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The Theatre as a Venue and Tool of Social Change in the “Long” 19th Century (An Introduction)

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Abstract

LASLAVÍKOVÁ, Jana. The Theatre as a Venue and Tool of Social Change in the “Long” 19th Century (An Introduction).

The present thematic issue of *Forum Historiae* 2/2025, *Theatre as a Venue and Tool of Social Change in the “Long” 19th Century*, seeks to contribute to the current scholarly discourse on the necessity of a cultural turn within the humanities, particularly in the field of (musical) theatre historiography. Drawing on the works of European cultural historians, the issue highlights recent research trends that may serve as suitable tools for identifying key elements in the transformation of Central and East-Central European society in the given period “in and through the theatre.” Individual contributions in this issue approach the central theme from political, economic, institutional, and sociological perspectives, with authors investigating previously unexplored aspects of theatre culture. At the same time, innovative theoretical processes are employed as a way of interpreting familiar objects. Rather than seeking to provide a comprehensive treatment of the subject, the aim here is to outline new directions in cultural historiography within the region—approaches that may enhance the potential for comparative analyses along with other European developments.

Theatre and the dramatic arts have been regarded in every historical period as performative instruments of social change. Through the interaction of protagonists within specific spatio-temporal contexts, the theatre itself has contributed to the social transformation of both theatre makers and audiences alike. By applying the concept of “space” to the study of theatre—one of the central cultural and economic phenomena—in the “long” nineteenth century, the studies here seek to transcend the—imaginary—boundaries that have traditionally defined theatre historiography in Central and East-Central Europe. Until recently, this perspective, largely derived from literary studies, resulted in nationally oriented approaches to historical theatre studies, focused solely on constructing national theatre histories.¹ The aim was to construct linear narratives of individual nations, characterised by the glorification of significant historical

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- 1 DREXLER, Otto. Přistoupit k dějinám divadelní kultury jinak? In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2023, vol. 71, no. 4, pp. 405–417; p. 407 cited here. The author aptly identified the causes and consequences of the situation in Czech theatre historiography in Czechia, while the Slovak scholarly milieu shows similar characteristics.

events that were led by prominent individuals and their works,² and were frequently recoded according to the political requirements.

Today, partly due to the sociological theories of structuralists and post-structuralists,³ this type of reasoning on theatre history and historiography as such is proving to be inflexible, tending to overlook rapid global transformations in the development of society in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries and at the same time, reinforcing the radical positions of certain political groups.⁴

Until recently, efforts to transcend national boundaries in theatre and music historiography were rare and, owing to the international nature of historical source materials, their systematic treatment within nationally oriented research contexts was largely neglected.⁵ This resulted in the production of factually dense works that built narratives of glorified national cultures, yet lacking critical analysis or reflection on the broader historical and social context.⁶ In the local geopolitical region, a shift in this trend is evident in recent joint projects of musicologists from Visegrad Four (V4) countries which investigate nation-building strategies through musical theatre.⁷ These scholars have replaced traditional national narratives with an analysis of local and regional networks, opening up new possibilities for mapping the theatrical landscape free of national stereotypes and biases. By applying a biographical approach⁸ to selected case studies, the transnational contexts of theatre artists' careers have been identified, while the reasons behind their decisions to migrate across the Habsburg Empire and Europe are also listed.⁹ Through the lens of "us" and

