

# THE HIGH PROVINCE ON THE WESTERN BORDER OF HUNGARY: IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE OPERATIONS OF THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE IN PRESSBURG IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *The newly built Városi Színház / Das Stadttheater (Municipal Theatre) in Pressburg, designed by the architects Ferdinand Fellner, Jr. and Hermann Helmer, was opened in the autumn of 1886. The building was a significant milestone in the theatrical history of Pressburg in several respects. It offered new technical possibilities for carrying out performances, provided a solid background for the performers, and impressed the spectators by being very comfortable. In the Hungarian government's view, it was to become a symbol of the modernizing efforts of the town in terms of the proclaimed centralization and Magyarization of the country.*

*It functioned in a typically provincial style of half-year theatrical seasons, divided into a German and a Hungarian part, and placed in the hands of newly arriving directors. The cultural history of this former coronation town helped in gaining subscribers because going to the theatre was part of the cultural life of the Pressburg bourgeoisie, and discussions about the theatre were at the centre of the attention of the town representatives. On the other hand, the audience demanded the standard that prevailed in the Viennese theatres, which they knew very well from their regular visits. Since the revenues came mainly from ticket sales, the directors tried to gain the favour of the regular theatre-goers. Whenever the German part of the season had a larger number of months, theatre operations were stable and achieved a high standard; but whenever the number of Hungarian performances increased, the town had to increase its subvention because attendance was consistently low.*

*This paper analyses various ideological aspects of the daily theatre operations, including the contractual terms stipulated by the town (along with the technical requirements), the performed repertoire (significantly influenced by the theatres in Vienna), and the composition of*

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*the audience. It deliberately focuses on the period before 1900 because this was a key phase in the development of the theatre and its operations which influenced even the later years of its existence.*

**Keywords:** Municipal Theatre in Pressburg, nineteenth century, daily theatre operations, funding the theatre, theatre ensemble, repertoire, audience

Theatre buildings representing the role and significance of the theatre in a given era form an inseparable part of the history of European culture. The boom they experienced from the second half of the eighteenth century established conditions for the continuous cultivation of the dramatic arts and contributed to building a tradition. Two theatre buildings, both called Városi Színház/Das Stadttheater (Municipal Theatre), played a major role in the history of Pressburg (now Bratislava). The first was erected in 1776 and the second in 1886. Their emergence and development was determined by the socio-cultural situation. The first theatre was formed by the enlightened aristocracy, whereas the second one was shaped by the ideals of the educated bourgeoisie. The first theatre existed until 1884, when it was demolished and construction of a new Municipal Theatre was started in its place according to the plans of the architects Ferdinand Fellner, Jr. (1847–1916) and Hermann Gottfried Helmer (1849–1919). Discussions about the need for a new theatre had been going on for many years, as some of the representatives of the town favoured an extensive renovation of the old building instead of building a new one. A key step was the decision of the Hungarian Ministry of Interior Affairs which, after inspecting the theatre building, declared it technically unsound and instructed the town to build a new one.<sup>2</sup>

The invitation of the Viennese architects Fellner Jr. and Helmer reflects the long-standing and close connection of Pressburg with the artistic environment of Vienna, and, on the other hand, also an effort to integrate the “town on the western border of Hungary” into the wider cultural area of the Monarchy.<sup>3</sup> The architects designed the new theatre according to state-of-the-art safety standards in a historical Neo-Renaissance style with an elaborate Neo-Baroque interior and a seating capacity of approximately 1,170. The location of the new theatre in roughly the same place where the old municipal theatre had stood pointed to the continuity of the theatrical

2 Zur Geschichte des Pressburger Theater-Baues 1879–1887. Zusammengestellt von Oberingenieur Anton Sendlein. Municipal Archive of Bratislava (hereinafter referred to as MAB), City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Theatre, box 2940, inv. nos. 15879, p. 35.

3 Jozef Tancer, “Obraz nie je odraz: Reprézntácie mesta ako výskumný problém”, in *Medzi provinciou a metropolou: Obraz Bratislavy v 19. a 20. storočí*, ed. Gabriela Dudeková (Bratislava: Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2012), 39.

tradition. At the same time, this theatre was situated away from the historical centre of the town and, consequently, a new cultural hub was created. The building was to be the home of the Hungarian muse, which was clearly suggested by the Hungarian name Municipal Theatre visible on the façade. Another sign of the new socio-political situation, characterized in the late nineteenth century by strong centralizing and Magyarization tendencies, was the programme of the opening performance compiled exclusively from Hungarian works, and closing with the Hungarian composer Ferenc Erkel's opera *Bánk bán*.<sup>4</sup> Because of the mixed German-speaking and Hungarian bourgeoisie, the representatives of the town decided to divide the season into two parts, a German and a Hungarian one, with their respective directors.

This decision reflects the fact that the town, as the owner of the previous theatre building, had experience in running a theatre, and although the rhetoric of the dailies in Budapest talked about the new building as a significant national tool in the process of strengthening Hungarian theatre,<sup>5</sup> the reality was different. The Hungarian Government did not contribute to the construction of the building and clearly declared to the representatives of the town that it was not planning to fund the operations of the theatre.<sup>6</sup> During the ceremonial opening of the theatre, Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza (1830–1902) called on the people of Pressburg to be patriotic, and this was to be manifested in the form of generous moral and material support for Hungarian theatre.<sup>7</sup>

The new building represented a significant milestone in the theatrical history of Pressburg in several respects. It offered new technical possibilities for carrying out the performances, provided a solid background for the performers, and impressed the spectators by being very comfortable. It was to become the symbol of the modernizing efforts of the town. However, we must not forget the fact that it was a theatre operating in a province and could not be compared with theatres that were receiving high subventions. In Pressburg, the directors had to rely on the favour of the regular theatre-goers who found scope for self-presentation, entertainment, and amusement in the theatre. The rich cultural history of this former coronation town helped in gaining subscribers because going to the theatre was part of the cultural life of the Pressburg bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the audience demanded the standard that prevailed in the Vienna theatres, which they knew very well from their regular visits. Ensuring daily operations was a precon-

4 Katalin Kim-Szacsvai, "Die Erkel-Werkstatt: Die Anfänge einer Arbeitsteilung in der Komposition", in *Studia Musicologica*, 52/ 4 (2012): 28.

