture**

Often the words *ethnic* and *culture* are interchanged in today’s society. According to the Random House dictionary, the word *ethnic* comes from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning “race, culture or people;” (“Ethnos”) therefore making an *ethnic group* “a group of people of the same race or nationality who share a common and distinctive culture” (“Ethnic Group”) Then what is culture? *Culture* is “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another” (“Culture,” Def. 3)

Based on the glimpse so far put forth in this article, the history of Slovak theatre has been influenced by the political history of the country. The culture has shaped the writing and productions of Slovak plays, especially those that have surfaced and blossomed after being restricted and censored for many years. In each contemporary Slovak play, aspects of the Slovak culture can be seen. There are five of which are the most prominent on the Slovak stage.

## [The Importance of Relationships](#)

Slovaks are a wonderful people with a deep love for connection with others. Though they are hard-working, one can often find Slovaks socializing, and not only in clubs, but in cafes, on

long hikes, or sitting by a river. They love taking the time to get to know people whether in a one-on-one setting or in a group. Once a week in the summer, a large portion of the population of the capitol city of Bratislava can be found rollerblading together around the town. Pubs and cafes around the city are found full of people sharing conversations and laughing. When asked what is more important than theatre, director and actress Slava Daubnerova said, “Relationships with people” (*Even Erwin*). Slovaks love people, though in many parts of the country the love for others is highly tainted by another deep trait in their culture.

### Trust Issues

Czech writer and broadcaster Benjamin Kuras once said, “The Slovaks themselves approach everyone with suspicion, assuming everyone is there to rip them off, because they know that everyone has already ripped them off and everyone owes them something. And by everyone, they mean everyone” (Cravens 1-3). Though this statement is definitely a hyperbole, there some truth to it. The Slovaks have been “ripped off” over and over again in history. This does make them very careful when it comes to trusting others. Unfortunately, this aspect of their culture has an impact on the relationships they crave. Slovaks abundantly question. They are curious people who find it fascinating when anyone outside of their country finds anything about them in which to be as equally curious.

Where Kuras is misleading is in the idea that Slovaks believe that everyone owes them something. This is spoken like a stereotypical Czech. Though the countries were once connected quite often the Czechs portray Slovaks as the needy sibling in a family. Slovaks have a pride in what they do. Many are proud to be Slovak but are skeptical about why anyone else would be interested in their country. This can sometimes lead to the appearance of being aloof, but there is

something within a Slovak that does want to risk trusting people...maybe not the government...but individuals.

There is a good reason to mistrust the government. Slovaks have been ruled by several different people groups over the years. Even a man like Gustav Husak who was one of the leaders of an all-Slovak Communist organization and planned the 1944 armed uprising, to his idea of nationalism beyond what the Slovaks were expecting. “Husak’s regime demanded obedience and conformity in all spheres of life” (Cravens 18). They had been forced repeatedly to live life a certain way under each leader they had before the Velvet Revolution and Havel’s presidency of Czechoslovakia.

### Superstition, Dreams, and Symbols

Slovaks have numerous traditions that are rooted in superstitions. For instance on the Monday after Easter,

“It is customary for the women to stay at home while the men, usually dressed in nicer clothing or even sometimes in traditional costumes, go from the residence of one relative to the next, bringing greetings and intending to *oblievat*’—to ‘water’ the female relatives who are present...In return for the watering, the men are offered something to eat and a shot of strong alcohol. Younger boys in the party are sometimes given a decorated egg, chocolate, and/or money” (Hurn 119)

But it does not stop there; besides dousing a woman with a bucket of water, there is the “šibat” in which they also lightly beat her with a braided willow branch. The water is supposed to bring a healthy life and beauty to the girls, while “the willow branch is chosen because it is the first tree that ‘wakes’ in spring and, according to folk tradition, the fertility and vitality from the

branches were thought to flow into the woman during this act” (Hurn 120). This is still practiced in major cities across Slovakia.

Also, in the spring, there is a ceremony called *The Burning and Drowning of Morena*. Morena symbolizes all that winter brought: death, illness, and infertility. An effigy is taken through the villages or towns to a nearby river or bridge. There the effigy is set on fire and thrown into the river to signify the end to all that winter brought to them. Though this is a tradition that is not found in the large cities of Bratislava, Kosice, and Banska Bystrica, it is found in smaller towns outside of the cities. (Nadaska)

Dreams are crucial to Slovaks, especially when and where the person was when the dream occurred. If a dream happens on the first night of a visit at a friend’s home, it is believed that the dream will come into being. Any dream that a person can remember or that recurs over a period of time is believed to be a sign that should be taken seriously. They also believe that a person should share his/her dreams with others so that the person can be encouraged to trust it. (Dorazilova)

### Resignation

With all that is held in their superstitions and beliefs on dreams, Slovaks still tend to be more realistic than optimistic in their approach to life as a whole. “If there is one thing that characterizes [Slovak] literature, it is humor. But this is not to be confused with optimism or cheerfulness...they have developed an oddly unsentimental, dark, yet humorous view of the world” (Cravens 87). Often their realistic mentality borders on pessimism, especially compared to the common American mindset.

“The most common attitudes toward public life after the 1968 invasion were apathy and passivity” (Cravens 18). The country had already been under the Austro-Hungarian Empire for a

thousand years. Every time they had a moment to being their own nation afterwards was taken from them again and again. The influence of the Nazis and the aftermath of communism, set the citizens in a state of resignation. They began to feel like it did not matter what they would try to do to improve their situation; it was all going to backfire on them anyway.

### Remembrance enhances the present and the future

“Culture actually develops according to what you remember from your past and past without context is just a sum of years and dates which mean nothing to anyone anymore. To be more precise, memory is all context,” stated the archivist Oleg Dlouhy (*Even Erwin*).

