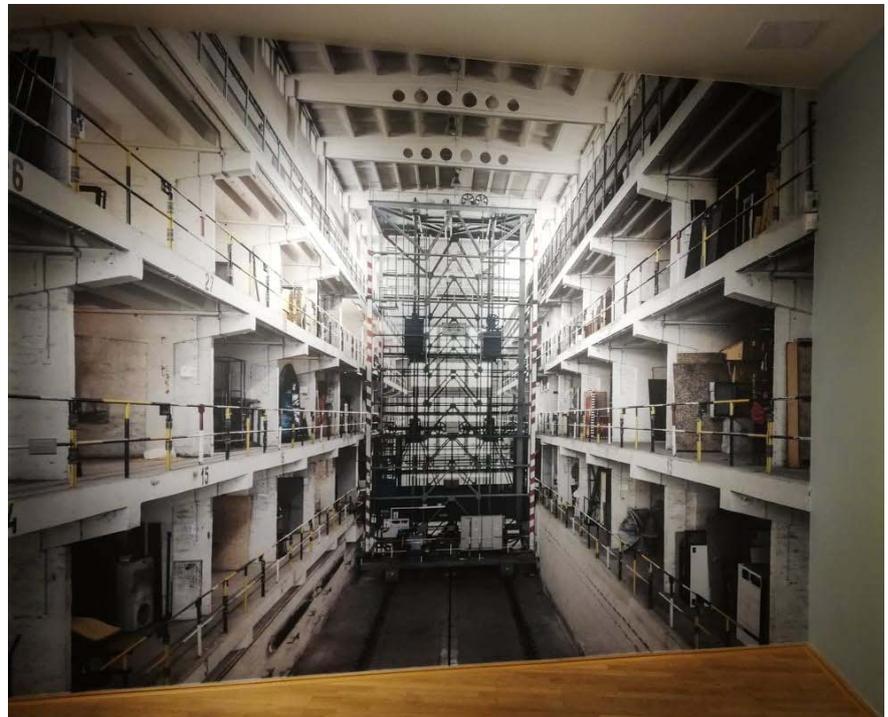


Ladislav Vychodil and the 20th century scene

Peter Mazalán

The year 2020 is a very important period for the Slovak professional theatre celebrating a century of existence. In addition to a huge number of accompanying programmes produced by the Slovak National Theatre, the Slovak National Gallery has also organised a significant thematic event. On 29 February 2020, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Ladislav Vychodil's birthday (1920 – 2005), an artist who made scenography, mere handicraft production, an autonomous art in our small and young cultural provenance, it has opened for public a monographic exhibition of him. Vychodil, being a prominent educationist and founder of today's Art-decorative workrooms of the Slovak National Theatre, has left behind several significant tangible and intangible legacies; Czech theatre designers were helping in creating scenic designs during the first seasons of our stage craft. Everything, including the need to further advance the level of the craftsmen and theatrical technicians, lead to the necessity of establishing a school of scenography as soon as possible. Ladislav Vychodil came to Bratislava as a young Czech scenographer with a view to developing his artistic ambitions. He, however, was given the task of organising also scenography and course of events in the theatre but, first of all, being an educationist. [1]



Celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Slovak National Theatre, under the influence of the pandemic in the first half-year of the planned period, remained limited in scope to the scheme of quite poor internet alternatives. The exhibition project: SNG LV100. *Ladislav Vychodil a scéna 20. storočia* (*The Slovak National Theatre LV100. Ladislav Vychodil and the 20th Century Scene*), which is interlinked with the Slovak National Theatre institution maybe more than the Theatre is aware of, has overcome the worst coronavirus period and has been

reopened in the gallery after approximately two months. In this context, a consideration arises to what a degree scenography, as an isolated fine-art discipline, is able to push through its existence without dramatic correlations. As analysed in the text of the accompanying exhibition catalogue written by Alexandra Kusá and Dušan Buran: *“Exhibiting scenic design and maquettes brings dilemmas. First of all, it is due to conceptual nature of the material. They were mere “intermediate products” determined for further creative processing... Design, esquisse, or sketch have become emancipated as fully-fledged exhibits in the last decades suitable to be exhibited regardless of whether or not such autonomy was inherent to them when having been created. In this respect, the exhibition opened up can thus serve as a demonstration of a change in curator optics...”* [2]



