

PETER KONWITSCHNY, OPERA AND THEATRE DIRECTOR SHAPING THE PROFILE OF THE BRATISLAVA OPERA OF A NEW MILLENNIUM



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Abstract: The paper examines the work of the acclaimed German opera and theatre director Peter Konwitschny at the Opera of the Slovak National Theatre. The authoress bases herself on an analysis of the productions of *Eugen Onegin* (2005) [Eugene Onegin], by Tchaikovsky, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (2007) and *Bohéma* (2013) [La bohème], Janáček's *Vec Makropulos* (2015) [The Makropulos Affair], and Halévy's *Židovka* (2017) [La Juive], all of which, save for Janáček's opera, the Opera of the Slovak National Theatre has borrowed from foreign theatre scenes. The authoress makes a stocklist of the basic principles of Konwitschny's direction signature and his contribution to theatre production, as well as to the artistic ensemble of the Bratislava Opera.

Key words: Peter Konwitschny, Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, engaged theatre, Bertolt Brecht

During the socialist regime, the contacts between Slovak opera and European operatic life were scanty. This applies to both the import and export of opera production. Even though, especially in the 1960s, the soloists of the opera ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre were considered the best in former Czechoslovakia and quite a number of them would have successfully competed with their foreign counterparts, the door to international recognition had not been opened to them. Several Slovak artists embarked on an outstanding career path toward success in illegal immigration (the most brilliant examples are Lucia Popp and Edita Gruberová, both sopranos of world renown). Eventually, the ideologists of normalisation realised that the presentation of outstanding artists abroad was not only profitable for the regime (the state agency Slovkoncert, founded in 1969, was mandated to supervise their foreign performances), but it also was a way to improving the reputation of the socialist arts. The generation that followed (Peter Dvorský, Sergej Kopčák, Magdaléna Hajóssyová, Gabriela Beňáková and others) was no longer banned from performing in the world opera houses.

While in the vocal arts the communication thrived on an individual basis (thanks to Slovak artists performing abroad and to the guest performances of foreign artists in the Slovak National Theatre, abbr. SND), the information regarding European production trends did not reach us via direct interactive meetings but almost exclusively via secondary channels. Among the generally more accessible sources of information were largely the reviews by foreign critics (or by a handful of Slovak critics allowed to travel abroad) of the progressive productions by directors Walter Felsenstein and his students Götz Friedrich, Joachim Herz, Harry Kupfer, all from East Germany. Personal encounters of the opera ensemble of SND with their foreign audiences and producers were rare under socialism. Between 1948 – 1989, there were three directors

permanently domiciled outside Czechoslovakia staging five opera productions at the Bratislava opera house. Nikolai Severianovich Dombrowski, director of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, staged two productions of Russian classical works at SND, Tchaikovsky's *Eugen Onegin* (1952) [Eugene Onegin] and Modest P. Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1954). Indeed, these were dramatic forms conforming to the ideologically enforced poetics of descriptive realism, however, thanks to the consistency of all production elements and elaborate actors' work following Stanislavski's acting principles, they had a positive effect on the requirements to be met by the future opera productions in Bratislava. In the early 1960s, the guest director Klaus Kahl from Dresden, put a highly rated production of Paul Dessau's *Odsúdenie Lukulla* (1962) [The Condemnation of Lucullus], on the SND opera stage, in which the elements of Brechtian theatre were applied. A year later, in a similar vein and with a more modest feedback, he staged Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1963). The last project to be launched by foreign creative professionals on the SND opera stage before November 1989 had been a successful production of Gershwin's jazz opera *Porgy and Bess* (1974), which, similarly to its Leipzig staging earlier on, was produced by a German team of theatre professionals under the guidance of director Günther Lohse.

Although the socio-political climate after November 1989 changed and the ideological barriers to the influx of theatre inspirations from abroad were lifted, a more intensive communication between Slovak opera theatres and their foreign counterparts was not triggered. For the sake of comparison: While the audiences of Prague National Theatre, soon after the split of Czechoslovakia, frequented the productions of acclaimed European directors (David Pountney, Robert Wilson, Ursel and Carl-Ernst Herrmann, David Radok, and others), the Slovak prime national scene, for the decade that followed, remained to be a secluded milieu. And even though there were isolated cases of international acquisitions, they were largely mediocre in terms of artistic value, without a potential to improve the perception of a quality opera theatre in Slovakia. A change in the understanding of the significance of international discourse was achieved with Marián Chudovský taking up the position of SND Opera musical director (2002 – 2006). His most valued acquisition was German director Peter Konwitschny, whose collaboration with SND was started in 2005, by staging Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*.