History is essential to Slovaks, young and old. They know not only the history of their nation but that of Europe and the United States. How else can one learn without repeating the same mistakes? Learn from the past. A seventeen-year old Slovak man from a large city can easily give the history of his major city as well as surrounding villages. A walk through Bratislava with a Slovak can easily lead to a history lesson of greater detail than anything found in a U.S. history class.

This aspect of the Slovak culture is the embodiment of all the previously mentioned ones. It is through relationships that memories continue. Stories are passed from one person to the next. It is because of their past situations with other nations and what has happened within their country that Slovaks do not trust easily. Their superstitions, dreams, and symbols continue on and encourage a look to the future. The remembrance of their past resignation and the impact it has on today is the driving force behind some Slovaks who are determined to keep their country from falling into the same place again. All that has shaped them thus far determines the course on which they currently exist. Many are choosing to embrace it and let it move them forward.

**Divadelny ustav / Theatre Institute**

One of the greatest international outreaches for Slovak theatre has not come from the directors or actors or playwrights, but has come from the organization that is trying to make the directors, actors and playwrights known to the rest of the world. This organization is the Divadelný ústav or Theatre Institute located in Bratislava. Because most of the plays done in Slovakia are written in Slovak, the Theatre Institute has been making translations available via collections they have published as well as via their online website. The list of translations is still small in comparison to some countries, but the amount already available is enough to fill three large binders. Not only has the organization supplied translations, but they also encourage the playwrights, directors, and actors by hosting two major events. Nova drama or New Drama is a festival held once a year in May to celebrate new theatre pieces and give others in the country and abroad the chance to view the top pieces in a week's time.

In May 2013, the Divadelny Ustav hosted its annual Nova drama festival. Out of the eight productions all of which had clear cultural and historical ties, there were three that specifically captured what the Slovaks have faced in history and how that impacts the Slovak people today while helping visitors to understand this ethnic group and their culture. *Holokaust*, *Sedem dni do pohrebu*, and *narodnycintorin.sk* each brought to life an aspect of the Slovak world in a way that was understandable, thought-provoking, enlightening, and enjoyable to non-Slovak audiences. The conversations of theatre-goers after the performances were filled with insightful questions to further comprehend the Slovak culture.

The Theatre Institute of Bratislava is located in a small square named Jakubovo. The window to its store is quite noticeable, but the door for the institute can easily be passed repeatedly without a pedestrian ever knowing all the history and capsules of Slovak culture that wait behind that door. Like many of the older buildings in Bratislava, there is much more to what

is inside than what appears on the outside. Following hallways and stairs lead to different sections of the institute, each one as fascinating as the next.

In 2011, the institute worked with a distinguished Slovak playwright Viliam Klimáček to create *Even Erwin Would Like This*, a unique documentary that would explain the various aspects of the institute in a theatrical context of five short acts. Each act was directed by a different eminent theatrical director. Viewing the documentary and touring the more exclusive sections of the institute gave an enlightening view of all the hard work that is done at the institute, all to save a portion of the Slovak heritage for future generations.

Act one was performed as a monodrama or a one-person performance. As director and actress Slava Daubnerova explained how the institute's research helped her to create her monodrama, her interview is interwoven with her portrayal of Magda Husakova Lokvencova, the woman who took the first steps in creating the Theatre Institute of Bratislava by establishing the Theatre Department of the Slovak Museum as a separate branch from the Theatre Institute of Prague in 1961. Daubnerova used old photographs, articles, stage sketches, and other saved artifacts to help her study and write her one-woman show *M.H.L.* based on Lokvencova. One of the most interesting finds were some of Lokvencova's own writings about her time trying to gather information for what would be the institute.

"I managed to convince authorities that each day we were losing precious memories of what theatre used to be like, before. Memories of amateur theatres that were vanishing, those that later formed the first professional theatre in Slovakia. Works of hundreds of first drama directors is lost day by day, our first art directors, scenographers [set designers], composers, actors, actresses—all those who formed the evanescent face of our country" (*Even Erwin*).

Slowly her requests were answered by stage managers who, because of their love for theatre, had held on to different aspects of plays on which they worked. Lokvencova received posters, photographs, bulletins, scripts (some with the original blocking still marked), costume sketches, set design mock ups, director books, reviews, audience statistics, and theory books. She needed a building to house everything and hoped to one day see a time when a sound collection could be added and theory books could be written based on the overall development seen across the country. She believed that “the evanescence needs to be captured to create a chance for us to learn from it to draw inspiration for the future, when theatre will be, just like so many times before, again searching for its meaning in the society” (*Even Erwin*).

The current head of the Theatre Institute of Bratislava is Vladislava Fekete, a remarkable woman who has the same passionate drive, if not more so, as the founder. Since a theatrical performance is a fleeting art that is gone right after the moment of performance is complete, Fekete sees the institute’s position as one that tries “to capture theatre in the moment when it doesn’t exist anymore, after it has been staged... When the play ends, theatre disappears, [but we try] to prolong that moment” (*Even Erwin*). True to the Slovak cultural belief that remembrance will enhance the present and the future, Fekete believes: “It’s important to document the past to be able to move forward, to take modern steps to find our place in the context of European theatre” (*Even Erwin*).

Act two of the documentary was done as an opera that is set in one of the archive rooms of the institute. At the time of the filming, the institute had collected 90 costumes, 130 three-dimensional set designs, 5500 drawn set designs, 6500 theatrical posters, 240 objects from puppet theatre, 2200 object of museum and gallery value and 19000 costume designs. The

numbers increase every year. As plays are done around the country, the information is sent to the Theatre Institute of Bratislava to archive.

