

The Role of the Director and His Impact on the Dramaturgy of the Slovak National Theatre in the Interwar Period

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Abstract. The most important cultural establishment in Slovakia, the Slovak National Theatre (SNT), was founded in 1920. The beginnings of this institution were extremely complicated because its activities were not managed by the state, but by a private company called the Cooperative of the Slovak National Theatre. This joint company was founded in 1919 and consisted of representatives of the then governing bodies, the Slovak intelligentsia, and representatives of banks and other associations. In the first two seasons, the Cooperative was dealing with operation issues, mostly with obtaining the financial resources needed. The complete artistic program was in the hands of the first director of the SNT, Bedřich Jeřábek (1920–1922). During this period, however, we cannot talk about the profiling of the dramaturgy of opera and operetta on the SNT stage. This period was followed by that of directors and private entrepreneurs Oskar Nedbal (1923–1930) and Antonín Drašar (1931–1938), who due to the financial incompetence of the Cooperative, took the management of the SNT fully into their own hands. Both directors, together with the heads of the opera ensembles, preferred modern and experimental dramaturgy, including the latest works of art. Whereas Drašar used a pragmatic approach to resolving the theatre's financial problems, for Nedbal caused the loss of his function and life.

This study deals with the comparison of the work and theatre management of individual directors in the interwar period, with an emphasis on opera and operetta dramaturgy.

Keywords: Slovak National Theatre, Cooperative of the Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, opera, operetta, director

Introduction

The Slovak National Theatre (SNT) belongs to the most important cultural institutions in the country. Over its more than 100-year activity, the SNT has gone through several periods, influenced by numerous factors, especially political, social, and financial. In this sense, one of the most complicated was the interwar period, covering the years from the establishment of the institution in 1920 to its nationalization

in 1938.¹ First, it should be noted that the SNT was a private institution rather than a state-subsidized organization the way it is today. During its integration into Austria–Hungary, Slovakia did not have the conditions to develop its own national theatre on a professional basis. But everything changed after the Great War. In 1918, following the dissolution of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, the territory of Slovakia became part of a new country, which was again a multi-ethnic state, with Czechs and Slovaks as constituent peoples.

The idea of establishing a representative national theatre arose as early as May 1918, when the celebrations of the fiftieth jubilee of laying the foundation stone of the National Theatre in Prague were taking place, a ceremony attended by a Slovak delegation.² However, the establishment of the SNT could be considered the will of Slovak politicians more than a manifestation of some inner artistic need. For this reason, the SNT was neither Slovak nor national in its origins. One crucial feature is that its operations were not managed by the state but by a private joint venture company called the Cooperative of the Slovak National Theatre. It was established in November 1919 from representatives of the then governing bodies (the first chair of the Cooperative was the Minister with full powers for governing Slovakia Dr. Vavro Šrobár³), the Slovak intelligentsia, and representatives of other associations and institutions. The associate membership base was expanded by the purchase of shares offered to private companies, banks, factories, and several noble citizens.⁴ The Cooperative was subsequently granted a concession by the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment in Prague for professional theatrical activity in the entire country, although most of its committee members had never had anything to do with theatrical operations.

A major initial problem was that although Bratislava became the capital of Slovakia, the proportion of Slovaks in the city's population was minimal at the time. From the times of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, the population of the city had been made up mainly of Germans, followed by Hungarians, and finally Slovaks (Table 1).⁵

After 1918, Slovaks from other parts of the country gradually came here for work, and the population of the new state increased also by the arrival of Czechs. One of the priorities of the new Czechoslovak government was to acquire the territory of the city of Pozsony/Pressburg/Prešporok, which became the capital of Slovakia in 1919. This

1 From 1 November 1938, the SNT was operated by the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment of the Slovak state. After World War II, on 3 July 1945 it became a state entity by the Regulation of the Slovak National Council.

2 Podmaková, "Známe-neznáme začiatky Slovenského národného divadla," 54.

3 Maťašík, "Vavro Šrobár a vznik Slovenského národného divadla," 338–56.

4 Bokes, "Družstvo Slovenského národného divadla," 236–58.

5 Francová, "Obyvatelia – etnická, sociálna a konfesijná skladba," 22.

happened regardless of its inhabitants' preferences, who did not expect to become part of the new state and preferred to stay in Hungary or join Austria.⁶ The name was later changed to Bratislava and, besides its favorable location, one of the main reasons for choosing it as the capital was that there were enough buildings for the newly emerging institutions to move into. It was decided that the new national theatre would be resident and operate in a neo-renaissance building that had already served as a municipal theatre from 1886.⁷ Here, the SNT began its activities on March 1, 1920.

Table 1 According to annual censuses and the percentages.

