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## Abstract

This article discusses the final four working years of the stage designer Vasily Mitrofanovich Ulyanishchev (УЛЬЯНИШЧЕВ Василий Митрофанович, born 30 January 1887, Bobrov in the Voronezh province, Russia; died 11 September 1934, Ljubljana, Slovenia, Kingdom of Yugoslavia). From 1930 until his death in 1934, Ulyanishchev worked for both the Opera and Drama of the National Theatre in Ljubljana. During his brief time in the Slovenian city, he designed the sets for fifty-five performances. Only twenty-nine of them are well documented with different visual material, mainly with photos and sketches. During this period, Ulyanishchev collaborated with several Slovenian directors, including Osip Šest (1893–1962), Bratko Kreft (1905–1996) and Ferdo Delak (1905–1968). Although Ulyanishchev is widely regarded as one of the most prominent avant-garde scenographers in Slovenia, his work has not yet received comprehensive scholarly attention. This article therefore attempts to address this shortcoming. The author examines his three distinct approaches to set design, discussing his orientation towards the practices of historical avant-gardes. At the same time, she explores the changes and innovations in his work during his final period. The article is thus the first reconstruction of the part of the author's oeuvre created in Slovenia. The discussion is grounded in a comprehensive examination of the preserved stage designs and photographs of performances, complemented by a meticulous analysis of preserved sources in newspapers. The focus of this study is to illuminate the stage sets that drew inspiration from the historical avant-garde practices. Through a critical evaluation it aims to ascertain their significance in the evolution of historical avant-gardes within the context of Slovenian theatres.

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**Keywords:** avant-garde, Russian avant-garde, scenography, Ulyanishchev, Yugoslav stages

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# The Traces of the Historical Theatre Avant-Garde in Vasily Ulyanishchev's Stage Design for Slovenian Theatre between 1930–1934

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The article focuses on the work of the Ukrainian set designer Vasily Mitrofanovich Ulyanishchev (1887–1934). He worked for both the Opera and Drama of the National Theatre in Ljubljana from 1930 until his death in September 1934. During his last four working years, he created sets for fifty-five performances, of which only twenty-nine are documented with visual material, photographs and set designs. Most of his creations were for Ljubljana's Opera, others for the Drama theatre. Over the four years, he worked with many directors, but most frequently with Osip Šest, Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak.

In 1920, Ulyanishchev emigrated to Yugoslavia, where he initially worked for the theatres in Split, Zagreb and Osijek. Except for two preserved set designs for Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, which he signed and dated in 1921, there is no trace of his activity in Ljubljana until 1930. Regarding these two sets, the article puts forward a partially supported thesis that those two set sketches were most likely created for a guest performance by artists of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in Ljubljana (on 2 March 1921) and were finished by Ulyanishchev instead of the set designer I. Y. Gremislavsky, whose name was written in the theatre's programme. As demonstrated in archival sources, Gremislavsky was not a member of the Russian theatre company that toured Ljubljana and other Yugoslav theatres during this period.

In Yugoslavia, Ulyanishchev was recognised as an expert in set design. Therefore, he was invited to join the Ljubljana Opera. The avant-garde directors Ferdo Delak and Bratko Kreft had also just started working there, and they immediately appointed Ulyanishchev as their stage designer. In collaboration with Kreft, he created several avant-garde productions that received critical acclaim, including Audran's operetta *La Mascotte* (9 November 1930), Messenet's *Werther* (4 January 1931), Beatzky's *The Three Musketeers* (28 January 1932), and, in collaboration with the director Ferdo Delak, Offenbach's *Robinson Crusoe* (12 January 1932). Among the most significant and independent creations of his Ljubljana oeuvre, it is considered the avant-garde set design for Marcel Delannoy's ballet *The Lady's Jester* (*Le Fou de*

*la Dame*, premiere 15 October 1931), in which there is a clear reference to Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*.

Upon his arrival in Ljubljana, the opera stage was characterised by the realist-expressionist style of set design, which exerted a significant influence on the Slovenian painters of that era who were responsible for designing the stage scenery. However, Vasily Ulyanishchev began to incorporate other elements of artistic and architectural modernism and, with experiments such as the revolving wheel in *La Mascotte*, led our professional stage into avant-garde scenographic directions.

Initially, he relied on the well-established box-like spaces of the Russian set designers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, as a collaborator of directors Kreft and Delak, he concentrated on identifying parallels with the solutions of Russian avant-garde set designers. It is evident that the utilisation of vibrant colours in the decoration of sets and stage elements by the artist has been instrumental in bringing to life the aesthetic sensibilities of Russian scenographic Fauvism, drawing notable inspiration from Natalia Goncharova's sets, particularly evident in the set design for Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Snow Maiden: A Spring Fairy Tale (Snegurochka)* (5 April 1931). In consequence of this influence, Ulyanishchev also incorporated Russian folk decorative motifs into his sets. Conversely, he demonstrated an affinity for Constructivism. He indicated his intended direction using platforms and scaffolding at various heights, as well as a substantial revolving wheel, drawing inspiration from the stage designer, Lyubov Popova. Furthermore, he was a master of light, and, in collaboration with director Ferdo Delak, he introduced a scene with light projection in *Robinson Crusoe*. In certain instances, such as the scenes for the ballet *The Lady's Jester* and Netroy's play *The Ground Floor and the First Floor*, Ulyanishchev drew inspiration from the German milieu.

The last set design by Ulyanishchev on our theatre stages was for Modest Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* (premiere 28 September 1934), which was entirely performed in the classical-Russian style. This visual motif bears a striking resemblance to the set design for Alexander Porfiryevich Borodin's *Prince Igor* (4 October 1930), for which he drew inspiration from Nikolai Konstantinovich Rörich's stage concept. Because of ill health, he was no longer able to stage *Khovanshchina* himself. His last note to the director of the opera, Ciril Debevec, was written on 21 August 1934. He informed him that he had sent him thirty-two sketches, plans and floor plans in the post, addressed to the Opera manager Mirko Polič. He died just days before its premiere on 19 September 1934.

We can conclude that many of Ulyanishchev's scenographic ideas were based on scenic templates that he knew from the European, especially Russian, scenographic milieu. His stage creations, which he could set up anew and independently of the old scenery theatre holdings, were famous for their innovative scenic installations, including spatially diverse installations, which still represent groundbreaking innovations for Slovenian theatre history.