5 "Eröffnung des Presßburger Theaters", *Pester Lloyd*, 23 September 1886, 3.

6 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Theatre, box 2d 6/2, inv. nos. 15861, minutes from the meeting of the theatre committee from 25 August 1885 and 7 November 1885.

7 "Töredékek tegnapról", *Pozsonyvidéki lapok*, 24 September 1886, 3.

dition for the successful career of each lessee. What its main determinants were, what contractual terms the town offered to newly arriving directors at a time of growing Hungarianization, and what role the repertoire-based operations played are among the areas this study examines. It deliberately focuses on the period before 1900 because this was a key phase in the development of the theatre and its operations, and also influenced the later years of its existence.

### THE MANNER OF LEASING THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE AND FUNDING ITS DAILY OPERATIONS

Ever since its completion, the Municipal Theatre in Pressburg was owned by the town and leased to theatre directors and their companies. The season lasted seven months, usually from early October to late April, or to Palm Sunday. In the summer months an open-air Arena was available to the directors on the Petržalka side of the Danube, in which Max Reinhardt also worked in his youth in 1893.<sup>8</sup> In 1899 the town built a new, covered Arena in roughly the same place as the old one. Since the half-year season in the Municipal Theatre was divided into a German and a Hungarian part, the town was aware of the problem of finding good lessees. This is why, even before launching the theatre operations in the autumn of 1886, Pressburg entered into an agreement with the town of Timișoara about alternating the directors and their ensembles providing German and Hungarian performances in the theatres of these two towns. Like the Municipal Theatre in Pressburg, the Franz Joseph I Theatre in Timișoara was also designed by the Viennese architects Fellner Jr. and Helmer, and the composition of the German- and Hungarian-speaking bourgeoisie was also similar. The daily *Preßburger Zeitung* reported that Timișoara decided to support Hungarian performances with 7,200 guildens and German performances with 1,600 guildens, which were to cover travel expenses. This highlighted Timișoara's interest in promoting Hungarian theatre in the town.<sup>9</sup> The agreement lasted for thirteen years (1886–1899) and resulted in securing a half-year lease of the theatre for both directors.<sup>10</sup>

Since German-speaking representatives of the town prevailed at the time of building the theatre in Pressburg, they decided to assign the more favourable autumn and winter months to performances in German. The rest of the season remained for Hungarian performances. This division was in effect until 1899, when

8 Miloš Mistrík, "Reinhardt's Sommerspielzeit 1893 in Preßburg," in *Max Reinhardt a Bratislava / Preßburg*, ed. Miloš Mistrík (Bratislava: VEDA, Vienna: Theatermuseum, 2019), 98–125..

9 "Vom ungarischen Theater", *Preßburger Zeitung*, 11 April 1886, 3.

10 Maria Pechtol, *Thalia in Temeswar: Die Geschichte des Temeswarer deutschen Theaters im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Bucharest: Kriterion Verlag, 1972), 190.

the town leased the Municipal Theatre to a single director with two companies – a German and a Hungarian one. Pressburg returned to the original two-director model again in 1902, albeit under different conditions. The Hungarian performances were staged in the more favourable winter months and their number also gradually increased. Despite all the changes, the German and Hungarian performances in the Municipal Theatre continued to alternate until the arrival of Czech artists in 1919 and the launching of the operations of the *Slovenské národné divadlo* (Slovak National Theatre) in March 1920.

The selection of the lessees of the Municipal Theatre was influenced to a large extent by the personal recommendations of the directors under consideration. This definitely applied in the case of directors of the Hungarian performances, who were recommended by the Hungarian government that supervised the activities of theatres in the provinces through the Ministry of the Interior and its offices.<sup>11</sup> For the German performances, the town officially issued an appeal for tenders. However, since the Hungarian government intervened in the selection through the pro-Hungarian elite associations in Pressburg, the town tried to find a suitable candidate in advance and enter into an agreement with him about the terms of the lease. One of the most important conditions was his financial stability, which he had to demonstrate by paying a deposit before the beginning of the lease. From 1886–1899 this deposit amounted to 5,000 guildens.<sup>12</sup> After 1900, the deposit was increased to 10,000 guildens, or 20,000 krone.

The selected candidate was first interviewed by the theatre committee, whose proposal had subsequently to be approved by the representatives of the town. A three-year lease agreement of the theatre could be signed only afterwards. The agreement of 1886 and 1889 and news items in the local press reporting the course of the tender procedure reveal that, at the beginning of the operations of the theatre in the new building, the director of the German part of the season was responsible for the German as well as the Hungarian performances, whose number was set at sixty evenings.<sup>13</sup> The Hungarian performances took place with the participation of the Hungarian ensemble led by the director himself, but the main responsibility for the whole season lay with the director of the German season. A change occurred in 1890 (in 1889 the 1886 agreement had been renewed for another three years, but the director violated the rules and the town terminated

11 György Székely, ed., “Országos Vidéki Színészeti Felügyelőség”, in *Magyar színházművészeti lexikon*, ed. György Székely (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994), <http://mek.niif.hu/02100/02139/html/sz18/76.html>, accessed 20 September 2019.