The friendly head of archives, Oleg Dlouhy, said that he considers the main focus of the Theatre Institute to be “perhaps to remind us of the past. Every author is convinced that what he is working on is something entirely new” (*Even Erwin*). What that author can learn through the institute is that not only has it been done but in some cases it has been done better. The hope is that this will push playwrights to learn from the past and strive to be better.

Act three was directed by the playwright who helped formed the documentary, Viliam Klimáček. His section was about the books that the Theatre Institute publishes, which is currently about twenty a year. “Slovak literature is badly neglected by translators and hence very little recognized in the English-speaking world” (Cravens 102), so the institute tries to make it possible for more people to have access to the writings of Slovak playwrights as well as to books on theatre theory and criticism.

Klimáček created characters that embodied Contemporary World Drama, Classic Slovak Drama, Contemporary Slovak Drama, Theory, and KØD. In his act, Classic Slovak Drama had very little to say, and Contemporary Slovak Drama did not seem to match with the others. She spoke in the vernacular and was focused on pure instincts. Even when she danced, her rhythm was off and too fast, but Theory reminded the others that “All classics were once new dramas that everyone cursed” (*Even Erwin*) After this, Theory met KØD, the theatre magazine published by the Theatre Institute, and they fell in love. Contemporary Slovak Drama was not fully appreciated by Contemporary World Drama until she took a stand for herself, “No one knows about me yet, but my time will come!” (*Even Erwin*). The basic idea is that the only way for

contemporary Slovak theatre to ever have a chance in the world is by forcing the world take notice.

Act four was done as a form of puppet theatre, which is one of the four major forms of theatre in Slovakia—besides the straight drama, ballet, and opera. This section covered the aspect of how the Slovak theatrologists, people who study theatre, improved upon their organizational skills over the years. Nelly Šturova studied under Erwin Piscator, a German theatrologist who specialized in archiving—hence the title of the documentary. In 1964, she taught the theatrologists to organize according to staging. At first, over 11500 envelopes were used to organize the collections. Now the works are being digitalized and transcribed. Gradually, the Theatre Institute developed what is now [www.theatre.sk](http://www.theatre.sk), an online database in which people can search for any information about a staging, theatre, personality or festival since the 1920s. Though the majority of the database is in Slovak, there is an English translation that has a plethora of information as well, including access to a number of translated contemporary plays.

The last act was done as a mini-drama or small skit in which a new playwright brought his manuscript to the institute for a chance to have it performed. Sadly, with the allowance of more outside television shows and movies after the fall of communism, theatre attendance dropped. This new playwright was constantly tempted by the mass media to change it into a script for television or a screenplay for film. The struggle that most playwrights faced was captured in this mini-drama: the idea that many plays will never be produced because they are not good enough, yet poorly-written television shows and films are produced and make more money every year.

The Theatre Institute uses part of its space as Studio 12 and gives a chance for new playwrights to see their works on stage. They host a competition for child playwrights as well as

for adult playwrights. The winner has the opportunity to see his/her work on stage and receive a small compensation.

Beyond all of this, the Theatre Institute of Bratislava hosts an annual Nova Drama Festival. Throughout the year, theatrologists and critics view productions all over the country and try to find which ones are the best examples of new Slovak plays. In 2013, the running theme seemed to be a look at certain aspects of Slovak history. Since the festival is open to international guests, this gives a wonderful opportunity to explore the Slovak culture through theatre. Dramaturges, playwrights, and actors are all there waiting for questions to help their audience understand; but having English-speaking Slovak companions sitting in the audience next a guest can lead to greater conversations and richer aspects of understanding.

### **In Depth Cultural Look at Three Contemporary Slovak Plays**

#### [Holokaust / Holocaust](#)

Klimáček's *Holocaust* premiered at the Arena Theatre in Bratislava on 12 December 2012. By May 2013, the Theatre Institute had chosen it to be one of the top examples of contemporary Slovak Theatre and had it as the first performance to be seen in the 2013 Nova Drama Festival. Being that the festival was held in the same city as the premiere, the same theatrical space was used for the showing. The show was done in Slovak with English subtitles, but the Theatre Institute was able to provide a PDF of the script upon request.



*Figure 3. Men listen to soccer match*



*Figure 4. Hana is scolded by Rosa*

Though this was a fictional play, it based on an aspect of the Holocaust of which I was not familiar. “It is fair to say that history is controversial; Slovak history is no exception. In Slovakia, several historic events have been interpreted in more than one way and are subject to debate event today” (Hurn 27). That is definitely true when looking at Klimáček’s *Holocaust*. In Act One Scene One, a young lady by the name of Anna Kralikova arrives in Bratislava. It is 1991, and she has traveled from Argentina to reclaim what she believes to be her family’s café. Based on the Act on Extrajudicial Rehabilitation, people who had property seized between 1948 and 1989 were to receive their property. Her father, Ambroz Kralik, was a renowned poet and political figure, so Anna assumes she is going to receive what is owed to her family finally.

Act One Scene Two establishes the belief that “before 1900, it seems the Prague and Bohemian Jews had no desire to be considered a separate people or culture equal to that of the Czech and Germans” (Cravens 32). Even during the early 1900, the people were considered one. Yes, there were differences. In Bratislava, there was a synagogue in place, but for the most part, people did not emphasize the differences because there was no real visual difference between the people groups. In this scene, the audience is taken to the café in 1929. Ambroz Kralik and Jakob Weiss are sitting at the Rose Café. Ambroz has hired Jakob, a Jew, to help him with an inheritance issue so that he can get his family’s mill from his brother because he knows Jakob to

be one of the best lawyers in the city. Jano Pujdes, a Slovak man who works for a Jewish movie theatre owner, joins Ambroz and Jakob. Jano brings in a radio—which becomes its own lively character played by a man on stage throughout the show. Together the men and the Jewess Rosa Rozenfeld, the owner of the café, celebrate the football (soccer) match in which Slovakia beats England. The unity shown in this scene is so delightful. There is a joy that they all have in being together. The relationships and connections with each other were important.