The opera poetics of Peter Konwitschny

Vladimír Zvara, Slovak musicologist and dramaturge of all Konwitschny's productions staged in Bratislava, introduced the Slovak audience to the fundamental principles of Peter Konwitschny's musical theatre in a programme booklet to *Eugene Onegin*: "It is impossible to compartmentalise Peter Konwitschny and associate him with any style, with any clearly defined stream in the history of opera direction. It is symptomatic that in his early years, he was inspired by two prominent personalities embodying two basic principles of modern opera direction: Walter Felsenstein at the Comic Opera Berlin and Ruth Berghaus at Berliner Ensemble. Felsenstein's realism and Berghaus' conceptual and radically stylised, almost choreographic approach to opera direction, are present side by side in Konwitschny's work, whereby style turns are oftentimes abrupt and conspicuous. The compactness and inner logics of his productions stem from a director's clear view of the work, of its theme and of its mission

rather than from a strict purity of style and from the consistency with which he translates his view in each and every detail of the production."¹

The impact of Walter Felsenstein's psychological realism on Peter Konwitschny's poetics of music and drama is especially patent from the way he focuses on the singing actor. Like Felsenstein, Konwitschny insists that the singer's emotions be strictly based on music: the dramaturgic motivation of a character must be internalised by the singer so that it becomes his/her personal motivation. Only then an opera production will be emotionally credible.² Working as an assistant to Ruth Berghaus has been imprinted in Peter Konwitschny's capacity for artistic abstraction, reduction and stylisation. Colour semantics and visual arts per se play an important role in Konwitschny's productions. Despite that, he did not become another Robert Wilson or Pierre Audi who, similarly to Berghaus, base their productions on ingenious and meticulously construed choreography. The artistic uniqueness of Peter Konwitschny stems from an ability to carry out an indepth analysis of characters' psychology and of their dramatic motivation which is derived not only from the libretto but also from music.

Peter Konwitschny has introduced high staging criteria to Slovak opera: a clearly declared artistic view and rigorous professional requirements imposed on all the elements of a stage form. Until *Eugene Onegin* was premiered, Jozef Bednárík had been the most consistent shaper of the art of acting in local opera productions.³ He, too, viewed performers as singing actors. However, he did not attempt for an indepth psychoanalysis. He shaped distinct character types on stage and his productions were oftentimes concluded with overt morality. By contrast, Peter Konwitschny puts his heroes under a psychoanalytic magnifying glass and their profiles are contoured in sharp details: each one is alive, evolves and reacts. The omnipresent feature of his direction signature is also noticeable in his five Bratislava productions. Three of them were the re-makes of older productions: *Eugene Onegin* (2005), originally premiered in Leipzig, in 1995, *Madama Butterfly* (2007), staged for the first time in Graz, in 1992, and *Bohéma* (2013) [*La bohème*], premiered in Leipzig, in 1991. His most recent Bratislava production is *Židovka* (2017) [*La Juive*], and it was put on SND stage by borrowing a production of the Flemish Opera in Antwerp (opening performance in 2015, in co-production with Nathionaltheater Mannheim). However, it was *Vec Makropulos* (2015) [*The Makropulos Affair*] that has been indelibly imprinted in the context of European theatre and especially in Janáček staging tradition. It was the only original work directed by Konwitschny on the Bratislava opera stage.

The productions by Peter Konwitschny are generally noted for a high rate of social criticism, political commitment, and moral compellingness. The director deliberately

¹ ZVARA, Vladimír. Hudobné divadlá Petra Konwitschného. In Piotr Iljič Čajkovskij: *Eugen Onegin* [programme booklet], SND, premiered on 16 September 2005, p. 19.

² In this sense, East German productions were in opposition to opera production in West Germany which was dominated by singing stars.

³ Jozef Bednárík (1947 – 2013), embarked on a professional career of an actor. Later, he became a much acclaimed and successful drama director. From 1986 onwards, he was especially prolific as opera a musical director. His staging of Gounod's opera *Faust a Margaréta* [*Faust*], (SND, 1989), was awarded Critics' prize at Edinburgh Festival. For more information on his music and theatre direction refer to MOJŽIŠOVÁ, Michaela. Jozef Bednárík – Homo musicus. In KNOPOVÁ, Elena (ed.). *Divadelní režiséři na prelome tisícročí*, Bratislava : Združenie slovenských divadelných kritikov a teoretikov, Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy SAV, 2014, pp. 65 – 89. ISBN 978-80-969266-4-0.

