

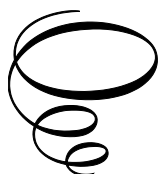
The Twenty-First-Century Slovenian Theatre and Drama and Its International Context

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Edited by

Tomaž Toporišič, Barbara Orel,
Maja Murnik and Gašper Troha

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and Its International Context

Edited by Tomaž Toporišič, Barbara Orel, Maja Murnik
and Gašper Troha

Translation: Katja Kosi, Jaka Andrej Vojevec
Proofreading: Jana Renée Wilcoxon

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Dragan Živadinov, Cankarjev dom, 1986, photo by Tone Stojko, SLOGI
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BACKGROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of many years of research on, first-hand observation of and close interaction with the Slovenian drama and theatre of the past two decades. Previous versions of most of the chapters were first published in Slovenian language either in the journal *Amfiteater – Journal of Performing Arts Theory* (from 2018 to 2022) or in the book *Drama, tekst, pisava 2* (Drama, Text, Writing 2, edited by Petra Pogorevc and Tomaž Toporišič, Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko, 2021). In compiling and preparing the chapters for *The Twenty-First-Century Slovenian Theatre and Drama and Its International Context*, the contributions were thoroughly revised, elaborated and updated. Several chapters were also written anew.

The text by Mateja Pezdirc Bartol was prepared and written within the framework of the research programme Intercultural literary studies (Medkulturne literarnovedne študije, P6-0265), co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency – ARIS (Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije) from the state budget.

The texts by Tomaž Toporišič, Barbara Orel, Blaž Lukan, Jakob Ribič, Gašper Troha and Aldo Milohnič were prepared and written within the framework of the research programme Theatre and Interart Studies (Gledališke in medumetnostne raziskave, P6-0376), co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency – ARIS from the state budget.

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INTRODUCTION

TOMAŽ TOPORIŠIČ, BARBARA OREL,
MAJA MURNIK AND GAŠPER TROHA

This book aims to outline the key developments in Slovenian theatre and drama over the past two decades and to situate them within an international context of twenty-first-century drama and performing arts. Producing the first volume on contemporary Slovenian theatre and drama for an international audience presents several challenges and opportunities. Firstly, the Slovenian theatre scene is not widely recognised globally. Secondly, its extreme dynamism makes it challenging for the editors to balance broader, historically situated contributions with up-to-the-minute materials. Nonetheless, this demanding task has made our endeavour all the more compelling.

The fall of the Berlin Wall signalled a shift towards post-socialist transitions across Europe, including in Slovenia. As Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz suggest in their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance* (2023), this transition led to political, economic and social changes from 1989 till the present that had an enormous impact on the theatre-making, institutional structures and forms of representation, resulting in Central and Eastern European countries in the change of funding models as well as aesthetic and political strategies. This period of change led to a significant transformation in Slovenian theatre and drama. Once a prominent social forum and collective cultural dissident, Slovenian theatre had to adapt and find new modes of expression to engage its audience effectively.

And it has accomplished this task cum laude because Slovenian theatre and drama comprise a vital part of European theatre with names like Ivica Buljan, Maja Delak, Žiga Divjak, Evald Flisar, Oliver Frlijić, Meta Hočever, Sebastijan Horvat, Emil Hrvatin/Janez Janša, Tomi Janežič, Dušan Jovanović, Mateja Koležnik, Iztok Kovač, Ema Kugler, Jernej Lorenci, Katarina Morano, Vinko Möderndorfer, Barbara Novakovič, Tomaž Pandur, Janez Pipan, Matjaž Pograjc, Draga Potočnjak, Simona Semenič, Igor Štromajer, Vito Taufer, Tanja Zgonc, Matjaž Zupančič, Dragan Živadinov, etc.

The book roughly follows the trends of theatrical development in comparison with other parts of Europe, stressing certain specificities that stem from its Central European and post-socialist contexts. It shows how it redefined the social role of the theatre and drama in the 1990s, following a strong urge to reconnect with its audience and a chance to redefine its forms and themes as well.

Within this frame, we could say that the book's main objectives are to:

- offer a comprehensive account of contemporary Slovenian theatre and drama, a story of a smaller nation that traditionally has been underrepresented in English-speaking academia;
- critically discuss trends, themes, artists and movements that can provide insight into the most important issues and phenomena in contemporary performance and politics in Slovenia;
- introduce artists and trends that are producing some of the most distinctive work in Slovenia;
- uncover specific traditions, genres and ideas that have influenced the artists and phenomena;
- show how these performances and plays found their place within the broader context of Central European performing arts.