The next scene takes place in 1939. Rosa's daughter Ester and their Slovak orphaned maid Hana Kostolnikova are introduced to the audience. Hana has the tendency to break things, which upsets Rosa, but Ester always helps her, especially after she learns of Hana's story from Jakob. The men, especially Ambroz, who visit the café make Hana nervous, but they take it as a sign that she likes Ambroz.

In this scene, Ambroz no longer works with his family mill. He is affiliated with the minister's office in the government. He starts to question Rosa to see if she had paid the "loan" amount to the government. The German Reich had control, but full military occupation had not happened; everyone had to pay a certain amount of money to the government. Ambroz's desire to see a movie completely done by Slovaks shows the push for nationalism, which was growing at the time. Jan Pujdes tells Kralik that he should write the movie, which begins to spark ideas. The government is willing to fund the first film as long as it is about Svätopluk, the king of old Slovaks.

At the end of the scene, a Slovak woman, Kristina Majerova, presents Rosa with white tablecloths brandishing a rose on each one "for all to know whose these are" (Klimáček 13).

Ambroz hits on Hana, and his poem "Lumps of Soil" is broadcasted on the radio.

The scene changes to 1991, where Ambroz's daughter is reading the same poem. She still believes that the café was stolen from her father by the government. "Whenever someone wants to do something dirty, they always hide behind the nation" (Klimáček 14). She declares that she will get the Rose back.

Act One Scene Five takes up back to 1939 where Hana's fear of the Jews is mentioned. At the end of the day, she hides in the attic because she heard that other Jewish friends were coming to visit Rosa. After allowing the seventeen-old Ester into her room, Hana explains that when she was a child, she was told that Jews capture Gentile children and put their bodies in matzah. Though she is twenty-four, she still believes this about Jews. Ester explains that only bad people make up stories that horrific about other people. While the girls are still speaking, the Guardsmen break Rosa's windows.

In the next scene, Ester and her friend Lili—Jakob's sister—are talking about the first Slovak movie when Jakob enters and tells them that he was no longer allowed to be an attorney. Only four percent of the Jews were allowed to work as an attorney, so he as well as many others had to be fired. Jakob tells the girls his plan to leave so that he can do something to change the situation he was seeing slowly spread across Europe. Jan Pujdes enters and gives them all the news that another collection for the state is being taken and he nails a sign on the wall of the movie theatre. It reads: *Jewish Business*.

It is 1940 in Scene Seven. Across the radio, it is declared how people are to be divided into "Hlinka's Youth." They would be categorized by age and sex as Wolves, Eagles, Lads, Fairies, Tattras, and Lassies. The push is strong for nationalism as the voice over the radio cries out: "Be unselfish, faithful, and kind! Be prepared to set up a Slovak home!" (Klimáček 19)

Rosa tells Hana that a law has been passed. She cannot employ an Aryan nor can Rosa have full control of her café, so she asks Hana to be the “temporary manager” who will hold 51% of the café. Hana is not allowed to thank her or act as if Rosa is superior to her in anyway. Then Rosa allows Hana to choose one of her dresses so that she can look more suitable as a manager.

Later that year, in Scene Eight, the radio announces that over three hundred acres have been taken from Jews and given to non-Jewish farmers. Ester and Lili are no longer allowed in school. Jakob finds a way to get to England and enlist in the British military so he says his final goodbye and tells Ester and Lili to listen for his code so that they will know he is safe. His code, “A watchful eye,” is also a reminder of how they are all being watched by this time.

There is a change in Hana by this scene. She does not understand the financial books, so she asks Jan Pujdes instead of going to Rosa. She yells at Ester when Ester enters the café and throws the hat Ester was wearing onto the floor. Hana claims the hat as hers, but Ester does not back down and argues back that the hat is her mother’s and Rosa never gave it to Hana to keep. This sparks Jan into telling Hana that word is starting to spread that she does not really own the café and that she and Rosa were trying to get around the government regulations. He reminds her that “The Party gives, the Party takes away” (Klimáček 23).

When Rosa arrives, Ester is rude to her mother because she hates what she sees happening. The relationships are being torn apart. Mistrust is starting to settle into the hearts of all the people who were once so close. Jan blames the Jewish doctor for the death of his son. Kristina Majerova comes back to warn Rosa that it is time she goes into hiding and that she should take as many valuables as possible or it will be taken from her. Rosa tells Kristina that Hana already knows what they own and that she still trusts Hana.

Everything shifts when Ambroz appears. Not only is he higher in position in the government, he is also the writer for the new film *Svätopluk*. He declares that the café has been given to him by the government. Rosa has no say and is harshly told to shut up when she states that she wants to appeal. Ambroz allows her to stay for work but tells her she cannot live in the main house anymore. He plans to keep Hana as a partner.

Act One Scene Nine takes the audience back to 1991, where Ambroz's daughter Anna is putting up a bronze plaque to honor her father. The café has had three owners since Ambroz Kralik. Anna admits her disgust with society by saying:

“There wouldn't be any problems if people had the decency to remember what was whose and who owned what. Property should remain untouched, should it not?”

(Klimáček 27)

The next scene starts in the attic of Rosa's old home. It is 1941, and what used to be Hana's room now holds Rosa, Ester, and all of their belongings. Rosa mentions her wish to change names, but Ester reminds her that they should be proud of who they are. Word comes over the radio in code to let Ester and Lili know that Jakob is still alive.

