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Characters of the Other in Slovak Folk Drama and Czech and Slovak Professional Puppet Theater

By Ida Hledíková

Abstract: My contribution concerns depictions of characters in Slovak puppet theater and its dramaturgy. In the first part, characters of folk theater in Slovakia will be discussed. The term “folk theater” implies that it is not a popular puppet theater of the sort generally known in Europe as *bastinado*, or slapstick in English. Rather, I am concerned with a historical kind of theater, played by folks through the 19th century. There were plays presented on the occasion of Christmas, spring folk celebrations, harvests, etc. In theater texts of the folk theater, we find characters of Jews and gypsy heroes. Their portrayals have indicia of stereotypical depiction. Over time, there was a transfiguration of attitudes from the potentially racist to the positively idealistic and romantic.

The second part of the chapter looks into the dramaturgy of Slovak and Czech contemporary puppet theater in which Romany heroes are presented. I present the plays that were staged in professional puppet theaters, e.g., *Kalo Mitraš* by Miloslav Klíma, who was a dramaturge of the famous Czech director Josef Krofta (DRAK Theatre Hradec Králové); *Piatko and Pustaj*, written and directed by the young, renowned Slovak director Gejza Dezorz in the Puppet Theatre in Košice; a play written by Gabriela Pataráková titled *Nothing*; and a play of Ján Romanovský, *The Dilino's Violins*. The majority of these texts were written and staged in the 1980s, the final decade of socialism and communism in the country and the beginning of the post-communist period.

I reflect on and compare depictions of the main heroes in the above-mentioned plays—old folk plays and the plays of 1980s—as well as discuss reasons why the Romany ethnic minority was popular or a focal point of interest.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, theater history, folk drama—Slovak, Czech drama

This essay concerns theatrical characters representing members of minorities in Slovak puppet folk theater and stagings of professional puppet theaters. In the first part, I present characters of the others who appeared in the folk theater. Folk theater in Central Europe is now a historical form of theater. It was played by folk from medieval times through the 19th century. In Slovakia, it made a unique contribution to the development of the performing arts thanks to its character, aesthetic structure, and social function. Today, we can only find remnants of this folk culture.

In its aesthetics and relationship with everyday life, folklore does not make a sharp distinction between art and religion or between rite and work. Genres likewise tend to converge in folklore. Folk theater was no exception to this syncretism of folklore, manifesting a wide-ranging symbiosis of forms, types, and functions. Folk theater covers folk drama and all the expressions of folklore involving dramatic forms or theatrical elements: drama, dialogue, costumes, gestures, facial expressions, masks, objects, puppets, etc. The presence of such phenomena makes folklore interesting for theater researchers even if part of the overall structure is not theatrical. Theatrical elements within non-theatrical structures are, in fact, relatively common.

Folk theater did not put up barriers. It counted on active audience participation. It incorporated the performance of customs that accompanied the whole life of a person and formed part of people's rustic religion, moral standards, social relations, and shared knowledge and experience.

In the syncretic form of a rite, play, or magic spell, some elements of a religious character often found their way into the liturgy, while more playful elements would become ritual theater. Freed from the constraints of ritual observance, the play opened up broad opportunities for cultural expressions. Thanks to the conventions of "make believe" and games, the play was a means for people to escape from fear and social decrees and express their feelings, views, and passions, especially their dissatisfaction with moral and religious rules. The immanence of the play and its opposition to the sacred and the existential gave rise to parody, farce, and ridicule. The roots of carnivalization can be found in elements such as ritual laughter, profanation, and other customs performed in the context of change—the transition from winter to spring, life and death, etc. The negative power of malevolent forces could be broken by laughter. Ritual laughter, defamation, and ridicule became liberating and regenerative forces for humanity in the play. For example, the spring equinox is associated with the theatrical ceremony of taking out and drowning Morena—a female

figure or puppet that represents the outgoing winter. Entries in 12th-century chronicles suggest that such rituals may once have involved human sacrifice and that the Morena figure was a substitute for a live victim.