In trying to find the most appropriate structure to capture the complexities of the current Slovenian scene, we have organised the book into four parts:

In part one, **“Dramatic and Stage Writing from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century”**, readers will find the analyses of different forms of dramatic writing and an ever-changing relationship between the text and theatrical performance. It is introduced by Tomaž Toporišič and his lucid overview of the different relationships between theatre and drama. Leaning on the theoretical findings of Gerda Poschmann and Bruno Tackels, he shows that the Slovenian theatre of the twenty-first century is undoubtedly based on no-longer-dramatic texts. The latter demands the actor's and audience's active and creative engagement to realise its potential. Furthermore, Toporišič shows that despite this openness and complexity, these texts do infuse a large dose of referentiality and the dramatic into their postdramatic tissue. Here, he draws on ideas of Élisabeth Angel-Perez, Anne Monfort and Birgit Haas on post-postdramatic theatre, neo-drama theatre and dramatic drama that all try to describe a contemporary return to the dramatic text.

He analyses a variety of Slovenian writers from different generations and aesthetic orientations: from the more traditional Matjaž Zupančič, who

nevertheless comments on modern society in dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis, to Simona Semenič and Oliver Frljič, who are the most prominent representatives of socially engaged postdramatic theatre, to Žiga Divjak and Katarina Morano, who have been developing their own form of verbatim and documentary theatre. By comparative analyses of their works, he shows how the relationships between theatre and text and theatre and its audience differ but have a common objective, i.e., to engage the receiver emotionally and to activate his/her ethical consciousness. He goes on to analyse the works by the younger generation of authors, Katja Gorečan, Urša Majcen and Ela Božič, whose texts are even more of a palimpsest. These authors draw on poetry, poetic drama and social media. As Toporišič concludes, the Slovenian theatre of the twenty-first century belongs to the postdramatic trend. However, it simultaneously transcends it, returning to the dramatisation and problematisation of the opposition representation/presentation.

Barbara Orel explores postdramatic forms of performing from a different angle, discussing them from the viewpoint of originality and reproducibility. In doing so, she draws on Giorgio Agamben's reflection on originality as a major feature of the work of art and reproducibility as a major feature of the product of technics. The notion of originality is explored in terms of two prevailing tendencies that led to innovations on Slovenian stages at the turn to the twenty-first century: the tendency towards the aesthetics of the real and the tendency towards authenticity. As presented in the selected performances (by Vlado Repnik, Matjaž Berger, Marko Peljhan, Dragan Živadinov, Ema Kugler, Igor Štromajer, Bojan Jablanovec, Emil Hrvatin/Janez Janša and the next generation of theatre directors and choreographers Matjaž Pograjc, Tomaž Štrucl, Sebastijan Horvat, Tomi Janežič, Jernej Lorenci, Irena Tomažin, etc.), their search for the real and the authentic was linked to the needs to renew the language of theatre, to the search for theatre's new identity and to redefine its characteristics in relation to other media and fields of art.

At the same time, while investigating the various aspects of originality, it has been possible to observe the increasing use of reproduction as an artistic procedure. This way of creating led to several interesting phenomena, such as ready-made plays (in the PreGlej Laboratory), licensed performances (especially in commercial theatres, such as Špas Theatre and SiTi Theatre) and reenactments of Slovenian neo-avant-garde and experimental theatre performances of the late 1960s and 1970s. In the committed research on originality and reproducibility, it is possible to recognise the need to restore the unity of *poiesis*, i.e., the need to reunite the two fields of human productive activity (which in antiquity were

inextricably linked): the field of artistic production and that of technical production.

In the final chapter of part one, Zala Dobovšek further discusses the concept of authenticity. She discusses it in relationship to documentary material or fact. She leans on the ideas of Janet Gibson, Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson and Timothy Youker to make a comparative analysis of three different approaches in Slovenian theatre. The first is the documentary theatre of Žiga Divjak, who uses different approaches, i.e., field research and interviews, facts from the media, e-mails and so on, for creating powerful, socially engaged performances about topical themes of emigration and working conditions. The second is a series of autobiographical performances by acclaimed Slovenian playwright Simona Semenič. Her tactics seem contrary to Divjak's, as she uses her life experience and autobiographical narrative to comment on the artist's life and social position in a neo-liberal world. She builds highly authentic and dramatic performances that activate the audience's emotions and raise ethical questions. The last artist Dobovšek analyses is Mark Požlep, who positions himself between the two possibilities. He performs personal narratives about his travels, in which he questions his own beliefs in the foreign contexts of former Yugoslavia and the United States. Dobovšek shows that the main force of those performances is the presence of the real—documentary material in Divjak's case and the performers' bodies in the cases of Semenič and Požlep. It is this authenticity that moves the audience and engages the spectator.

Part two, **“No-Longer-Dramatic and Non-Dramatic Writing for the Stage”**, is introduced with the chapter ““This text never existed. It's all just fiction.”” in which Blaž Lukan reflects on some of the most recent examples of post-postdramatic texts for theatre, which he conditionally designates as *new drama*. He states that many of the starting points in the text are still tentative, provisional, hypothetical assumptions. He is well aware that the very necessity of defining the term “new drama” makes the task almost utopic. Nevertheless, using examples of texts of the youngest generation and referencing Tackels's desacralisation of the text, Blaž Lukan delves into the new position of the text in contemporary theatre. He focuses on the specifics of the textual production of Varja Hrvatin, a representative of the youngest generation of Slovenian theatre artists. Lukan attempts to read new drama outside of all definitions, theories and practices by inhabiting the text. He observes that one of the key characteristics of new drama is the elimination of established sequences, hierarchies and similar aspects of Aristotelian dramaturgy. This results in a de-hierarchisation of relationships that define dramatic discourse, leading to decolonisation: the text no longer colonises the stage and vice versa. Additionally, digital practices are

introducing new, non-linguistic modes of presentation into dramatic writing.