12 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 24 and box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

13 Idem.

the agreement after a year) when a decision was taken that the Hungarian performances would not be overseen by the director of the German season but would be managed separately by the Hungarian director.<sup>14</sup> This decision paved the way for a change in the theatre operations because, by shifting the competencies, the role of the director of the German season diminished, and in 1899 the pro-Hungarian circles managed to achieve the assignment of the theatre exclusively to the Hungarian director with a bilingual ensemble.

The lease of the theatre building was free, but the director paid for the lighting and heating of the building. In 1889, heating fees were as follows: from November to March, the fee was around five to nine guildens for evening performances and two to four guildens for afternoon performances. In October and April, 2.50 guildens had to be paid for an evening performance and 1.50 guildens for an afternoon one. A one-time two-hour heating of the stage outside the performances cost two guildens.<sup>15</sup> The issue of lowering these fees was repeatedly raised by the theatre directors when applying for subventions from the town; sometimes they were granted and sometimes not.

The funding of the theatre by the town was connected to its support for Hungarian theatre and increased in proportion to the gradually growing number of Hungarian performances. The financial ledgers reveal that in 1892, i.e. two years after the change in the directors' competencies, the fees for the maintenance of the theatre building and the subvention to the director of the Hungarian performances almost doubled because it became evident that the Hungarian theatre could not survive in Pressburg without the help of the town. In 1891 the town provided 5,543.50 guildens for running the building, while in 1892 it gave 9,811.91 guildens. By 1895 the total amount for the maintenance of the theatre building and the subvention for the Hungarian director was 11,599.86 guildens instead of the originally planned 11,300 guildens, which the town funded from its own budget. The following year, this item was divided into an amount for the maintenance of the theatre building and a subvention for the Hungarian director, an amount for water and an amount for deliveries, and was roughly the same total sum (only the schedule budget is available from 1896 and it records 10,818 guildens). In 1898 the amount for the maintenance of the theatre building was divided among several items: building maintenance (5,295.20 guildens), fire protection (3,029.84 guildens), and lighting (2,943.07 guildens), to which were added an item for water (69.40 guildens) and for deliveries (15.60 guildens). The total amount (11,353.11 guildens) corresponded to the amount from the previous year

14 "Zur Theaterfrage", *Preßburger Zeitung*, 9 January 1890, 2–3.

15 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

(the difference was in the subvention for the Hungarian director).<sup>16</sup> From 1899, when the town built a new summer Arena, expenses for the summer operations of the Arena were added to the expenses of the town to run the Municipal Theatre. The total amount for the maintenance of the Municipal Theatre and the Arena paid by the town represented 40,000 kronen (i.e., 20,000 guildens) in 1900.<sup>17</sup> It was increased in 1906 when the town planned to support both theatres with an amount of 50,000 kronen.<sup>18</sup> From 1912, finances dropped by 10,000 kronen. The reason is unknown, but we may assume that it had to do with the achieved stabilization of the Hungarian theatre in the town, since at that time the Hungarian director leased the theatre for eight months and attendance at the performances was higher than in the previous years.

Repairs in the theatre were taken care of by the town. In the first years of the theatre operations, the director had to arrange for the cleaning the building. If he neglected this duty, the town was entitled to have it cleaned it at the director's expense.<sup>19</sup> From 1908, a separate item was listed in the accounting books as payment for guarding and cleaning the theatre, which documents the above fact that the town took over several expenses connected with running the building at a time when the number of Hungarian performances was increasing.<sup>20</sup>

During the German part of the season, the town presumed that the director would make a decent profit from the tickets and would be able to earn a sufficient income for himself. Ticket prices were the same for both the German and the Hungarian parts of the season. From 1886 to 1899 they were as follows: for a ground-floor or first-floor box: 5 guildens; a second-floor box: 4 guildens; a place in the three front rows on the ground floor: 1.20 guildens; a place on the next three rows on the ground floor: 1 gulden; for other rows: 0.80 guildens; and for standing room on the ground floor: 0.50 guildens. For the second-floor balcony, first row: 0.80 guildens; second-floor balcony, second row: 0.70 guildens; second-floor balcony, other rows: 0.60 guildens. For an armchair on the third floor in the first row: 0.50 guildens; an armchair on the third floor in the second row: 0.40 guildens; an

16 *Pozsony szabad. királyi város zárszámadása és vagyonleltára / Schluss-Rechnung und Vermögens-Inventar der königlichen Freistadt Preßburg* (Pozsony: Nyomatott Angermayer Károly nyomdaintézetében, 1892, 1895, 1896, 1898), 25.

17 *Ibid.*, 27.

18 *Pozsony szabad. királyi város költségelőirányzata / Präliminare der königlichen Freistadt Preßburg* (Pozsony: Angermayer Károly könyvnyomda-intézetéből, 1906), 25.

19 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 24 and box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

20 *Pozsony szabad. királyi város zárszámadása és vagyonleltára / Schluss-Rechnung und Vermögens-Inventar der königlichen Freistadt Preßburg*. Pozsony: Nyomatott Angermayer Károly nyomdaintézetében 1902, 1908, 27.

armchair on the third floor in the other rows: 0.30 guildens; and for standing room on the third floor: 0.25 guildens. An Armchair in the fourth-floor gallery cost 0.25 guildens, and standing room on the fourth floor 0.20 guildens.<sup>21</sup> The number of performances in a subscription cycle was announced before the season began. The director was not allowed to increase the ticket prices or raise the number of performances per season that he wanted to play outside the subscription (such as premieres and rare guest performances) or to make any changes in the middle of the season without the town's permission; otherwise, he would have been fined.

