

BOOK REVIEW

Laslavíková Jana, (2020). *Mestské divadlo v Prešporuku na sklonku 19. storočia. Medzi provinciou a metropolou*. [The Municipal Theater in Pressburg in the Late Nineteenth Century. Between Province and Metropolis]. Bratislava: Music Centre – Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. ISBN: 978-80-89427-47-5

Reviewed by **Štefan GAUČIK***

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Bratislava¹ has been an important research topic in Slovak and Hungarian historiography for a long time. Numerous Slovak studies and monographs rely on in-depth source research and focus also on the little researched areas of the social, economic, and cultural history of this “former coronation town” or, using another topos from the period of dualism, “the second town of Hungary.” We may rightly claim that we encounter diverse, sometimes even refreshing, approaches that rely mostly on German, to a lesser extent Hungarian, archival documents, forgotten graphic materials, and museum objects in public collections.

The selected topics and published outcomes were definitely important because they relied on primary archival research and encompassed social history, the history of mentalities, economic history, heritage preservation, interethnic relations, the citizenry, and the public collections that hold the tangible cultural heritage of the town. However, several research areas remained incomplete, including research on nineteenth-century theater and musical culture, the history of their institutional background, the socio-historical aspects of the operations of the Municipal Theater of Pressburg, and the careers and professional profiles of the prominent representatives of its theatrical life. Unfortunately, another important aspect has also appeared only peripherally in Slovak approaches: the placement of the civic existence into Central European contexts and the exciting sphere of cultural transfers.

Specific forgotten topics are always personalized and require a well-prepared scholar. In my opinion, this does apply to the author of the reviewed book, Jana Laslavíková, a researcher at the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. She has been indefatigably investigating the pre-1918 history of the Municipal Theater in Pressburg for many years. She has coordinated several Slovak and foreign programmes of theater history and has been awarded scholarship funding to work in Austrian research institutes.

* Corresponding author. E-mail: stefan.gaucik@gmail.com

¹In this text, Pressburg is used as the name of the town in historical contexts and Bratislava in its contemporary equivalent.

The structure of the monograph is clear and comprehensible. The Preface and the Introduction are followed by the first thematic unit that focuses on the social “embeddedness” of the theater, the history of its construction, and the idea, the designs, and the circumstances of the erection of its new building. The second unit opens up a new perspective: readers get a glimpse of the internal, day-to-day operations of the theater with meticulous analyses of the tasks of the director and the “triangle” of the ensemble, the repertoire, and the audience that exists in mutual interactions. The author devotes special attention to the reactions of the local German and Hungarian press. The backbone of the volume consists of the lives and careers of two high-profile theater directors, Max Kmentt and Emanuel Raul. The book ends with a summary, a list of archival sources, bibliography, résumés in English and German, an index, and a rich, colorful graphic appendix. The latter contains a list of voluminous scenic designs.

The typologically well-structured source materials, which form a solid base of the book, should be discussed separately. Naturally, in certain aspects, the fragmentariness of the sources had a major effect on the comprehensive elucidation of some of the topics (mainly the lives of the actresses who gave up their careers prematurely for various reasons or stepped back due to their deteriorated social situation), but the author was able to reconstruct the roles of the actresses from the activities of the directors. More sources, mainly German theatrical almanacs, were available about the male actors, and she also used these in an excellent way for the portrayals of Kmentt and Raul.

The book relies on extensive archival research of Slovak, Hungarian, Austrian, and Polish documents of theater history. The other substantial and, at the same time, rewarding source material consists of the contemporaneous, mainly German-language, press of Pressburg. This contains important news and data about the play days of the theater, the plans of the directors, the careers of the actors, and the guest performances from Vienna and Budapest, all of which are difficult to trace elsewhere. Since the documents (minutes, lease agreements, safety, and fire safety measures) of the municipal theater committee survived only fragmentarily, it proved to be a good decision to consult the press. The author also systematically utilizes a little-used group of sources in Slovak research on theater history, namely theater posters. She may also be the first researcher to include in Slovak discourse on theater history the “Pressburger,” German-language, and partly the Hungarian-language, theater historical evaluations and critiques of the period. In addition, Laslavíková conducted research on the invaluable Batka Collection from Bratislava and on the materials of the Theater Museum in Vienna, as well as in Bratislava and Viennese archives of photographs, designs, and drawings. All these sources not only made the circumstances of the establishment, the driving forces, and the operations of the Municipal Theater of Pressburg more nuanced and more accurate, but the use of some of them as images enhanced the attractive quality of the book, too.

