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The Journey from The Workers' Theatre to the Municipal Theatre Zlín

Libor Vodička

Iva Mikulová and Marcel Sladkowski. *Městské divadlo Zlín. 70 sezon* [Municipal Theatre Zlín. 70 Seasons]. Zlín: Městské divadlo Zlín, 2015. 245pp.

[reviews]

The book, *Municipal Theatre Zlín. 70 Seasons* by Iva Mikulová and Marcel Sladkowski, was written to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Workers' Theatre, Zlín, in 2015. When writing about the Municipal Theatre Zlín, one has to cover the complicated seventy year period from the end of World War II up to the present day, which included more than forty years of socialism. One has to speak about the theatre in a town which bore the name Gottwaldov. In an almost Orwellian way, the town was named after the first 'worker's president', the representative of 'new labour'.

Zlín was essentially a labourer's town, and not only in the socialist era when it followed Soviet models. Tomáš Baťa, as the founder of a huge factory was in the lead of the 'labour's fete' parade; people marched through Labour square in the newly built town which provided tens of thousands people with work and stopped a massive outflow of people to the United States. In her novel, *People at the Crossroads* (*Lidé na křižovatce* 1937), communist writer Marie Pujmanová named the town Úly (Hives), and labourers in her story work like bees; the leader of the bees is Kazmar instead of a queen bee. A theatre in such a town must have been called the Workers' Theatre (*Divadlo pracujících*). In other words, the theatre of the labourers – for the labourers.

The first and only professional theatre in Zlín was more or less founded due to Baťa's factory and the language spoken on stage was exclusively Czech. Baťa's factory succeeded in expanding the originally small town of several thousand inhabitants and changed it into a modern city full of boulevards and high-rise buildings. The amount of inhabitants then grew more than three times and Zlín achieved a modern city infrastructure. The town was built according to the image of the best functionalistic architects and engineers. It was often compared to other European metropolises (it was dubbed the most spectacular town to the east of Frankfurt on Main).

The first architectural plans for the theatre building were completed in the early 1930s. However, the theatre building remained just a blueprint – unlike the 'big cinema' (Velké kino), the biggest in Czechoslovakia, which was successfully built in 1932. Then, after World War II, Baťa's factory was nationalized and renamed Svit under Communists. A building of a smaller 'chamber' cinema was turned into a theatre. Paradoxically enough, the consequences then made the new theatre building stand against Tomáš Baťa and his family business. Even though his family had contributed to its formation, Zlín's theatre was building up

myths depicting Baťa as an evil capitalist in the Communist era.

One of the first productions of Workers' Theatre was based on a pamphlet against Baťa and his working methods. Its author, Svatopluk Turek, was a Communist writer, propagandist and designer who was a Baťa employee for a short period of time. In 1938, Turek lost a legal dispute with the Baťa family (after five years of proceedings) and was forced to stop the distribution of his book. In 1945, Czechoslovakia adopted a new power regime as stipulated by world powers at the Yalta Conference (Crimea). This decision influenced the situation in Zlín; as in other Czechoslovak towns, the political structures fought for the character of Czechoslovakia which slowly shifted to dictatorship and Stalinist autocracy. It was at this time when the theatre in Zlín was actually founded and built. From the very beginning, the theatre had a clearly defined socio-political function that influenced its repertoire. At the beginning, the theatre was managed by Baťa's factory. Later, the administration passed over to the national committee with its residence in Zlín.

It needs to be pointed out that both authors are well aware of these complex historical circumstances. The book arose as a cooperation of a theatrologist (Mikulová, born 1984), who specializes in the history of Czech theatre after 1945, and a qualified historian (Sladkowski, born 1974). Both are regular theatre critics and have been familiar with the theatre in Zlín since childhood. Their writing congenially relates local patriotism to a sober attitude of 'no matter what'. This, however, applies more to the historic chapters than to those devoted to the last decade. I would say that such an approach is not only understand-

able but, in my opinion, also pretty much correct.