digresses from the interpretive tradition of produced theatrical works and subjects it to rethinking and, oftentimes, even negates it. He locates conventional opera models in a new period, emotional, psychological, societal (etc.) contexts. He understands opera theatre as a space in which the creator may (or is literally obliged to) mediate his view of society to the audience along with the values it upholds (or disproves). Konwitschny's ambition is not to have the viewer passively succumb to aesthetic experience, within the meaning of Brechtian epic theatre⁴, but rather have him/her leave the theatre disturbed, concerned, and contemplating. Similar thoughts are to be found in the production of a number of contemporary opera directors. However, Peter Konwitschny stands out from this artistic community by his musical proficiency and a deep knowledge of opera scores. This enhances the value of his direction arguments and ensures that performers hold him in high regard.⁵ In his essay, Vladimír Zvara refers to this important aspect: "While many other directors base their understanding of an opera work largely on the analysis of a libretto, to Peter Konwitschny, music is equally important. The uniqueness of his direction is largely connected with his capacity to listen to music. (...) Konwitschny carefully listens to music from the very first beat of the prelude, he scrutinises what music communicates "between the lines", which character on stage is given its voice, whom it advocates or convicts of hypocrisy. A poignant analysis of the score, combined with an unbridled theatre fantasy, gives a sound basis and strength to his direction ideas."⁶

Peter Konwitschny was born to a family of musicians: he is the son of a reputable 20th century conductor Franz Konwitschny (1901 – 1962), his mother was a singer. The milieu had a strong impact on his proclivity to music. "I grew up with music, and I believe that from this upbringing, I have learned to understand the nature of music from childhood. To understand that music not only consists of tones, but rather reflects on human existence. This I believe to be a central prerequisite for the work of an opera director."⁷ The presented study shows that Konwitschny's opera productions, including Bratislava stagings, are full of *mise-en-scènes* whose visual impressiveness and scenic expressiveness follow directly from music situations.

Another permanent feature of the director's works pinpointed below, is a desire for human nearness and sincerity in interpersonal relations, including love relationships and furthermore, respect for the family and frustration from its destruction. The themes almost constantly present in Konwitschny's creation come hand in hand with an analysis of distorted or pathological family or partner relationships. He ad-

⁴ The director refined this inclination from the outset of his professional career. He worked as assistant theatre director of Berliner Ensemble and collaborated on several stagings of the works by Bertolt Brecht (*Die gewehre der Frau Carrar*, 1971, direction Ruth Berghaus; *Turandot oder Der Kongress der Weißwäscher*, 1974, direction Peter Kupke/Wolfgang Pintzka; *Die Mutter*, 1974, direction Ruth Berghaus; *Galileo Galilei*, 1978, direction Manfred Wekwerht/Joachim Tenschert).

⁵ It should be noted that during Peter Konwitschny's direction career of long standing, there were several cases reported when artists refused to follow his ideas and requirements. This exactly happened during the rehearsal of the Bratislava version of *La Juive*, when one of the lead characters quit during a rehearsal due to the differences of opinion with the director.

⁶ ZVARA, Vladimír. *Hudobné divadlá Petra Konwitschného*. In Piotr Iljič Čajkovskij: *Eugen Onegin* [programme booklet], p. 20.

⁷ SKRAMSTAD, Per-Erik – KONWITSCHNY, Peter. I don't consider myself a representative of the Regietheater [interview]. Available at <http://www.wagneropera.net/Interviews/Peter-Konwitschny-Interview-2009.htm> [cit. 1 June 2017].

mits that the angle of perception of society is determined by his own childhood: "As a child, I perceived a lack of closeness. My father was rarely at home. My parents' marriage was typical for the relationships in western culture: the moments of jealousy were followed by passionate love, only to break up in the end. I was the only child and I had to cope with everything by myself. Having had such a childhood, the yearning for closeness may turn into a permanent need."⁸

Family crisis

The yearning for closeness and inveteration is a powerful theme of his production *Eugene Onegin*, which is a charge against indolent, superficial and emotionally burn-out society, where partner and parental love were replaced with tokenism. The first mise-en-scène introduces the audience to the atmosphere of landowner Larina's country estate: Two resigned old women drown their cynicism in vodka, two young girls covet love and happiness. While quiet Tatyana finds them in books, temperamental Olga is more active. But her cheerfulness is artificial. Konwitschny's interpre-



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*. (Scene 4: The ballroom of the Larin house) The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 16 September 2005. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Alena Klenková. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

⁸ Citation according to DRÁPELOVÁ, Věra. Operní režie: Peter Konwitschny. Available at <http://clanky.muzikus.cz/clanek.php?id=2063> [cit. 1 June 2017].



