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978-0-521-10086-1 - National Theatre in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1746-1900

Edited by Laurence Senelick

Excerpt

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General introduction

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‘Nationalism’, to the Victorian English mind, was a dirty word. The earliest usage traced by the *OED*, to *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1844, was pejorative: “‘Nationalism’ is another word for egotism.’ The term was no substitute for such an accepted if more abstract concept as ‘patriotism’, and its later association with the Irish independence movement kept it at a remove from respectability. On the eve of the First World War, whose outcome would make nationhood a crucial issue in Europe, the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, that compendium of all that the nineteenth century believed it knew, failed to bestow an entry on ‘Nationalism’ but defined ‘Nationality’ as:

a somewhat vague term, used strictly in international law [. . .] and in a more extended sense in political discussion to denote an aggregation of persons claiming to represent a racial, territorial or some other bond of unity, though not necessarily recognized as an independent entity. In this latter sense the word has often been applied to such people as the Irish, the Armenians and the Czech [. . .]

The arm’s-length aloofness of this definition suggests a reluctance to admit the lesser breeds without the law into the exclusive precincts of nationhood. Longer-established nations like Great Britain, France, Austria, Russia and the United States tended to regard aspirants to that status as mere ethnic groups, linked by a cultural bond but without justifiable claim to political sovereignty. Newer nations, Germany and Italy, were more sympathetic to nationalist claims, so long as these did not infringe their own freshly drawn boundaries.

This attitude *de haut en bas* recurs whenever cultures which lack political autonomy attempt to gain acceptance as being distinct and equal to cultures of the old-established firms. However, in the wake of the French Revolution and the dissemination of democratic ideas throughout Europe, the ‘principle of nationalities’, the notion that each ethnicity is entitled to statehood, had gained currency. It was assumed that, once given a voice, no people would choose to be ruled by strangers or imposed on by alien values. ‘As a result of these developments,’ writes

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Benjamin Akzin, 'consciousness of one's nationality assumed in the Western world the character of a permanent and mass phenomenon rather than of a sporadic and isolated one, and was increasingly linked with the attribution of a positive value to the preservation of that nationality both in the cultural and in the political spheres.'¹

Throughout the nineteenth century, the struggle of various European tribes, ethnic groups, principalities and enclaves to become independent nations was commonly bound up with the promotion of the arts, literature, music, folklore and other cultural manifestations peculiar to the struggling minority. Literacy, higher education and improved technology were regarded as tools to build autonomy. Keenly aware of their ethnological and linguistic community, these cultures chafed under alien domination, and frequently insisted that they were more progressive than the state which held them in thrall. This was, for instance, very much the case that Poland argued against the Russian Empire.

Since the principle of nationalities required that each individual in an ethnic group contribute to self-government, the logical conclusion was that nationhood would provide the optimal chance for self-expression and promotion of the group's values. Moreover, nationhood was strongly endorsed by a burgeoning bourgeoisie, which substituted 'the nation, the culture, and traditions of the fatherland' for the unattainable high culture of the aristocracy. Sprung from the folk, yet devotees of the ideals of enlightenment and high culture, the ambitious middle classes were anxious to establish traditions of which they themselves would be the guardians.² Since the bulk of the populace was illiterate, the best way to educate it to new nationalistic ideals until such time as it learned to read was by spectacle and sound: hence the crucial importance of the theatre to nationalistic movements.

These theatrical johnnies-come-lately were at a serious disadvantage, for the major European powers had stolen a long march on them. France, Italy and England, with their well-established dramatic and musical traditions, along with those later theatres of Germany and Austria, presented a double obstacle. The emerging theatres were attracted to the models presented, and could not help but try to emulate Shakespeare, Molière, the *commedia dell'arte*, the Englische Komödianten and the Comédie française as paradigms of what a developed stage was like; at the same time, they were anxious to avoid being overwhelmed by foreign example and to preserve what was unique and idiosyncratic in their own traditions. The tension between these poles of attraction and repulsion was particularly keen wherever a dominant or occupying power imposed another language or taste from above, or where a new national audience, inchoate and inexperienced, was attracted to already established if outlandish modes.