There is no doubt that scenography constitutes a part of the fine arts having also its place in galleries. This type of presentation of the exhibited items, similarly to architectural exhibitions, attracts a larger audience and brings new opportunities for interlinkage and perception. Finally: study of scenography is included in many Fine Art Academies throughout Europe. In the period when the renaissance building of the Theatre was built, its scenography was created by architects and painters. The legacy of that practice could also be seen in Vychodil's pedagogical methods. He started to teach scenography at the Academy of Performing Arts in 1951, which was two years after the Theatre Faculty had been established. At that time he required the students, before beginning the study of the scenography, to first either complete four semesters of architecture at the Slovak University of Technology or painting at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design. [3]

The exhibition is structured as a presentation of the scenographer's principles of art. In the architectural solution of the exhibition, developed by the scenographer's grandson Mojmir Vychodil, the woman curator Zuzana Koblišková presents the scenographer's design, sketches and models. The concept of the exhibition is focused on autonomy of graphics in neutral environment of the gallery. Scenography is an art whose substance vanishes upon the final day of the theatre play. The last Vychodil's performances available at the Slovak National Theatre have already been withdrawn from the theatre's repertoire. From more than five hundred productions created during almost sixty years, only small museum fragments remained in depositories. The only possibility of restoring the historical and creative contexts of his work is to keep track of both of them through their designs.

The exhibition occupies seven rooms and in addition to them, a monumental prologue in the form of an installation is situated in the atrium of the Esterházy Palace. It is a combination of a replica of a scenic element from Nezval's *Atlantis* (1961) and original of the embossed female eagle from the production: *Prince Fridrich of Homburk* (1983). The exhibition, conceived in the style of virtual arts and not presenting standard theatological criteria, leads the exhibition visitors through pass-through rooms displaying the topics: *Lines of Force*, *Lights*, *Imagination*, *Sorela*, *Stage props and Svätopluk* and through an interactive laboratory room in which the exhibition visitors can try out the fundamental principles of scenographic design in the form of a small-scale maquette.

In the first room, "Lines of Force", the woman curator mainly analyses graphic materials linked to theatrical performances which were conceived as geometrisation of space and reflecting op-art influence. Design of the performance: *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell (1974) was the first work initiating the perception of geometrical concept in his works. This was just the work, produced for Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara, in which he proposed a method of how to get a perfect optical illusion by using a new material: Japanese foil. A fragment, a new form of a set design for the performance: *Atlantis* (1961), is installed in the centre of the hall. Theatrical rigging system in the portal enables the exhibition visitors at least to imagine the projection of the scenic designs into the space. Similar installation, using scenography from the production of the opera: *Orpheus and Eurydice* by Gluck (1966), competes with the object at the end of the hall. In the opera by Gluck, he drew attention to the application of new materials and surprising techniques using the structures of vertically stretched rubber cords. The scene got a special airiness and graphical beauty, lyrism and charm. In the productions, Vychodil used his knowledge of descriptive geometry. He often used this principle of illusion and line in his works.



