



UDK 792.02(497.4Ljubljana) „193“:82.09-293.2

82.09-293.2:792.02(497.4Ljubljana) „193“

DOI 10.51937/Amfiteater-2024-1/174-194

Abstract

The essay outlines two Ljubljana productions of Edmond Audran's operetta *La Mascotte*, both directed by Bratko Kreft (1905–1996) with set design by Vasilij Uljaniščev (1887–1934). The story of a peasant girl who, as a mascot, is supposed to bring happiness to everyone around her if she does not marry was first staged in Paris in 1880, with music by Audran and libretto by Alfred Duru and Henri Chivot. It premiered on 9 November 1930 on the stage of the Ljubljana Opera House, and under the same direction, two years later, in the open air at Ljubljana's Tivoli Park (première 8 September 1932). *La Mascotte* was one of the first performances on Slovenian professional stages designed according to avant-garde concepts. Kreft adapted it to the then-current political as well as artistic, theatrical and film conditions. He replaced some of the original characters with those caricaturing the politician Benito Mussolini, the comedian Charlie Chaplin and others. He even added a fictional character of a delegate to the League of Nations. He created the modern *commedia dell'arte*, which immediately became a theatrical hit.

Keywords: scenography, operetta, open-air theatre, historical avant-garde, Slovenian modern art, caricature, Bratko Kreft, Benito Mussolini

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Operetta *La Mascotte* (The Girl of Happiness), directed by Bratko Kreft

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Summary

This article outlines two performances of Edmond Audran's operetta *La Mascotte*, both directed by Bratko Kreft (1905–1996) and with set design by Vasilj Uljanišičev (1887–1934). Kreft first premièred *La Mascotte* on the opera stage in Ljubljana (9 November 1930). Two years later (8 September 1932), he transferred its adaptation to the meadows of Ljubljana's Tivoli Park. The story of a peasant girl – the mascot, who is supposed to bring happiness to everyone around her if she does not marry – was first staged in Paris in 1880, with music by Audran and libretto by Alfred Duru and Henri Chivot.

La Mascotte was Kreft's directorial debut in Slovenian professional theatres and one of the first performances in Slovenia designed by avant-garde concepts. Kreft adapted the play to the then-current political satire and artistic, theatrical and film conditions. He turned the 19th-century romantic operetta into a musical and, with some theatrical gags, into a comic operetta.

The stage setting of *La Mascotte* was simplified with a few raised platforms, stage traps and a special scenic element of the "wheel of fortune" with intertitles "happiness", "sadness" and "bad luck". The wheel rotated according to the situation and helped increase the dynamics of the play. Another new scenic element was a ladder hanging from above, on which the acrobats climbed. The entire stage design pointed to the Russian avant-garde performances of Alexander Tairov and Vsevolod Meyerhold.

The performance was even more interesting in terms of costumes. Kreft changed the theatrical costumes and masks into caricatures of politicians and film actors, such as Italian leader Benito Mussolini and the comedians Charlie Chaplin and Pat and Patachon. With such caricatured costumes, Kreft protested against the growing fascism in the Julian March, which until 1920 was partially within the Slovenian territory. He was actually the first theatre director to put a caricature of Mussolini

on the Slovenian theatre stage. At the same time, the caricature of the Italian Duce appeared in Slovenian art in the caricatures by Hinko Smrekar and in the church wall paintings in the Julian March by Tone Kralj.

In *La Mascotte*, Kreft also increased the number of actors with the new role of the delegate of the League of Nations and the role of a boxer. The role of the delegate of the League of Nations was also Kreft's reaction to other political situations as well, such as the fascist liquidation of Slovenian people near Bazovica in 1930. He further spread anti-fascist propaganda in the open-air production *La Mascotte* at Tivoli Park, where he cast over 150 extras costumed as soldiers, cyclists and gunmen and staged a battle involving machine guns and mountain cannons. Gun bangs and grenade explosions increased the feeling of the war front.

In the article, the author notes that director Bratko Kreft successfully disguised his critique of fascism and politics in the 19th-century operetta *La Mascotte* and created a stage caricature perfectly understood by the audience and critics. However, nevertheless, the critics did not dare to write about it as an anti-fascist performance, as they would risk their own prosecution. Through costumes and added effects, the operetta *La Mascotte* showed more than words were allowed to express.