Slovak folk plays were performed by ordinary urban and rural inhabitants and sometimes by members of professional guilds such as miners or gingerbread makers. The plays can be classified as ritual plays, Christmas plays, martyr plays, guild plays, humorous interludes, and semi-folk plays. Slovak folk theater was performed mainly by live actors, though they often wore masks and, less often, used figurative puppets. Figurative puppets were often used in ritual plays, Christmas plays, and semi-folk plays. Elements from the visual arts most frequently included face masks and full-body effigies (e.g., Morena), but animal figures and original, imaginary beings are also typical features (see Figure 1). Objects would also be used, mainly as props.



Figure 1. (1936). The Puppet of Morena, the character symbolizing the equinox of spring, Zborov, northern Slovakia. Photo by Ján Krákora.

In terms of the calendar of plays, Slovakia had widespread Christmas traditions including caroling and Christmas plays. These were among the most widespread of such phenomena, and it is still occasionally possible to see children going dressed as Three Kings and carrying a *betlehem* (Nativity scene) resembling a miniature church. Christmas plays that include puppetry can be found in the northern part of Slovakia near the border with Poland.

Alongside the traditional figures of a Nativity play or crib scene, such as the Infant Jesus and the shepherds, they include figures such as King Herod, Death, and other figures that ethnographers, inspired by the idea of carnivalization, treat as comic supporting characters. Such characters include a policeman, masked musicians, a Gypsy man and woman, a chimney sweep, and a traditional Slovak tinker, together with animal figures, often of a fantastical appearance created by costumes made of reversed skins. One of these was a Goat mask, which had a central role in one of the Christmas plays. A procession would arrive with wishes for a good harvest and a request to look after the Goat for the winter. This play is linked to Christmas only by the figures of King Herod, his servant, and a Jewish man, who are part of the procession.

Christmas plays are widely represented in Slovak folk theater. Every region had its own Christmas plays and customs. A traditional folk Nativity play would usually incorporate not only the liturgical Nativity story but also jocular playfulness and rough humor reflecting pastoral life, bandit protest, and arrogance (see Figure 2). The relics of a harsh medieval culture of ridicule upset many people, who called the plays “foolish Nativity scenes.” In the 19th century, the authorities tried to reform the plays into a more purely religious model.



Figure 2. (1962). Caroling with puppet Bethlehem, Babin, northern Slovakia. Photo by Ján Dérer.

Nativity puppet plays were influenced by the Polish Nativity scene (*šopka*). Similar puppet shows connected with the Nativity can also be found in Ukraine and Belarus, where they are known as *vertep* or *batleyka*. Polish and Slovak puppet theater both worked with puppets operated from below on a peg. A famous example of a *betlehem* puppet play was produced in the village of Lechnica. The play came from Poland around 1920. Another famous puppet play comes from the village of Lendak. Here, the play was modified to reflect the presence of Romany people (gypsies) in the society. This Nativity play was given the name *Džafkuline*. A gypsy is included as a comic character. The word *Dža* in Romany language has two meanings: “church” (or temple, synagogue etc.) and the imperative “go!” Folk theater treated ethnic minority characters (but also women and several male characters) as comic characters. In the Slovak plays, the character of the Jew from the Polish plays that inspired them is replaced by the Gypsy, probably as a result of the differences in the population of North and East Slovakia.

There are also signs of adaptation to the Slovak environment in a non-puppet play about Herod based on Polish sources and performed at Spišská Magura (see Figure 3). The play told the following story: A Jewish sage, a caricature of a village rabbi, informs Herod that a new Jewish king will soon be born. Herod fears for his throne. Death comes and strikes him down with a blow to the head, after which the Devil carries him away. The play with the closest relationship to the Polish original was “The Farmer and the Jew.” It has the form of a Baroque interlude. It is a sung religious dispute between a Jew and a Farmer who is predicting the birth of Jesus.



Figure 3. (1958). The Jewish man, the mask from the folk theater, Haligovce, northern Slovakia. Photo by Martin Slivka.