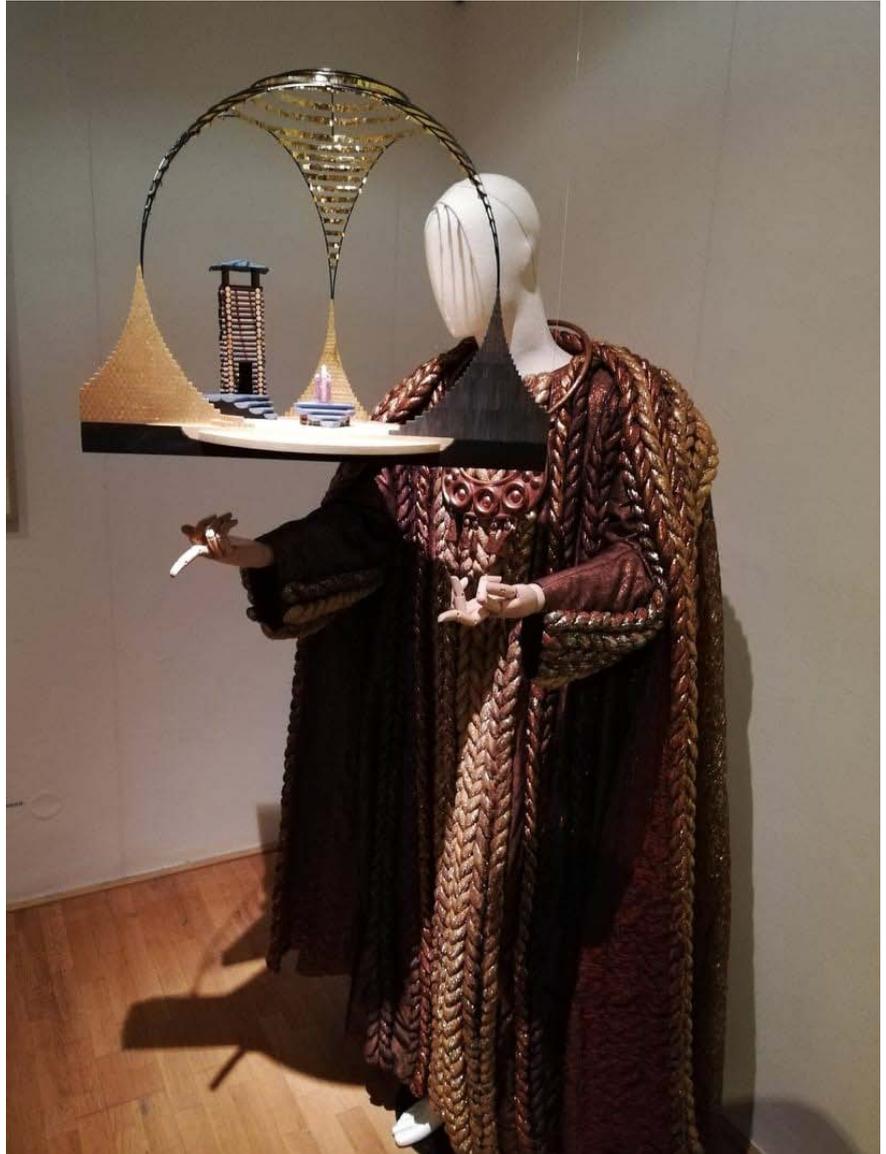
Black hall dedicated to designs working first of all with the lighting design concept analyses Vychodil's approach to lighting media according to the theories by Appio. The drawings and other graphical techniques presented, created placing special weight upon the light on the scene, show Vychodil's abandoning of decorativism. At the time of increasing power of technologies in the theatre, Vychodil discovers his roots and sources of motivation: "*Of course we do not want to present plays under the light of candles. The whole point of this is that theatre cannot put itself to the service of technologies; technologies must serve to the theatre; to the theatre that is based on actors.*" The exhibition in this room is

accentuated through a maquette coming from the performance: *Optimistic Tragedy* by Višňovský (1957). [4]

For Vychodil, imagination means to always bring a new perspective to the stage performance. The work of a scenic designer is, however, influenced by the personality of the director. In the third room, the woman curator examines various elements and approaches employed by the scenic designer in his works. Only with the benefit of hindsight, when looking at his life-long works, it is obvious that the key to them can be found in poetism, in the collage technique, poetic and painting surrealistic attempts, and in his luminous theatre. [5] The type of the scene: collage surprisingly enabled to discover new meanings and clarify contents and messages, definitely not using explication. On the contrary, it provided the audiences with the possibility to discover multiple layers of both the original work and its adaptation to the stage. [6] Mixing together montage as cross-fading of contrastive elements, collage and the luminous theatre became a starting point of the stage designer's manuscript. He managed to cope with diverse technical conditions on the stages at home and abroad. Installation of these opinions on the stage designer's works is made present here through exhibiting several maquettes. The competition of citation of the scenic fragment of *Manon* by Massenet (1980) is not necessarily the best solution in the architectural concept of this room. Vychodil's artistry did not only consist in artistic vision, but also in his craftsmanship. Even though the maquettes exhibited were not originals, their objects clearly show that they had been created with a high degree of understanding of the material also on a small scale. This is mainly supported by the space model of the play: *Balladyna* by Juliusz Slowacki (1960) and model of the performance: *The Cunning Little Wixen* by Leoš Janáček (1973). Leoš Janáček became one of the most significant authors for Vychodil to whom he often returned. His scenography suppressed the folkloristic colouring interconnecting the interior and the exterior. As a native of Moravia, he applied his natural affection for this country, his lyricism and impressiveness: hint and particular detail. [7]