Under the agreement, performances took place daily, which is confirmed by the regular reviews published in the daily newspapers. If the director wanted to organize a second performance on the same day (for example, a Sunday afternoon performance), he had to submit an explicit request for it. It was forbidden to have performances in the theatre on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.<sup>22</sup> Although 24 December is not mentioned in the 1886 and 1889 draft agreement, the theatre was closed on that day according to the dailies. Also, the agreement required the director to provide the theatre premises for the concert of the Church Music Association of Saint Martin's Cathedral in Pressburg (hereinafter referred to as CMA; in German the Kirchenmusikverein bei der Dom-, Kollegiats- und Stadtpfarrkirche zu St. Martin; in Hungarian the Szent Márton Pozsonyi Egyházi Zeneegylet).

The director had to organize three fund-raising performances each season, to support the Catholic municipal hospital, the Lutheran hospital, and the municipal fund for the poor.<sup>23</sup> These fund-raising performances usually took place at the end of the season, with the participation of well-known guests from Vienna, who guaranteed high attendance despite a higher ticket price. The repertoire was selected by the organizing committee, with a preference for classical plays and tragedies. Thanks to the almost yearly guest performance of Bernhard Baumeister at the fund-raising performances supporting the Lutheran hospital, Spanish classics were staged regularly in Pressburg in the late nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

The safety measures of the Municipal Theatre in Pressburg, drawn up according to the new requirements and issued after the fire at the Ringtheater in Vienna,

21 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 24 and box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

22 Idem.

23 Ingrid Kušniráková, "Sociálna a zdravotnícka starostlivosť v Uhorsku v prvej polovici 19. Storočia", in *Historický časopis*, 64/3 (2016): 406.

24 Beatriz Gómez-Pablos, "El teatro de Calderón de la Barca y sus traducciones," in *Actas del XXI Encuentro de profesores de Español en Eslovaquia* (Bratislava: Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2018), 22.

contain information about the staff responsible for the technical operations of the theatre.<sup>25</sup> The director was required to employ a lighting inspector and assistants who had to operate the gas and oil lamps in the Municipal Theatre (the new theatre had gas lighting) and the electric lighter of the large chandelier in the auditorium. If the director rented the Arena for the summer, the lighting technicians were at his disposal.<sup>26</sup> He also had to employ a theatre technician / theatre master and several labourers. This staff was responsible for all the devices and stage machinery in the theatre, the theatrical property and their placement on the stage, the inventory of the building, order in the theatre, and compliance with safety measures.<sup>27</sup> The list of employees taking care of the daily operations of the theatre also included painters, carpenters, upholsterers, dressers, hairdressers, and property masters. The names of the members of the technical staff keep repeating in the German almanac, which suggests that, contrary to the ensemble members who came and went, the members of the technical staff were local inhabitants. This ensured the continuity of the functioning of the theatre building.

The director was also responsible for arranging for a physician, a prompter, a cashier, an assistant to the orchestra, and a theatrical assistant. The porter stayed in official lodgings on the premises of the theatre, excluded from the lease of the theatre building. The roles of the secretary, librarian, and stage manager were often performed by choir members. Ignaz Werbezirk, the father of Pressburg-born actress Gisela Werbezirk (1875–1956), was a secretary for many years while also singing in the choir. Cashier Franz Skalák, who worked in the theatre for forty-six years (from 1861 to 1907, i.e., even in the era of the old Municipal Theatre), was an almost iconic figure in the theatrical history of Pressburg. He was the only employee for whom a benefit performance was organized twice a year (one in the German and one in the Hungarian part of the season) as a reward for his loyalty to all the directors, as the *Preßburger Zeitung* reported.<sup>28</sup>

Ensuring the smooth functioning of the building was one of the operational aspects a provincial theatre director had to guarantee. Otherwise, the artistic part of the operations, which rested on three pillars – the art ensemble, the repertoire and the audience – would be jeopardized.

25 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 37; *Utasítás a Pozsony vár. színházban követendő övrendszabályok végrehajtása iránt.*

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.; MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Theatre, box. Theatre 1, inv. nos. 15870, scenery design sketches.

28 “Franz Skalák”, *Preßburger Zeitung*, 24 September 1907, 2.

## THE COMPOSITION OF THE ART ENSEMBLE AND THE THEATRE ORCHESTRA

According to the agreement, the director had to submit the list of the members of the art ensemble to the theatre committee for approval before the season started. If any member did not meet the requirements, the committee could request his replacement.<sup>29</sup> One of the pitfalls in setting up the art ensemble of the Municipal Theatre in Pressburg was the fact that the actors and singers had to travel to Pressburg from Timișoara, and vice versa, in winter. The very fact that they were engaged only for half a year was a reason enough for the frequent fluctuations of the performers. In the case of the German-speaking ensemble, the director relied on the proximity of Vienna, which was very attractive for young artists because, if they performed well in Pressburg, there was a chance of getting an offer from a theatre in Vienna. In 1886–1899, two directors of the German part of the season worked in Pressburg: Max Kmentt and Emanuel Raul (1843–1916). Kmentt rented the Municipal Theatre as well as the Arena, which meant a year-round engagement for the members. Raul had been the director of the theatre in Karlovy Vary for many years, and this represented a good background for his ensemble. Nevertheless, neither of the two could escape the outflow of high-quality artists after the end of the seasons since, according to director Raul, travelling to Timișoara and the growing influence of the pro-Hungarian circles in Pressburg on the operations of the theatre made it difficult to engage members in the German-speaking ensemble in the long run.<sup>30</sup>