Giacomo Puccini: *Madama Butterfly*. Eva Jenisová (Cio-Cio-San), Monika Fabianová (Suzuki). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 5 October 2007. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Alena Klenková. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

tation goes hand in hand with Tchaikovsky's music, which is no way near the happy-go-lucky text of Olga's aria *Ja nye sposobna k grusti tomnoy* [I am no good at languid melancholy]. The melody was composed using unusually low-pitched notes with a tragic overtone. The song about yearning for a happy life is sung by Konwitschny's Olga with the defiance of a misunderstood child. In conclusion, she slumps onto her mother's lap, in vain waiting for her embrace. Surprised, her mother lifts her hands, holding a liquor glass. "Heaven sends us habits in place of happiness"⁹ – following the philosophy of self-preservation instinct, her heart turned so arid that she was unable to feel any emotions for her own children. Neither Olga's insouciance nor Tatyana's melancholy are internalised. Her love of books, chaotically cluttered in the corner of the stage, covers up her helplessness resulting from a depressive and an unreceptive environment in which she lives. In love with Onegin, she asks her nanny Filippyevna, who is the only being close to her, to narrate the story of her youth. But it brings her no consolation: nanny's recollections are the recollections of a life without love, of an arranged marriage of two children and a hard life amidst a strange family.

In Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* the director, too, escalated the timeless aspects of drama, of a tragedy of a disintegrated family, of a bleak situation of abandoned wo-

⁹ Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*, Scene One. English translation of the libretto cited from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1021778/reviews>.

men and unhappy fates of children raised in a pathological environment. In the second act, after Pinkerton leaves his Japanese bride and returns to America not knowing that Cio-Cio-San expects a son, Konwitschny veritably portrays an unhealthy environment which is bound to affect the shaping of a child's identity: Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki, still wearing traditional Japanese garments, with black sunglasses giving them American look, are seated on a sofa covered up in American flag, placed in the corner of a broken stage, looking as if they have been doing nothing else but waiting in the past three years of Pinkerton's absence. They are resigned, low-spirited, with a comforting bottle of liquor close at hand. When Cio-Cio-San learns from consul Sharpless that Pinkerton arrives to take the child away from her and plans to raise him with his American wife Kate in the United States, the Japanese geisha retreats from the way of her child's happiness. However, the child must not see his mother dying, so that his life overseas is not burdened by a traumatic experience. Butterfly ties a black ribbon around his eyes and gently directs him onto stage, to seek happiness she was not graced with.

In Janáček's *The Makropulos Affair* Peter Konwitschny expanded the European interpretive tradition of this philosophical work by a novel and ingenious view: His Elna Makropulos/Emilia Marty was not an overripe lady tired of her three-hundred-year life, but rather a young woman emotionally stuck at an age she had drunk the fatal elixir of life. She was a victim of multiple abuse by males: The first time when an elixir of life was tested on her by her father, court alchemist and physician to Emperor Rudolf II who, by administering untested potion, put the life of his own child at risk. She shows the evidence of abuse to Albert Gregor when he threatens her life because



Leoš Janáček: *The Makropulos Affair*. Eudovít Ludha (Albert Gregor), Jozef Kundlák (Vítek), Pavol Remenár (Jaroslav Prus), Linda Ballová (Emilia Marty), Gustáv Beláček (Dr. Kolenatý). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 6 November 2015. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

Emilia's rejection made him flow into an hysterical rage: "See the scar on my neck? There was this man who said he'd kill me. I'm not gonna strip myself naked for you to see all my other trophies. What makes men think they must kill me?"

The unscrupulousness and cruelty of the central character acquires an emotionally appellative quality: it alerts to a situation when abused and unloved children grow up to become individuals with a callous personality. In Bratislava production, Emilia Marty is impersonated by a thirty-year old actress Linda Ballová, petite blond of girlish appearance. The male territory (i.e. Dr. Kolenatý's law office) is not intruded upon by her mysterious mature charm but rather by her adolescent cheekiness and by her showing no respect for the dignity of legal profession and for male gender per se. After all, the space given to her by Konwitschny allows for no other attitude: all men in his production are embarrassing figures, the representatives of a rigid and an unviable world. Lawyer Kolenatý's aloofness is irritating, his assistant Vítek is a sleazy fellow, the self-possessed Jaroslav Prus sadistically vents his frustration on his son, simpleton Janek, and the pitiful hysteric Albert Gregor desperately clings to a chance for salvation, which he hopes to find with a beautiful mysterious woman, unaware that he has a crush on his great-great grandmother.