Throughout the documents published in this volume, the same notes are

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sounded again and again. There are the initial manifestos which proclaim the need for a national theatre in order to fortify the language, improve manners and morals, educate the people and, ultimately, validate the credentials of the nation, putting it on a par with its European fellows. To this end, Schiller's famous essay on the moral benefits of the theatre is quoted, adapted and referred to frequently. Crawling out from under foreign repertoire is thought a step in the right direction, so heated debates are held on whether it is preferable to foster native talent, whatever its quality, or to preserve those outside models which may be beneficial to local progress: the 'Buy Czech (or Norwegian, or whatever)' approach vs. the 'Don't throw out the brilliant baby with the bathwater' approach. The new genres of melodrama and vaudeville, imported from France and Germany, proved attractive to untried audiences and, not infrequently, to playwrights; but how were they to be adapted to local circumstances and character?

These early stages (in both senses) are usually thwarted or aborted by two obstacles: governmental and financial. The powers-that-be, King, Viceroy or bureaucracy, have their own agendas to pursue, and wish to keep the theatre under firm control. Therefore the emerging national drama finds itself hampered by official regulations, censorship, fines, and a weighty influence that insists on the plays and players that suit its taste. In many cases, the rise of a national theatre is concurrent with the formation of a national administration, and the latter has considerable say in the former. Our documents trace running battles between officialdom and the interests of artists.

Internal upheavals and theatre fires occur with aggravating regularity. Less predictable but equally destructive are events which cross national borders and affect whole sectors of European life. The Napoleonic invasions, aiming to force a new foreign rule on European nationalities, stirred native patriotism both in opposition to the French and to previous rulers, a patriotism which suffered a setback following the retrograde Congress of Vienna. The cholera epidemic of 1829-30 closed many theatres by emptying audiences and killing off promising performers. The revolutionary movements of 1848 and the Dano-Prussian, Crimean and Russo-Turkish wars also interrupted the normal course of events leading towards cultural autonomy.

Within the artistic sphere, concern is shown to nurture a national acting style, which often turns out to be a natural acting style, opposed to the declamatory or artificially stylized conventions imported from abroad. To foster this, schools are proposed and established. Over the course of the century, the intendant or administrator of the theatre is replaced by the stage director. Power that was once invested in a bureaucrat is now wielded by an 'artist', whose control over productions leads to a more unified effect. It would seem that the control over their own political destinies gained by the emerging nations of Northern and Eastern

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Europe was paralleled in the theatre by this rise of the *metteur en scène* or *Regisseur*. The improved literacy and taste of audiences over time also enables a refinement of technique and a move to experiment in new 'isms' as they spread from Paris and Berlin.

It is also interesting to observe the same foreign works surfacing as evidence for the progress made in these theatres, suggesting a homogeneity in the European dramatic scene not unlike the ecumenism of medieval Christendom, an internationalism of taste. The opera and ballet of *Cora and Alonzo* are among the earliest experiments in those genres in Sweden and Poland. The ability to stage Shakespeare, particularly *Hamlet*, is made a touchstone of a theatre's maturity. Hungary and Rumania both commence their dramatic activity with Voltaire's *Mahomet*, challenging with Enlightenment principles the Islamic invader who had once threatened their independent existences. Later on, melodramas with a broad emotional appeal like Birch-Pfeiffer's *Die Grille* become showcases for skilled actresses as different as Johanne Dybwad and Mariya Ermolova. But for all the recurrences, it is the divergences among the new national theatres and their careers which arrest the imagination.