As for the Hungarian ensembles, the situation was even more complicated than with the German-speaking ensembles. Theatres in the provinces suffered due to an insufficient number of high-quality artists, since most of them were trying to gain a foothold in Budapest. At the same time, artists were sensitive to manifestations of the audience's favour and, in the case of the Hungarian performances in the Municipal Theatre in Pressburg, they often had to face an empty auditorium since their attendance was consistently low. In 1890–1899 the Hungarian director Ignác Krecsányi worked in Pressburg, having been previously active in towns with a mixed population in terms of language. He perceived his whole artistic activity as a cultural mission in favour of building the Hungarian state.<sup>31</sup> However,

29 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 24 and box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

30 MAB, Johann Nepomuk Batka Fond, correspondence, Emanuel Raul, inv. no. 5, box 26, letter of 24 September 1896.

31 "Ignác Krecsányi", in *Színművészeti lexikon. A színháztudomány és drámairodalom enciklopédiája*, vol.3, ed. Aladár Schöpflin (Budapest: Az Országos Színészegyesület és Nyugdíjintézet, 1931), 54–55.

he could not have succeeded in Pressburg without the support of Timișoara, where he had worked for twenty-three years.<sup>32</sup>

The number of the members of the ensemble was between twenty-five and thirty; the choir consisted of about sixteen people. At the time of Raul's directorship in 1890–1899, when operas were regularly performed, the ensemble had forty members. It is important to note, however, that directors in Pressburg could not afford a strict division of the ensemble. Although theatre critics talked about the actors' ensemble and the singers' ensemble and about a separate choir, the practice was such that the actors had to be able to take over minor roles in operettas, sometimes even in operas, while the singers also acted in comedies and farces. The choir took part in operas, operettas, and even dramas. The Pressburg theatre did not have its own ballet ensemble; ballets were performed only with guest soloists from Vienna or Budapest. To execute the dance items in the dramatic and musical-dramatic repertoire, the director engaged a small group of female solo dancers led by a ballet mistress, who danced in the performances along with the upcoming dancers.

Until 1906, the theatre orchestra consisted of local musicians who were also members of the CMA. In 1897 the members formed a new music association, the *Preßburger Musiker-Verein*, which organized independent concerts in addition to the theatre performances.<sup>33</sup> In 1906 a Municipal Orchestra was set up on the initiative of the CMA officials, which the director engaged as a theatre orchestra. Within the theatre, it was conducted by the *Kapellmeister*/conductor arriving with the art company. According to the agreement, the orchestra had to have at least thirty members, but this was often the maximum number and presented a problem especially in the case of opera performances. The situation was solved by modifying the scores by the conductor, just as Bruno Walter did in the 1897/1898 season.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes the military band helped out in the theatre.<sup>35</sup>

Setting up a good art ensemble was a condition for a balanced repertoire, in terms of forms and genres, to be offered by the director in the Municipal Theatre. Analysis of the daily programme plans reveals the preferences of the regular theatre-goers and the strong influence of the theatrical environment of Vienna on the repertoire performed in Pressburg during the German and partly even the Hungarian part of the season.

32 Adrienne Darvay Nagy, *Állandóban változókonnyan* (Marosvásárhely: Mentor Kiadó, 2003), 33.

33 J. B. [Johann Batka], "Zum morgigen Orchesterkonzerte des Preßburger Musiker-Vereines", *Preßburger Zeitung*, 3 December 1898, 1.

34 Bruno Walter, *Téma s variacemi* (Prague: SHV, 1965), 120.

35 Gustav Mauthner, "Samson und Dalila", *Westungarischer Grenzboten*, 14 January 1902, 4–5; Jana Lengová, "Pressburg im letzten Drittel des 19. Jahrhunderts: das Musikmilieu der Jugendjahre Franz Schmidts", in *Franz Schmidt und Preßburg*, ed. Carmen Ottner (Vienna: Verlag Doblinger, 1999), 21.

## THE REPERTOIRE OF THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The lease agreement of the theatre contained a general outline of the repertoire and determined the performance of plays, comedies, folk plays, farces, and operettas based on the level of the artistic preferences of the town and the demands of the audience.<sup>36</sup> The selection of specific works was up to the director, who had to present a list to the theatre committee for approval before the season started. One long-standing member of the committee was the municipal archivist, significant organizer of the cultural life of Pressburg, and music critic of the *Preßburger Zeitung* Johann Batka (1845–1917). As an advocate of the classical musical tradition, he insisted on including opera performances in the daily programme plans of the German part of the season. At the time of constructing the Municipal Theatre, Italian and French operas prevailed in the repertoire, including *Un ballo in maschera*, *La traviata*, *Il trovatore*, *Rigoletto*, *Aida* (G. Verdi), *Faust* (Ch. Gounod), *Carmen* (G. Bizet), *La Juive* (F. Halévy), *Les Huguenots*, and *L'Africaine* (G. Meyerbeer). The Pressburg audience welcomed each staging of an opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (*The Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni*) or Ludwig van Beethoven (*Fidelio*) as representatives of the classical musical tradition. In the summer of 1892, an International Exhibition of Music and Theatre took place in Vienna, where the works of Italian *veristas* were performed with great success. Shortly afterwards, they were premiered in Pressburg and the audience could hear the operas *Pagliacci* (R. Leoncavallo) and *Mala vita* (U. Giordano). The exhibition in Vienna also brought the premiere of the *Bartered Bride* (B. Smetana) in German to Pressburg. German romantic operas, such as *Das Nachtlager in Granada* (C. Kreutzer), *Hans Heiling* (H. Marschner), *Marta* (F. von Flotow), *Zar und Zimmermann*, *Undine*, *Der Waffenschmied* (A. Lortzing), and *Das goldene Kreuz* (I. Brüll) were also staged frequently in the Municipal Theatre. Richard Wagner's works (*Lohengrin*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*) also made their way into the repertoire but their performance depended on securing high-quality solo members for the art ensemble or guest soloists from the Hofoper in Vienna. Prominent opera soloists guest-performing in Pressburg in the late nineteenth century included Theodor Reichmann, Anna Baier, Ida Liebhardt-Baier, Caroline Tellheim, Antonie Schläger, Minna Walter, Rosa Papier, and Louise von Ehrenstein.