Strong women versus weakish men

The contraposition between strong women and weakish men identified in *The Makropulos Affair* as yet another vital characteristic of Konwitschny's signature is present in all his Bratislava productions. However, Konwitschny's heroines are not driven by emancipation ambitions or by gender equality. Adverse life situations and especially incompetent men made them strong.

Onegin, as perceived by Konwitschny, is not a bored dandy who ridicules the chaste love of a guileless young woman, kills a friend without batting an eyelid and quits in quest of new impulses. He is an unanchored young man, fearing life and drowning his uncertainty in liquor. Despite his growing affection for Tatyana, he is unable to assume responsibility for their relationship, fearing that love would eventually turn into a habit, which is a repulsive disease bringing death to the people around him. The duel, in which he kills his friend Lensky, takes place under the pressure of the onlookers yearning for a scandal. Lensky's death is an immediate consequence of Onegin's inability to stand up against what society thinks, against a society he holds in contempt and which frustrates him by its aloof behaviour toward him. Among the most powerful scenes is *Polonaise* at the beginning of the sixth scene. Konwitschny, who takes ballet in opera as composers' concession to the period audience taste, introduces a highly dramatic and cathartic scene instead of an aristocratic dance: half frantic Onegin, in ravishing rhythm, attempts to dance with the dead body of his friend. Upon return from abroad, where he tried to escape the void in his life, he gets to know Tatyana Larina, the stunning spouse of Prince Gremin and he falls victim to a devastating passion. His emotional outburst (arioso *Uzhel' ta samaya Tatyana*) is a musical variation of Tatyana's girls' passion in the second scene (*Puskai pogibnu ya, no pryehzde*). A breathtaking musical bridge, built by Pyotr I. Tchaikovsky between two people, whose feelings did not meet at the right time and in the right place, was enhanced by the musically educated director: visually, it is an identical mise-en-scène but with a different cast. Tatyana's



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*. Pavol Remenár (Onegin). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 16 September 2005. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Ctibor Bachratý. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

sense of duty and respect for her spouse prevail over an emotional tie to Onegin, although her moral victory means having to keep internally dying for the rest of her life. In the final scene Onegin joins the company of others, leaving Tatyana on the proscenium, so deplorably alone.

In Peter Konwitschny's interpretation, even Pinkerton is not a heartless hedonist who comes to irresponsibly pick and trample underfoot an oriental flower. In the introductory act he is a victim of his own lust, in the final act he is unable to fight his own weakish nature. When he arrives at Cio-Cio-San's house, after having spent three years in the USA, he is accompanied by wife Kate and consul Sharpless. Right from the outset, the latter had been fatherly sympathetic and compassionate towards Cio-Cio-San, but himself being a softy and alcoholic, he failed to protect her from the fate of a "puppet" wife. Infuriated by the situation they got him into, he keeps shoving his companion, showing his anger and contempt for him. Pinkerton lost his dignity and devastated, he cries his heart out in an aria, bidding farewell to his love nest and to his own honour (*Addio, fiorito asil*). He tries to draw the curtain and cover up his disgrace from the audience. While in the first act, together with Cio-Cio-San, he manages to maintain the intimacy by keeping the curtain drawn, this time, Pinkerton is not strong enough – the moment of humiliation takes place before the audiences and before his lawful wife. By an elaborate *mise-en-scène* the director questions the functionality of Benjamin F. Pinkerton's family: after this event, wife Kate will never be able to respect and love him.



Giacomo Puccini: *La bohème*. Daniel Čapkovič (Schaunard), Pavol Remenár (Marcello), Kyungho Kim (Rodolfo), Jozef Benci (Colline). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 31 January 2014. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

Konwitschny's concept of *La bohème* narrates the fear of loneliness, of death and of love that comes with the responsibility for the beloved/loving person. Konwitschny's bohemians are preoccupied with themselves: they are pushed to the edge of society, they are individuals without prospects, poor, shivering with cold and hungry. Their teasing is not frolicsome any more and jokes cover up the blows received. The anger over a failed life and subdued frustration strip them of compassion and empathy. What holds them together is need and inertia rather than friendship beyond grave. Mimì, the seamstress who makes her living by embroidering artificial flowers, does not become an accepted part of the group, although she is more alive than any one of them, despite being fatally ill. She is different – she believes in love and is not afraid of it. It is not an innocent doll that enters Rodolfo's room that succumbs to the spell of a charming poet, but rather an active woman grabbing at her chance for happiness. While looking for a key, she is the first to establish physical contact by taking Rodolfo by the hand (*Che gelida manina*). She, too, like most of Konwitschny's opera heroines, encountered a weakling. First, when leaving café Momus with other rejoicing bohemians, he forgets her standing on the proscenium, with Mussetta's fur coat in her hands. When she joins them in the final act, coughing on the threshold of eternity, their (and his) immediate emotion is the fear of death. Rodolfo fails the confrontation with human finality: when his friends leave him on the stage with the dead Mimì, he is deranged and has no energy to join his friends or to sink next to this sweetheart's dead body.