Analysing new drama as written and staged by Varja Hrvatin, Lukan notes that it is rhapsodic, akin to poetry. New drama is not mainly about construction. It freely uses formal (dramaturgical) principles and spontaneously constructs a subject that does not exist before writing but emerges as a distinct will to power during the act of writing and, with the text's conclusion, sinks back into context. Construction is a *conditio sine qua non* of any writing and does not need special emphasis. Just like language, drama is built from within. It is intertextual, intensely engages the reader and directly guides the audience. Furthermore, it offers its performative discourse for consideration to potential performers.

Jakob Ribič analytically portrays and summarises the panorama of the youngest generation of playwrights and writers for theatre in the chapter "Young Drama in an Old World". He observes in this young generation a simultaneity of the postdramatic and the return of the dramatic, alongside the abolishment of the classical or causal relationship between text and representation. The authors of the text and the directors abandon the traditional author's monopoly over the meaning of the text or event, leaving the interpretation to the recipient. Ribič, referencing the theoretical findings of Mark Fisher, Gerda Poschmann and Tomaž Toporišič, concludes that new drama asserts an awareness of the crisis of the dramatic author, a return to the theatre of the word and a renovation and reintegration of the joy of storytelling. A hallmark of these young authors is their explicit heterogeneity and diversity, which defy simplification into a few straightforward categories. This may stem from the current scarcity of enduring groupings united by a common magazine, artistic or political manifesto, theatrical institution or direct political action. The erosion of public space, a feature of "capitalist realism" (Mark Fisher), means there are few stable environments for young people to come together to discuss the aesthetic and political issues of their time, making it difficult to establish common orientations. Consequently, unifying this diverse group of individuals seems impossible based on shared characteristics. Thus, a defining trait of this group of artists is precisely their lack of common traits.

He considers two of the authors recently nominated for the Slavko Grum Award: Urša Majcen's play *Zgodba o Bakrenem kralju* (The Tale of the Copper King), which, like the works of Dane Zajc and Gregor Strniša in Slovenia, belongs to the tradition of poetic drama. This play explicitly lyricises the dramatic form, approaching the style of poetry. Although it addresses contemporary issues, it sets its story in a distant, fairy-tale world that serves as a metaphor for modernity. Nina Kuclar Stiković's play *deklici*

(two little girls) is quite different; it is entirely imbued with the most direct political context, the verbatim use of documents, creating a very remote world compared to the sublime poetic world of Urša Majcen. Anja Novak – Anjuta, who won the 2023 Slavko Grum Award¹ for her play *Tekst telesa* (The Text of the Body), chooses as the protagonist of her text, the Body, a sick body. However, as the author writes in the text, illness is “only the body’s healthy response to a sick environment”. The Body in Anja Novak’s text is a politicised body because the cause of its illness is to be found in the violence of the external environment, which is structured by the prevailing social relations, the hierarchy and power dynamics between the sexes, by physical abuse, by harsh words, by difficult living conditions.

In the last chapter, “*can you hear me?* by Simona Semenič and the Question of No-Longer-Dramatic Writing”, Gašper Troha analyses three plays by Simona Semenič (first published in Slovenian in 2017 and then in English in 2019 as *can you hear me?*). At first sight, the three pieces appear to be written in Semenič’s now-familiar writing style with no punctuation marks or upper-case initials and no apparent division between dialogues and stage directions. Content-wise, however, the three plays differ significantly from the bulk of the playwright’s opus as they represent autobiographical texts that re-establish character and distinct dramatic action. Referencing the theoretical findings of Gerda Poschmann, Tomaž Toporišič, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Birgit Haas and Nika Leskovšek but also evoking comparisons with the plays of German playwright Dea Loher, Troha focuses on two questions: Are these still no-longer-dramatic texts? And what is the status of representation and performativity in them? By analysing the formal and content properties of the three texts, more precisely, through an analysis of the drama character, the relationship between dialogue and monologue and dramatic action, the author shows that these texts establish recognisable dramatic characters and strong dramatic action. Thus, they move away from no-longer-dramatic texts, even though their legacy is still very much present, e.g., in the fragmented writing style. The drama reintroduces referentiality and conveys a coherent message while influenced by the postdramatic experience. It no longer relies on the spectator’s aesthetic distance and disinterested contemplation in the Kantian sense, nor on the alienation effect (Brecht) intended to maintain rational reflection. Instead, it engages the audience emotionally, positioning them as co-creators of meaning, even if their participation is guided. The outcome

¹ This is the most prestigious award for playwriting in Slovenia. It is named after the Slovenian playwright and writer Slavko Grum (1901–1949).

is a potent social critique grounded in personal experience, engaging the spectator emotionally.