Polish influences appear in Slovak folk theater only in the northern part of the country. The ethnographer Martin Slivka (1992), who has done more than anyone else to advance our knowledge of Slovak folk theater, notes:

A general overview cannot fail to note that the frequent appearance of Jews in various forms is a distinctive feature of such plays. Such figures have appeared in dramatic and acting roles in ceremonial folk plays and interludes in other areas of Slovakia, but they have a special integrity and unprecedented popularity at Spišská Magura, part of the North of Slovakia. This is the unmistakable influence of Poland, where such motifs appear frequently in folk theater and literature. They begin to appear in folklore with the waves of anti-Semitism in the 17th and 18th centuries. Jewish figures appear as caricatures in Polish and Slovak plays, usually performing comedic functions. (97)

Folk theater is no longer a developing phenomenon. It survives mainly as an object of ethnographic research. The research and filmmaking activities of Martin Slivka, whose documentary films recorded an authentic portrait of Slovak folk customs and plays in the second half of the 20th century are unparalleled and form an integral part of Slovak cultural heritage.

Whereas folk theater incorporated Jewish and Romany figures as comic figures, reflecting the fear of people who are different, the dramaturgy of modern professional puppet theaters gives only marginal attention to Romany people and the issues that affect them. Jewish characters do not appear in modern puppetry. There is a logical explanation for this: The dramaturgy of the professional puppet theaters established in Czechoslovakia between 1949 and 1960 was oriented toward works for children. Under socialism, themes like the Holocaust were not discussed openly because of their taboo nature. There was a similar distaste for Romany issues. The authorities wanted to assimilate the Romany communities into society and made several (largely unsuccessful) efforts to use social benefits to motivate Romany people to adapt to majority norms.

Professional puppet theaters¹ performed a few original plays featuring Romany characters and issues. Some featured a stereotypical Romany hero who needed to be transformed or reformed. Other plays presented the Romany lifestyle in a romanticized way that was orthogonal to the norms of majority society.

¹ Five professional puppet theaters in Slovakia were founded between 1951 and 1960 as institutional puppet theaters within the process of the professionalization of theater network in Czechoslovakia. In the Czech part of the country, nine professional theaters were founded at the time. The first professional puppet theater in Czechoslovakia was founded in 1949 in Prague.

Puppet plays with Romany themes, mainly fairytales, were staged in the 1980s. In 1981, the play by Gabriela Brajerová-Pataráková was staged by director Ján Uličiansky in the Puppet Theatre Košice (Eastern Slovakia) under the title *Nothing* [Nič].² This well-written text was published in 1982 by the agency of literary authors known as LITA.³

There are two main heroes in the play—the young Gypsy boy Kalo and his personified alter ego called Nothing. Nothing represents desolation. Nothing gets bigger and bigger, more expansive, and finally displaces Kalo from his house. Kalo becomes the victim of his own ineligibility to do anything. Despite this, he tries to work, but never finishes what he starts. Nothing occupies his house but becomes smaller when a young pretty Romany girl, Iboya, the daughter of an ironsmith, appears. Kalo starts to work with the ironsmith and marries Iboya. Nothing disappears, vacating Kalo's house.

The text is based on cultural traditions of the Romany minority. In the text as well as in the staging of puppetry, director Ján Uličiansky used elements of Romany culture and aesthetics including words from Romany vocabulary and dialect, music, and also design (see Figure 4). The play was presented under the name of Gabriela Pataráková, although the real author of the play was her husband Ján Patarák, playwright and writer, TV, and radio editor. He was a prohibited author before the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 for political reasons. The staging was presented at the well-known international puppetry festival in Bielsko-Biala (Poland) in 1981.

² I present the titles of the plays in the original Slovak language in brackets.

³ LITA is the Slovak agency of literary authors. During socialism, this was the only official publishing house in Slovakia.



Figure 4. (1981). Kalo and Iboia, the characters of gypsies in the staging *Nothing* by Puppet Theatre in Košice. Photo by Mária Litavská-Pružinská.