Year	Total	Slovaks	Germans	Hungarians	Other
1850	42,238	17.9%	74.6%	7.4%	–
1880	48,006	15.6%	65.5%	15.6%	3.1%
1890	52,411	16.6%	59.9%	19.9%	3.5%
1900	61,537	16.2%	50.4%	30.5%	2.8%
1910	78,223	14.9%	41.9%	40.5%	2.6%

The main political maneuver was to eliminate the German and Hungarian languages and to replace them with Slovak culture. As the original inhabitants of the city perceived their birthplace as a natural multilingual organism, this governmental interference was unthinkable for them, and as a result they boycotted the new theatre. Their needs were fulfilled mainly by performances of Hungarian and German theatre companies. In the municipal theatre, the SNT and the Hungarian and German troupes each performed for four months of a season.⁸ During the Hungarian and German periods, the SNT had to move to Košice at the other end of the country, where they operated in accordance with the theatrical concession.⁹

Jeřábek's directorship

Slovak amateur theatre, no matter how developed and branched it was territorially, could not become the basis of professional theatre. Although many amateur ensembles reached a high artistic level,¹⁰ the career of a professional artist met with

6 Provazník, "Dejiny Bratislavy od roku 1918–1945," 328–34.

7 For theatrical practice in nineteenth-century Pressburg, see Laslavíková, *Mestské divadlo v Prešporku na sklonku 19. storočia*, 79–128.

8 Cesnaková-Michalcová, *Premeny divadla: inonárodné divadlá na Slovensku do roku 1918*, 111–112.

9 The alternation of different companies in the same theatre was also typical of local theatrical practice even before 1918.

10 Among the most prolific ensembles, there was the choral and theatrical association called Slovenský spevokol [the Slovak Choir], established in 1872 in Martin, northern Slovakia.

misunderstanding and moral prejudice.¹¹ In addition, they were lacking other necessary prerequisites, such as a residential building, organizational capacity, or a balanced repertoire (caused mainly by the lack of original plays and operas). Therefore, the Cooperative decided to engage and commission the East Bohemian Theatre Company, headed by director and private entrepreneur Bedřich Jeřábek.¹² His theatre company consisting of three ensembles for drama, opera, and operetta, arrived in Slovakia with a complete repertoire. The company employed 234 people: there were 20 opera and 30 drama soloists, a choir of 30 singers, four members in the ballet group, and 49 musicians in the orchestra. In addition, several technicians, and an administrative and other auxiliary staff helped their work.

The main objective at this stage was to attract a wider circle of audience. For this purpose, operas and operettas were most suitable, because musical theatre had a long tradition in the city.¹³ Although the repertoire was naturally performed in Czech, for the smaller language barrier than in the case of prose, German and Hungarian inhabitants began to gradually attend the shows, even though tickets cost 30 per cent more compared to those of foreign companies.

In the opening season, Jeřábek premièred 22 operas and 20 operettas in total, which is not a negligible number in the four months when the theatre was running.¹⁴ Although not all of the pieces had an exceptionally high artistic value, but they were all based on current trends in the Czech cities where Jeřábek had previously been active. For this reason, he struggled with the objections voiced by representatives of the Slovak national life, pointing to the absence of the Slovak language on stage as well as to the inappropriate presence of operettas in the national theatre's repertoire.¹⁵ Besides works by Czech authors, such as *Maharadžův miláček* [The Maharaja's Sweetheart] by the lesser known composer Emilian Starý, or *Polenblut* [Polish Blood] by Oskar Nedbal, among others, they staged Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* [Orpheus in the Underworld], *Daphnis et Chloé* [Daphnis and Chloe], Kálmán's *Die Csárdásfürstin* [Csárdás Princess] and *Ein Herbstmanöver* [Autumn Maneuvers], Strauss's *Tausend und eine Nacht* [Thousand and One Nights], and Fall's *Die Rose von Stambul* [Rose of Stambul].

One of the reasons for Jeřábek's appointment was that he owned the complete theatrical equipment (props, scenery, and wardrobe) for the operation of the

11 Bánová, "Repertoár slovenského ochotníckeho divadla v rokoch 1900–1914," 171.

12 Lajcha, *Dokumenty SND 1 (1920–1938)*, 7–25.

13 Laslavíková, "Opera a opereta v Prešporku na sklonku 19. storočia."

14 All the information about the premières and the repeats comes from the following publication: Blahová-Martišová and Jaborník, *Súpis repertoáru Slovenského národného divadla 1920–2010*, 15–259.