- 2 In the Slovak context, the following works of theatre studies, published after 1990 and mapping the history of theatre in Slovakia, are characterised by this approach: MISTRÍK, Miloš et al. *Slovenské divadlo v 20. storočí*. Bratislava : VEDA, 1999; ŠTEFKO, Vladimír et al. *Dejiny slovenskej drámy 20. storočia*. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2011. The most recent multi-authored publications in theatre studies have sought to provide a new perspective on the history of Slovak theatre, which has been reflected primarily in the publication of new pieces of information, albeit without the application of contemporary anthropological and sociological interpretative frameworks. Cf. ŠTEFKO, Vladimír et al. *Dejiny slovenského divadla I. (do roku 1948)*. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2018; ŠTEFKO, Vladimír et al. *Dejiny slovenského divadla II. (1948–2000)*. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2020.
- 3 FOUCAULT, Michel. *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris : Gallimard, 1969; WHITE, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973; CERTEAU, Michel de. *L'écriture de l'histoire*. Paris : Gallimard, 1969.
- 4 ZAVACKÁ, Marina. Správa o stave kohézie na Slovensku. In KOSNÁČ, Pavol – GLOSS, Hugo (eds.) *Súdržnosť na Slovensku: Čo drží krajinu pokope a na čom sa rozpadá?* Bratislava : DEKK Inštitút, 2023, pp. 176–193.
- 5 In the field of Slovak musicology, a multi-authored monograph has recently been published, whose authors reflect on this fact through a novel treatment of historical sources. Cf. KALINAYOVÁ-BARTOVÁ, Jana et al. *Hudobné dejiny Bratislavy: od stredoveku po rok 1918*. Bratislava : Ars Musica, Katedra muzikológie FFUK, 2019.
- 6 DREXLER 2023, p. 407.
- 7 See the results of the international projects: *The Network of Musical Theatre Companies in Multilingual East-Central Europe* (Visegrad Grants 2017–2018) and *Towards a Common Regional History of Our Nation Building Strategies. Traveling Directors, Musicians* (Visegrad Grants 2020–2022), published at <https://zti.hu/hu/mzt/projektek> [last viewed on 24 July 2025]. In 2015, several team members contributed to an international publication that originated in Slovakia. Cf. ZVARA, Vladimír (ed.) *Musiktheater in Raum und Zeit: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Theaterpraxis in Mitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Bratislava : NM Code, 2015.
- 8 SZYMANSKI-DÜLL, Berenika. Transnationale Theatergeschichte(n): Der biographische Ansatz. In BALME, Christopher – SZYMANSKI-DÜLL, Berenika (eds.) *Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft*. Tübingen : Narr Francke Attempto, 2020, pp. 81–97.
- 9 BARTHA, Katalin Ágnes. The National Theatre of Kolozsvár [Cluj] in the Network of Hungarian Theatre Companies (Mapping Theatre Towns in the Second Half of 19th Century). In *Musical Olomucensia*, 2023, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 73–96; BÉKÉSSY, Lili Veronika. The Pesth-Ofner

"ours," common elements found in the history of all V4 countries which constitute the musical theatre culture of the region have been highlighted.¹⁰

The Habsburg Empire was a time capsule of European history in which different phases of state formation remained alive in the present.¹¹ As a multi-lingual region characterised by complex cultural processes where the construction of cultural identities of a variety of national and ethnic groups occurred within the same area, or even the same town, the Habsburg Empire offers a rich repository of sources for identifying key features of the transformation of society occurring in and through the theatre. In this context, it becomes necessary to reconsider established paradigms in historical theatre studies to reaffirm the autonomy and specificity of the discipline, and to chart new directions moving towards an interdisciplinary approach, treating theatre culture primarily in relation to social development.¹² Such a perspective allows us to understand the performative role of theatre not only in the centres or metropolises, but also in the periphery or provinces, as evidenced by the outputs of recent local research projects,¹³ which continue to fill gaps in Slovak theatre historiography.

It is therefore essential to move beyond the traditionally dominant perception of theatre as an aesthetic phenomenon and instead conceptualise theatrical manifestations as part of broader cultural practices.¹⁴ In this context, the investigation of both private and public, institutionalised and unofficial theatrical spaces¹⁵ may be understood as something more than an analysis of theatre production across various genres and forms, including emergent theatrical expressions. Theatre may be primarily considered as a means of the cultural and power dynamics of political elites, which can be seen in the historical sources related to the construction of theatre buildings in the Kingdom of Hungary, including the economic involvement of their aristocratic patrons who held high-ranking positions in the empire. The interconnected activities of patron and official—often embodied by a single individual—contributed to

Localblatt und Landbote as Source of Music History: Guest Performers in Context of Pest-Buda, 1857. In *Musicologica Olomucensia*, 2023, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 52–78.

