

## THEATRICAL DOCUMENTARY OF PERFORMANCE ART<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *M.H.L.* is a theatrical production dedicated to the first Slovak professional female director Magda Husáková-Lokvencová, which combines documentary theatre and performance. Sláva Daubnerová wrote the script and scene concept and is director and plays the sole character in the play. She portrays the private and professional life of *M.H.L.* in a chronologically sequenced and mosaic-like fashion. *M.H.L.* is portrayed as an educated, broad-minded and intelligent woman who knows her own mind. She graduated in law and then took up theatre direction. Her private and professional life represented a series of ups and downs. Initially happy at the side of her husband, Gustáv Husák—successful early on as a politician, and flourishing in the theatre, she later had to struggle to survive and make a comeback to the theatre. Performer Daubnerová, enhanced the performance by using video art and sound design as important elements in the production.

**Key words:** documentary; performance; director; Magda Husáková-Lokvencová; video art.

Over the past two years, a production with the mysterious initials *M.H.L.* has increasingly been performed at various theatre festivals in Slovakia and abroad. The author of the play and actress Sláva Daubnerová used these three letters to encrypt the name of Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (1916-1966)<sup>2</sup>, the first Slovak professional female theatre director and first wife of an important Slovak, and later Czechoslovak, politician, Gustáv Husák<sup>3</sup>.

In the past, not many people would have known that Husák's first wife was a renowned Slovak theatre director, who pursued this career for almost twenty years. Alongside her theatrical career, she also lived through the rise and fall of socio-political events from the 1940s up until her husband was vindicated (1963). Her name is also associated with the actor Ctibor Filčík.

In 2008, a voluminous book was published on Magda Husáková-Lokvencová under the guidance of Nadežda Lindovská et al. For the first time ever, Magda Husáková-Lokvencová was brought to prominence within the Slovak cultural context and partly within the political

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<sup>2</sup> Originally Magdaléna, she began to use the abbreviated form of her name in the mid 1930s.

<sup>3</sup> Gustáv Husák (1913-1991), a Slovak lawyer, communist politician and Czechoslovak president between 1975 and December 10, 1989.

context. The monodrama *M.H.L.*<sup>4</sup> is closely linked to the book of Lindovská et al. The book is divided into four parts, comprising chapters by ten authors, Lokvencová's articles, excerpts from theatre programmes, interviews with Lokvencová and personal testimonies and memoirs of those who outlived her. There are also recollections of her and of her work including information on Husáková-Lokvencová's life and lists of her creation.

The book is a scenic representation of Lokvencová's life. Chronologically sequenced images and the reader's associations cross-fade against the backdrop of the wider socio-political context. The image layer in documentary literature and especially in documentary theatre is among the more complex aspects of the perception of a work of art. It is in this context that *M.H.L.* might partly be seen. The informative layer contains facts on the educational background of Lokvencová's family and on her own high school and university studies. It also includes a comment on her "godlessness", makes mention of her decision to exchange the security of a legal position for the artistic insecurity of theatre work, and covers her greater and smaller successes in theatre and film. We also learn about her becoming jobless after her husband's conviction and life sentence,<sup>5</sup> about her struggle to support her family, her work in a museum and at the theatre in Košice, and are given an account of her relations with her children.

The superstructure and scenic image layer includes the reader's/audience's capacity to interpret the life circumstances affecting the artist's life in a wider context. For instance, in the first half of the 1930s, Lokvencová was only one of nine students out of a total of 386 at her girls' grammar school to have claimed no religious affiliation and this was bound to affect her future life. Similarly, she met the leftist undergraduate Gustáv Husák from Bratislava while she was still a student at a grammar school in Banská Bystrica where Husák was sent to give lectures. This is also true of the psychological pressure she was put under by the communist authorities (she and her children were banned from visiting her husband in prison and she was also forced to publicly distance herself from her husband and to file a petition for divorce). The official opinions of critique reflected the country's political development: when Husák was charged, critics rejected all her artistic achievements. When dismissed from the theatre, she and her family experienced severe economic hardship on the edge of survival.