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The Scandinavian nations differ from other emerging nationalities because they were not under imperial domination, but had been independently ruled by Danish kings since the late Middle Ages. Denmark, Sweden and Norway each preserved a sense of separate nationality, but had to cleave together until the nineteenth century for mutual protection against stronger powers. Sweden managed to draw independence from the victories of Gustav Adolf during the Thirty Years' War, whereas Norway did not achieve an autonomous government until 1905. Reinhold Niebuhr has remarked,

Their languages, being dialects of the same tongue, prove both the force of affinity and of separateness in the building of nations. Geographic factors have also contributed to their collective, as well as separate independence. Their collective independence was due to their remoteness from the main currents of imperial politics, and their separate independence was due to the water barrier between Denmark and the two northern countries and to the mountain barrier between Sweden and Norway, and, of course, also the increasing economic strength of Sweden in the nineteenth century.³

Of these three countries, Denmark enjoyed the oldest theatrical tradition, tracing its mystery plays to the Middle Ages and the Reformation. School drama and court theatre flourished, but a genuine 'public' did not develop before the nineteenth century. The modern Danish theatre paradoxically owes its origins to

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a French restaurateur, Etienne Capion, who obtained a patent in 1718 to give public performances; these were presented in French and German and, after 1722, Danish, thus commingling middle-class spectators with an aristocratic audience. It was thanks to this mixed audience that Ludvig Holberg could successfully found a Danish repertoire, which enriched all the Nordic cultures. The primacy of Holberg means the primacy of comedy, which may explain why, in the nineteenth century, Denmark developed a characteristic school of vaudeville writing. In other emerging theatres, such as Russia's, reformers deplored vaudevilles as unworthy (though Russia itself also bred a rich national school of vaudeville writers). J. L. Heiberg, again under French influence, adapted the genre to Danish manners, played up the role of music and stressed the moral. Denmark also enjoyed a greater freedom of the press than any other monarchy in Europe, although under Russian pressure limited censorship was imposed in 1799.

Sweden had the benefit of a king in the person of Gustaf III who was a connoisseur and a patriot. When A.J. von Höpken had tentatively offered a national repertoire at the Konglig svensk Skådeplats (Royal Swedish Stage) in 1737, he had had a hard time finding worthy plays in Swedish, for Swedish playwriting and production at this period followed French and Italian models rather closely. Von Höpken's efforts were effaced by a mediocre French troupe summoned by Queen Louisa in 1753, but it was dismissed by Gustaf on his accession to the throne. A dramatist who wrote the opera which opened the National Theatre in 1773, a savant who founded the Swedish Academy in 1786, Gustaf was an ideal patron of the arts. Unfortunately, it took him two *coups d'état* to consolidate his power, and he continued to be despised by a Russophile aristocracy which eventually had him assassinated. Not until the liberally inclined and anti-German Oscar I ascended the throne in the mid-nineteenth century did the monarchy take an interest in the theatre again.

Norway is the odd-man-out here, for during its period as a Danish dominion there was no aristocracy to serve as patron to the drama. The first glimmers of a Norwegian theatre flicker in the amateur dramatic societies or *Dramatiske Selskaber* of the 1780s, essentially social clubs in the larger towns. The theatre as an institution run by groups of citizens would become the norm; although the dramatic societies would eventually be effaced by a developing dramatic profession, the committee approach to theatrical management was a long time dying.

Denmark had fought on the wrong side during the Napoleonic Wars, and so in 1814, as punishment, it was forced to cede Norway to Sweden. An Act of Union established Norway as 'a free, indivisible kingdom, united with Sweden under one king', but very soon a cultural-separatist movement arose, the Young Norway party led by Henrik Wergeland. Battles raged long and loud over whether the theatre should be *norsk-norsk* or whether it should retain the best of the Danish

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legacy. The development of the theatre was not, unfortunately, assisted by the absence of a foreign governing power interfering in artistic affairs, since internal dissensions and an unsympathetic parliament provided their own disruptions. Representatives of peasant districts had begun to enter the Storting in 1833, and their often ludicrous zeal in pursuing economy at the expense of the arts became notorious. It was not until the Bergen playhouse was opened in 1850 that a theatre could be called programmatically Norwegian. Ibsen himself tended to be international in his tastes; Bjørnson, though not a radical, voted with the separatists and was a prime mover in the establishment of an exclusively Norwegian theatre. The Declaration of Independence from Sweden in 1905 set the political seal on what had long been a *fait accompli* in the cultural sphere.