The essays in part three, “**Postdramatic and Beyond—From Tragedy to Comedy**”, are linked by the question of what happens to classical dramatic forms in contemporary performing arts, which are emerging beyond the paradigm of postdramatic theatre, and how media influence the shaping of dramatic texts and the redefinition of performance strategies.

Krištof Jacek Kozak explores the possibilities of an allegedly obsolete dramatic form, i.e., tragedy, in our contemporaneity. He begins by noting that contemporary playwrights often address burning issues that shake the sociopolitical reality of the world (such as migration, terrorism and wars) precisely by means of classical tragedies. Kozak focuses on how the post-postdramatic reincarnations of classical tragedies reflect the pressing issues of migration and the related emotions of alienation, otherness, strangeness, non-belonging and rejection. The stitching together of two completely different worlds, the ancient and the modern, is examined in the case of three intriguing texts: *Charges* (*Die Schutzbefohlenen*, 2013)—a reinterpretation of Aeschylus’ *The Suppliant Maidens* by Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek, *Antigone in Molenbeek* (first part 2016, second part 2018)—a reinterpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* by Flemish Belgian writer Stefan Hertmans and *Romeo and Juliet Were Refugees* (2017)—a reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s tragedy by Slovenian playwright Vinko Möderndorfer. None of these three plays has a way out, and the fate of the everyman ends tragically. Compared to them, only the ancient Aeschylus’ *The Suppliant Maidens* has a positive outcome. An in-depth comparative analysis depicts the ethical decay of Europe, showing that today’s reincarnations of classical tragedies are more deadlocked than their models.

Jure Gantar examines how comedy has responded to changes in theatre practice and postdramatic writing since the decline of modernism. This dramatic and performance genre is almost overlooked in theories of postdramatic theatre. Gantar starts from the observation of Elinor Fuchs, who argues that the main characteristic of postmodern theatre and, consequently, the main reason for the decline of the dramatic text (as the most important element of classical theatre) is the death of character. Does character also disappear from postdramatic comedy? This is the main question of Gantar’s essay. In his search for an answer, he focuses on three subgenres of postmodern comedy: sketch comedy, stand-up comedy and improvisational comedy. His research confirms that sketch comedy dismantles the notion of a unified self; stand-up blurs the border between the real and the fictional, while improv destabilises subjectivity itself. In doing so, however, Gantar draws attention to a hitherto completely ignored

and unexplored aspect in theatre studies: that postmodern comedians still resort to fictional and psychologically motivated characters in their performances when designing their roles and approach to acting. This aspect is demonstrated by the examples of English and Slovenian comedians (such as Janez Hočevar – Rifle, Vinko Šimek – Jaka Šraufčiger, Boštjan Gorenc – Pižama, Andrej Težak – Tešky, Jan Tomažič – Jankić and comedians in the Society for Contemporary Clown Art). In this respect, Gantar significantly contributes to Elinor Fuchs's findings and convincingly demonstrates that character has survived the transition to postdramatic theatre, certainly in postdramatic comedy.

Mateja Pezdirc Bartol examines how media technologies have co-shaped new textual and performance practices on Slovenian stages over the last two decades. She finds that the dialogue of Slovenian drama with other media takes place on several different levels: a) the media feature as the subject or topic in many dramas and are often discussed in terms of awareness of the power of media, the shaping of social values and ethical standards; b) the influence of television, film and digital media introduces into Slovenian drama the genre and structural characteristics of soap operas, reality shows, American sitcoms, computer games, the medium of e-mail, etc., and c) new ways of addressing and interacting with the audience are being established through new technologies (smartphones, tablets). The essay focuses on how media influence the shaping of space and time. These two drama categories have been reconceptualised since the early twentieth century in the face of accelerated technological development. However, the rise of digital culture and media technologies in recent decades, which has enabled the bringing of mediated action into live theatre performance, has further expanded the understanding and perception of space and time. This is illustrated in four selected examples: Dušan Jovanović's *Revelations*, Simona Semenič's *1981*, Andrej E. Skubic's *Paula Above the Precipice* and Neda R. Bric's *Eda – the Rusjan Brothers Story*.

Part four, “**Sociological Perspective on Contemporary Dramatic and Theatrical Practices**”, emphasises the inevitable framework of every theatre event—namely, its embeddedness into the social tissue or, in other words, the social, political and cultural context of drama and theatre. The authors included in this part are explicitly aware of these roots, but they take different stances and approaches to them.

The starting point of Aldo Milohnič's chapter is the architectural style of brutalism from the second half of the twentieth century, a style which uses raw concrete in a “ruthlessly straightforward way”. By borrowing the term from architecture, which describes the brutality and rawness of the materials with its tendency to strip and dismantle structures, the author

implies a new paradigm in contemporary Slovenian theatre. He notices a direct, often documentarist use of “raw materials” in plenty of recent performances on Slovenian stages (in their textual and semantic layers, and not at all in their scenography), by which the artists problematise the diverse forms of systemic violence and exploitation ruling in contemporary society.