Sorela (abbreviation for "social realism" is a period in the work of an artist which is not commonly accentuated. The exhibition does not omit that period, just the opposite is true; it intends to interpret the context of time during which Vychodil played a significant role in building workrooms of the Slovak National Theatre. The period of large-scale painted prospects enabled creation of grandiose spaces for the workrooms. Unfortunately, they are dilapidated halls at present necessarily needing to undergo fundamental reconstruction and modernisation.



In the forties, Vychodil was developing the understanding of the scenography as an architecture. He was discovering dramatic richness and conflicts of characters of the plays through robustness of the structure and its complicated vertical and horizontal segmentation. Vychodil's personality was formed based on the art movements and styles typical for the Czech theatre, literature and fine art in the twenties and thirties. Poetism, surrealism and painting and architectural trends of the Czech theatrical scenography were the motives adopted by him during achieving his artistic maturation. [8]

He often confronted his work with surrealism. Real things in unreal or more precisely, unusual connection brought him as an author a new metaphoric meaning. I thus came to the conclusion that "*not decoration, but property. Property: metaphor*". [9] This principle of his work is best documented by the model of Neveux's *The Woman Thief of London* (1962) and Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1959).

Svätopluk is the last exposition in the exhibition. The period of the Great Moravian Empire was a very significant topic for Vychodil as local historical topics were very popular themes for some other dramatists and publishers at that time. He devoted to the opera *Svätopluk* by Suchoň in his artistic practice several times. The productions of *Svätopluk* held in the amphitheatre in Devín (1960) and at the Bratislava Castle courtyard (1970), the maquettes of which are exhibited here, rank among the most spectacular ones. From the viewpoint of scenography,

those were just the sites which made Vychodil a mentally strong pedant. Vychodil was able to work with the stage on multiple levels from monumental portals of national theatres through huge spaces of natural amphitheatres to small-scale and humble studies. Vychodil's earlier cooperation with the director Alfred Radok is considered of vital importance for the former's work. It was during that period that the space using method was invented. It mainly was in the cramped rooms of the Chamber Theatre in Prague where Radok and Vychodil found themselves without necessary technical equipment. They made the best of a bad job surpassing difficulties by not accessorizing the stage with properties, acknowledging misery, not pretending anything, and discovering their cards they had in their hands during the game. [10]

Undoubtedly, the exhibition has to be visited, but the presentation of the scenography without theatre, however well-substantiated it may be from the curator's viewpoint, desperately lacks the moment of a live presentation of art. It is very problematic to understand the comprehensiveness of the dramatic pieces of works for which the scenic designs have been created and it is difficult to comprehend the meaning of the works. Captioning of the individual works in the exhibition did not help much to that because it was sometimes problematic to match the caption with the particular work. The architectural concept of exhibiting the works excessively copied the aesthetics of the period presented. More minimalistic and clearer approach to the presentation would certainly be beneficial to Vychodil's work. And that is to the detriment of the exhibition. Worse yet, part of the tradition of personalities in the Slovak National Theatre has currently been interrupted after Vychodil does not work anymore. Only fragments have remained of the workrooms and full opera house auditorium. It is all the more apparent with this significant anniversary of the establishment of the professional Slovak theatre where it is just professionalism that is somehow disappearing from this branch and popularity of theatre also becomes weaker.

Exhibition photo: Peter Mazalán

LV 100. Ladislav Vychodil and the 20th century scene

Slovak National Gallery

Esterházy Palace, 2nd floor

29 February – 5 July 2020

Woman curator: Zuzana Koblíšková

Architecture of the exhibition: Mojmir Vychodil, Vychodil architects, s.r.o.

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