After 1900, staging operas became the duty of the Hungarian directors who, however, had been facing financial problems for several years. A change occurred only in 1911 when Hungarian audiences began to prevail in the theatre. This made it possible to perform operas regularly under the aegis of the Hungarian director

36 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 24 and box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

Károly Polgár (1864–1933). Under his directorship, Puccini's operas *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madame Butterfly* appeared on the stage of the Municipal Theatre repeatedly.

The reports in the dailies reveal that, besides operas, the most visited performances were operettas, especially the Viennese ones. For the bourgeoisie of Pressburg, these works embodied their connection to the Austro-Hungarian urban environment, their openness to novel literary and musical contents, and their political and social criticism.<sup>37</sup> The most frequently played authors included Johann Strauss, Jr. (*Die Fledermaus*, *Der Zigeunerbaron*, *Eine Nacht in Venedig*, *Der Karneval in Rom*, and *Simplicius*), Karl Millöcker (*Der Bettelstudent*, *Der Vice-Admiral*, *Der arme Jonathan*, and *Gasparone*) and Franz von Suppé (*Boccaccio*, *Donna Juanita*, *Flotte Burtsche*, *Die schöne Galathée*, *Fatinitza*, and *Das Modell*). Jacques Offenbach's operettas (*The Tales of Hoffmann*, *La belle Hélène*, and *Orpheus in the Underworld*) were added to the works of Viennese authors. The most popular guest performers in operettas included Alexander Girardi, Therese Biedermann, Gusti Zimmermann, Wilhelm Knaack, and Josefine (Pepi) Glöckner.

In the new century, the works of the “Silver Age” of the Viennese operetta became popular in Pressburg and continued to be staged even after the birth of the Slovak National Theatre as the “legacy of the Monarchy.”<sup>38</sup> The most frequently played authors included Franz Lehár (*Der Rastelbinder*, *Die lustige Witwe*, *Wiener Frauen*, *Der Graf von Luxemburg*, *Die Zigeunerliebe*, *Die Juxheirat*, *Das Fürstenkind*, and *Eva*), Emmerich Kálmán (*Tatárjárás*, *Der Zigeunerprimas*, *Die Csárdásfürstin*, and *Die Faschinsfee*) and Edmund Eysler (*Bruder Straubinger*, *Künstlerblut*, *Der lachende Ehemann*, *Der Frauenfresser*, and *Die Schützenliesl*).

Farces and comedies figured in the largest number in the programme plans. At the time when the Municipal Theatre was built, the era of Viennese farces had ended in Vienna but the works of Johann Nestroy (*Der böse Geist Lumpacivagabundus*, *Einen Jux will er sich machen*, *Das Mädel aus der Vorstadt*, and *Talizman*) and Ferdinand Raimund (*Der verwunschene Schloss*, *Der Bauer als Millionär*, and *Der Verschwender*) continued to be popular entertainment pieces in the Pressburg theatre even at the end of the nineteenth century. Besides these, the most frequently played works at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries were *Im weißen Rössl*, *Als ich wieder kam*, *Auf der Sonnenseite*, *Die strengen Herren*, and *Zwei Wappen* (O. Blumenthal,

37 Moritz Csáky, “Der soziale und kulturelle Kontext der Wiener Operette”, in *Johann Strauß: Zwischen Kunstanspruch und Volksvergnügen*, eds. Ludwig Finscher, Albrecht Riethmüller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 39.

38 Vladimír Zvara, “Auf der Suche nach dem Sinn der Oper: Die untote Kunstgattung in der Stadt Bratislava”, in *Musiktheater in Raum und Zeit: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Theaterpraxis in Mitteleuropa in 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Vladimír Zvara (Bratislava: Assoziation Corpus in Zusammenarbeit mit NM Code, 2015), 223.

G. Kadelburg), and *Gold'ne Eva*, *Comtesse Guckerl*, and *Renaissance* (F. v. Schönthan, F. v. Koppel-Ellfeldt). Besides German and Austrian composers, the French dramatists Alexandre Bisson (*Le Contrôleur des wagons-lits*, *Monsieur le directeur*, *La famille Pont-Biquet*, and *Les surprises du divorce*) and Edouard Pailleron (*Les Cabotons* and *La souris*) were very popular.

Operettas, comedies, and farces were performed in German as well as in Hungarian. During the Hungarian part of the season, Hungarian folk plays with songs and dances, drawing on themes from the Hungarian rural environment and being counterparts of the Viennese farces, were also performed.<sup>39</sup> The most frequently staged ones were *A csók*, *Az utolsó szerelem*, and *Széchy Mária* (Lajos Dóczy); *A piros bugyelláris* and *Sárga csikó* (Ferenc Csepreghy); *A falu rossza* (Ede Tóth); *Közsa Jutka* and *A vereshajú* (Sándor Lukácsy); *A cigány* (Ede Szigligeti); *A dezentor* (Viktor Rákosi); and *Felhő Klári* (László Rátkay). Compared with the comedies of German and Austrian authors, these works got a weaker response from the Pressburg audience. The people of Pressburg were familiar with them but they were not their preferred form of entertainment.