Through the works of the design architects (Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Gottfried Helmer), Laslavíková introduces a broader Central European horizon, integrating also the achievements of German and Austrian theater history. She establishes that the nineteenth century, which was a great period of the bourgeoisie and of socio-economic modernization, did not differ from previous traditions with respect to cultural history, because the new bourgeois elite returned to earlier cultural models, and this manifested itself in the diverse – mainly architectural and, consequently, theater-architectural – forms of historicism, too. A peculiar duality can be discerned: on the one hand, progress, the development of civilization, and “the highest law,” whereas, on the other hand, a certain “return” can be seen.



The author analyses the social and cultural life of Pressburg in the latter half of the nineteenth century in detail, and especially the associations (e.g. the Kirchenmusikverein) and the persons (Archduke Friedrich and his wife Isabella from among the members of the House of Habsburg, also the Pálffys, the Esterházy, the Batthyány, the Erdődys, and the Grassalkoviches as representatives of the Hungarian nobility) that shaped its musical and theatrical life. She devotes attention to the intriguing set of multiple (German-Hungarian) identities, the loyalty of the Pressburger Germans, and the components of their patriotism. She points out the radiating power of Vienna and how its cultural models were followed and imitated by the bourgeoisie in Pressburg even in theatrical life. She views the 1886 opening of the Municipal Theater of Pressburg as a milestone, a major event that created a community and shaped identity. It was a sign of the loyalty of the Pressburger Germans (Deutschungarn) to Hungary and a building block of their local (urban) identity. At the same time, members of the bourgeoisie felt a certain comfort because the new theater was “theirs” and it was the fruit of their communal cooperation. A new demand was also voiced: to grasp the opportunity to make it a theater that operated on the level of the capital, for which theater directors with a clear concept were needed.

The local autonomous cultural concept, however, was soon confronted with the cultural policy plans of the Hungarian nation state (one of whose mouthpieces was the Hungarian State Theater Association) and with the efforts to hungarianize Pressburg, communicated most vigorously by the Toldy Kör association and the local Association of Hungarian Theater Patrons. The need for theater shows in Hungarian was already formulated in 1886, but it remained problematic for a long time due to the lack of large numbers of Hungarian theater-goers and a lower standard. All in all, shows were held in two languages from 1886. This was made possible by an “exchange agreement” with Temesvár, which could be considered a relatively well-functioning, and not even unique, model until 1899. In Pressburg, the more favorable winter months went to the German theater and the rest to its Hungarian counterpart.

Laslaviková examines a previously completely unnoticed aspect, the appearance of the (ethnic) cultural policy of the government in theatrical matters. This is a novelty in Slovak, and maybe even in Hungarian, historical writings on the theater. In Pressburg, the Hungarian directors were recommended by the government, while the appointment of the German director, tendered by the town and selected by the theater committee, depended on governmental approval.

The third and fourth chapters, which analyse the Pressburg theatrical careers and achievements of two directors, Kmentt and Raul, form the focus of the book. Max Kmentt, who may have been born in Pressburg County, headed the theater company from 1886 to 1890. He already had ties with Pressburg from 1876 when he worked there as an actor and subsequently led a theater company there together with Heinrich Bohrmann, focusing on “light” genres. He had significant theatrical connections in Vienna and, in Pressburg, he also managed to build a network of Hungarian contacts quickly. His name already appeared as a possible candidate for the post of director in 1885, before the construction of the theater. Kmentt turned out to have been the right choice: he was a Hungarian citizen on closely familiar terms with Hungarian theater professionals, so the government could not raise any objections to his appointment. He was contracted for holding German and Hungarian shows in Pressburg and Temesvár, but, in 1888, it became obvious that the Hungarian theater shows faced difficulties with quality and attendances (these could be partly rectified only under the directorship of Ignác Krecsányi). Kmentt did his best to raise the standard of the Pressburg theater. He contracted talented young



actors, invited Viennese and Budapest companies, and tried to increase the number of opera performances.