Giacomo Puccini: *La bohème*. Katarína Juhásová-Štúrová (Mimi), Kyungho Kim (Rodolfo). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 31 January 2014. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

The prototype of a weakling who, unlike Onegin, Pinkerton or Rodolfo, does not arouse a pinch of compassion or affection, is Prince Léopold from Konwitschny's production of *Židovka* [La Juive] by Jacques Fromental Halévy. A Christian noble who, in love for a beautiful Jewish woman Rachel, pretends to profess her religion, is unable to stand up for his dame and is the immediate cause of her doom. At the time when the story of Halévy's opera unfolds (Constance 1414), sexual relations between Christians and Jews were strictly forbidden and breaking the ban was punishable by death. Rachel knows nothing of Léopold's real identity. Disguised as a young Jew, he first makes Rachel his accomplice, but runs away from her when the only chance to preserve their love, i.e. converting to Judaism, is wasted. The bed of his lawful bride, Princess Eudoxie, becomes his shelter. He first hides under her blanket and when Rachel publicly accuses him of committing adultery, he hides under the bed. The opposite of a male cowardly character are two strong females. Rachel is like an Amazon woman: bold and dauntless in love, determined in revenge and prepared for self-destruction (she accused Prince Léopold in public wearing an explosives belt she wanted to blast off to kill the much-hated and hateful Christians). Princess Eudoxie fought the hateful world with different weapons: she showed devoted love to wretched Léopold and compassion with Rachel which changed to friendship and respect unadulterated by religious bias.

Konwitschny and Brecht

In the introduction to this study, Konwitschny's inclination towards Brecht's concept of epic theatre was mentioned. The inclination is transformed into alienation

principles, which are yet another constant feature of his direction signature. Every single Konwitschny's production staged in Bratislava is typical by having the lights switched on in the auditorium while the performance is on. The meaning of these signals is obvious: in the dimmed auditorium, the audience ought not to be overwhelmed by burgher emotions over an opera story, but rather be a component responsible part of socially engaged drama. In *Eugene Onegin*, Tatyana's Letter Scene takes place with all the lights switched on and the same applies to Onegin's monologue that follows. The lights are on when they are crying their hearts out from a bridge erected in front of the orchestra pit or when the final ball scene unfolds with Tatyana, Gremin and high society seated in the boxes on the far end of the first balcony. For the very first time in the history of Slovak opera theatre, the audience experienced that the light in the auditorium did not dilute theatrical illusion, on the contrary, viewers became part of the illusion.

In Puccini's *La bohème*, in which the director presented a theatrically evocative truth about poverty that is neither romantic nor noble and although we instinctively run away from death, at the same time, we keep walking towards it, the light in the auditorium is ruthlessly switched on in the last scene with the dying Mimi. Cio-Cio-San, too, dies before the eyes of the audience, with the auditorium illuminated. In *The Makropulos Affair* the light does not just prevent the viewer from being passively overwhelmed by emotions like in *La bohème* or *Madama Butterfly*. The viewer is drawn in the play by the director exposing him/her to temptation via Emilia Marty. The main



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*. Adriana Kohútková (Tatyana). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 16 September 2005. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Alena Klenková. The Slovak National Theatre archives.



Leoš Janáček: *The Makropulos Affair*. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 6 November 2015. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Jozef Barinka. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

heroine offers a formula of immortality to the audience. “I don’t want it any more! Take it. Would anyone want it?” But no one in the audience or the scared male protagonists in judges’ gowns backed-up by a choir standing next to the rows of viewers is willing to take the formula for a miraculous elixir from Emilia’s hands. In Janáček’s libretto it is burnt down by Vítěk’s daughter Kristina, upon which Emilia Marty sinks to the floor, uttering the words of the Greek prayer “Pater Hemon”. In Konwitschny’s production, the girls incinerate it together and leave, hand in hand, packed with trunks, taking the back entrance to Bratislava streets, to real (i.e. mortal) life.

