

A Secret Hidden in Old Theatrical Photographs

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When we talk about photographing theatre today, we think above all of recording theatre productions. Historically, for understandable technical reasons, photographers only began to record theatre productions in the 1920-30s, that is, toward the end of the period covered by the Europeana Photography project. Before that time, it was extraordinary to find

photographs that were made during actual theatre performances or those that authentically captured theatre in action, including, for example, light design as well.

One of the oldest successful attempts at such photography is of a staging of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth* (*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk*



Dimitri Shostakovich:
Russian Lady Macbeth
(Lady Macbeth
from the
Mcensk District),
Slovak
National Theatre
1935.
Photographer unknown.
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Bratislava



An analysis of theatrical photography requires not only erudition in theatre study, art history and geography, etc., but also the ability to perceive, as expressed again by Barthes, the *gestus* or *punctum* of photography. And its secret.

District) at the Slovak National Theatre in 1935. It can be found in the Theatre Institute's collection. We do not know anything about its author or how it was taken. We can, however, say that this photograph documents a style of staging that avoided illustrative naturalism and was very probably inspired by the Russian and Czech avant-garde, which gave equal weight to elements of theatrical expression, such as lighting, sound, movement and text. This photograph also has, nonetheless, a mystery, a secret about it that we cannot name. It is an outstanding example of a work that has captured the magic of theatre. The Theatre Institute in Bratislava is helping to unearth, preserve and show historical photographs to an unlimited audience, thanks to the Europeana Photography project. Most of these theatre photographs from the Institute's unique collection.

However, they portray quite a different theatricality. We find theatricality not only in subjects that interest the photographers, such as portraits of actors and actresses, theatre ensembles, costumes, set design, theatre buildings, etc., but also in various forms of social life in cities, towns and villages.

Formally organized celebrations in cities and towns had and still have a theatrical character, involving a precise written scenario, scenery, directors, artists, performers (speakers), etc. For photographers, it was no doubt interesting to capture this external, theatrical quality of these events. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, theatricality in public life was a normal part of culture in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. We are further convinced of this by the richly documented visit of the Habsburg



Visit
of the last ruler
of the
Austro-Hungarian
Empire
Charles I of Austria
and his wife Zita
in Bratislava,
16. 7. 1918.
© Múzeum mesta
Bratislavy

couple Karol I and Zita on July 16, 1918 to Bratislava, a city that until then had been called by completely different names in German (Pressburg) and Hungarian (Pozsony).

The territory of present-day Slovakia was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its proximity to the monarchy's metropolis, Vienna, shaped the lifestyle of its multi-ethnic population. In the life of European cities at the time, theatre as such enjoyed an incredibly important position.

Stefan Zweig, in his famous book *The World of Yesterday*, with the subtitle *Memoirs of a European*, described the theatricality of those times thus:

“It was not the military, nor the political, nor the commercial that was predominant in the life of the individual and of the masses. The first glance of the average Viennese into his morning paper was not at the events in parliament or world affairs, but at the repertoire of the theatre, which assumed such an important role in public life as hardly was possible in any other city. For the Imperial Theater, the Burgtheater, was for the Viennese and for the Austrians more than a stage upon which actors enacted parts: it was a microcosm that mirrored the macrocosm/.../ The Minister President or the richest magnate could walk the streets of Vienna without anyone turning around, but the court actor or opera singer was recognized by every salesgirl or every cabdriver.” (*Stefan Zweig: The World of Yesterday*, University of Nebraska Press and Viking Press, p.14-15).



Not only was the Burgtheater a microcosm that reflected a macrocosm. When Henrik Ibsen wrote his most popular play, *A Doll's House*, better known as *Nora*, the discussion about whether the heroine should have left her husband or not at the end of the play made it onto the front page of the newspaper. One of the most important reasons for this was that the theatre, or more precisely theatricality, gave ordinary life a touch of extraordinariness, a deeper dimension and reach into time. Certainly, the crisis in religion and the process of secularization was also a reaction to the inability of Christian religion to fulfil the spiritual needs of the masses. It was the theatre, long free of other competing media, which became

Theatricality of the Slovak Republic under the Nazi regime. 1939.