Meanwhile, down in the café, Jan Pujdes comes to Ambroz for help to gain another property. He has already taken over the movie theater from his former Jewish boss, but he wants more because he is not making enough money with the films that they are allowed to show. Ambroz turns him away by telling him that there are a lot of Slovaks seeking handouts from the government.

“A Slovak loves his home village like nothing else in the world. But it's too confining. So he runs off to Bratislava. And once there, he makes it to an important post—which I did, in all modesty—and brings along the customs of his birthplace.

This is why there are no real cities in Slovakia, just large villages. And it's our strong point! Simplicity and cleanliness, that's it" (Klimáček 29)

Then Ambroz speaks of the deal that the Slovaks have made with Germany so that there would not be a full invasion. The Slovaks would provide food when called upon. Bratislava is no longer to be called *Bratislava* or *Pressburg* (as it had been called under the Austro-Hungarian Empire). It is to be called *Fressburg* and Slovakia is to be called *Salamia* because of the amount of food they have. Ambroz also speaks about what he sees happening to the country:

Hana returns to Ambroz; she still has problems doing the accounts. Ambroz propositions her again, and this time Hana asks for more time. Eventually, he wins her by offering her a chance to be in his movie. Back upstairs, Rosa is getting sick with a fever. Then she and Ester watch their synagogue burn from the small window in the attic.

In Act One Scene Twelve, Jan Pujdes will not let Ester and Lili into the movie theater to watch a newsreel, even though Lili's family was the original owner of the theater. He tells them to read the new laws that have been passed by the government, Act 198/1941:

"It is prohibited for Jews and Jewesses to marry non-Jews and non-Jewesses. The conscious breach of this prohibition is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years. Jews do not possess any voting rights and cannot be elected to the Assembly of the Slovak Republic. Jews may not perform medical, apothecary and veterinary practice. The Ministry of the Interior and subjected offices may prohibit Jews from staying in specified villages or city parts, squares, parks, as well as spas, pubs, cafes, exhibitions, and so on. Jews may not be granted a radio license. Jews cannot possess or bear arms...cannot be issued a fishing license...Jews may not drive

Slovak motor vehicles...bank deposits can be withdrawn only up to the amount of 500 crowns” (Klimáček 36).

Fueled by Ambroz’s words of entitlement, Hana goes into the attic and begins to take things from a sickly Rosa. She specifically takes the binoculars that Jakob had given Ester and the radio, stating that Jews are “not allowed to listen to national songs. It offends the Aryan culture” (Klimáček 36).

Act One Scene Thirteen takes place in 1991. Anna is upset about the information she received from her lawyer. He found out that the original owner of the café was a Jewess. Anna’s reaction is one that is contradictory to all that she stated in other scenes. Now she believes that people are going to far back to find the owners. Her mother told her that they received the café by doing everything according to the law, so Anna does not think that the Jews should have anything to claim.

The last two scenes of Act One cover 1941 and 1942. A drunk Ambroz is surrounded by Rosa’s possessions. He apologizes to Hana for making her confront Rosa but admits that he is afraid of Rosa and wants to kick her out of the attic. Then he proposes to Hana. A year later, Rosa tries to hide Ester because Jewish girls are been taken. Jan Pujdes enters the attic, looking for Ester. He beats Rosa until Ester comes out of hiding and goes with him. Lili was able to escape because someone gave her a shot to make it look like she had typhus. The act ends with the announcement of the new film *Svätopluk*.

Act Two is very different than the first act. The audience and the cast switch places, so that the audience is on stage and the cast is in the house. Ambroz and Hana enter and sit as if they are watching their film. Meanwhile, four different monologues are said, each interrupting the other at certain points and repeated at others.

The first monologue is that of Jakob Weiss in navigation training in England. He hates the idea of killing people he once respected, but he realizes that this is the only way to stop the travesty that is happening in Europe at the time. “The worst thing about this war is that nobody will remain without blemish. Dear Lili, dear father, dear Ester, there are no winners. Everybody is a victim” (Klimáček 43).

The second monologue is Ester’s. It was March 21, 1942, when she was taken. She tells how she thought she was being taken to work at a regular business in Germany, but she was put on a train and taken to Auschwitz. There she was given a number *1890* and no longer addressed by name. She thinks of her mother and how much she wants to see her again. Then word comes that transports were going back home and would bring her mother to her.

The radio plays the part of the fourth monologue. It informs the audience of how to protect themselves in case of an air raid.

The last monologue is that of Lili. She ran to Kristina Majerova’s house and is allowed to stay in her cellar. Kristina lets her come upstairs at night so they can eat together, but she mainly stays hidden all day. She finds a dance book and begins to teach herself to dance. “Dance is an eraser I use to delete my brain, to remain clean. I’m learning the foxtrot” (Klimáček 45). This is always followed by her doing a crazy dance, falling to the ground with a loud thump, and looking around scared that she has alerted someone to her presence.

The play ends with the last lines of each monologue being repeated, and the audience feeling a jumble of emotions. All five cultural points that were mentioned previously are shown in this play. The tight relationships at the beginning are driving apart by mistrust. The superstitions of Hana are played out in the real threat that the Jews end up facing. A sense of resignation is seen in Rosa as she realizes that all power has been taken from her. The play itself

is a symbol of the final point. It calls the audience to remember what was done, how the Slovaks went with the flow and it hurt the lives of many people who were once dear to them. “In addition, the Jewish population of Czechoslovakia was nearly wiped out. Of a population of 350,000 in 1930, the Nazis murdered approximately 250,000, and many others fled” (Cravens 36). The play urges the audience to action for the present and the future.

[www.narodnycintorin.sk](http://www.narodnycintorin.sk) (1 Čašť) / [www.thenationalcemetery.sk](http://www.thenationalcemetery.sk) (Part 1)

*The National Cemetery* is a collaboratively written musical first performed in the city of Martin. This is another fictionalized story about a historical event, but this one is based on an incident that occurred a few years ago when the mayor of Martin was confronted with the idea of allowing the new R3 highway to be built through a portion of the national cemetery.