15 Bokesová, "O cestách vývoja operety v Bratislave," 238.

theatre. As was soon confirmed, he did not come to build a representative Slovak opera or drama theatre but only tried to keep the theatre running according to the contractual conditions. As the Cooperative was established as a private company, state financial support was partial. The budget of the SNT predicted relied on revenues, the sale of shares, and mainly subventions provided by the state, the county, and the city. In addition to wages, energy bills and rents, the entertainment tax paid to the municipality represented another significant expense.

Already after the opening season, Jeřábek pointed out that despite subsidies and various public contributions, the SNT did not manage to generate enough funds. During the next 1920–1921 season, the deficit was further increased by the Cooperative's decision to buy Jeřábek's complete equipment, contract most of his artists, and build a residential flat building.

From the 1921–1922 season, in this unstable situation, the SNT committee decided to divide the management of the theatre and engage Jeřábek only as the administrative director. The conductor Milan Zuna, on the other hand, was appointed artistic director of the opera ensemble. His three-year tenure is considered as the founding period of the SNT opera on its path to professionalization. He inherited a repertoire which could not change much, consisting of Czech opera represented by major works, such as Smetana's *Libuše*, *Hubička* [The Kiss], *Tajemství* [The Secret], *Dalibor*, *Braniboři v Čechách* [The Brandenburgers in Bohemia], *Prodaná nevěsta* [The Bartered Bride], Dvořák's *Čert a Káča* [The Devil and Kate], *Rusalka*, and *Jakobín* [The Jacobin], and Fibich's *Šárka*, along with French and Italian operas, including Halévy's *La Juive* [The Jewess], Bizet's *Carmen*, Massenet's *Werther*, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Puccini's *La bohème*, and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* [Clowns]. Nevertheless, despite the Cooperation's demands, he significantly reduced the number of premieres, focusing more on quality and the artistic criteria of individual performances.¹⁶ Works such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugen Onegin* were only occasionally staged, but Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Janáček's *Káťa Kabanová* can be considered valuable dramaturgical contributions during his directorship.

Through Šrobár's negotiations, the 1920–1921 season was finally extended to six months in favour of the SNT. To maintain this trend, there were attempts to buy the theatre building from the city into state ownership, which, however, failed.¹⁷ In September 1921, Vavro Šrobár was appointed as minister of education, and the chair of the Cooperative remained vacant. The full responsibility thus stayed in the hands of deputy vice chairs. On the other hand, Šrobár's appointment improved the acquisition and the amount of state subventions on which the entire operation of the

16 Földváriová, "Hlavné umelecké projekty v opere SND do roku 1939," 23.

17 Maťašík, *Vznik a prvé roky Slovenského národného divadla*, 43.

SNT still depended. The position of the SNT in the theatre building was constantly improving and from the 1921–1922 season it was extended from six to eight months at its disposal. Nevertheless, the situation in the drama section was still very poor. Most of the repertoire was played in Czech, because of a shortage of Slovak plays, translations, and actors. The worst aspect was attendance, which was still very low.

At Jeřábek's initiative, the second drama ensemble was formed with better promotion, education, and the consolidation of national awareness in the Slovak countryside in mind, as well as with the purpose of hiring potential new actors from the ranks of amateurs. Several talented persons, who later formed the professional core of the SNT drama ensemble,¹⁸ appeared for the auditions. Thus, in August 1921, the Rural Drama Company of the SNT was established. The activity of this touring ensemble, generally known as *Marška* (according to the German word *Marschkompanie*), consisting of almost 20 members did not last long: after more than 250 performances in Slovak towns and villages, its mission ended in June 1922. There were several reasons for that, ranging from the poor performance of some actors to the absence of their own facilities, but mainly due to the lack of finances.

The situation in the SNT was getting worse and after persistent financial problems and several conflicts with the Cooperative, at the end of April 1922 Jeřábek was forced to leave the theatre for good. Unfortunately, despite his entrepreneur experience, it seems that he was unable to manage the theatre at the level required. In addition, he failed to understand its main mission. Representatives of the Cooperation were also naïve to think that the Slovak National Theatre would arise from the Czech ensemble.

Nedbal's directorship

After Jeřábek's departure, the head of the drama ensemble Josef Hurt followed him as director for the 1922–1923 season, but this arrangement was only temporary. With the decrease of subventions (caused mainly by the departure of Vavro Šrobár from the post of minister of education), the Cooperative came under strong pressure. The solution was to appoint a new director, which the Cooperative did by inviting Oskar Nedbal. As long as the Cooperative was only a representative control body, the complete management of the SNT was passed into the hands of this prominent Czech composer, conductor, and private entrepreneur.¹⁹ When Nedbal took up the post in August 1923, he undertook to fulfil one main task: to Slovakize the theatre to the

18 The actors who emerged from these casting auditions were e.g., Ján Borodáč, Oľga Országhová, Jozef Kello, Andrej Bagar, and others.