Sláva Daubnerová's play *M.H.L.* is based on documents from a book on Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (especially on Husáková-Lokvencová's correspondence and her director's books to her productions). Daubnerová also conducted research in the Czech and Slovak archives for additional information. Shots from news reports (of Husáková-Lokvencová's première, of government officials attending a theatrical performance, or of the show trial of her husband) are also highly valued. Shots from Bielik's film *Vlčie diery*

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<sup>4</sup> P.A.T. Theatre Prievidza and Štúdio 12 Bratislava: M. H. L. Scene concept and direction: Sláva Daubnerová, dramaturgy and music by: Pavel Graus, movement by: Emil Píš, video art: Lukáš Kodoň, Cast: Sláva Daubnerová. Premiéred on 27 February, 2010. Sláva Daubnerová is an author of several interesting theatre projects, which are on the border line between a theatrical production and performance.

<sup>5</sup> In 1960, G. Husák was released on amnesty. He was fully vindicated as late as 1963, and shortly afterwards, the couple were divorced.



**Photo 1.** Videoart with Sláva Daubnerová. Photo Samo Trnka

[Wolves' Lairs] are an example of her acting talent and the film title creates a metaphoric level of *M.H.L.*: the 1950s were a time when leading communist officials treated many individuals worse than wolves would have done. This is also conveyed in Husáková-Lokvencová's analysis of the characters in Gorky's *Nepriatelja* [The Enemies]<sup>6</sup> found in her archives.

The play *M.H.L.* and the way the author (as actor and director) interprets it also partly reflect the techniques of documentary theatre. Patrice Pavis points out that there is a wide range of documentary drama, i.e. also theatre reflecting the model of the source material arrangement (for instance, socio-political or socio-economic model, etc.), (Pavis 2008, 126-127).

While film consists of a photographic recording of phenomena, theatre conveys phenomena via the performer. The proponents of verbatim documentary theatre would oppose performance elements.

Performance is to be understood as a connection between traditional theatre (with the focus on experiencing) and conceptual art (designed to fulfil aesthetic expectations). In performance, visual and auditory elements and also longer time periods are used.

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<sup>6</sup> The original name of the Russian play is *Vragi*; if the "g" is replaced with an "h", the word becomes "vrahovia", meaning murderers in Slovak.

## A panoramic portrait of a woman-wife-theatre director

In this 80-minute drama production, Daubnerová manages to broaden the image and objective portrayal of a real person using time dimension (Lehmann), while keeping theatrical stylisation.

Daubnerová is actress/performer and narrator (she presents herself as the author). She maintains an impartial attitude towards the person she talks about. The play, written so as to cater for production needs, features a montage of the narrator's lines, recordings of Lokvencová's utterances and State Security files (from when she was put under surveillance for being the wife of a leftist politician), along with excerpts from reviews, Lokvencová's letters, and photographs and film shots. Daubnerová would not give in to sentimentality or switch over to a politicising image of the wife of a sentenced politician and victim of political reprisals. She rejected the opportunity to build on her public image as a female director by capitalising on the fate of the politician's wife. The gossip about Husáková-Lokvencová's husband buying her one of the most luxurious of fur coats would surely not have contributed to the positive image of a politician's wife and theatre director. "It was one of the most expensive fur coats a lady in Bratislava has ever been seen in" (Daubnerová 2010, 8). The portrayal of Magda Husáková-Lokvencová's personality is bolstered by passages from her letters, for instance, from the letter of 13 November, 1951, written to deputy prime minister Viliam Široký:

Dear Comrade Široký,

Excuse me for writing to you. I have been contemplating this for a long time and I have decided to approach you only because I see no other possibility and you are my last resort. From day-to-day, I am being faced with such worries that sometimes I do not know how to live and what to do. (...) Please, reconsider whether it would be possible for me to work in the theatre, I cannot breathe without this work. I have nothing more cherished and dear. My entire existence depends on the decision of the Party and the possibility to work in the theatre. I would gladly accept any solution, even in the form of unremunerated holiday, and I would make use of the time and take any job in a theatre in Prague (like a prompter, dressing room attendant, etc.)... If this were not possible, I would take a job in a factory, for I am writing drama from this environment and I need to familiarize myself with all the problems and with the atmosphere. By doing this, I would most probably get rid of my bourgeois traits and become a more useful person.