- 10 See: the outputs of the V4 team members, published in MOJŽISOVÁ, Michaela (ed.) *Cultural and Artistic Transfers in Theatre and Music: Past, Present, and Perspectives*. Bratislava : Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Theatre and Film Research; VEDA Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2021.
- 11 WHEATLEY, Natasha. *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty*. Princeton; New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 2023, p. 6.
- 12 This approach characterises the latest edition of *A Cultural History of Theatre*, which may be a valuable source of inspiration for reasoning about theatre history in Central Europe. BALME, Christopher B. – DAVIS, Tracy C. (eds.) *A Cultural History of Theatre*, 1 – 6. London : Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017.
- 13 LASLAVÍKOVÁ, Jana. *Mestské divadlo v Prešporku na sklonku 19. storočia: medzi provinciou a metropolou*. Bratislava : Hudobné centrum, Historický ústav SAV, 2020. This publication was an output of the project *Musical Theatre in Bratislava from the Second Half of the 19th Century to the First Half of the 20th Century: Personalities, Institutions, Repertoire, Reflections* (VEGA 2/0040/18). The articles by Tomáš Janura, Ivona Kollárová, and Jana Laslavíková published in this issue of *Forum Historiae* are outcomes of research conducted within the framework of the project *Theatre as a Venue and Tool of Social Change* (VEGA 2/0024/22).
- 14 Examples of a broadly conceived methodology applied to the post-1990 history of theatre in Slovakia include the contributions in KNOPOVÁ, Elena (ed.) *Súčasnité slovenské divadlo v dobe spoločenských premien: pohľady na slovenské divadlo 1989–2015*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2017.
- 15 BALME, Christopher B. *The Theatrical Public Sphere*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 167.

the establishment of several public theatres at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Tomáš Janura’s study, *The Construction of a New Theatre in Bratislava by George Csáky According to Documents of the Hungarian Royal Governor’s Council*. At the same time, an analysis of the motivations of elite circles from the Kingdoms of Hungary, Croatia, and Galicia-Lodomeria, as well as the Principality of Transylvania, who publicly framed their entrepreneurship in the field of theatre culture as an act of philanthropy, reveals that such initiatives primarily served as catalysts for social advancement—see Raluca Mureşan’s study *The Stakes of Theatre Patronage in the Habsburg Monarchy’s Eastern Lands at the Turn of the 19th Century (1790–1810)*. It may be concluded that noble patronage, status-driven philanthropy, and profit-oriented business often overlapped during the given period.¹⁶ These undertakings did not occur in isolation, rather theatre functioned within a broader network of social practices shaped by familial, communal, and regional relationships, as well as by identity frameworks and the loyalty attitudes that were rooted in them.¹⁷

At the same time, the theatre served as a means of politicisation and political socialisation. The architectural design of theatre buildings facilitated mutual communication¹⁸ and many structures played a multifunctional role, housing restaurants, casinos, and dance halls (*redoutes*) in addition to the main auditorium. A variety of associations, including Masonic lodges, organised artistic and political activities within the theatre building.¹⁹ The extent and intensity of involvement by individuals and groups depended on a range of internal and external factors. One such determiner was the fact that institutionalised theatre was a platform for the ruling classes. In the nineteenth century, theatre buildings symbolised bourgeois culture, which emulated aristocratic models through the daily attendance of performances. The desire to see and be seen typified the behavioural patterns of bourgeois families, many of whom were actively engaged in the establishment and development of “their” theatres—institutions regarded as markers of progress and urban modernisation. Unlike the private theatres of the nobility, these so-called municipal theatres—public venues for theatrical production—offered a broader audience access to theatrical art. These repertoire theatres (staging operas/opereettas, dramas, and occasionally ballets) embodied an educational function closely intertwined with a social purpose. As focal points of the emerging modern public sphere, such spaces were acutely responsive to socio-political developments in the country, in contrast to the noble theatres.