19 Lajcha, *Dokumenty SND 1 (1920–1938)*, 40–99.

largest possible extent, while preserving a multi-ethnic Bratislava audience by introducing ballets to replace the unsuitable operettas, which due to public invectives had started to slowly disappear from the repertoire already under Jeřábek's directorship.

However, the genre of the operetta did not disappear completely from the repertoire, but unlike his predecessor, Nedbal selected only high quality, well-trying works. An operetta composer himself, he did his best to keep the genre on the SNT stage. From his 1923 appointment onward, he focused on staging classical operettas, which were artistically fully effective and followed the concept of operas, and which, consequently, required opera singers and a large symphonic orchestra. From among the tried-and-true works, including Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* [The Bat] and *Der Zigeunerbaron* [Gypsy Baron], Hervé's *Mamzelle Nitouche*, Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* [Orpheus in the Underworld], and Schubert-Bert's *Das Dreimäderlhaus* [House of the Three Girls]. Nedbal's own works, including *Polenblut* [Polish Blood] and *Die Winzerbraut* [The Vineyard Bride], and two fashionable revue operettas, Zdeněk Folprecht's *Z Prešporka do Bratislavy* [From Pressburg to Bratislava] and Josef Odcházal's *Z Bratislavy do Šanghaja* [From Bratislava to Shanghai], also featured in the repertoire. The shows were always executed at high artistic standards, which followed from Nedbal's circumspection in choosing the conductors and the singers. In choreography and direction, the ballet master Achille Viscusi also participated in staging operettas.²⁰ Despite all the positive developments, however, under Nedbal's directorship, no more than three operetta premières and a maximum of 15 repeats took place in a year, although the agreement with the Cooperative was to have 15 opera premieres a year.

With the arrival of Oskar Nedbal, the successful era of Milan Zuna as the head of the opera ensemble came to an end. After his departure, his successors were Pavel Dedeček and Bedřich Holeček. However, Nedbal was still a decisive figure in the profiling of the opera ensemble. In addition to managing the theatre, he staged and conducted operas himself. Bratislava attracted him, and he felt the city's great potential. On the other hand, he was also aware of its potential and limitations in the field of dramaturgy. From the end of the nineteenth century, competing German and Hungarian theatre companies had performed mostly popular Italian, French, and German titles such as *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Carmen* or *Les contes d'Hoffmann* [The Tales of Hoffmann]. Wagner's operas occasionally appeared in the 1920s. Of the possible Czech titles, they were interested only in Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* [The Bartered Bride] and *Libuše*, Dvořák's *Rusalka*, and Janáček's *Jenůfa/Její pastorkyňa* [Jenůfa/Her Stepdaughter].

Although in the 1920s Slovaks and Czechs together already constituted almost half the city's population, because of their jobs they had practically no time for going to

20 Martišová-Blahová, *Slovenské národné divadlo 1920–1995*, 44.

the theatre and were not even interested in it. Moreover, the theatre remained a distant dream for most, which few could afford. In addition, most residents left the city for the weekends and travelled home to their families. In this situation, Nedbal as director realized that the Czechoslovak audience in itself would not maintain a theatrical operation, therefore he still had to focus on the German and Hungarian speaking citizens, who were not interested in drama, but regularly attended musical theatre. Under these complicated conditions, Nedbal tried to assert his artistic orientation in creating a truly modern operatic repertoire.²¹ He avoided conducting popular Italian and French operas, leaving them to other conductors in the theatre or to guest artists. He focused on presenting Czech operas at a high level and was the first to stage a complete cycle of Smetana's operas. Although the audience did not show much interest in some of the titles, critics enthusiastically praised the excellent quality of their performance and his suggestive and temperamental personal contribution.²²

In his next seasons, Nedbal moved from the Czech classics Smetana and Dvořák to contemporary composers, such as Josef Bohuslav Foerster's *Debora*, Karel Boleslav Jirák's *Apolonius z Tyany* [Apollonius of Tyana], and Nedbal's own single operatic work *Sedlák Jakub* [Jakub the Peasant] and Vítězslav Novák's fairytale opera *Lucerna* [The Lantern]. The opening of *Lucerna* took place in March 1928 under the lead of Nedbal and "was overall much more heartfelt in its mood and performances than the Prague one, which seemed cold by comparison." Therefore, the audience received it "with unprecedented enthusiasm."²³

After performing Wagner's romantic operas, including *Der fliegende Holländer* [The Flying Dutchman] and *Lohengrin*, Nedbal turned to the post-Wagnerian line of German music represented by works, such as Karl Goldmark's *Die Königin von Saba* [The Queen of Sheba] and Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* [The Knight of the Rose].