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Netrpezlivé tetky na prievoze.



Photographs
of Pavol Sochán
published
as postcards.
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an entertaining, educational, and opinion-making institution, a democratic space loved in equal measure by aristocracy and the lowest social classes, by young and old, men and women.

This great love of theatre caused and was caused by a very widespread network of amateur theatre groups throughout the Habsburg Monarchy. It was these amateurs and their families who then became very dynamic and demanding viewers of professional theatre and constituted its breeding ground. (During my travels in countries of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire I have often been surprised by the size and splendour of old theatre build-

ings, even in small towns.) In today's globalized society with its continuous bombardment of endless attractions, the world saturated in and unified by theatre, *The World of Yesterday* seems like a paradise lost.

The other side of this fascination with theatre and theatricality is, however, a disappearance into illusion and a weakening of the perception of reality - one of the most important reasons for the failure of European society that caused the outbreak of two world wars. The external form has not changed - the theatricality remains, but the content became different.

Behind the endless slew of staged celebrations at the end of the 1930s, not only after the Anschluss in Austria, but also in Bratislava - the capital city of the first independent Slovak Republic and then a satellite of Hitler's Germany - was above all an effort to demonstrate power.

Here we see an overlap in urban and village culture where theatrical elements are used, including artistic values and attractive costumes (folk dress); dance and vocal performances; and the theatricality of ritual. In reality, this village culture becomes an instrument, misused for purposes of propaganda. It is photography that manages to capture and document the dissonance, which emerges with this forced, inorganic style.

Since its beginnings, photography has had to reconcile itself to many limitations. At the time, technical factors (length of exposure,

method of focusing, sensitivity of emulsion, size and weight of cameras, etc.) required the object in front of the camera to be static. That is, the reality in front of the lens had to be staged. For this reason, I have included in the Theatre Institute's collection of photographs several classic studio photographs, which were made in photographic salons and are very intentionally stylized. They were made using elaborately expressive costumes and props or an artificially staged and specific situation.

Talented photographers in Slovakia, such as Pavol Socháč, himself an owner of a photography salon, or photographer-ethnographer Karol Plicka, were able to use the static quality of photographed objects and subjects in an artistic manner.

For his photographic settings, Socháč used his previous experience in the theatre where he was a playwright and director. His pictures



Karol Plicka always arranged his photographs properly.
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Saint Elisabeth,
tableau vivant.
Ateliér Mindszenty,
Bratislava
1907
© Múzeum
mesta Bratislavy



were popular and printed in the form of postcards. On some of them, the author or editor has even added lines (speech) to his “characters” thus accentuating even more the theatricality of the situation captured on film.

Plicka’s arranged photos were primarily guided by an effort to document in the best way the disappearing world of folk culture. Therefore, although he focused above all on quantity, he also achieved a mastery whose effects are difficult for us to decipher.

Perhaps we could take the famous category of Roland Barthes. We can photograph *gestures* or *sets of gestures*, but we cannot photograph what is behind them, that is, the *framing narrative* – the *gestus*. Similarly, we can photograph the result of the creation of *tableaux vivants*, a theatrical form that already in the 18th century consisted of men and women – usually from higher social circles – creating live theatrical scenes that appeared shortly after the curtain went up and ended with the curtain coming down. It became very popular in the second half of the 19th century as a photographer’s rewarding

topic. We cannot, however, photograph its potency – what Barthes calls *pregnant moments*.

Tableaux vivants, live scenes, a form also used in modern theatre by Brecht, Wilson and others, remind us of the process of creating photographs – the shutter opens, the light-sensitive emulsion is exposed to light, and the shutter closes again.

Thus, old theatrical and staged photography offers its potential for other uses, both artistic and theoretical. Until now, the field of theatre studies has worked with it only rarely. Usually, a few photographs are chosen as more or less an isolated illustration of historical studies. A barrier to more substantive use of old theatrical photographs in research could in fact be that which is at the same time the biggest advantage of photography as such – its complexity. An analysis of theatrical photography requires not only erudition in theatre study, art history and geography, etc., but also the ability to perceive, as expressed again by Barthes, the *gestus* or *punctum* of photography – and, I would add, its secret.