By discussing several examples, Milohnič shows how social relations manifest themselves in contemporary Slovenian theatre. The anatomy of social relationships in today’s Europe, particularly in Slovenia, reveals infamous topics of psychological and physical violence, asymmetrical power relations, structural violence of the neoliberal system, increasing intolerance and the rise of neo-fascism. In this light, Milohnič discusses the performances *The Game*, directed by Žiga Divjak (revealing the brutal violence of the refugee crisis), *The Republic of Slovenia* by an anonymous team (insight into the criminal political power struggles shortly after Slovenian independence), *Our Violence and Your Violence* by Oliver Frljić (a provocative performance on systemic violence), *Ubu the King* by Jernej Lorenci (a politically intonated depiction of a depressing social constellation) and *Manifest K.* by Sebastijan Horvat (dealing with the exploitation of precarious art workers). The author concludes the chapter by questioning the aim of such a documentarist and verbatim approach in “engaged” art.

The next chapter, written by Pavel Ocepek, puts sexuality into the foreground. The paper takes as its starting point the theory of sexuality as a social structure defined, among other things, by sexual cultures and their distinctive discourses and imperatives. Aware of the understanding of sexuality as a cultural and sociohistorical construction, the author first examines the theoretical background of this concept, emphasising the significance of Critical Sexualities Studies. He then moves on to a sociological and literary analysis and interpretation of two drama texts by Simona Semenič. The detailed analysis of the distinguishing elements of restrictive and permissive sexual cultures in two of Semenič’s plays—*this apple, made of gold* and *rowan, strudel, dance and more*—shows that sexuality is indeed one of the central themes in both.

Ocepek claims that Simona Semenič primarily liberates the woman and her sexuality, who—with the rejection of the anti-sexual tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and the social changes in the organisation of sexuality in (post-)socialist society—traverses the path from sexual restraint to sexual liberalisation. The author concludes that a sexually liberated woman, as Simona Semenič thematises, is a true novelty in Slovenian drama and a crucial step further in a century-long deficit of the thematisation of explicit sexuality in Slovenian drama.

In the final chapter of the last part of the book, Maja Murnik discusses political theatre. Starting from the observation that over the last fifteen years, Slovenian theatre has witnessed an increase in theatre productions dealing with socially engaged, political and activist topics, she first examines the changes in the drama/theatre structure, such as “no-longer-dramatic texts” and postdramatic theatre. She claims that we encounter heterogeneous, performative and open structures in the crisis of representation and drama form. Such an understanding of stage writing is thus put into a broader context: theatre should be seen as a part of the broader social, political and cultural changes we have witnessed in the last decades.

In this light, the author claims that the social engagement of Slovenian theatre has to be understood in the context of the changed position of art in contemporary society (i.e., a partial erosion not only of its modern autonomy but also of its meaning), as well as in the context of contemporary changes in politics (in the direction of post-politics) finally in relation to the specific attitude towards political issues in Slovenia.

In the article, Murnik examines several examples of Simona Semenič's plays, as well as several politically shaped and activist examples of recent performing arts in Slovenia (*Metamorphoses 4: Black Holes* by Bara Kolenc, *The Republic of Slovenia* by anonymous authors and *Odilo. Obscuration. Oratorio.* by Dragan Živadinov). They range from simple political agitation plays to complex and insightful examinations of topical social and political issues.

The essays in this collection cover a range of topics. Some discussions analyse the form of twenty-first-century theatre (Toporišič, Lukan, Orel, Troha), and a part of the essays consider thematic and genre changes (Kozak, Gantar, Murnik, Očepek, Milohnič). The essays treat the political and socio-critical issues of the post-socialist tradition (Dobovšek, Ribič, Milohnič) but also uncover the impact of the political theatre of the 1980s (Toporišič, Murnik, Milohnič). On the other hand, intimate themes come to the surface, i.e., love and sexuality, women's sexuality (Očepek, Pezdirc Bartol), personal traumas and social networks (Lukan), migration, terrorism and poverty. Following the discussed themes and topics, the reader can follow the specific history of the theatre and drama that has had special significance in Slovenia. During the last decades of the twentieth century, as well as during the first decades of the new century, it was and always has been close to reality. Drama and theatre constitute a live commentary on the current situation in the country.

To summarise, this volume on contemporary Slovenian theatre and drama elucidates how new textual and stage practices have redefined contemporary Slovenian theatre and the performing arts as a whole. By

delving into the realms of reading and viewing, it guides readers into new territories of drama, text and writing in modern theatre and performance practices.

Some might believe this book is premature, arguing that there has not been sufficient time to fully understand the developments in the Slovenian theatre over the past few decades. However, we are persuaded that it is important to write in the *tempus imperfectum* about the trends and artists that are still ongoing and still unfolding.

Ljubljana, 13 September 2024

I.