The nine-year directorship of Emanuel Raul, originally called Friedmann, of Moravian origin, had a completely different character. His term coincided with the last prominent years of German theater up to 1899. He was popular among the German bourgeoisie and the town management, and also had good relations with Johann Batka, the most influential local theater critic. The book introduces the most prominent personalities and the repertoire of his company. The author points out the background to the stage adaptations and audience reactions, too. It was during his years, namely in 1892, that the first serious effort was made to promote Hungarian theater. The proposal of the Toldy Kör association, also supported by some members of the municipal council, was not only directed at securing the autumn-winter season, but also at contracting a director who would give priority to Hungarian theater. Raul, however, enjoyed a professional advantage, as he was able to ensure continuous operatic performances and a colorful repertoire, by which he won even the Hungarian audiences of Pressburg; moreover, as a skillful manager, he raised the actors' salaries. It was not by chance, therefore, that he could continue his work. The 1895 memorandum of Toldy Kör, calling for support for Hungarian theater, failed, although its members lobbied hard and brought up as an argument the 1896 millennial celebrations, too. Their plan was promoted by the Hungarian State Theater Association in vain; nothing changed, and they received heavy criticism even from the local German press. The German bourgeoisie attended the Hungarian shows out of loyalty, whereas the members of Toldy Kör could hardly be seen there. The standpoints of rejectors viewed the Hungarian theater initiative as a camouflage for scoring points in politics. However, by 1898, a new situation occurred in the municipal politics of Pressburg and Temesvár. The management of both towns began to favor Hungarian theater, whose alpha and omega consisted of the promotion of hungarianization, at least outwardly, and of gaining a subvention from the state to ease the burden on the municipal budget. Although the memorandum of October 27, 1898 of the Toldy Kör and the Pozsonyi Kaszinó about the promotion of Hungarian theater in Pressburg was submitted to the government and was even acknowledged by it, nothing moved forward. The actual change was only brought about by a new director. Since Raul did not apply for the German theater tender, and as Krecsányi did not apply for the Hungarian one, the tender was won by Iván Relle (1861–1914), a native of Győr, who had been leading the Hungarian theater in Pressburg from 1897. His “multilingual” concept, built on the joint management of the German and Hungarian theater company and on the modernization of the Aréna (the summer theater) of Pressburg, was acceptable for the Hungarian elite of Pressburg, too. This, however, is another story, which Laslavíková may write in the future.

Laslavíková is fact-oriented, and it may be no exaggeration to say that she has “innovative” skills. She creates something new by integrating previously unknown facts and connections and, especially, by considering the concepts of the directorial activities. She is interested in the day-to-day operations of the theater and its management concepts and strategies, which were expressed and implemented by the theater companies. She dispels several clichés, mainly those that burdened the post-1920 discourse of Slovak historians (on a nation-centred view; a refutation of continuities, while one of the links was the genre of the operetta; on a continuity with the old theater which can indeed be demonstrated with respect to the repertoire). She does not avoid the issue of discontinuity, either, and points out the role of the “German-Hungarian theater” that shaped the town and its identity. In her opinion, the theater has been an indispensable part of



the cultural history of Bratislava. At the same time, she does not get stuck with this apparently appealing and general statement: she discusses the theater in its international context and examines the political, social, and cultural influences on it. The new municipal theater fulfilled several functions: it was the venue of ideas and personal stories, a communication tool of the German (and partly of the Hungarian) bourgeoisie, an expression of the image the town created of itself, the “cradle” of national (German, Hungarian) culture, and, in the late nineteenth century, the object of cultural political battles, too.

This is the first comprehensive Slovak treatment of the history of the Municipal Theater of Pressburg between 1886 and 1899. It elucidates several hitherto unknown informations and links, and, at the same time, it is a highly enjoyable read.

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