16 Similar socio-economic practices prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the most recent Czech publication on Leopold II. Lažanský. See: ZEMANOVÁ, Berenika. *Hrabě hraje divadlo: Leopold II. Lažanský z Bukové (1854–1891)*. Praha : Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2024.

17 ŠOLTÉS, Peter – VÖRÖS, Ladislav. “Odťaté ruky”? Kontinuity a diskontinuity politických a spoločenských elit na Slovensku v 19. a 20. storočí. In *Forum Historiae*, 2018, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 1–8; p. 2 cited here.

18 HABERLANDOVÁ, Katarína – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, Laura. Innovations in Architecture and the Impact of Architects’ Mobility on their Application: The Case of the New Building of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava. In *Historický časopis*, 2023, vol. 71, no. 5, pp. 867–894.

19 MANNOVÁ, Elena. Vereine als Medien des Kulturtransfers in Zentraleuropa. Das Beispiel der Slowakei. In HACKMANN, Jörg (ed.) *Vereinskultur und Zivilgesellschaft in Nordosteuropa: Regionale Spezifik und europäische Zusammenhänge*. Wien; Köln; Weimar : Böhlau Verlag, 2012, pp. 677–690.

While the owners of private theatres were members of the nobility, municipal theatres were owned by the city or by influential municipal associations which leased the buildings to incoming theatre directors operating as entrepreneurs. These directors arrived with their own artistic companies, whose composition changed frequently as members migrated across German-language theatres in the Habsburg Empire in search of more favourable engagements. This otherwise destabilising factor also served as a vehicle for vibrant cultural transfer and exchange, as exemplified by the day-to-day operations of the Ljubljana theatre—see the study by Marko Motnik and Tanja Žigon, *The Ljubljana Stage in the 1830s: Cultural Exchange and Institutional Dynamics*.

The historicist interior and exterior design of municipal theatre buildings,²⁰ along with the system for awarding subsidies and appointing directors, reveal the cultural strategies pursued by members of the municipal council deciding on a theatre's operations, with the aim of enhancing their political influence within both the city and the broader region.²¹ As incoming directors usually had no ties to the local social milieu, gaining the support of municipal council members was essential as without such backing, new initiatives often failed to gain traction. Tactics for building trust varied. Most directors employed tried and tested philanthropic events such as benefit performances in support of the city's poverty fund or other local social institutions.²² Another successful strategy involved joining prominent local associations linked to financial groups. To retain support should they return in the future, many directors maintained memberships in these associations even after leaving the city.

The proliferation of municipal theatres across Europe—particularly in German-speaking regions—was a phenomenon rooted in the ideals of classical education and the promotion of moral values. As a medium of mass communication, theatre assumed a central role in this endeavour due to its multimedia nature, encompassing language, music, and scenography. The didactic function to educate audiences about their own history was attributed to German historical drama in particular.²³ However, along with education, unwelcome liberal thoughts and ideas were also disseminated from the stage, and bourgeois theatre emerged as a vehicle for both personal and social criticism. Despite strict regulation of the repertoire, both advocates and detractors of bourgeois theatre recognised its potential to challenge authority and to provide a platform for resistance against untenable ideological positions.²⁴

20 LASLAVÍKOVÁ, Jana – LUKOVÁ, Jana. Prešporské mestské divadlo: nové nálezy, nové možnosti. In *Pamiatky a múzeá*, 2024, vol. 73, no. 2, pp. 34–38.

21 MICHÁLEKOVÁ, Jana Magdaléna. *Na mestskej radnici: Inštitucionálne dejiny mestského zastupiteľstva a komunálni politici v Prešporku (1867–1918)*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2025.