DRAMATIC AND STAGE WRITING FROM THE TWENTIETH TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY (NO-LONGER-)DRAMATIC TEXTS AND THEATRE

TOMAŽ TOPORIŠIČ

1 Contemporary plays as open texts

In this essay, we will discuss the processes of dangerous liaisons between drama and theatre in the corpora of dramatic and non-dramatic texts as a borderline area belonging, on the one hand, to the fields of literature and theatre and, on the other hand, to the theatre or performative work as the “interpretation” of a dramatic or literary work. We will also discuss the specific process of translation from the literary dimension into the performative one. In detecting the specifics of interpreting drama and theatre as well as the broader performance and literary practices in theory and art, we will employ an eclectic array of tools offered by literary and performance studies, applying them to the corpora of contemporary dramatic or no-longer-dramatic textual and performative practice (Simona Semenič, Matjaž Zupančič, Tim Crouch, Oliver Frlijić, Katarina Morano and Žiga Divjak, Katja Gorečan, Urša Majcen, Ela Božič ...), as it has been forming and transforming during the first three decades of the twenty-first century.

Let us start with a quote by Bruno Tackels, a contemporary theorist of the textual in theatre after 2000. In his excellent book *Les Écritures de plateau* (Stage Writings), he argues that recent texts intended for the stage “are mostly open texts, free prose that imposes nothing onto the actor, except the attention to language” (Tackels 2015, 117; translated by T.T.). It is precisely language “that is the only thing leading the actor, a language consisting of voids and fills, imperfect language, full of contexts that leaves the actor a full range to embody a story. A story that did not exist prior to

this and needs to be reinvented at any moment” (117; translated by T.T.). Tackels points out that the time in which we live is facing the fallout from the de-sacralisation of the text and that since 2000, we have been witnessing the implementation of a belief that it is only possible to write texts deriving from the full range of possibilities offered by the theatre stage. Contemporary theatre is seeing a comeback of “stage writers”.

More often than not, theatre artists today do not have any text other than the one being offered and developed directly on the stage alongside—that is, through—the creation and rehearsals themselves. Such texts no longer derive from books as cultural monuments but rather from their own book, which unconditionally enters the space through the actors’ bodies. Moreover, they invoke words because they need them. The text is no longer the be-all and end-all of creation but rather something its creators look for on stage. It is something that drives them to lure the text onto the stage to find their own place inside it, no different from music, movement, light, props, set and images: stage writing finds inspiration in a whole range of scenic expressions:

The notion of stage writing allows us to “read” all these yet unseen works. “Stage writing” actually presupposes the existence of a “stage reader”. We do not read the text but rather what the artist has created from it, the writing that derives from it. Stage writers share the belief that a performance can only really be completed in the imagination of all the people who are watching it. A theatre text is, therefore, an incomplete reality in becoming; it is “waiting” for a stage and stage realisation. Thus, in theatre, the text once again becomes the starting point rather than the goal. It is like an equation that needs to be resolved via the stage. (Tackels 2015, 55; translated by T.T.)

Tackels builds on the legacy of reading drama and theatre established by Anne Ubersfeld and her semiotic school headed by Patrice Pavis. This school emphasises that the theatricality of a text in contemporary theatre is no longer exclusively intrafictional. Instead, it is positioned in and counts on “an external communication system, on the space of interplay between the stage and the auditorium” (Poschmann 1997, 45). Such texts that could be defined by the term “no-longer-dramatic texts” or “theatre texts”, a term coined by Gerda Poschmann, enable the spectator to read a performance or, rather, theatre, in the sense of Anne Ubersfeld and her syntagm “*lire le theatre*”, to experience theatre meaning as a process of construction of meaningful associations. Thus, in contemporary theatre, playwriting and performance arts, it often comes to what Tim Crouch “stages” in the metatheatrical discourse of his essay-play *The Author*: in it, the author takes us beyond postdramatic theatre, which was considered a hallmark of the deconstruction of drama at the turn of the millennium.

Thus, we embark on the path towards what Anne Monfort dubs “neo-dramatic theatre”. However, this neo-dramatic theatre takes us in the opposite direction back to the twentieth century and even to the end of the nineteenth century. It takes us back to symbolism and Maeterlinck’s model of modern drama as the watershed moment. In his essay “Maeterlinckov model moderne drame” (Maeterlinck’s Model of Modern Drama), Lado Kralj pointed this out by demonstrating the fact that even today, we are still living out the legacy of *fin de siècle* and the utopian models of new drama and new theatre (e.g., the concept of second-level dialogue) that formed at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. On this path, we encounter a new type of lyrical subject and end up on a Steinesque landscape stage or inside a specific landscape play. This landscape play is halfway between theatre and performance. At the same time, it is documentary, verbatim and autobiographical, even though it paradoxically re-legitimises fiction, which suddenly finds itself in the centre of postdramatic theatre, thus creating a particular form of story and drama. Drama in the twenty-first century derives from its “non-identical twin”, the drama of the twentieth century, thus entering into dangerous liaisons with theatre. We will attempt to capture these liaisons in which new drama and theatre enter to create new theatre configurations. These configurations let us know that we should reconfigure our understanding of the landscapes of artworks, spectators and readers, all in light of the blurred line between fiction, autofiction and authenticity. We also need to reposition our theoretical views of such artistic landscapes that sometimes appear indecipherable but tend to attract us precisely because of that.