The performance was done at ten o’clock in the morning and was open to having teenage students attend. It had a Tim Burtonesque feel to it as the souls of those living in the cemetery came to life on stage. They appeared from within cabinets and wardrobes that were scattered around the stage. An old Slovak flag graced the stage—covering up items—and was moved when it needed to be. This show was done in Slovak and translated into English subtitles, but all of the words were not translated. When asked why, my archivist and teatrologist friends explained that some of the sentences would only be understood by Slovaks and would take much



Figure 5. *The Souls confront the Mayor*

more time for explanation than a subtitle would allow. No PDF of the full script has been made available in English, but the subtitles were accessible upon request. Unfortunately with subtitles, each line is not identified as to whom says what.

Alena, the mayor of Martin, meets with a developer by the name of Arnošt Mazanik at night in the national cemetery. She believes that he keeps hearing voices of warning as she walks through the graveyard. This fuels her skepticism about destroying a portion of the history found at the national cemetery. Arnošt tells her not to delay. Progress should happen and the past should be negated.

The souls of the dead appear and sing the theme song of the show *Narodny Cintorin*. In it they speak of the cemetery as an old place where many have mourned. The ground is sacred and should never be treated with disregard. Then there is the reminder to the audience that death comes to all, so we should respect the dead since we will one day join them.

Alena almost relents, but the voices of the souls continue to sing to her. “Prominent individuals critically, with no regret. Characters, titans of cultural life rest here” (Mankovecky). People in whom others believed. People who fought for truth in Slovakia. The ghosts as they there souls be left to rest (Mankovecky).

Through the play, different historical characters are introduced by the narrator. Elena Marothy-Šoltsova was a Slovak writer, editor and publicist. She died in 1939 at the age of eighty-four. She was known as one of the leaders of the Slovak feminist movement and chairman of the women’s club, Živena (Mankovecky). Martin was “a leading national center,” and Živena was started in 1869 to Slovak women across the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Kirschbaum, A

*History* 136) “Many other social organizationa, among them Živena...helped in the explosion of cultural and social life that Slovakia experienced in the new state” (Kirschbaum, *A History* 174).

The second historical figure was Miloslav Schmidt, a fire brigade organizer who died in May 1939 at the age of 54. Like Elena, he died in Martin. He was a member and secretary of the Slovak National Council (Mankovecky).

Anna Hurbanova-Jurkovičova was the third figure addressed. She was the first Slovak theatre actress. She died in February 1905 in Martin at the age 91. She was the wife of political leader Jozef Miloslav Hurban. A mother of nine, she started a move for the emancipation of Slovak women.

The fourth ghostly character introduced is not a known historical figure. It is a dog who happened to be killed when traveling with his owner at the crossroads of the cemetery. He was beautifully put into the story as a mix breed of a Slovakian Cuvan, German Shepherd, and Hungarian Vizsla (Mankovecky). In many ways, he symbolized the mixture amongst the Slovak people.

Karol Kuzmany, the Lutheran pastor and writer from Banska Bystrica is the fifth figure. He was the editor of the *Hronka* journal from 1836-1839. He was also the first vice-president for the Lutherans in the region.

Before the last person is introduced, Miloslav—also known as “Milko”—threatens to go the city council meeting by himself. The women decide to go with him because they feel that the still need to make a plea for equality.

**Miloslav:** There is no one to pressure us, even the barbed wire is pulled out, borders demolished, and everything is to be united.

**Eleana:** But women are still unequal to men. There is no unity in this (Mankovecky).

The other concern for the souls was that the new highway was going to be built by fellow Slovaks who should know better than to disturb their sacred resting place:

“If the highway was built by Hungarians,...then we could do something. But it’s Slovaks, who want to build it, right?

“Us.”

“We against us” (Mankovecky).

All of the souls leave except Janko Kral, the most significant poet of the Štur group. He died in April 1876 and was originally buried in a different town. His remains have already been moved, but because there was no formal picture of him, the government had no idea whether or not they got all of his problems. He was transported to Martin in 1940 (Mankovecky). While waiting for the other souls to return, he begins to recite a poem that is more majestic in form than anything Kuzmany tried to exhibit.

“Who counts our sorrows, desires, tears, which pour from our soul every day? They want to call the hope from the grave, and their shadow always dies: and a tear, dripping down the face, won’t move the heart of a man” (Mankovecky).

The souls return and confront the mayor Alena who has fallen into a grave while messing around with the developer. They address the fact that no one was at the council who would speak for them, so they decided to address her personally. Alena wonders if this is a dream warning, but the souls tell her that all will be explained in the second part of the play. They await the arrival of Jan Francisci, who will come in the second part. He was a revivalist who has been asleep in the grave for over 107 years. Francisci was a lawyer who helped Jozef Hurban draft a

nation program, *Ziadești slovenskeho naroda* or *The Demands of the Slovak Nation*. He led a sixteen-man delegation to Budapest and handed the memorandum to the president of the Diet, Kalman Tisza, at his home. He was a man who wanted equal rights and legal recognition for Slovak identity (Kirschbaum, *A History* 117).

The mayor is told that this is only the beginning of what the souls hope will bring about change. They ask Alena to close the first part by reading an epitaph for the living.