22 KUŠNIRÁKOVÁ, Ingrid. The First Hospitals in Hungarian Towns (1750–1850): Their Founders, Funding, and Patients. In *Historický časopis*, 2024, vol. 72, no. 3, pp. 513–546.

23 See also Ulrich's article which examines the geographical distribution of German-language theatres beyond the borders of Germany, with a particular focus on Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on statistical data from theatrical almanacs and yearbooks, the author maps the presence and role of German-speaking theatres across various provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy. ULRICH, Paul S. The Topography of German Theater outside Germany in the 19th century. In FASSEL, Horst – ULRICH, Paul S. (eds.) *"welt macht theater": Deutsches Theater im Ausland vom 17. – 20. Jahrhundert. Funktionsweisen und Zielsetzungen*. Berlin : Lit Verlag, 2006, pp. 76–98.

24 EBERT, Olivia et al. (eds.) *Theater als Kritik. Theorie, Geschichte und Praktiken der Ent-Unterwerfung*. Bielefeld : Transcript, 2018, p. 11.

Not even stringent censorship could prevent the gradual erosion of patterns of order and doctrine of any kind.²⁵ Despite official regulations demanding adherence to approved scripts, improvisation rich in innuendo—often directed at the Church, the State, and prevailing moral norms—regularly found its way onto the stage. This happened primarily—but not exclusively—in summer theatres, which were monitored by police as the mutual encounter and communication of non-privileged social classes posed a threat of ridiculing the authorities. Although earlier scholarship tended to categorise audiences into “higher” (i.e. the educated classes frequenting brick-and-mortar theatres) and a “lower” groups (i.e. the socially weaker classes attending performances in makeshift or open-air venues), an analysis of the repertoire performed in summer arenas at the close of the eighteenth century suggests that there was no rigid division between audiences. On the contrary, recent research on theatrical life in Bratislava (formerly Pressburg) has revealed that brick-and-mortar theatres and summer arenas were interconnected not only in terms of lease agreements and operations, but also through shared staging practices—see Ivona Kollárová’s study *The Summer Theatre in Bratislava: Dangerous Laughter and the Disciplining of Urban Popular Culture in the Late 18th Century*. The gradual acceptance of popular theatre was accompanied by Raimund’s and Nestroy’s farces, labelled as “popular culture,” including versions translated into the many languages of the empire, penetrating brick-and-mortar theatres.²⁶

Alongside theatres, the print media emerged as an additional conduit for theatrical content. The role of the local press, which structured the daily life of the urban population through its coverage, expanded in response to the demands of theatre audiences for timely information about cultural events, both in their own towns and across the Habsburg Empire. The need to experience theatre in a private setting was met by separate theatre and music periodicals. In addition to news and programme listings, these publications featured extensive reviews and reports, which largely reflected very similar aesthetic criteria regardless of the performance venue. This may be attributed to the formulaic nature of acting and singing, as artistic practice at the time prioritised the faithful imitation of major acting and singing and musical models over the portrayal of original characters.²⁷

The system of stage roles (the so-called *Rollenfächer*), according to which the theatrical art functioned until the early twentieth century, was based on exclusivity and gender stereotypes.²⁸ For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, the acting company in Bratislava comprised the following male roles: youthful lover, heroic lover, bon vivant and conversational lover, youthful hero, comedian, character comedian, singing comedian, singing youthful comedian,

25 KOLLÁROVÁ, Ivona. Diela nemeckých dramatikov očami uhorských cenzorov na prelome 18. a 19. storočia. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2024, vol. 72, no. 1, pp. 5–20.

26 LINHARDT, Marion. *Residenzstadt und Metropole. Zu einer kulturellen Topographie des Wiener Unterhaltungstheaters (1858–1918)*. Tübingen : Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006.