The introduction of Slovak opera on the SNT stage can be described as a key feature of the entire Nedbal era. This is marked by the milestone date of April 28, 1926, when *Kováč Wieland* [Wayland the Smith] by Ján Levoslav Bella had its debut. The opera in three acts on a German libretto by Oskar Schlemm, based on an original libretto draft by Richard Wagner, was composed during the 1880s and 1890s and the premiere took place with the personal participation of its 83-year-old author. Although it was originally written in German under the title *Wieland der Schmied*, the poet Vladimir Roy translated the libretto into Slovak. Nevertheless, the literary basis of the opera ensured that the performance did not escape the attention of

21 For the main sources of Nedbal's artistic activities in the SNT, see Földváriová, "Východiská bratislavskej dramaturgie Oskara Nedbala," 109–20.

22 Blahynka, "Oskar Nedbal a predpoklady modernej opernej dramaturgie v SND," 40.

23 Krúpková, "From Prague to Vienna via Bratislava," 171.

German reviewers, who rated it highly, thereby fulfilling Nedbal's goal of attracting German audiences to the theatre.²⁴ Two years later, on April 1, 1928, another Slovak piece entitled *Detvan* by Viliam Figuš-Bystrý opened under the lead of Oskar Nedbal.

As the director, Nedbal considered it necessary for the host artists to be active in the theatre, especially composers conducting their own works. At his invitation, Pietro Mascagni conducted his *Cavalleria rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* [Clowns] on February 20, 1925. At the rehearsal, after the ceremonial welcome, Mascagni said that he was honored to substitute for the famous artist and conductor Oskar Nedbal, whose great artistic overview was visible in the activities of the SNT opera scene, and Bratislava should be grateful that an artist of such qualities and such a resounding name was heading its theatre.²⁵ A similarly valuable event was the presence of Richard Strauss, who conducted his *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier* [The Knight of the Rose] here on January 9 and 11, 1929.

For Nedbal, it was also important to introduce the theatre abroad. During his tenure, the SNT opera ensemble made the first historical trip to Madrid and Barcelona (1924) and gave significant performances in Vienna (1925, 1929) and Prague (1925, 1930).²⁶ When performing abroad, Nedbal reaped great success, which ensured him respect from the German and Hungarian audiences in Bratislava. On the other hand, the trip to Spain tarnished his reputation in nationally oriented circles, who blamed him for his business intentions. He also preferred musical theatre to drama, which was another critical point in their eyes. It might seem that Nedbal was very popular and almost untouchable in Bratislava, but he also had a wide group of biased opponents. One of his main rivals was Dobroslav Orel, who, in addition to founding and heading the Department of Musicology at Comenius University, played an important role in the cultural development of the city.²⁷

When assuming his position, he was immediately faced with technical problems to solve, such as the modernization of the stage and the purchase of a circular horizon and lighting equipment. These adjustments were expensive, not to mention the cost of wages, accommodation, and travel, because the ensembles performed in Košice during the German and Hungarian periods in the municipal theatre. During the five seasons of his directorship, Nedbal faced similar financial problems as his predecessor Bedřich Jeřábek: despite the artistically valuable performances, at the end of almost every season the theatre was in the red.

24 Lengová, "Opera Kováč Wieland Jána Levoslava Bellu v ohlasoch kritiky," 31–47.

25 Anon., "Pietro Mascagni a náš divadelný orchester," 4.

26 Fisher, "Opera v Bratislave v rokoch 1920–1959," 165.

27 Janek, *Dobroslav Orel*, 26–36.

Jiřikovský's directorship

In 1928, Oskar Nedbal resigned as director and his financial responsibilities were taken over by Václav Jiřikovský.²⁸ However, Nedbal stayed at the opera as a conductor along with Zdeněk Folprecht and Josef Vincourek. As a conductor, he had a penchant for nineteenth century opera, but as a director, he made sure that contemporary works were included in the SNT opera repertoire.

From August 1928, at the invitation of his uncle, Karel Nedbal took over the post of head of the opera ensemble, which had become vacant after the 1927 departure of Bedřich Holeček. His ten-year tenure (1928–1938) at the SNT opera could be considered as the most remarkable period in its entire history.²⁹ Karel Nedbal brought to Bratislava his rich experience that he gained working for Czech theatres. He was open to current opera trends, which was a perfect match for his uncle's ideas and vision.