The authors are attentive to cultural, economic, social, and psychological (pre) conditions for a gradual formation of theatre culture in the town. They also pay some attention to its specific audience. The text is chronologically segmented, and its chapters reflect individual stages of urban development. Therefore, the authors start with a theatre set in a 'mono-capitalistic bastion' of a new-born socialist realism, which soon faced a crisis. This era is followed by the so-called golden sixties with their artistic increase; paradoxically enough, such a period lasted even through the 1970s and 1980s, this general period of the 'normalization dullness' in which Zlín's theatre remained an island of 'positive deviation'. The book stresses that both artistic directors – Alois Hajda and Miloš Hynšt – were such first-rate artists who would, be it under different circumstances, work in one of the two leading theatre centres in the Czech Republic. The text covers also the last decades, ending as late as 2015.

Mikulová and Sladkowski observe the changing and progressing production framework in the theatre, the main aim of which was to build a new building in the 1960s, as well as theatre productions of the Workers' Theatre.

They focus on *personalities, dramaturgy and repertoire development* and *chosen works*. This allows them to interpret the first forty years of existence sensitively, and not as a battle with the autocratic power (a method frequently present in Czech historiographic context of theatrical history). They rather perceive it as a fight for form, expression, transmission, and testimony. This method proves to be successful, primarily in those

chapters when the richness of materials inspired them both and the documents themselves 'gave evidence' of individual events and productions. However, it is a pity that somehow, the people and their destinies have vanished. There are a number of lists that include numerous names and roles; yet, the most important participants – the actors and their personal works – have 'faded away'. Such approach to presenting facts is understandable and sometimes even necessary, mainly when there are only historical sources, photographs, and reviews. Nevertheless, oral survey always provide us with plenty of facts and priceless pieces of information. Therefore, some interviews with contemporary witnesses, living participants, and spectators would provide both authors with a different perspective and bring a lot of valuable material. Portraits of important creators (but not only them) could also prevent the feeling that individual human beings were lost in a stream of anonymous historical time. Selected chapters providing a more profound analysis and interpretation of chosen actors and directing methods would also help. One also misses more attention paid to theatre machinery, technical facilities and stage design, even though the new building the Workers' Theatre opened in 1967 was one of the best technically, mechanically, and personally equipped theatres in Czechoslovakia.

It is easily understood that the chapters on the period after 1989 seem more elaborated. The objective 'science' stands back and gives more space to the authors' personal perspectives and preferences. Some readers may dislike this subjectivity, especially when such a publication suggests objectivity, detachment and it also tends to be canonical. Let us not perceive it that way. We should rather bear

in mind that such a guide is also a document of its authors and times. Therefore, I incline to think that, as far as the present time is concerned, this subjective interpretation is both necessary and correct. The authors might have been more aware about this fact; they should have used more quotes and paraphrases in order to point out their personal perspectives even more clearly.

The final sections of the book include a broader context and secondary activities organized by the theatre in Zlín (Gottwaldov, respectively). Zlín has revived its traditional theatre festival with its associate events, the organization of which was interrupted for twenty years during the era of normalization.

The need of an intercultural exchange and of communication in the whole region arose in the second half of the 1960s. In the beginning, the festival was an overview of South Moravian theatres (the theatre founder at that time was the South Moravian Region that resided in Brno). The beginning of the 1990s brought about this festival's revival; simultaneously, the festival was transformed into a Czech-Slovak cultural exchange which also hosted international ensembles.

As already mentioned, the book depicts all the events up to 2015, because its main aim was to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Workers' Theatre in 2015. Therefore, one can also read parts devoted to the first years of Petr Michálek's directing. The narrative deepens in this section; each season is discussed in detail which causes a sense of disproportion. Michálek's start as a director of the Municipal Theatre Zlín (2011) should have provided a good ending point. The remaining information could have been presented in

the Appendix that includes a list of all productions, awards, name index etc.

The book is printed on glossy paper and includes a number of photographs; however, we are not speaking just about the representative guide that each and every theatre wants to publish as a part of its promotion, popularization, and as

a proof of its numerous achievements. Both authors wanted to write a specialized, yet readable text which was accessible to the public. They have succeeded in doing so. Moreover, the offered text successfully follows the methodology of today's theatre studies.