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Abstract

During his studies with Emil František Burian in Prague, the director Fran Žižek developed a unique version of anti-illusionist theatre. He presented it at the international congress of avant-garde theatres in 1937 in Prague, the centre of the Central European avant-garde. Žižek advocated an ascetic version of total theatre as a synthesis of literature, drama, dance, music and visual arts that is established in an empty space, with acting as its main component. He sought to enrich the possibilities of actor's expression with moving scenic devices or "stage machines" powered by new technologies, while projections and spotlights created the dynamics of movement on stage. This idea of anti-illusionist theatre was realised in the Independent Theatre, which he founded in 1938, and further developed on the stage of the Mestno gledališče v Ptuj (Ptuj Municipal Theatre) in the 1938/39 and 1939/40 seasons. Although Žižek regularly reflected on his work (in lectures, essays and other publications), this chapter of the Slovenian avant-garde has remained largely unexplored. It was probably neglected in the processes of historicising (Slovenian) theatre because Žižek's avant-garde endeavours took place at the Ptuj theatre, which was considered a peripheral theatre venue in relation to nearby Maribor. While elaborating on Žižek's concept of anti-illusionist theatre, the paper focuses on the question of how the director's theory and practice entered into a dialogue with other theatre reformers, especially with the protagonists of the Prague avant-garde.

Keywords: Slovenian theatre, avant-garde, Ptuj, Fran Žižek, anti-illusionism, Prague, Central-European avant-garde

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The Ptuj Avant-Garde: The Anti-Illusionist Theatre of Fran Žižek

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Fran Žižek's anti-illusionist theatre is a unique form of total theatre as a synthesis of literature, drama, dance, music and visual art, which is established in an empty space, with acting as its main component. In terms of stage design, Žižek broke with the established practice of illusionistic paintings and backdrops that authentically represent the sets. Instead, on an empty stage, he created "stage machines", as he called architectural constructions for anti-illusionist performances, in which the actors merely suggested the space through the play of light, projections (slides, films) and carefully chosen props, encouraging the audience to complete the space with their own imagination. Technological innovations were made possible by the use of technical equipment for screening films in the hall of the Ptuj Municipal Theatre, which was also used as a cinema.

Žižek developed his anti-illusionist theatre in dialogue with his international colleagues, especially the avant-gardists and other theatre reformers of the time. His greatest role model was the Czech avant-gardist Emil František Burian, with whom he studied in Prague between 1936 and 1938 in his then internationally acclaimed theatre, D37. Following Burian's theatre model – a new theatre production model that imagined theatre as a cultural centre linking theatre artists with like-minded (avant-garde) artists from other fields of art, expanding them into the social space and based on a collective in which all members are equal to each other – Fran Žižek founded the Independent Theatre in 1938. He found a home for the development of anti-illusionism on the stage of the Ptuj Municipal Theatre and attracted a group of permanent collaborators. Together, they created two avant-garde seasons on the Ptuj stage (1938/39 and 1939/40), both of which were highly politically engaged. They sought to develop a distinctive Slovenian avant-garde style of performance that would differ from the established patterns of European theatre culture. Žižek looked for inspiration in various forms of folk theatre in Europe and in the traditional theatre of Eastern cultures (China, Japan, India). Repertoire-wise (in the first season of 1938/39), he relied mainly on Slovenian plays, choosing to perform those in which

he recognised a fruitful starting point in anti-illusionism. He was looking for dramatic stories whose themes would be universal and, in this respect, globally interesting and international. At the same time, he responded to pressing sociopolitical issues in the world and in Ptuj. This was the time, just before the start of World War II, when Hitler was consolidating his power and authority. The majority of the population in Ptuj was of German origin and recognised Hitler as a leader who would save them from the pressures of the Yugoslav regime. Žižek, therefore, deliberately included in his repertoire works that appealed to the strengthening of Slovenian national consciousness; they had a provocative and politically engaged effect. His avant-garde efforts and performance innovations were not only aesthetically groundbreaking but also socially engaged. It is therefore justified to designate Fran Žižek and his group the “Ptuj theatre avant-garde”.

After WWII, when circumstances were not inclined to avant-garde artistic explorations during the establishment of the socialist system in Yugoslavia, Žižek was engaged as a director at the Slovene National Theatre in Maribor. Although he was unable to establish an experimental stage there, he related his first productions (with a selection of plays) to the Ptuj productions, and in collaboration with the stage designers, he further developed the “stage machines” in the anti-illusionistically conceived space of the stage.