2 Plough-wright Matjaž Zupančič

We will begin with probably one of the most translated contemporary Slovenian playwrights, Matjaž Zupančič (1959). One of the best descriptions of Zupančič’s theatre work can be summed up in the two-word phrase coined by the Macedonian playwright Goran Stefanovski: plough-wright. Zupančič studied theatre directing and dramaturgy in Ljubljana and London, became the director of the Glej Experimental Theatre in the 1980s and continued his career as a playwright, theatre director and professor at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television, University of Ljubljana (UL AGRFT). As the director of more than fifty theatre productions, he began writing (no-longer-)dramatic plays in the late 1980s and soon became one of the key contemporary Slovenian playwrights, winning several Slavko Grum Awards for the best new Slovenian drama and becoming the most performed Slovenian playwright in Europe and

beyond. He has received numerous awards for his plays, which are now close to twenty in number.

In his plays, he establishes a dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis, revealing games of sliding signifiers and new versions of the desire of the Other, signifying a radical otherness, an otherness that transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary. In his early plays, written in the 1990s, he uses and appropriates the nature of various genres, including the underground culture of thrillers, which is suggested in the very titles of his plays: *Izganjalci hudiča* (The Exorcists, 1991), *Slastni mrlič* (The Delicious Corpse, 1992) or *Ubijalci muh* (The Fly Killers, 2000). Matjaž Zupančič's plays take place in in-between spaces, in reception areas and corridors, where people are constantly moving, coming and going in a mysterious chain of events.

Zupančič likes to play with different dramatic techniques and styles, from hyperrealism to mystery and thriller, from the direct depiction of reality to the absurd and the strangely poetic. In his black comedy, *Bolje tič v roki kot tat na strehi* (A Dick in the Hand is Worth Two Thieves in the Bush, 2004), in a style in which Monty Python meets Harold Pinter, the characters act like robots, producing a series of repetitions, using the vocabulary of psychiatry and neurology. In his play *Padec Evrope* (The Fall of Europe, 2011), he comments on and reveals the background of contemporary society after the turn of the millennium. With his sarcastic black humour, Zupančič reveals the grotesque reality of the modern world and the crisis of ethics in today's society, be it in Europe or anywhere else.

Zupančič distils a particular condensation of metatheatrical commentary and hyperrealism of the Debordian society of the spectacle in an unusual and radical drama-essay on the contemporary mediated civilisation of reality shows and simulacra, his most (post)dramatically or mediated play, *Hodnik* (The Corridor, 2003). He deliberately chooses live performance, namely theatre, as a medium to comment on and deconstruct a currently highly exposed form of media, namely reality television. Guillermo Gómez-Peña's statement could illustrate Zupančič's starting point: "And each metier, language, genre and/or format demands a different set of strategies and methodologies" (2001, 73). Here, Zupančič uses "pure theatre" as the appropriate medium, deliberately avoiding the intermedial means of today's theatre and staging a corridor of the ubiquity of reality television images, the very space of media violence in the age of humanitarian impotence.

This way, he reveals the problem of a subject with fictitious freedom that is presented as an illusion of interactivity and openness for collaboration and dialogue, which is reinforced by the electronic media of television. Zupančič stages a reality that he interprets as an image of Philip

Auslander's universe of television, which "enabled television to colonize liveness, the one aspect of the theatrical presentation that film could not replicate" (Auslander 2008, 13). The playwright is fully aware of the problematic fact that theatre has evolved into an imitation of media discourses and that the taste of today's public is being shaped by television, which has become the model and telos of theatre. Capital is no longer interested in the economy of the representation of live performance. Instead, it is intensely focused on the economy of media representation, which presents itself as a representation of reality in the here and now.

Zupančič opts for live performance, more specifically theatre, which "in the economy of repetition, live performance is little more than a vestigial remnant of the previous historical order of representation, a hold-over that can claim little in the way of cultural presence or power" (Auslander 2008, 46). The question posed by *The Corridor* is, therefore, the key question that Auslander asks in his excellent book *Liveness*, namely, does a performance have its own ontology that is more honest than television re-enactments? Moreover, both Zupančič's play and its staged performance raise the crucial question of the possibility of subverting reality TV in live performance. The author uses exclusively theatrical media to open a picture of the deterritorialised ethics of the postmodern world and its cybernetic models of organising reality. In this way, he shows that (as Debord would say)—even in theatre—today, the spectacle is "both the result and the project of the present mode of production"; it is "the heart of this real society's unreality" (Auslander 2008, 6).