The fog creeps at the national cemetery  
We get lost for times inside it and ourselves  
Before we believed that in the footprints of the dead  
A mirror shines, which shouts from the past,  
Stole the pride, noise of our times  
Shouted loud  
Open your eyes  
Don't be stupid  
We're not decorations of the city, region, republic  
Read sense in our crosses  
Doubt, what you think  
Don't believe all you hear  
Don't trust only schoolbooks  
Stop here, wait, slow down.  
Think where from and where to.  
When the feet in the fog  
Hurrying bury in the mud

A man gives a sigh

Here we belong

Here our roots are

Here we belong

Here we're meant to be (Mankovecky)

This play wonderful brought to life several key figures of Slovak history, teaching as well as entertaining the audience. The relationships between the ghosts are crucial to how the story moves forward. The way they interact with each other and their personalities begin to appear, show what can happen when people are exposed to each other for long periods of time. The characters knew each other. They knew what could be said to irritate the other. They also knew what could be said to unite the group as seen when Miloslav rallies the group to visit the city council. The hint of mistrust comes against the Hungarians as Miloslav makes remarks about how to handle Hungarians. Superstition can be found as the mayor speaks of hearing voices in the cemetery. The idea that the voices beyond the grave could be reaching out to her is one that matches the traditional beliefs of respecting the dead while visiting the cemetery. She also wonders if she is dreaming at the end of the play, taking the presence of the historical figures as a much-needed sign to handle the highway situation differently. There is a slight level of resignation that is seen with Jan Francisci's refusal to appear and with Janko Kral's decision to not attend the city council meeting but to drink instead. Francisci and Kral have left the work of change in the hands of others. This play repeatedly cries for the audience and the mayor to remember the past. The souls sing the refrain of the theme song several times throughout the play, asking to be remembered even in death.

## Sedem dni do pohrebu / Seven Days to the Funeral

*Sedem dni do pohrebu* was performed at ten o'clock at night, after a full day of the festival—a day that included [www.narodnycintorin.sk](http://www.narodnycintorin.sk). Both shows featured Dano Heriban in leading roles—in *National Cemetery*, he played Janko Kral and in this play he was Jan Rozner. The style of the play is extremely somber and slow, which music to match, but the words and the story were fascinating. *Sedem dni do pohrebu* was performed in Slovak with English subtitles. The Theatre Institute only had a copy of the subtitles to be used for research. Like Rozner's book, an English copy of the play is not yet available.

This play was first produced by the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin which “regularly stages dramatizations of original Slovak works while searching for topics that would portray our past in an idiosyncratic manner” (Feherova). This play is based on the autobiographical novel of the same name. Written by Jan Rozner and published thirty years afterwards, *Sedem dni do pohrebu* the book became the 2009 Book of the Year in Slovakia. Jan Rozner was a journalist, translator, and theatre critic. His wife Zora Jesenka was one of the best translators of English, German, French, and Russian literature for the Slovak people (Feherova).

“The novel introduces a topic that will never cease to be disturbing—it tackles the fairly recent period of Slovak history which has not yet been confronted critically” (Feherova). It takes place over the course of seven days at the end of 1972 and reflects back over the first three years of the Soviet occupation. “An estimated half million people were removed from official positions, and thousands emigrated” (Cravens 18).

What helps to adapt the novel into a play is that Zora is a part of Jan's mind. Quite often in the play, she would sit on the side, watching Jan and letting the circle of his thoughts bounce between the two of them as if she were the vocalization and “interpreter of his mind” (Feherova).

The set is also simple with clean lines so that the focus is on the words more so than any spectacular distraction.



*Figure 6. Dano Heriban as Jan Rozner*

Act One is intimate. It focuses on his relationship with Zora, what it was like for him to lose her. “It allows a deep insight into the privacy, life and philosophy of the two partners shaped by the day and age in which they lived their lives” (Feherova). The play starts with Zora describing Jan’s routine of eating and shouting at the can of food out of frustration with life. He receives a call that Zora died and goes to the hospital with a cousin. “Her face was unchanged, only her mouth was wide open. As if she wanted to shout” (Rozner). He knows that his life has been forever changed for it will be filled with silence instead.

There is a quick flash to New Year’s Eve 1970, when Zora told Jan that life no longer had any meaning. Though her work had been taken for her, the loss of her niece was even greater. Zora said she was done with this life. All of this comes back to Jan’s mind as he stares at Zora’s hospital bed.

His family members and friends start to question whether or not he will put out a public death notice. To which Jan responds, “I will not call anyone. This country doesn’t consider my wife a personality. She mustn’t exist for the public. Her name was wiped out; the newspaper won’t take it” (Rozner). All of the library records that had either of their names on it had been removed.

Through a section of these opening scenes there is a refrain said after a certain amount of talking. “How nice, when someone holds your hand” (Rozner). This phrase exemplifies the intimacy between Jan and Zora, a bond not completely broken by her death.

When Jan finally decides to give a public notice, he tells his family and friends that he wanted to use a quote from *Hamlet* that they had translated together. In it, Hamlet refers to people watching as he dies but how he does not have enough time to say everything that should be said. Jan feels that Zora died the same way, wanting to say more but shut up by death too early.

Later Jan talks about the safety he felt at the theatre. There was no oppressive sense of being watched. He could feel so safe there that he began to believe that the “watching eyes” were gone, but Zora’s voice reminds him that they are not.

As Jan begins to plan things for the funeral, he realizes that Zora had 140000 crowns saved. He knew he would be questioned about it. Their work had been taken from them. Plays they had translated together were forbidden and would eventually be either copied or translated by someone else. All they had done had been erased so that they could be forgotten.

Zora had been imprisoned alongside of Husak years before he became a political giant. In the spring of 1968, Husak stopped being polite to her because he wanted to advance his career, which was not possible with Zora in his life. She was too outspoken about what was going wrong with the government. He showed up at one of her debates only to make sure that no one spoke with her afterwards.

Jan wanted the funeral to take place as quickly as possible and for Zora to be buried at her family’s plot in Martin, but the manager told him that he would have to wait seven days so

that the Christmas holidays would be over. She was scheduled to be buried on Thursday, December 27, 1972.