The critics praised the classics, but their attendance was not always high even in the German part of the season. The Pressburg audience knew the works of William Shakespeare (*Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); Friedrich Schiller (*Die Jungfrau von Orléans*, *Die Räuber*, *Marie Stuart*, and *Kabale und Liebe*); Johann Wolfgang Goethe (*Faust*, *Götz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand*, and *Egmont*); and Franz Grillparzer (*Medea*, *Sapho*, *Die Ahnfrau*, *Die Jüdin von Toledo*, and *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen*). The performances took place as part of the so-called classical evenings and almost exclusively with the participation of guests from the Hofburgtheater in Vienna, such as Bernhard Baumeister, Marie Pospischil, Friedrich Mitterwurz, Ernst Hartmann, and Adolf Sonnenthal.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the folk plays of Ludwig Anzengruber (*Der Pfarrer von Kirchfeld*, *Der Meineidbauer*, *Das vierte Gebot*, and *Brave Leut vom Grund*) regularly figured in the repertoire. Another popular author of works with social criticism was Adolf L'Arronge (*Hasemanns Töchter*, *Doktor Klaus*, and *Mein Leopold*).

Under the influence of the Hofburgtheater, conversational plays, with a number of unique character roles and rich dialogues, were fully adopted in Pressburg, just as in some other provincial towns of the Monarchy.<sup>40</sup> They were perceived as a “school of acting” and their staging was less costly than that of the narrative

39 Peter Por, “Die rustikale Variante: das ungarische Volksspiel im 19. Jahrhundert”, in *Das österreichische Volkstheater im europäischen Zusammenhang 1830–1880*, ed. Jean-Marie Valentin (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 1988), 177.

40 Elisabeth Grossegger, “Mýtus Burgtheater: Příběh, který dokázal vytvořit identitu”, in *Divadelní revue*, 24/2 (2013): 170.

historical plays and dramas. The most frequently played authors were Victorien Sardou (*Madame Sans Gene, Cyprienne, Andrea, Georgette, Nos Intimes!* and *Papillone*); Eugene Scribe (*Le Verre d'eau ou Les effets et les causes*); Émile Augier (*Le Gendre de M. Poirier*); and Alexander Dumas fils (*L'Étrangère, Denise, and Francillon*).

Other new genres included scenes from life and, lastly, modern drama. Their main representatives in Pressburg were Hermann Sudermann (*Heimat, Es lebe das Leben, Das Glück im Winkel, and Der gute Ruf*); Gerhard Hauptmann (*Furman Henschel, Die Versunkene Glocke, Der Biberpelz, and Die Weber*); Henrik Ibsen (*Genganger, Nora, Samfundets Støtter, and Hedda Gabler*); José Echegaray (*El gran Galeoto, De mala raza, Lo sublime en lo vulgar, Mariana, Mancha que limpia*) and José Echegaray (*El gran Galeoto, De mala raza, Lo sublime en lo vulgar, Mariana, Mancha que limpia*) Arthur Schnitzler (*Liebelei and Abschiedssouper*). The Pressburg audience did not reject modern dramatic works but, according to the reports in the dailies, it preferred the traditional repertoire. The directorship of Paul Blasel (especially from 1906 to 1919) from Vienna was an exception; he staged a sophisticated dramatic repertoire and attendance at the performances was still very high. This was connected with the low number of German performances in the period in question, so the audience made use of every opportunity to see a performance in German.

It follows from the above that the daily programme plan of the Municipal Theatre of Pressburg was similar to the repertoires of the theatres of other provincial towns at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the beginning of the season, earlier and newer dramas also figured in the repertoire because musical-dramatic novelties required longer preparations and coherence even from new members of the art ensemble. The daily programme plan was compiled in such a way that the classical dramatic repertoire and operas were played on weekdays, when the wealthier strata of society went to the theatre, whereas comedies, farces, and operettas were on the programme at the weekends when the theatre was filled with audiences even from the less wealthy strata.

Scenic designs were an indispensable part of the performances. As archive documents and contemporaneous literature reveals, the town purchased typified designs from the atelier of Brioschi and Burghart when the Municipal Theatre began its operations.<sup>41</sup> Each director could use them during their lease of the theatre. As for refreshing the depository and adding new items to it, the directors' agreement required them to have one complete set of new decorations made in each season, including backdrops, arches, walls, coulisses, wreaths, doors and windows, paint-

41 Zur Geschichte des Pressburger Theater-Baus 1879 – 1887. Zusammengestellt von Oberingenieur Anton Sendlein. MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Theatre, box 2940, inv. nos. 15879, p. 55. Otto von Fabricius, *Das neue Theater* (Preßburg: Druckerei des Westungarischer Grenzboten, 1886), 20.

ed on new, durable canvas and reinforced. After the end of the season, the director had to leave these decorations to the town. Also, he had to have two of the town's decorations repainted each season and he was required to announce in advance which decorations he was planning to restore.<sup>42</sup>

The most significant scenic designers working in Pressburg in the late nineteenth century were Otto Wintersteiner (1839–1894) and his son Gustav Wintersteiner (1876–1950), who took over his father's post after his father's death. Gustav Wintersteiner's works have been preserved in the form of three albums,<sup>43</sup> and they share features with the scenic designs of the painters Carl and Anton Brioschi, Hermann Burghart, and Johann Kautský.<sup>44</sup> In his youth, Gustav Wintersteiner came to know the works of scenic designers in Vienna under the directorship of Raul, who ordered from Brioschi designs for the Pressburg premiere of the opera *Heimchen am Herd* in 1896 and decorations made in the Viennese style for the premiere of the opera *The Evangelist* in 1897.<sup>45</sup>

The art ensemble, the repertoire, and the audience were mutually connected, and they determined and complemented each other. If a director managed to set up a good ensemble which provided an interesting repertoire, he secured the favour of the audience.