27 GOOLEY, Dana. From the Top: Liszt’s Aristocratic Airs. In BERENSON, Edvard – GILOI, Eva (eds.) *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. New York; Oxford : Berghahn Books, 2010, pp. 69–85.

28 LINHARDT, Marion. Kontrolle – Prestige – Vergnügen. Profile einer Sozialgeschichte des Wiener Theaters 1700–2010. In *LiTheS*, 2012, vol. 5, Sonderband 3, pp. 7–41.

serious and humorous father figures, character actor, and singing hero. The female roles consisted of conversing lover, daring lover, naive lover, heroine and lover, mother, chaperone, drawing-room lady, first comic spinster, character actress, and local singer.²⁹

The criteria by which artists were assessed before being cast in specific stage roles were frequently based on social standing rather than artistic merit.³⁰ Less affluent artists could not aspire to higher-valued roles, as these were reserved for members of wealthy families. In the case of women, economic pressure on artists translated into moral vulnerability and social marginalisation. In such cases, the theatre became an instrument of their social descent.³¹

The image of the director and his company was the product of a targeted media campaign, and efforts by local journalists to construct a favourable image of the theatre had a significant impact on its economic viability. In Bratislava, at the time of the city's Magyarisation process, the German-language theatre remained a focal point of local press coverage, and this played a considerable role in maintaining large audiences. Conversely in Timișoara, despite the city's predominantly German-speaking population, German-language performances were discontinued towards the end of the nineteenth century, which was done with the support of the German-language press whose critics championed the Hungarian theatre and its director more strongly than the German-speaking one.³²

At the same time, both the theatre of criticism and the criticism of theatre—encompassing media coverage of events occurring behind the scenes of Thalia—contributed to increased demand for subscriptions, thereby generating a regular audience, something which may rightly be regarded as the economic, cultural, and social capital³³ of every theatre and concert hall.³⁴ A specific category of attendees comprised affluent box owners, whose entitlement to free admission to the theatre was hereditary. Not only the economic aspect of the theatre's operation, but also the decision-making processes depended on them, since many held voting rights in matters of the theatre's operation.³⁵

29 LASLAVÍKOVÁ 2020, p. 104. The same is true for Hungarian theatre system. See: BARTHA, Katalin Ágnes. Színészkonstrukció és szerepör: a szalonszínésznőség szubjektivitásai. In EGYED, Emese – PAKÓ, László – SÓFALVI, Emese (eds.) *Certamen VII: Előadások a Magyar Tudomány Napján az Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület I. szakosztályában*. Kolozsvár : Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2020, pp. 149–170.

30 DETKEN, Anke – SCHONLAU, Anja. Das Rollenfach: Definition, Theorie, Geschichte. In DETKEN, Anke – SCHONLAU, Anja (eds.) *Rollenfach und Drama: Europäische Theaterkonvention im Text*. Tübingen : Narr Verlag, 2014, pp. 7–30.

31 Involvement in women's orchestras, which also performed in theatres, represented another pitfall. For women's orchestras in Austria-Hungary, see: TRÜMPI, Fritz. *Musik als Arbeit. Der Oesterreichisch-Ungarische Musikerverband als Gestalter des Musikbetriebs in der späten Habsburgermonarchie (1872–1914)*. Wien : Böhlau, 2024, pp. 232–247.

32 LASLAVÍKOVÁ, Jana. Obraz meniacej sa kultúrnej identity nemeckojazyčného meštianstva na príklade mestských divadiel v Prešporoku, Temešvári a Karlových Varoch. In KUŠNIRÁKOVÁ, Ingrid (ed.) *Historické štúdie 57: Ročenka Historického ústavu Slovenskej akadémie vied, v. v. i.* Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV; VEDA, 2023, pp. 89–102.

33 BOURDIEU, Pierre. Ökonomisches, kulturelles und soziales Kapital. In BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Die verborgenen Mechanismen der Macht*. Hamburg : VSA, 1992, pp. 49–75.

