

# National Theatres in 19th Century

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„The purpose of theatre is the embroidering and improvement of the mind of a whole nation... A good theatre serves a whole nation.“

J. E. Schlegel



## How to define National Theatre?

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- Each national theatre reflected a specific originating moment, location, set of goals, language, history, and mythology, as well as the idiosyncratic beliefs of its individuals founding members (Wilmer)
- Types of NT:
  - Established by a stable autocratic government (Comédie-Française in Paris in 1680, Burgtheater in Vienna in 1741, etc.)
  - Established after an effort of a nationalist movement in emerging states under a foreign rule (Prague National Theatre in 1883, Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904)

# Comédie Française ( 1680 )

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- Established by Louis XIV.
- For plays by Molière, Corneille, Racine



# Polish National Theatre in Warsaw (1765)

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- Founded in 1765 by the king Stanisław Poniatowski
- Poland is dissolved (Russia, Prussian, Austria) 1772, 1793, 1795
- Polish NT could not exist under the title “national”
- Idea of NT as Poles try to regain sovereignty (1924)



# Danish Royal Theatre in Copenhagen (1748)

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- Built on land provided by the king
- Quickly stepped away from the tradition of hiring Italian and French actors
- Engaging Danish actors and staging Danish drama
- Ludvig HOLBERG – in 1750s 25 of his plays in the repertoire
- Handed to municipality in 1750



# Hamburg National Theatre (1767)

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- Established by the citizens and theatre professionals – first attempt on German NT
- A failed experiment that had nevertheless shown the potential and the method
- An idea of dramaturgy – Gotthold Ephraim LESSING
- A need to write national plays, in national language, with nationalist themes
- Also translations into German



„The good-natured idea of getting the Germans a national theatre, while we Germans are not yet a nationality! I don't speak about the political condition, but only about the moral character. One should almost say that this consists in not having one of our own, yet. We are still the devoted admirers of the never enough admired French. Everything that comes to us from across the Rhine is beautiful, charming, lovely, divine”.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing





Washington crosses Delaware river, Commons



E. Delacroix, Commons

„If in all our plays there was one main stream, if our poets reached an agreement and created a firm union for this final purpose – if a strict selection led their work and their brushes dedicated themselves only to national matters – in one word, if we had a national stage, we would also become a nation.“

Friedrich Schiller

- 19th century national theatres were often established with nationalist agenda
  - Constructing national identity
  - Legitimizing the aspirations of nationalist movement
  - Instilling a sense of national commitment and future citizenship
  - Essentialist and exclusionary notions of identity (us and them)
- → Johann Gottfried von Herder: importance of cultural traditions of common people



## Manuscripts of Zelená Hora and Dvůr Králové

Proved to be faked by Hanka and  
Linda in 19<sup>th</sup> century



Collecting and reworking  
folktales and legends



Lilli and Marie Lehmann  
as Helmwig and Ortlinde  
(Die Walküre)



Franz Betz as "The Wanderer"  
(Siegfried)



- Fairytales by the Grimm brothers
- *Nibelungenlied* – Germanic saga adapted into an opera cycle by Richard Wagner

# Nationalist Movement and the Romantics

- Friedrich Schiller: *Wilhelm Tell* (1804)

ROSSELMANN. By this fair light, which greeteth us, before

Those other nations, that, beneath us far,

In noisome cities pent, draw painful breath,

Swear we the oath of our confederacy!

We swear to be a nation of true brothers,

Never to part in danger or in death!

[They repeat his words with three fingers raised.

We swear we will be free, as were our sires,

And sooner die than live in slavery!

Juliusz Slowacki: *Kordian* (1833)

KORDIAN. So from the fire of all the stars I will make a crown on my forehead,

In the blue sky of the spheres I will melt the body so

That like marble, like ice, it will light up with sun beams...

Then beautiful as the ghost of a fairy tale,

I'll go to a cold world and I can swear

That those thousand stars on the forehead and in the eyes a thousand more,

That the statuesque grace of nations will expand the feelings

And inspire the people;

And in hearts as a thought will strike,

Like God's miracle...