## THE AUDIENCE

A well-established system of season tickets enabled the theatre to strengthen its base of regular audience who considered daily attendance at theatre performances a part of their social life. The holders of the season tickets included members of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, higher officials; members of the urban intelligentsia consisting of factory owners, school directors, and professors, bankers, lawyers, physicians and officers; and members of the local musicians' and singers' associations.<sup>46</sup> The theatre directors were aware of the fact that, despite the constant growth of the population, the composition of the regular audience had not changed. Therefore, they counted on the owners of the season tickets and adjusted the daily repertoire to their preferences.

42 MAB, City Bratislava, Municipal Establishments, Municipal Archive of Bratislava, box 2836, inv. nos. 15800, document 24 and box 2839, inv. nos. 15803, document 32.

43 Bratislava City Gallery, Gustav Wintersteiner, Album I. (A 2518–A 2561), Album II. (A 2617–A 2636), Album III. (A 2562–A 2583).

44 Rudi Risatti, "Kein Tag gehe dahin, ohne daß er etwas erdacht habe: Einblicke in die Wiener Bühnenkunst bis 1869", in *Geschichte der Oper in Wien*, vol. 1: *Von den Anfängen bis 1869*, eds. Otto Biba, Herbert Seifert (Vienna: Molden Verlag, 2019), 336.

45 MAB, Theatre Posters Collection 1796–1936 (1941).

46 Jiří Kopecký and Lenka Křupková, *Provincial Theater and Its Opera: German Opera Scene in Olomouc, 1770–1920* (Olomouc: Palacký University, 2015), 313–315.

In the nineteenth century, when the theatre became a conveyer of national ideas, a specific situation developed in Pressburg. The above-mentioned efforts of the Hungarian government to transform the Municipal Theatre into a vehicle for the dissemination of Hungarian language and culture met with opposition from the regular theatre-goers. The fact that the audience was made up of German-speaking Pressburgers largely predetermined theatre attendance. They regarded Hungarian cultural traditions as their own and declared their loyalty to the Hungarian government in public.<sup>47</sup> More important for the people of Pressburg, however, was their relationship to their town, and they expressed their sectionalism through their wide-ranging participation in the social and cultural development of the town. To maintain their social status, they used Hungarian in public but preferred German in the theatre. They attended Hungarian performances primarily when an exceptional guest performed or when Hungarian holidays were celebrated. Although the supporters of the Hungarian theatre tried to create an impression of a double (German and Hungarian) audience, the reality was different. The same audience attended (and, consequently, supported) the German as well as the Hungarian performances, as can be seen from the critics' statements about a *single* theatre audience.<sup>48</sup>

After 1900, concert attendance increased in the town due to the growing number of Hungarian performances in the Municipal Theatre. The German-speaking audience did not welcome the exchange of the seasons and preferred concerts to Hungarian theatre. The above-mentioned support of Hungarian director Polgár from 1911 was a result of the long-standing efforts of the pro-Hungarian circles in the town. Erkel's opera, this time *Hunyady László*, was staged as the opening performance of his first season, which was also a ceremonial performance on the 25th anniversary of the erection of the Municipal Theatre (an Erkel opera was played also when the theatre was opened), and this symbolically confirmed the tireless efforts of the Hungarian theatre to gain a foothold in this German-speaking environment.<sup>49</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The continuity of the theatrical life of Pressburg, reflected in the construction of a new theatre building in 1886, contributed significantly to the strengthening of the central position of the theatre as a cultural and social institution in the late nineteenth century. The theatre took centre stage in the town, and regular attendance

47 Elena Mannová, "Sebaprezentácia nemeckých stredných vrstiev v Bratislave v 19. storočí", in *Slovenský národopis*, 43/2 (1995): 170.

48 Julius Derra, "Die verflossene deutsche Theatersaison", *Preßburger Zeitung*, 1 February 1895, 3.

49 "Theater: Eröffnungs- und Festvorstellung des ungarischen Ensembles", *Preßburger Zeitung*, 10 October 1911, 13.

was part of the life of the Pressburg bourgeoisie. The background of the daily operations of the theatre revealed that it was a dynamic system and could not avoid conflicts, controversies, and failures. To get a realistic picture of the Municipal Theatre, even the internal (and heterogeneous) power struggles with the political and economic operators had to be pointed out.

An overview of the technical and artistic aspects of its operations reveals that the Pressburg theatre functioned in a way similar to other municipal theatres in Central Europe at the time. The contractual terms regulating the composition of the art ensemble and the repertoire to be performed reflected the attitude of the town, which demanded high-quality performances comparable to the programmes of the major theatres because a long-standing cultural identity had been encoded into the collective subconscious of the representatives of the town. A detailed analysis of the first years of the functioning of the theatre reveals some characteristics which assumed a specifically local character in contact with the changing socio-political situation.

One of these was the composition of the daily programme plan, in which the Viennese entertainment repertoire prevailed. The local ensemble managed to capitalize on the inspirations brought by guests from Vienna during the German part of the season. The Viennese dialect, present in the entertainment repertoire of the Vienna theatres, sounded familiar in Pressburg thanks to their proximity and frequent contacts. The audience could decode the cultural codes in the famous allusions thanks to their common history. Performing a Viennese repertoire in the Pressburg theatre led to the development of the concept of the cultural memory of the town on the one hand and strengthened the cultural connection of Pressburg with Vienna on the other.

Thanks to the cultural transmission and circulation of the repertoire and the frequent migrations of the performers all over Central Europe, the municipal theatres became interconnected, and thereby the theatre in Pressburg became part of a large complex. The fact that the works that prevailed in the programme of the Municipal Theatre in the late nineteenth century are almost completely unknown for today's theatre-goers should not be overlooked. The character of the Pressburg theatre, which may appear strange at first sight, becomes more familiar by gaining information about its daily operations, and the words about the High Province used by theatre scholar Ladislav Lajcha to label the theatre in Pressburg acquire their true meaning.