Alienation principles present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all Konwitschny’s Bratislava productions have been most intensively captured in *Židovka* [La Juive]. The lights in the auditorium are on during the most beautiful musical parts of the opera: the self-questioning arias of Rachel (*Il va venir* – she discloses her worries and remorse of conscience for her secret love affair with Léopold), and of Éléazar (*Rachel, quand du Seigneur la grâce tutélaire* – he is swayed by the feelings of guilt for his daughter’s nearing death). They are public confessions of opera protagonists, stripped of any intimacy whatsoever. The viewers/listeners are not allowed to appreciate the breathtaking orchestral interlude, played with the curtain drawn, because a multiple point reflector launched above the orchestra pit is directed at them. The director draws the audience in the centre of events when the conflict between Rachel and Léopold escalates. When the Prince reveals his real confession, the female performer, by an impromptu disparaging remark, comments on his emotional outburst and in a civil way addresses the viewers, standing amidst them (“Ah, yes, the tenor is singing an aria! Would your man be doing that at home?”). But what may cause the biggest discomfort to the audience are choir members scattered around the auditorium: wa-



Fromental Halévy: *La Juive*. Michal Lehotský (Éléazar), Liudmila Slepneva (Rachel), Johan Tralla (Léopold). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 7 April 2017. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Peter Breier. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

ving paper flags uproariously, they keep laughing at the quartet of Rachel, Éléazar, Léopold, and Ruggiero – *De ces nobles guerriers*, which in a grotesque actor hyperbole is unfolding on the stage. Aware or unaware, the effect present in immersion theatre performances is induced: the viewer observes choir members at a close distance while he/she is aware that his/her reactions are being observed by them. For the Slovak opera audience (which, in principle, is conservative) such a situation is particularly unpleasant, as it is not used to having its personal space transgressed. However, Konwitschny has this “heretic” approach internally well-argued.

In the quartet, Jacques Fromental Halévy composed light, in places trivial, operette music (conductor Robert Jindra, author of Bratislava musical production, stated in an interview given before the premiere that: “Possibly, Halévy’s idea was to accentuate the cynical facet of this tragic story”¹⁰), which Peter Konwitschny skillfully used with respect to the alienation principle.

The creator of engaged theatre

Alongside a psycho-analytical facet, Peter Konwitschny’s productions are noted for their distinct socio-critical dimension. The latter stems from the artist’s strong, verbally and creatively proclaimed leftist orientation and, in principle, he rejects capitalism (“Philosophically, I’m a Marxist. I shall never appease with capitalism,

¹⁰ KMEČOVÁ, Vladimíra – JINDRA, Robert. Halévyho Židovka ako predzvest’ Gesamtkunstwerku [interview]. Available at <http://operaslovakia.sk/robert-jindra-halevyho-zidovka-ako-predzvest-gesamtkunstwerku/> [cit. 16 June 2017].

because it is inhumane and destroys the Earth."¹¹), its consumerism (the belief that men's only entitlement to existence is consumption in his opinion is only beneficial for "the profits of transnational companies: Stupid, uncultured and unhappy people buy more."¹²) and aggression which is its immediate consequence ("There is only one law that applies to capitalism: God is dead and money is God. This leads to increased brutality. (...) Every civilisation gone extinct has been replaced by another one. I'm afraid, we'll use our chance to be last."¹³). In his case, however, it is not a shallow implanting of political or ideological themes in an operatic work. According to Konwitschny "the stories in operas give an account of crucial events that affect our entire civilisation. Being a director, I only have to show what they are about. (...) Even in Ancient Greece essential questions of life were debated in the theatre. It seems to be the last place where dialogue is still possible."¹⁴

La Juive, the most recent Konwitschny's production in Bratislava, carries the most powerful political and critical charge. Halévy's opus experiences new-era European renaissance, which is largely due to the polarised currentness of the theme of religious and cultural intolerance. The operatic piece was staged by Peter Konwitschny in line with this spirit: not as a *le grand opéra* with its traditional illustrative tableaux¹⁵ or a drama and a historical account of events of the long-gone past, but rather as a warning appeal to modern society. In his case, this was no ideological campaigning, with very good people on the one hand and others who are commensurately worse on the other hand. Konwitschny does not aspire to become an (political) arbitrator of either of the parties involved; he names and shames human intolerance without a straightforward confessional delineation. Save for the clerical collar of Cardinal de Brogny and Princess Eudoxie's prayer book, confessional signs are not accentuated. There are no crosses put up on the stage, no kips or seven-branched menorahs. The visual dominating element of the scene, the rosetta of a temple window, is made of a mosaic of minute stained glass pieces, however, only detailed photographs show their religious motives. From the viewer's perspective, it looks like an abstract colourful kaleidoscope. To Konwitschny's mind, it is not religion per se, but rather the acts in its name that are the true bone of contention covered up by religious fundamentalism. Had the libretto not been about Christians and Jews, a drama of the hatred between the blue and the red would have unfolded before the audiences (i.e. two colours on the hands of adversaries help distinguish between them). In it, one camp would benefit from the strength of the herd in a savage way and the other one would obstinately reject respecting the culture of the majority (by pounding on the steel structure, *Éléazar* deliberately disturbs sabbatical quietude), with revenge being their personal mission statement.