In the DRAK Theatre of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic), the Romany fairytale *Kalo Mitras* [*Kalo Mitraš*] was staged by famous director Josef Krofta in 1982. The play had a Gypsy hero with the same name as the hero of the play *Nothing*. It presented a story based on the conflict between good and evil. Racism, which represents evil, is directed at the Romany minority. The ideological purpose of the staging was to condemn racism, to protest against the oppression of people who were of a different ethnicity. Instead of a traditional fairytale hero, Kalo represents a wandering hero. Czech theater critic Petr Pavlovský (1987) defines the hero as “the western hero” who comes from somewhere and goes nowhere (100). The staging by Josef Krofta had extraordinary scene design and received awards in theater festivals several times (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. (1982). *Kalo Mitrash*, the staging of DRÁK Theatre, Hradec Králové. Photo by Josef Ptáček.

In 1988, one year before the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, the Slovak play entitled *Dilino's Violin* [*Dilino ve husle*] appeared at the Puppet Theatre in Nitra. Playwright Ján Romanovský presents relations between two communities, the Romany and the majority. Dilino is a young Romany who expects to be an ironsmith. He likes wood and wants to be a carver. He carves figures, and that is why he is considered to be a fool. From time to time he steals something small to help his family. He meets the gypsy queen of love named Kamli, who helps him become a gifted carver and find his bride Johanka. Kalo and Johanka have many children together, and they found a music band. The author attempts to update the theme by referencing contemporary social phenomena. For example, Dilino tells a dragon that he cannot eat him because he has AIDS. The play is not well balanced in its treatment of stereotypes, motifs, and genre.

In 2000, a young director of puppet theater, Gejza Dezorz, staged his own adaptation of a traditional Slovak fairytale named *Friday and Voidy* [*Piatko a Pustaj*]. The author enhances the story by including Romany phenomena in the original fairytale as well as more pop-culture sources like

horror films, grotesque imagery, and parody. The hero of the original fairytale is not a Romany boy, but the author of the adaptation changes him into a Romany hero. Dezor sets the story at the turn of the century and concretizes the place—Eastern Slovakia, which is a multi-ethnic region with a large Romany minority. The main hero of the adapted story is a Romany boy, an orphan found on Friday in the street and adopted. Later on, he leaves his home and wanders. In one town, he buries a dead man. This man was a defaulter, and his neighborhood refused to bury him; moreover, they beat him with sticks. Later on, the spirit of the buried man helps the boy to find the girl he dreamed of and she becomes his wife (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. (2000). Friday and Monk, characters from the staging *Friday and Voidy*, Puppet Theatre in Košice. Photo by Ondrej Béreš.

The Romany boy Friday is depicted as a positive character, devoid of stereotypes. The adaptation of the fairytale is humorous but brutal. The story presents the morality of the Romany hero. Furthermore, it shows a positive attitude of the young director toward the Romany ethnic minority by creating a positive character of the Romany hero. Gejza Dezor as a director of the production used *bastinado*—a brutal glove puppet genre, which is, from the formal point of view, a suitable means of expression for presenting the original brutal story of the fairytale.

All of the above-mentioned productions of professional puppet theaters in Slovakia were created by non-Romany theater artists. After 1989, the year of the so-called Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, Slovak society became more interested in Romany culture and original performances created by the Romany, especially music. A unique professional theater of the Romany ethnic minority of Slovakia, named Romathan, was founded in 1992.

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About the Author

Ida Hledíková is a professor, theatre researcher, critic, historian, and expert on puppet theatre at the Puppetry Department in the Academy of Performing Arts (APA) in Bratislava, Slovakia. She graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts Prague in Dramaturgy and Directing of Puppet Theatre. From 2004 to 2010 she fulfilled the role of the vice-dean of the Theatre Faculty, responsible for research. Between 2011 and 2015 she was the vice-rector of APA. At present, she is the chairwoman of the Department of Puppetry. She is the author of numerous articles in the *World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts*, two monographs on puppetry, editor of *The UNIMA Directory of Puppet Theatre Researchers* (2012), co-editor of *Tracing Past and Present*, and author of the internationally awarded documentary film *The Last Caravan*. From 2000 until 2016 she was the President of the UNIMA Research Commission. She has also directed two puppetry festivals and curated children and youth programs in the international television and film festival Prix Danube.