Have mercy upon me, look at me for who I am, not for my relationship with Husák. Please, take account of me having two children and that I am neither in good health condition nor strong enough to be able to cope with all this after all the blows I have received (*ibid.*, 9).

Also, subsequent letters to various party functionaries were apologetic and asking for personal meeting with them and for help.

Many documents from this period are still not publicly available (for instance, personal correspondence), although, undoubtedly, they would add to the portrayal of Husáková-Lokvencová's personality and especially the environment she lived and worked in. As part of a talk held during the Medzinárodný festival Divadelná Nitra [Nitra International Theatre Festival] in 2010, several participants raised the issue of whether family members were under obligation to provide historians and artists with all the material on Husák and his first wife, the mother of his two children, so that the account of this period and the portrayal of real-life figures were as comprehensive as possible. The answer to the question when and in what



**Photo 2.** *M.H.L.* Performer in the lift.  
Photo Samo Trnka

connection personal correspondence and other documents from private archives will be published falls within historiography and ethics.

As author, director and actress, Daubnerová did not wait for the complete material. She portrayed a woman with her inner and outer world, both little known to Slovak society prior to the 1990s. It is a portrayal of a woman, who from her early school days had been aware of society's different treatment of men and women and of gender inequality. The line "A woman is a human being just like any other man" comes from her play *Očarený život* [A Wonder-filled Life] (Lindovská et al., 17) and alludes to Husáková-Lokvencová's numerous characteristics which Daubnerová tersely projects on the backcloth in the play's introduction. Let us mention some of them: "...glamorous, intelligent, ambitious, rational, reserved, amicable, vulnerable, talented, brave, successful, respected, stunningly attractive, classically beautiful and she had nice hands." To this list, she would verbally add: "And a heavy smoker, too, and she couldn't make it without coffee" (Daubnerová 2010, 1).

The actress and director Daubnerová, sings part of a song by Doris Day, *Que Sera Sera*, about how it is impossible to see into the future. Dreams and reality often go their separate ways and this was also true of Husáková-Lorencová's life. Daubnerová frames the private life

and professional career of Lokvencová as a woman/mother/director by film images in the lift. The *paternoster* lift epitomizes how the different events in her life are linked together and her ability to proceed to a higher level and to bring this chaining to an end. When things go well and she is positively received by critics, the projected film shows her going up in the lift, when things go badly, the lift goes down. When she is hesitant, she stands by the lift while it goes up and down, when she encounters artistic problems, she gets stuck in the lift in a narrow space between two walls and crouches slowly down in the lift. A door at the rear of the stage is opened and an image of a lift is projected on the backcloth as a symbol/reflection of her state of mind. In a simple metaphor the door would mean liberation or freedom. Here, however, the door epitomizes a return to a no-way-out situation, where there is no alternative but to move in a vicious circle.

### **An artistic, not a political documentary**

The production is more biographical than political and documentary-like in style. Decoding images, symbols, and the use of performance art in which the word, video art and sound design are combined, depends on the audience's capacity and interest to share a common experience with the artist who offers his/her presence on stage for contemplation (Lehmann). The most decipherable scene is that of a tennis game. It logically symbolises Husáková-Lokvencová's family background and her carefree ways and naive thinking about gender equality, while her mechanic stacking of paper on the floor raises an understandable



Photo 3. *M.H.L.* Sláva Daubnerová in the bank officer scene. Photo Samo Trnka

need of liberation from this dreary office work. Similarly, a plate and cutlery on a small table creates a symbolic image of keeping the family together. Metaphorically, the family falls apart, when the actress intentionally breaks the plate, which is followed by an attempt to put it back together again from the broken pieces in the finale of the performance. More complex images of photo and film cuts contrasting and concurring with the spoken word require the audience's more comprehensive knowledge of the period in question. It seems, however, that this need not be the case and foreign theatre professionals without knowledge of Slovak would still understand the production (Porubjak 2010).