¹¹ ULÍČIANSKA, Zuzana – KONWITSCHNY, Peter. Opery nám ukazujú, ako so sebou nezaobchádzaf [interview]. In *Sme*, Vol. 15, Issue No. 280, 6 December 2007, p. 23.

¹² FELEGI, Juraj – KONWITSCHNY, Peter. Obmedzujú divadlo, aby ľudia ohlúpili [interview]. In *Pravda*, literary supplement *Salón Kumštu*, Vol. 17, Issue 230, 6 October 2007, p. I., III.

¹³ FELEGI, Juraj – KONWITSCHNY, Peter. Dialóg vedieme už len v divadle. In *Pravda*, Vol. 15, Issue 210, 10 September 2005, p. 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Peter Konwitschny sacrificed *Le grand opéra* principles in favour of the chamber drama of main protagonists. Music adaptation and several omissions especially of spectacular ballet and choir parts enhanced its character.



Fromental Halévy: *La Juive*. Pavol Remenár (Ruggiero), Michal Lehotský (Éléazar), Liudmila Slepneva (Rachel). The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, premiered on 7 April 2017. Direction Peter Konwitschny. Photo by Peter Breier. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

This solution not only helps the viewer find his/her way through the story but also it contains a powerful semantic energy in colour symbolism. When in physical contact, the hands covered in paint leave colour traces on the enemy's garment; in the reconciliation scene, Rachel and Eudoxie wash in a bucket of water and their hands stay clean; and, as critic Robert Bayer points out: "If the blue and the yellow ones shake hands, by mixing two primary colours you get green colour which stands for hope, peace, and reconciliation"¹⁶. The most intensive impact is that of the finale of the third act. After Rachel, hiding an explosives belt under her coat, terrifies the Christians by suicidal bombing, all soloists and choir members are assigned to an assembly line. Yellow and blue hands are joined in by green, red and purple hands and with the music escalating the manufacture of bomb belts is launched, in a dehumanised machine choreography reminiscent of *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, a film by Alan Parker. Throughout history, violence has been a companion to humanity, while race and creed have not proven important.

Peter Konwitschny and the Bratislava opera ensemble

An important aspect of the Bratislava remakes of the productions by Peter Konwitschny is that the director came to SND to personally rehearse them. This is not usual practice. For instance, two months prior to putting it on SND stage, *La Juive*

¹⁶ BAYER, Robert. Komorná grand opéra. In *Hudobný život*, 2017, Vol. 49, Issue 5, p. 30.

had been staged by Opéra National du Rhin in Strasbourg, where its rehearsal was in the hands of Konwitschny's assistant Dorian Dreher. Although Konwitschny has not created original opera productions in Bratislava, save for *The Makropulos Affair*, he meticulously tailored older productions to the needs of SND opera ensemble. Repetitive collaboration with an uncompromising theatre professional had a particularly positive impact upon the actors' profiling of the opera ensemble. Thanks to a systematic monitoring of this component of the work of the Bratislava opera ensemble, the positive turn cannot not be overlooked. After *La Juive* was premiered, several reviews raised objections regarding the prevalence of Konwitschny's productions in SND repertory (in 2016/2017 season, there were four of his productions: *Eugene Onegin*, *La bohème*, *The Makropulos Affair* and *La Juive*). However, a long-term and continuous collaboration with opera houses (Hamburg, Graz) is symptomatic for Peter Konwitschny's creation. It seems, as if in opposition to the constantly travelling keeps returning to an artistic domicile despite his guest performances abroad (much along the lines of Bertolt Brecht, his model). For the sake of maintaining the diversity of the repertory, it is desirable to have Bratislava theatre seek collaboration with other inspirational personalities of contemporary opera direction. Regardless of that, the impact of Peter Konwitschny's direction mastery on the quality and weight of the art profile of Opera of the Slovak National Theatre is unquestionable.

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