34 MÜLLER, Sven Oliver. *Das Publikum macht die Musik. Musikleben in Berlin, London und Wien im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014, p. 11.

35 SCUDERI, Cristina. *The Management of Opera (1861–1918). Theatres of the Eastern Adriatic*. Wien : Böhlau Verlag, 2024, p. 34.

The theatre is a space where the nation is imagined and critically discussed.³⁶ In regions inhabited by German-speaking populations, the theatre was attributed a specific role in building a German cultural nation.³⁷ The model to be emulated was the Viennese court theatres, which were renamed national theatres by Joseph II in 1776 and proclaimed the first German theatres.³⁸ There was also a shift in the composition of the theatrical repertoire, with German dramas supplanting the previously favoured French drama repertoire.³⁹ German Singspiele came to dominate the operatic stage, and foreign operas were given a German or Viennese touch. It became fashionable to articulate “Viennese taste” as a unifying cultural standard, fostering a national—in fact, Viennese—collective identity—see Andrea Horz’s study *Proclamation of a Collective Viennese Identity—Aspects of the Wiener Theaterzeitung’s Reports on Giacomo Meyerbeer’s Robert le Diable in the 1830s*. The almost mythologised figures of members of the Viennese court theatres were frequently portrayed and emulated by provincial artists.

Ideas were disseminated across the empire from Vienna. Central cultural policymakers faced the challenge of homogenising the multicultural character of the regions.⁴⁰ As the nationalisation process advanced, many municipal theatres in provincial capitals were redefined as national. This transformation could take the form of a publicly declared change such as renaming the theatre, or reforms to the repertoire and the language of performances.⁴¹ The matter of quality, an issue frequently raised in the press serving the dissociation from others, was in fact a pretext for expressing disapproval. High attendance at Italian opera performances—regardless of the language in which they were staged—demonstrates that they were status symbols and venues for elite self-representation. In the later period, operetta, especially the Viennese version, played a similar unifying role, with content that embodied cultural

36 HOLDSWORTH, Nadine. Introduction. In HOLDSWORTH Nadine (ed.) *Theatre and National Identity: Re-Imagining Conceptions of Nation*. New York; London : Routledge, 2014, pp. 1–16.

37 WILMER, Stephen E. The Development of National Theatres in Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. In WILMER, Stephen E. (ed.) *National Theatres in a Changing Europe*. Houndmills : Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 9–20. As for Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia), the situation was distinct, as the German-speaking population did not publicly identify as Hungarian Germans, but as German Hungarians. MANNOVÁ, Elena. Transformácia identity bratislavských Nemcov v 19. stor. In *Historický časopis*, 1995, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 437–450. Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, manifestations of loyalty varied across individual regions. While allegiance to the Hungarian government was declared universally, in Bratislava for example, the decisions of the municipal council reveal that local interests—including the support of German-language theatre—remained a priority. MICHÁLEKOVÁ, Jana Magdaléna. Politické spolky v Prešporku v období Rakúsko-Uhorska. In *Historický časopis*, 2023, vol. 71, no. 1, pp. 31–58. This was due to the city’s geographical proximity to Vienna and their longstanding cultural and economic ties.

38 GROSSEGER, Elisabeth. Theatermacher. In FEICHTINGER, Johannes – UHL, Heidemarie (eds.) *Habsburg neu denken. Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa*. 30 kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte. Wien; Köln; Weimar : Böhlau, 2016, pp. 207–213.

39 GRANGE, William. *Historical Dictionary of German Theatre*. Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 4.

40 FILLAFER, Franz Leander. Imperium oder Kulturstaat? In THER, Philipp (ed.) *Kulturpolitik und Theater. Die kontinentalen Imperien in Europa im Vergleich*. Wien; Köln; Weimar : Böhlau Verlag, 2012, pp. 23–53; p. 52 cited here.