The actress's pale face and bright red lips function as a mask. Frequent costume changes not only allude to changes in time but are also a logical and aesthetic ritual of the period. They symbolize those who change coats at times of socio-political changes, and indicate changes in social mood. They also represent success, economic well-being, and career and personal problems. The actress uses a civil, almost journalistic tone, free of any sentiment even in situations where emotions would be expected. This Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or, distancing effect), building on the shattering of the audience's illusions, prompts the audience to actively compare what they hear and see against their own experiences. The sense of impersonalisation is enhanced by her speaking into the microphone or cine camera with the image being immediately projected onto the side of the stage. Alongside the image, the cuts and projected photographs, this impersonalisation acquires ironical overtones.

Daubnerová's Magda is glamorous, intelligent, ambitious, rational, reserved. She would never attempt to be vulnerable or brave. The magnitude of her success is evidenced by recorded quotations from theatre reviews. The audience hears the recorded voices of well-known theatre critics which, in contrast to Husáková-Lokvencová's rationality and ambitiousness, emanate an emotional charge. These are the most telling and logically arranged lines carrying a targeted message.

In Daubnerová's alienated utterances any feelings for her husband, family, or for her sons are subdued. Her reply as to why she married Husák was strictly rational: „Když on byl nejchytřejší”. [Because he was the smartest one.] (Daubnerová 2010, 2).

Sláva Daubnerová has created a portrait of an independent, proud and unyielding woman who hides her feelings. This is a portrait of a female director at a time when this was a strictly male profession in Slovakia. However, her Husáková-Lokvencová is different from the real-life one. Daubnerová's young face is barely capable of expressing the tragedy that the real Husáková-Lokvencová had to go through. Her facial expressions, attire and life attitudes, quite logically, changed over time. The period photographs show the transformation of an attractive, slim and glamorous brunette into a mature woman, whose face bore the indelible imprint of her dramatic life at her husband's side. Her personality emanated great inner strength, strictness and also dramatism (Lindovská et al., 98). The face of Husáková-Lokvencová has remained vivid in the memories of a handful of her colleagues still alive today and historians. There is an image of her seated at a mixing desk or in a rehearsal room at an ordinary small table with the indispensable cigarette in her hand and a cup of coffee. There are notes and a clear idea of the message to be conveyed by the productions bearing her signature, detailing what she would say about a character and to whom and when. There are notes not only about Gorky's *Enemies*, referred to above, but also on other successful

productions shown in the play's finale, such as Mayakovsky's *Kúpel* [The Bathhouse] or *Ploštica* [The Bedbug], or Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Frisch's *Don Juan* and others. The actress demonstrates Husáková-Lokvencová's rational thinking as a director through the Husáková-Lokvencová's director's books. Daubnerová's outer fragility dissociated her as a performer from the character of a woman/mother/director.

One may get the impression that Husáková-Lokvencová's children are seldom mentioned in the play. In Lindovská et al., the reader learns about her being evacuated from the military airport *Tri duby* [Three Oaks] to Moscow during the Slovak National Uprising in the late stages of pregnancy, only to give birth to her first son four days later. The book gives an account of her having to lie on the floor during the entire flight, clinging to the seat she was supposed to be sitting in to save herself from getting crushed. It was the penultimate flight across the Soviet air bridge which could have flown them to exile (Lindovská et al., 40-41).

On numerous occasions, M. Husáková-Lokvencová mentioned theatrical performances that she had seen in Moscow and that were a source of inspiration for her. All of this shaped her and indirectly prepared her for a tragic personal fate and a successful career. However, Sláva Daubnerová does not go that far. She does not make use of subtleties to create a jigsaw-like portrayal of mother and theatre professional in one person. She focuses on the dichotomy of Husáková-Lokvencová's attributes, which are projected onto the backcloth during the play's introduction, thus "developing a comprehensive picture of her character" (Blaho, 2010). Daubnerová makes use of three projection spaces: the first is the backcloth and the second is a thin transparent curtain separating the performer from the audience, onto which shots from theatrical productions are projected, together with the shots of family celebrations and newsreel shots of socio-political events. The third is the paternoster lift projected on the stage backcloth. The lift is behind the door and the audience sees it after the door in the stage backcloth is opened.