In this sense, the performance of Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* in 1928 was one of the first signs of the progressive tendencies that were fully realized by staging such contemporary works as Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (staged under the title *Russian Lady Macbeth*), or Zemlinsky's *Der Kreidekreis* [The Chalk Circle]. On the other hand, the classic opuses of Impressionism (Debussy, Ravel, and de Falla), Neoclassicism (Stravinsky and Hindemith), or the Viennese School (Schönberg and Berg), and their successors were completely ignored.³⁰ The opening nights of contemporary works were considered important social events often with the participation of the composer himself, and attended by large foreign delegations. The high quality of the performances, in addition to Nedbal's musical component, was ensured by the collaboration with the stage director Viktor Šulc and the visual artist František Tröster. They were based mainly on the idea of symbolic theatre at the expense of illustrating, using subtle light effects as a stage-creating element and a revolving stage. Operas by lesser known contemporary authors were also performed, for example *Il Dibuk* [The Dybbuk] by Lodovico Rocca, *Chirurgie* [The Surgery] by Pierre-Octave Ferroud, or *La drumul mare* [On the Highway] by the Romanian composer Constantin Nottara. Through these performances, Bratislava reached the metropolitan level of theatres in such cities as Vienna or Prague. Since no other Slovak operas were composed during the 1930s, the only choice Nedbal had was staging the cantata *Svätopluk* by Alexander Moyzes and renewed premieres of Bella's *Kováč Wieland* [Wayland the Smith] and Figuš-Bystrý's *Detvan*.

28 Lajcha, *Dokumenty SND 1 (1920–1938)*, 79–88.

29 Blaho, "Cesty k slovenskej opere," 293.

30 Mojžišová, "Súdobá operná tvorba v repertoári Slovenského národného divadla 1920–1938," 375.

In addition to the afore-mentioned popular pieces by Dvořák and Smetana, Nedbal regularly conducted other Czech operas by living authors of various generations, in particular Jaroslav Krička's *Hipolyta* [Hippolyta], Otakar Ostrčil's *Poupě* [The Bud], Rudolf Karel's *Smrt Kmotřička* [Godmother Death], Jaromír Weinberger's *Švanda dudák* [Schwanda the Bagpiper], and Josef Bohuslav Foerster's *Jessika* [Jessica]. Along with Janáček's *Příhody lišky Bystroušky* [The Cunning Little Vixen], *Káta Kabanová*, and *Z mrtvého domu* [From the House of the Dead], his *Jenůfa/Její pastorkyňa* [Jenůfa/Her Stepdaughter] had the most performances.

Despite Nedbal's personal dislike of verismo operas, the repertoire included Puccini's most popular works *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, *La bohème*, and *Turandot*, Verdi's musical dramas represented by *Simone Boccanegra*, *Falstaff*, and *Don Carlos*, as well as other Italian bel canto operas, such as Rossini's *William Tell* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* [The Barber of Seville]. After Wagner's *Das Rheingold* [The Rhinegold], *Tristan und Isolde* [Tristan and Isolde], and *Parsifal*, pieces by German composers such as Albert Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmermann* [Tsar and Carpenter], Herman Goetz's *Der Widerspänstigen Zähmung* [The Taming of the Shrew], Peter Cornelius's *Der Barbier von Bagdad* [The Barber of Baghdad], and of course Richard Strauss's *Elektra*, *Salome*, *Ariadne auf Naxos* [Ariadne on Naxos], and *Der Rosenkavalier* [The Knight of the Rose] were performed. Of the older authors, space was also given to Christoph Willibald Gluck and his *Orfeo ed Euridice* [Orpheus and Eurydice] and Ludwig van Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio*.

French opera was represented in all genres from *opéra comique* with Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, through *grand opéra* and Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* [Robert the Devil], Halévy's *La Juive* [The Jewess] to Massenet's *Thais*, Gounod's *Faust*, Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* [The Pearl Fishers] as examples of *opéra lyrique*. Russian opera was rarer but Mussorgsky's *The Fair at Sorochyntsi* was regularly on the program. Bedřich Smetana and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had a special place in Karel Nedbal's dramaturgy. Like his uncle, Karel Nedbal put on stage all of Smetana's operas during his activities at the SNT. In the case of Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte* [The Magic Flute], *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* [The Abduction from the Seraglio], *Le nozze di Figaro* [The Marriage of Figaro], *Così fan tutte* [All Women Do It], and *Don Giovanni* were staged one after the other. However, not all operas in this rich program attracted a full house and were economically successful. However, Nedbal enjoyed his uncle's strong support, and later also that of his successor.

Oskar Nedbal's second directorship

After a year of Jiříkovský heading the theatre, Oskar Nedbal returned to the position of economic director. During the 1929–1930 season, which turned out to be his last

one, a second stage, the so-called Folk Theatre was opened, whose task was to stage drama and operettas. The Folk Theatre did not make the desired profit and was closed by Nedbal's successor in the spring of 1931. Throughout his time in the theatre, Nedbal was fighting financial problems, and he did not succeed in the Slovakization of the theatre, either. For this reason, he was under constant fire. Although as a manager he did not do anything wrong and did not pursue any personal gain, which was confirmed by a financial audit as well, he could not put up with the pressure and probably took his own life by suicide on the Christmas Eve of 1930.