41 SIEVERS, Wiebke. Mainstage Theatre and Immigration: The Long History of Exclusion and Recent Attempts at Diversification in Berlin and Vienna. In *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 2017, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 67–83; p. 71 cited here.

codes drawn from the musical traditions of multiple nations and ethnicities, resonating across the Habsburg Empire.⁴²

As national awareness progressed, tensions began to emerge in cities with linguistically diverse populations, as multilingual theatre companies—often operating within the same theatre building—began to avoid one another.⁴³ The national opera became a potent symbol of one's own culture and assumed a clear cultural-political function based on themes drawn from national history, with libretti characterised by mythologised narratives.⁴⁴ Composers, and their heroic struggle to establish works in an alien, or socio-linguistically different, milieu played a crucial role.⁴⁵ The audience, too, acted as a key agent in this struggle for freedom. Performances were frequently accompanied by impassioned patriotic manifestations, which effectively stirred patriotism and a sense of national belonging. The central themes of national operas—freedom, identity, continuity, and community—were embodied in protagonists such as Nikola Šubić Zrinski, portrayed as an ideal representative of the nation, in this case, the Croatian one—see Petra Babic's study *Politicization of Theatre Audiences Through Historical Opera and the Use of National Myths: A Case-study of Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*. This projection of national aspirations through music, alongside the (de)construction of historical memory, contributed to the recoding of original contents and messages during the upheavals and regime changes of the twentieth century.

Specific areas whose performative potential can be harnessed in addressing current research questions have been outlined here. The existing remains present within the process of change insofar as it is still recognisable as change, with the process of change often unfolding gradually and imperceptibly. Upheavals—whether revolutions or paradigm shifts—frequently appear more attractive, more worthy of attention, and are therefore often seen as prototypes of progressive change. Relaxation and mollification take time. The reconstruction of theatrical history—governed by its own laws—has itself become the subject of critical scrutiny in recent decades, ultimately reaching a stage of transformation.⁴⁶ Recognising and embracing new approaches or adapting established and well-defined practices to a new environment requires both time and courage. The long-standing privileging of high art within the tradition of theatre research (not only in Slovakia) has shaped both the selection and the treatment of research areas. Yet, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, there is no universal definition of quality. Rather, what is understood as quality is the

42 CSÁKY, Moritz. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis der Wiener Operette: regionale Vielfalt im urbanen Milieu*. Wien : Hollitzer, 2021.

43 KOPECKÝ, Jiří – KŘUPKOVÁ, Lenka. *Provincial Theater and Its Opera. German Opera Scene in Olomouc (1770–1920)*. Olomouc : Palacký University, 2015, p. 323.

44 FRÁNEK, Michal – FUTTERA, Ladislav – KOPECKÝ, Jiří – SPÁČILOVÁ, Jana. *Libuše. Edice libret*. Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2024.

45 THER, Philipp. *In der Mitte der Gesellschaft. Operntheater in Zentraleuropa 1815–1914*. Wien; München : Oldenbourg Verlag, 2006, pp. 378–384. For recent research on national opera, see: BŘEZINA, Aleš – RENTSCH, Ivana (eds.) *Bedřich Smetana and European Opera*. Würzburg : Königshausen & Neumann, 2024.

46 WIHSTUTZ, Benjamin – HOESCH, Benjamin. Für einen Methodenpluralismus in der Theaterwissenschaft. In WIHSTUTZ, Benjamin – HOESCH, Benjamin (eds.) *Neue Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft*. Bielefeld : Transkript Verlag, 2020, pp. 7–21.

outcome of selective processes within art.⁴⁷ This raises the question of whether it would be preferable to write about theatre culture without being encumbered by a tradition that privileges elite theatre culture over the non-elite one.⁴⁸ The solution may lie in the application of inspiring anthropological and sociological research concepts for the analysis and interpretation of historical theatrical sources that bear witness to seemingly (un)theatrical phenomena, as the studies in this volume show.

47 BOURDIEU, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1996.

48 DREXLER 2023, p. 414.