Jan went about preparing a death mask for Zora and drinking. His conversations with other relatives were cold and lacked the warmth that his relationship with Zora had. Unfortunately, for a brief moment, that came into question when he found out Zora had a dream about her death but had told the cousin and not him. In the dream, Zora saw her family that had passed away. They told her that she would join them soon. She did not want to leave Jan behind, but the ghosts told her that he was to follow shortly after her death. The fact that she felt he would be with her soon allowed her to be at peace with death. She died only a few days later. Jan had experienced a similar situation with his parents, where his mother had a dream about his father's death two weeks before it happened.

Zora worked for two different newspapers, losing the second job after five years because she was not a party member would rant about the lack of individual opinion and creativity in a paper that was starting to be controlled by the government. She hated how the Jews were being portrayed as people who wanted to murder God and how the push for Moscow and Stalin was growing in importance. She had no fear about speaking her opinions. She chose to stay while her friend Mnacko—who believed likewise—emigrated.

Her third job was dramaturge at the Slovak National Theatre. She preferred non-Eastern European plays, anything that avoided a socialist culture. So she looked to works in Brazil or plays by Bulgakov, Miller, and Shakespeare. Her views did not let her stay at the theatre either. Her last job before becoming a translator only was to work at the Scientific Institute at the Slovak Academy of Sciences for eleven years. She never quieted her views, so a discarded scientist and journalist who was a friend of hers asked what she would do when the school

finally fired her as well. She said she would translate. During the last four years of her life, many contracts for translations were cancelled.

Jan and Zora did not leave the country when others did. They believed that they could make a change. “Intellectuals think that people are like little David and he can conquer Goliath, whenever he wants” (Rozner). The government did not lock them up or send them away like they did others, instead Jan and Zora were wiped out of the records, making them non-existent. Yet they still stayed because they hoped to save some part of their country.

Jan had to make difficult decisions in regards to the funeral. Who would speak and what music could he play? All of these were discussed with Zora as she once again sat on the side of the stage and became a part of his mind. As he plans, he writes out a list of all the works Zora had translated for Slovakia: a useless Bulgarian book, three French novels, many Russian classics, Lermontov—the greatest Russian romantic poet, three Dostoyevsky novels, and *Quietly Flows the Don* by Sholokhov which was the book that brought Jan and Zora together in a heated debate that ended up with their marriage six months later. She had translated over 20,000 pages. All of which were banned.

The first time the audience has the sense of the real danger Jan is faces is when he is attacked on his way home from asking a professor to speak at the funeral.

Act Two is open to the watchful eyes of six coated men who stand on stage throughout the whole act. There is a break in the intimacy due to the political fears that are manifested. In this act, both the younger Jan and the older Jan are seen. They flip places in scenes as if the seven days of waiting and the fear are what age him. The coated men take the time to hand out fliers to the audience. Each flier said in Slovak and English that Zora’s funeral “does not comply with the ideas of the party and is not in the public interest” (Rozner). Before the funeral can take

place, Jan is interrogated. The government wanted to know each detail to the ceremony, including the reasoning behind the people who were chosen to speak and the music that was chosen. When the time finally comes for the funeral, the funeral home ends up filled with men in black coats. We find out after the funeral speakers have all spoken and left, that the professor who spoke had been stopped by the coated men. They wanted a copy of his speech, and he would not give them one. “A few weeks after the funeral, I heard Doctor Felix had to leave the university for the second time for being at the funeral” (Rozner).



*Figure 7. Zora and old Jan sit at her Funeral*

Rozner left Slovakia after the funeral. He wanted to go to a place where he would no longer be a stranger. It was in Stuttgart, Germany where he started to pen his story. “It is important to finish writing...For my own good feeling, I need to finish it—to do, at least once, something worthwhile”

(Rozner). The play ends with that statement as six men still stand in a straight row upstage. All throughout the applause the six coated men stand still, leaving the audience with a sense of unease.

“The production is comprehensible in all aspects and easy to navigate...even for those who are not familiar with the historical context. Besides, there are sufficient hints and one is left wishing to do more research and studies later...It is a play that introduces an important issue. It is a subjective statement about the beginning of the so-called normalization process, a statement that resonates with relentless

intensity. Not because it would present a protest, opposition or struggle, but because it is so resigned. It conveys hopelessness” (Feherova).

The connection to every one of the five cultural aspects chosen for this paper are most richly found in this piece. The intensity of the relationship between Jan and Zora, the mistrust of all those in authority and many outside of authority, the superstitious beliefs of dreams and the symbols used, the resignation and hopelessness conveyed by Jan, and the playwright’s beautiful job of bringing up the past so that the future of the country could be different were all intricately woven throughout the play to create a significant tapestry of theatre and culture.

## **Conclusion**

“The history of theatre in the Czech and Slovak lands is like that of no other nation” (Cravens 123). Besides electing a dissident playwright whose works had been banned as the first president of their nation after the fall of communism, their connection to theatre went far beyond what was on stage. Playwrights and puppeteers traveled throughout country trying to raise awareness and national consciousness during the many years of oppression. But things changed after 1989. The funding for the major theatre houses diminished. “The existing network of theaters transferred from the national to the local authorities” (Cravens 132). Private theatre companies began to produce plays that had been banned and create new pieces that touched upon topics that were once taboo. “On the whole, Czech and Slovak literature is still trapped in a time of transition, as writers try to feel out their newly found freedom” (Cravens 103). This is why organizations like Divadelny ustav do Bratislave, the Theatre Institute of Bratislava, is so important. Not only is theatre history being preserved for the future but aspects of the Slovak culture are being captured and brought to the stage for the world to see and experience.

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