## Czech National Theatre (1883)

- František Palacký after 1848: “Our national theatre will soon arise as a monument to our constitutional rights and equality”
- Who will pay for it? → Fundraising, public collections
- Laying the foundations – stones from various places



## Vojtěch Hynais: curtain of the National Theatre

- Národ sobě – The Nation to Themselves
- Allegory of Slavia

# Národní divadlo.

V neděli dne 18. listopadu 1833.

Mimo předplacení.

[Théâtre paré.]

## Otevření národního divadla.

První slavnostní představení:

# LIBUŠE.

Slavnostní zpěvohra, ve 3 odděleních.

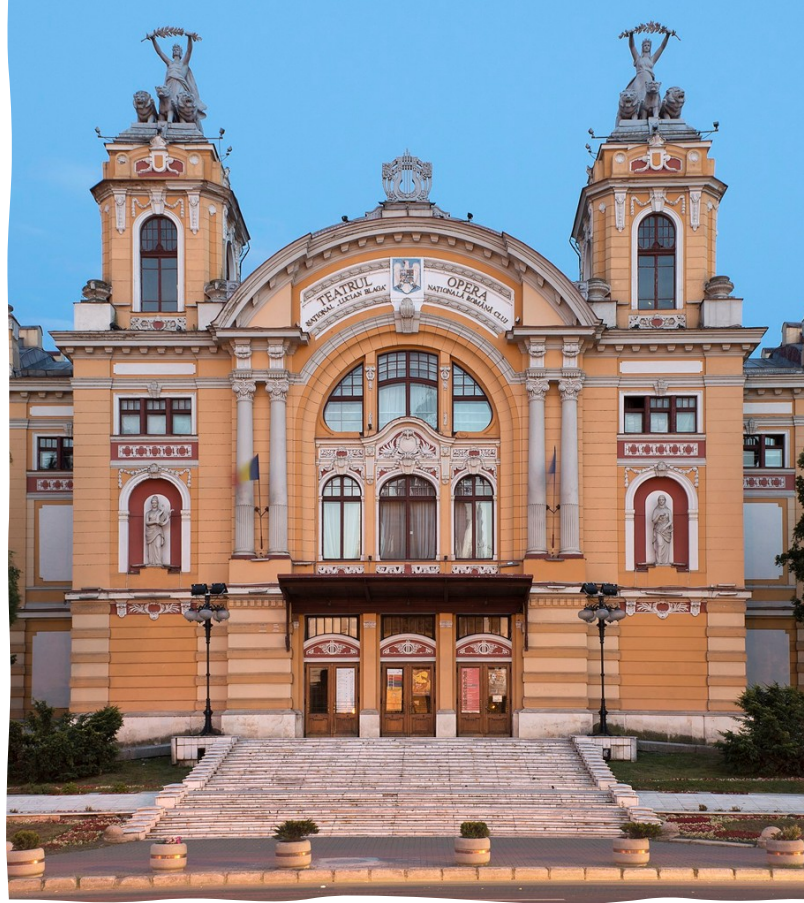
*I. Libuše soud; II. Libuše snatch; III. Libuše procectá.*

Na slova J. Wenziga složil *Bedřich Smetana*.

Ve scéně uvedl vrchní režiser p. *F. Kolár*. Tance uspořádal baletní mistr p. *V. Beisinger*. Vesměs nové dekorace jsou z atelieru c. k. dvorních malířů: *Brioschi, Burghart a Koutský* ve Vídni. Vesměs nové kostumy jsou zhotoveny dle nákrešů p. *F. Kolára* za vrchního dozoru pana *V. Beneše* a dozoru inspektora garderoby p. *J. Pešty*. Zpěvohru řídí první kapelník p. *A. Čech*.



- Opened with Bedřich Smetana's opera *Libuše*
  - Far-reaching importance of legendary figures
    - Wilhelm Tell (Germany and Switzerland)
    - Joan of Arc (France)
    - Boris Godunov (Russia)
    - Cathleen Ni Houlihan (Ireland)



Fellner and Helmer,  
architects of European  
National Theatres

# Recommended Readings

- HOLDSWORTH, Nadine and Nicholas HYTNER. *Theatre and Nation*. London: Macmillan Education UK, 2010.
- THER, Philipp. *Center Stage: Operatic Culture and Nation Building in 19th Century Central Europe*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2014.
- WILMER, S. E. (ed.). *National Theatres in a Changing Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.