Finland was wrested from Sweden by Peter the Great, but by the end of the eighteenth century it was a semi-independent grand duchy with a Diet to supervise domestic matters while foreign affairs were dictated from St Petersburg. As a result, the structure of Finnish officialdom was Russian but the official language, replacing Latin, was Swedish. Finland's actors, directors and repertoire were also Swedish – when they were not German – even though the subject matters of many plays dealt directly with Finnish life. Yet there were permanent stone theatres in towns like Turku and Viipuri before Helsinki received the New Theatre in 1860; typically, when its interior burned out three years later, the replacement was designed by a Russian architect and its name changed in 1887 to the Swedish Theatre. By that time, however, Swedish-speakers were under attack by Finnish champions.

The signal-gun for this attack was an 1864 pamphlet by a post-office employee named Matthias Weckström, *Notes on the Theatre in Finland* (the title is, of course, in Swedish: *Anteckningar rörande teatern i Finland*), which deplored the paucity of plays in Finnish. The cause was taken up by Karl Bergbom, a young playwright who changed his Christian name to Kaarlo and dedicated himself to promoting theatre in Finnish, a language in which he was barely proficient. He sponsored a Finnish drama festival in May 1870, and the enthusiasm it generated led to a Finnish theatre two years later, represented by a touring company and, from 1875 to 1902, a permanent playhouse in the ramshackle Arcadia Playhouse in Helsinki. The subsidies it received from the government were equal to and eventually larger than those made to the Swedish Theatre, whose repertoire came to be seen as more trivial than that of its Finnish rival.

During the 1880s and the repressive regime of Alexander III, Slavophile policy from Petersburg sought to russify the country. This merely intensified the nationalist spirit, which was manifested in an intense rivalry, played out in every sphere of public life, between the 'Fennoman' or Finnish camp and the previously dominant 'Svecoman' or Swedish camp. In 1902, the Finnish company moved to

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the impressive National Theatre (Suomen Kansallisteatteri), designed by Onni Alcidés Törnqvist-Tarjanne, a move which symbolized its supremacy over the Swedish faction. Still, for years to come, hostilities between the Swedish and Finnish companies kept up the foundation of more theatres by both camps. A typical bone of contention was whether actors in the Swedish troupes should speak standard Swedish or Finno-Swedish, an issue kept alive even through the civil war of 1918.

It would be inaccurate to speak of a Latvian theatre, since the notion of an independent Latvia was barely a gleam in a patriot's eye. Nevertheless, its principal city, Riga, a major intersection between Western Europe and the Slavic East, long held the germs of a Lettish culture. Lett had alternated with German and Latin in early church spectacles, but by the eighteenth century German was paramount as the language of theatre. A comic actor named Sigismundo obtained a licence to perform in 1742, with the proviso that he offer public spectacles in the city. However, there was no building to serve as playhouse, and in 1760 a Russian troupe had to perform in a barn. The requisite building was finally erected in 1768 to house Hilverding's German company; rebuilt, it would be the theatre where Wagner conducted from 1837 to 1839, while he composed *Rienzi*. With more rebuilding and refurbishment, this German-language opera- and playhouse was to remain one of the leading cultural centres in Eastern Europe until the end of the First World War. A Russian theatre opened in Riga in 1886.

The first national Lett-language theatre may be considered that of the Rīgas Latviešu Biedrība (RLB) or Riga Latvian Society, which opened on 27 September 1870, and gave twenty-five performances a year. Its history falls naturally into three phases. The first, the administration of the dramatist and director Adol'f Alunans, 1870–85, was primarily concerned with developing a repertoire and training young actors. The nationalist cause was set back in the second phase, the administration of the German Rode Ebeling, 1885–93, who invested his interest in elaborate scenic effects and translated plays of the naturalist school. The third phase, the administration of Peteris Ozoliņš and Jekab Duburs, 1893–1908, which reverted to nationalism and public education, ended with the destruction of the theatre building by fire. Meanwhile, the city saw considerable activity among private and amateur enterprises before 1918, when Latvia was made an independent nation with Riga as its capital.⁴

German cultural hegemony prevailed in Estonia for almost seven centuries, the native Finnish-speaking inhabitants in virtual serfdom to German landowners even after the territory was ceded to Russia in 1721. This dominance was patent in the German playhouse in Revel (now Tallinn) directed by August von Kotzebue from 1795 to 1798; supported by shareholders, the elegant and spacious playhouse constituted a club where they dined, played billiards and gave balls.