Drašar's directorship

After the sudden death of Oskar Nedbal, the Cooperation in agreement with Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment, commissioned Karel Nedbal with the management of the SNT. Although Nedbal was well acquainted with the artistic and economic situation in the theatre, his directorship was only temporary. After the 1930–1931 season, he was succeeded by an entrepreneur Antonín Drašar, who on behalf of the Cooperation, took over the complete management of the SNT based on a concession he received in August 1931.³¹ The Ministry assumed that Drašar, an entrepreneur with many years of experience, would be able to solve the long-term economic problems of the SNT, an area where the Cooperative had failed. The Slovak cultural sphere was not enthusiastic about this decision, because it was clear that the financial problems would be compensated for by interventions in the theatre's artistic direction. The rumours about Drašar's inability to manage the national representative institution were partially justified.

At this time, already ten months of the annual program in the municipal theatre building were given to the Slovaks, while the German and the Hungarian language minorities used it for one month each. Operetta had an exclusive position, outweighing both opera and drama. Despite previous objections about the unsuitability of this genre on the SNT stage from several nationalistically oriented critics and the cultural public, in terms of the number of premières and repeats, the time of Drašar's directorship was a golden age of the operetta in the entire interwar period.³² Unlike Nedbal, Drašar had a strong preference for operettas, which was witnessed by his previous activities in other Czech theatres. Immediately after his appointment, he engaged the operetta ensemble which he brought along from his previous place of work in Olomouc, and which was to replace Nedbal's ballet ensemble. The new director mostly preferred Berlin revue operettas, namely Ralph Benatzky and his *Adieu Mimi, Meine*

31 Lajcha, *Dokumenty SND I (1920–1938)*, 102–58.

32 Moyzes, "Opereta v prvej polovici sezóny 1933–34," 7.

Schwester und ich [My Sister and I], *Das kleine Café* [The Little Cafe], *Der König mit Regenschirm* [The King with the Umbrella], and *Im weissen Rössl* [The White Horse Inn], Jean Gilbert's *Die keusche Susanne* [Chaste Susanne], or Robert Stolz's *Pepina*. It is no secret that Drašar favored Hungarian operettas, for which he received lucrative royalties. Thus, titles like Nicholas Brodsky's *Szökik az asszony* [The Runaway Girl], *Az első tavasz* [The First Spring], *A kék lámpás* [The Blue Lantern], or Paul Abraham's *Die Blume von Hawaii* [The Flower of Hawaii], *Victoria und ihr Husar* [Victoria and her Hussar], *Ball im Savoy* [Ball at the Savoy] were also very frequently staged.

Of Viennese operettas, the repertoire included Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* [The Bat] and *Der Zigeunerbaron* [Gypsy Baron], Franz Lehár's works that had surprisingly been ignored by the previous directors, including *Paganini*, which was the first operetta ever staged in Slovak, *Giuditta*, *Frasquita*, *Der Zarewitsch* [The Tsarevich], *Die lustige Witwe* [The Merry Widow], *Der Graf von Luxemburg* [The Count of Luxembourg], *Das Land des Lächelns* [The Land of Smiles], Emmerich Kálmán's *Die Zirkusprinzessin* [Circus Princess], *Gräfin Mariza* [Countess Maritza], and Carl Millöcker's *Der Bettelstudent* [Beggar Student]. Of contemporary operettas, Rudolf Frimml's *Rose Marie* [Rose-Mary], *Ninon* [The Firefly], Jára Beneš's *Z pekla štěstí* [Dead Lucky], *Ztracená varta* [Godforsaken], and *U svatého Antoníčka* [At Saint Anthony] were staged. The first operettas by Slovak authors, such as Ján Móry's *Zimný románik* [Winter Story], *La Vallière*,³³ or Gejza Dusík's *Tisíc metrov lásky* [A Thousand Metres of Love], and *Keď rozkvitne máj* [When May Bursts into Blossom],³⁴ also appeared on the stage of the SNT.

Drašar's operettas project was well-planned and, as it soon turned out, his primary objective was not education or the establishment of a good ensemble with the prerequisites for continuous development, nor staging operettas in order to gain funds for running the SNT. Instead, he was interested in theatre entrepreneurship. This could be seen especially after his 1932 appointment as art advisor of the Modern Operetta in Prague, when the interactions between these two institutions became livelier, to the extent that they exchanged soloists and choir members, rehearsed the same repertoire, and shared equipment, especially the property of the SNT. These entrepreneurial activities could not escape the attention of Drašar's opponents and led to massive campaigns and multiple attacks against his person in newspapers and public protests. However, Drašar was a very different director from Oskar Nedbal: he was a hard-headed businessman and an adamant pragmatist, who did not lose perspective and withstood the enormous pressure he was under. Even though he made some concessions, they always served his interests, as in the case of Hungarian operettas gradually performed in Slovak translation.