In her minimalistic acting, Daubnerová uses minimal props to illustrate the director's life and work. This contrasts with epic staging where the message is often lost amidst the complicated setting. Music is used to finish off the lines rather than to illustrate them, such as Voskovec and Werich's song *Když nás půjdou milióny* [When millions of us will march] or a passage from Mayakovsky's play in the finale of Lokvencová's a-production. Husáková-Lokvencová's correspondence, which reflects her feelings, thinking and desires, constitutes yet another layer to be contrasted with Daubnerová's sober theatricality.

After seeing her husband in prison, she writes to her best friend Olinka (Lichardová): "Oli, I've just realised that Gusto will never return and even if he did, he would be an old man by then. What am I going to do? It's the same whichever way you view it. I'm so furious in my soul, I'd desperately want to do something, but I've no idea what" (Daubnerová 2010, 11).

To avoid sliding into emotions, the performer/actress, once again, uses an impersonal, declarative tone. She becomes slightly more emotional in lines about Ctibor Filčák, which she reads out from Husáková-Lokvencová's letters. In them, Husáková-Lokvencová admits that for the very first time she is truly in love:

I'm on my honeymoon and Tibor independently said the same. Coincidentally, this is the first honeymoon of our lifetime and the two of us look like cut out from a novel. He is sitting next to me, so handsome and nice, playing chess... In fact, I was a bit sulky and a bit furious,



but it was Tibor who cried this time, and to reconcile with me, he pretended to have fallen ill one morning, and no matter how hard I tried not to show that I cared, there was I, applying compresses, fussing around him, and when I eventually fell into his arms, he threw the compresses away and was in the best of health again.

I've never realised how beautiful the experience of love can be. I honestly love him and I'm very happy with him... Goodness me, I don't know what to write. Who would be interested in theatre now? I couldn't care less about the entire youth ensemble because they all treated me like cold-hearted stones. Even stones are more polite, at least they wouldn't move (*ibid.*, 11, 12).

Just as in life, in her letters we find the same will to survive, to work, and to look after her children. Not long after she describes her romantic relationship, she is forced by life circumstances to be guided more and more by her rationality.

Here I am, broke and completely stuck. There is no place to go and no one to borrow from. I'm waiting for Tibor to show up, but he's such an impractical man, he's in Trnava, a half an hour journey by train, he could come over and stay for the night and then I could go over to your place for two days. But I don't hear from him. If only I knew his address. Goodness me, if only he were more fit for such a complicated life with film!

I beg you once again to go to the agency, only they can requisition the money sent to me, they must have it by now, after all, it's been almost a month since it was sent. It would help me terribly if you could arrange for an advance payment of about 500 crowns. Oli, don't leave me without help. I honestly don't know what to do. (...)

Every time I think of the boys, my heart aches. If anything bad happens to them or if they perform poorly at school, I couldn't take it. I just hope that everything will be fine.

Good gracious me, it's so unhomey here. It's so cold! (*ibid.*, 13).

## In conclusion

*M.H.L.* is not a story about the wife of an unfairly sentenced politician. It is a chronological portrayal of interesting events and moments from the director's professional and private life and these are brought together in a jigsaw-like fashion. It is a portrayal of the first lady of Slovak theatre direction, combining documentary and performance styles. It is an interesting type of contemporary theatre that uses symbols and metaphors, as rendered by a performer and not an emotionally engaged actress.

Magda Husáková-Lokvencová did not live to see her fiftieth birthday. She died unexpectedly of a stroke at the peak of her creativity, at the time of her professional engagement with the establishment of Nová scéna [New Stage] theatre in Bratislava.

In *M.H.L.* she "departs" twice. At the beginning and at the end of the monodrama she silently slides to the floor, clad in a modest black dress. Life comes to an end, the struggle for audiences, for reviews, and for the love of her husband comes to a finale... The struggle was translated into a dramatic form in which the performer, together with video art and sound design professionals, not only recalls the recent past but also offers her own narration about a woman/director, transposed into the context of contemporary society. Each performance of *M.H.L.* that is given in a different setting offers an ever-evolving imaginative portrayal of human action under extreme situations and as such is a living component of Slovak culture.

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