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Censorship was comparatively liberal: at a time when Schiller was bowdlerized and emasculated for the Petersburg stage, his plays were performed intact in Revel. This theatre later received a governmental subsidy which was revoked after the First World War when it went private again; its pan-German character was reinstated during the Second World War under Nazi supervision.

One beneficial effect of the German influence in nineteenth-century Estonia was that it boasted better educational standards and a higher literacy rate than most of the Russian Empire. The official date for the start of the Estonian national theatre is Midsummer Day 1870, which marked the sixth anniversary of the Wanemuine Association of Music and Song. On that occasion, Theodor Körner's farce *Der Vetter von Bremen* (a German forerunner of *Charley's Aunt*) was recited in an Estonian version by the poet Lydia Koidula. This initiated a series of regular performances, and very soon a large number of music societies in many towns followed suit. They survived the repressive russification programmes of the 1880s and, in 1906, the Wanemuine Association went professional. In 1916 a group of actors founded the Draamateater, which lasted until 1924. By the time it gained political autonomy in 1918, this country of one million persons possessed four professional companies.

The fate of the Polish national theatre cannot be divorced from the fate of Poland itself. Poland had a long-standing theatrical tradition, but each form of its activity appealed to a different public: mystery plays for the laity, school drama in Latin for the clergy and courtly entertainments such as Italian opera for the elite. In the absence of an influential middle-class, which all but disappeared during the interminable warfare of the seventeenth century, a national theatre was unlikely to emerge. As usual, the impulse towards that goal was Francophile, as enlightened noblemen joined with Jesuits in providing a fund of Polish plays on classic models with the aim of educating the people.

The catalyst for change was the election to the throne of Stanislas Augustus Poniatowski, who founded both the royal Warsaw opera and the National Theatre, which opened on 19 November 1765 with a Polish-language adaptation of Molière's *Les Fâcheux*. It is noteworthy that, like its earlier Danish counterpart, the Polish theatre had an affinity for the comedy of manners and, later, bourgeois tragedy, but did not go in for high tragedy until the Romantic movement made its voice heard.

Like Gustaf III, Stanislas Augustus, for all his success as a Maecenas, was continually at loggerheads with the nobility, and his attempts to reform the *sejm* or Diet met with defeat, owing largely to the machinations of Russia which had supported his election but did not care to see an independent Poland. The three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1796) among Russia, Austria and Prussia quelled any serious efforts at national unity.

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A recurrent feature of early national theatres is that they are often animated by a single energetic and gifted virtuoso – Holberg in Denmark, Gustaf III in Sweden, Sweden, Ole Bull in Norway, J.K. Tyl in Bohemia, and in Poland Wojciech Bogusławski, who not only managed the Warsaw theatre from 1783, but inspired similar projects in Lublin, Lvov, Cracow, Poznań and Vilna. (On the principle that it is harder to hit a moving target, Bogusławski shifted his troupe from city to city whenever the situation in Warsaw became too difficult.) He was adept at surviving no matter which occupying force was in power, and his success brought about the almost unthinkable bankruptcy of the Italian opera in 1803.

Between 1807 and 1815, Central Poland recovered a sort of independence as a Grand Duchy; but this perished with Napoleon's ambitions. The Congress of Vienna created 'the kingdom of Poland', a Russian province with a new constitution. Sustained by a new university-trained audience, Bogusławski hoped to realize his dream of a National Theatre maintained and subsidized by the State, but this stability was not of long duration: a military revolt in 1830 prompted severe repression by Russia. Tsar Nicholas I was determined to stamp out Polish national culture and aspirations; so although the Warsaw stage continued to offer performances in Polish, it was under the heavy thumb of Russian censors. Even so, before that time, Bogusławski and his theatre had managed to nurture the movement of Polish romanticism, which carried on in exile.