33 Bárdiová, "Ján Móry a bratislavské inscenácie jeho operiet v prvej polovici 20. storočia," 117–40.

34 Ursínyová, *Cesty operety*, 68–70.

On the other hand, Drašar's activity had its advantages. For example, he divided the drama section into a separate Czech and Slovak ensemble. Because in his era it was typical that everybody, including dancers, musicians and conductors, had to perform in all genres, many young singers and actors were given the opportunity to start their artistic careers in the theatre, but they could also sing mainly operetta roles and occasionally in opera as well. In addition, mainly thanks to the profit gained from staging operettas, as it was previously said, Nedbal could implement an experimental dramaturgy, introducing contemporary and lesser known operas that were financially risky, and often turned out to be making a loss because of low attendance.

Košice and the Cooperative of the East Slovak National Theatre

The situation was similar in eastern Slovakia. Like in Bratislava, Košice, the second largest Slovak city with almost 45,000 predominantly Hungarian inhabitants, did not have the Czech-Slovak audience to ensure a full house in the city's theatre building throughout the season. It was initially shared between the Hungarian and German language theatre companies and the SNT, which opened its first 1920–1921 season in Košice in August 1920. The ensembles travelled to Košice for long-term stays, especially in the summer months, and the first opera the SNT staged in its premiere season was *Libuše* by Bedřich Smetana.

However, such a system of rotation within one season did not have a positive effect on attendance and thus on overall profits, nor did it provide the need for a permanent theatre. For this reason, in 1924, the independent Cooperative of the East Slovak National Theatre was formed, whose directors were Josef Hurt (1924–1926), Otto Alfieri (1926–1928), Otakar Novák (1928–1929), and Karel Želenský (1929–1930).³⁵ Their contracts were signed for a period of three years, but none of these persons managed to complete or extend their term.

Josef Hurt directed the East Slovak National Theatre for two years, and in his first season, only operettas were on the program. He decided to perform opera with the head conductor of the opera ensemble Juraj Viliam Schöffer only in the second season, when Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* [The Bartered Bride], Gounod's *Faust*, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, and Halévy's *La Juive* [The Jewess] were staged. During Alfieri's tenure as director, only one opera, *The Tales of Hoffmann* by Jacques Offenbach was performed.

Otakar Novák, like Oskar Nedbal, did not do the financial management of the theatre as a private institution. In the same way as Nedbal, he also chose the most

35 Chmelko, "Budovanie slovenského divadla v Košiciach," 10–13.

radical solution, ending his life by suicide. The ambition of Karel Želenský, who was assisted in management by his son Drahoš Želenský, was to raise the quality of the theatre and opera with a more demanding repertoire, but he remained in his position for only one season. At this moment, the East Slovak National Theatre, which was a more Czech than Slovak institution because all the musical-dramatic works were performed in Czech and by mostly Czech actors and singers, de facto ended. During the 1930–1937 period, Košice had to make do only with tours of the SNT, but the then director Antonín Drašar imported more ‘merchandise’ than art. The solution to the question of the theatre itself was to be the establishment of the so-called SNT Branch, which was eventually founded in 1937. As before, operettas and operas, such as Verdi’s *La traviata* or Smetana’s *Prodaná nevěsta* [The Bartered Bride] were not staged in Slovak.

Conclusion

The trend set by Drašar was to continue in the 1938–1939 season. In the opera, the plan was to stage Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* [The Coronation of Poppea] and Richard Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* [The Master-Singers of Nuremberg] as Nedbal’s bold ambitions. However, this did not happen, as the situation in the SNT suddenly changed after the Munich Agreement. In October 1938, Drašar was accused of embezzlement and was arrested at the behest of the public prosecutor’s office. On his release he had to leave Slovakia immediately. This was also the case for most Czech artists, including Karel Nedbal, who were fired from the theatre in the first months of the 1938–1939 season. As for Košice, after the First Vienna Award, this city became part of Hungary, and Slovak theatre ceased to exist for several years.

After these infamous political events, when the Czechoslovak Republic gradually disappeared from the map of Europe, a remarkable era of the Slovak National Theatre came to an end. Despite all its successes and failures, the leading personalities of the time, such as Bedřich Jeřábek, Milan Zuna, Oskar and Karol Nedbal, and Antonín Drašar, will always be remembered as important contributors to its history.³⁶

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