From the thirteenth century Lithuania comprised a grand duchy, whose native language was one of the most ancient of the living Indo-European tongues. In 1569 it was united as a Commonwealth with Poland with which it would share a rich tradition of Jesuit theatre and aristocratic spectacles; but no ethnic Lithuanian theatre existed, owing to the country's largely agricultural nature and its shifting fortunes as the map of Europe altered. The court of the Grand Duke of Lithuania was entertained by Italian, English, French and German ballets and operas, while the commercial class that might have supported an ethnic theatre was composed mainly of Germans, Jews and Poles. The first public performances took place in Vilna in 1785 when Bogusławski's troupe appeared there; in 1796, Dominik Morawski founded a company which thrived. When Russia annexed Lithuania in 1802, Morawski's widow managed to secure a patent, but could hardly count on permanence. Napoleon invaded the province in 1811; a revolt, simultaneous with that in Central Poland, occurred a generation later, but was put down by the Russians. For a while, the city played host to both a German and a Russian theatre, and a 'Young Lithuanian' movement tried to efface German influence, but after 1863 everything was russified. The Lithuanian language was prohibited as a medium of public expression. Mass emigration to America, to avoid military service, ensued, and there immigrant theatre, both Lithuanian- and Yiddish-speaking, flourished. The homeland itself was not to hear its first

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public performances in Lithuania until 1904, and the nation of Lithuania was not proclaimed until 1918.

Those national groups which were under the control of the Habsburg Empire suffered what Niebuhr calls 'ethnic confusion': not only were German, Slav and Magyar elements held in a loose colloidal suspension, but individual groups were widely scattered over a vast geographical expanse, complicating the formation into nations.

The struggle for a Czech national theatre in Bohemia and Moravia deserves an extended look, because of its exemplary nature. (Czech and Bohemian are synonymous; Moravian refers specifically to the Slavs of Moravia.) A Slavonic people dominated by a Germanic civilization, the Czechs used theatre in their own tongue as a potent tool to achieve nationalistic goals. Indeed, in old Czech, *jazyk* means both nation and language. It is noteworthy that the Czechs should have been cited by the *Encyclopædia Britannica* as a prime example of a 'nationality' unrecognized as a political entity but held together by a bond of unity; in their case the bonds were cultural and territorial as well as linguistic, for the Czechs looked back to the ancient kingdom of Bohemia as a model.

The first so-called Czech theatre, the 'Stavovské divadlo' or Theatre of the Estates, built by Count Nostitz-Rieneck in 1789, was allowed to play only on Sunday afternoons and holidays. During this period, Bohemia's autonomy was severely limited, but greater freedom of the press opened the way for newspapers in the national language. After 1815, with the shadow of Metternich darkening the land, long-suppressed national aspirations found their sole outlet in literature. It was then, the era of J.K. Tyl and J.J. Kolár, that the Czech theatre had animators energetic and talented enough to give it strength. When the insurrections of 1848 occurred, the theatre became a forum for patriotic dramas; but this was soon ended by the bombardment of Prague. The ensuing reaction from Vienna imposed stronger censorship and bureaucratic centralization; the German language was made exclusive in schools and offices, and all Bohemian newspapers were suppressed. Tyl was forced to vegetate in the provinces with a touring company. It was not until the proclamation of the 1861 Constitution that an independent Czech theatre could be countenanced, but German influence did not evaporate all at once, and it would be another twenty years before the long-awaited National Theatre was actually built, with this inscription over its portals: 'The People, to Itself'.

The situation in Slovakia, the homeland of the Slavs of West Hungary, was even more retrogressive. During the Hungarian domination, the Slovaks were treated as an inferior race; the aristocracy was Magyarized and the peasants took no interest in the arts. After 1830, amateur dramatic troupes fostered a national consciousness, and a number of Slovakian playwrights evolved. In the *annus*