3 Simona Semenič: Deconstructing and reconstructing representation

We will continue with Simona Semenič, probably the most radical representative of the new Slovenian drama of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. When Danijela Kapusta, a theorist of contemporary drama after 2000, speaks about the main shifts in German drama in recent decades, finding that, for Anja Hilling and her contemporaries, the text is no longer something fixed but rather "material as the beginning of something that has not yet emerged" (Kapusta 2011, 64), she could also be speaking about the very essence of the plays of Simona Semenič and a young generation of Slovenian dramatists.

These plays following the postdramatic turn are strongly opposed to a cold and distant approach and attempt to find a way to change into something that has emotions and feelings. Simona Semenič uses specific deconstructive procedures (which can be found in Slovenia, for example,

also the works of Simona Hamer, Tibor Hrs Pandur and Varja Hrvatin) to get rid of the linear and synthetic structure of the narrative. However, she uses a critique of both dramatic and mediated forms to reveal the banal but dangerous repetitions of society's everyday spectacle. With Semenič, the text passes from monologue to dialogical form and the form of a side text, even an essay. The dividing lines between the main and the side text are blurred and unclear. Spoken text is not attributed to specific persons. Stage directions are no longer the only part of a dramatic text in which the author appears as a subject.

The author is not absent but is present everywhere. Semenič deliberately tests different forms, and when they are no longer enough for her, she discards them and replaces them with others. She does not use sliding signifiers in their infinity but, at certain moments, begins to relate them to concrete signifiers of the author-subject and society. She thematises the problems of the individual and the margins and critiques modern, mediated society. Within this critique, she also thematises and problematises art and culture itself but does not spare the playwright.

When compared to her colleague Matjaž Zupančič, Simona Semenič seems to be more radically opposed to representation. The dialogical form of her writing has ended up in the company of heterogeneous textual strategies: from stage directions to descriptions that are closer to novels and prose and to narrative, essayistic, theoretical and other techniques, reminding the audience that what they are reading or watching is no longer a realistic dialogue.

Let us continue with a quote from her play *gostija ali zgodba o nekem slastnem trupu ali kako so se roman abramovič, lik janša, štiriindvajsetletna julia kristeva, simona semenič in inicialki z. i. znašli v oblaku tobačnega dima* (the feast or the story of a savoury corpse or how roman abramovič, the personage janša, julia kristeva, age 24, simona semenič and the initials z.i. found themselves in a puff of tobacco smoke):

*yes, of course, we are in the theatre, but this theatre is about to throw you a very special feast
a feast to which some eminent guests have been invited, we are going to sit them behind a table
(this of course doesn't mean that there has to be a real table on the stage, there can be, of course,
there can be a whole line of tables or a pile of them, the entire stage can be a table, the tables can
hang from the ceiling upside down or the other way around, there can also be a sign saying table in
one language or another, and there can be no sign anywhere and nothing anywhere; notable, no*

*chair and no soup tureen with delicious smelling stew, what i want to say is,
 the important thing is
 that you, the distinguished spectator, can imagine our eminent guests having
 a feast in front of you
 on the stage)
 this feast is of a very special and also important sort
 namely, our eminent guests are on the stage in front of you, respectable au-
 dience, they are feasting
 upon the corpse
 so, yes, dear theatregoers
 every spoonful of the stew that the eminent guests put in their mouths, is a
 spoonful of the stew
 cooked from the corpse
 so the corpse you are looking at, this corpse is not a living character
 (dramatis persona, if i had it my way)
 this corpse once was a living character, once, before it ended up in the stew
 i'm about to serve at
 tonight's feast
 this character
 character that's in front of you and that's being impersonated
 (being breathtakingly impersonated)
 by a true star actress
 is a character that's actually cooked in the stew that's going to be devoured
 by the guests who are
 present at tonight's special and important feast that's going to start any sec-
 ond now
 (Semenič 2010b, 4)*

As is clear from the quotation, Semenič proposes the structure of what Deleuze finds in Nietzsche's theory and names "a theatre of unbelief", in which "humour and irony are indispensable and fundamental operations of nature" serve "to ground the repetition in eternal return on both the death of God and the dissolution of the self" (Deleuze 1994, 11). She does not produce a copy of the real in the sense of the dramatic work. Instead, she creates a post-Brechtian commentary dealing with the issue of narrative development, establishing a relationship with the past and producing a critical narrative of the present.

She constantly interrupts dramatic events with authorial interventions while exploiting Deleuze's procedures of repetition through otherness, which destabilises the reader. However, Semenič also offers them aesthetic pleasure and a unique alliance with the author. Nevertheless, this no-longer-dramatic text produces strong fiction and reader identification despite its densely populated metatheatrical and metadramatic commentaries. The dialogue form is persistently reworked through diverse textual strategies:

from *didascalies* to descriptions closer to novels and fiction, narrative, essayistic, theoretical and other techniques that remind the audience that what they read or watch is no longer a realistic dialogue. But in doing so, her plays produce distinctly dramatic effects, which Haas (2007, 45) would probably call “dramatically dramatic” and, of course, Brechtian.

When speaking about Simona Semenič’s autobiographical works *Jaz, žrtev* (I, the victim, 2007), *še me dej* (do me twice, 2009) and *drugič* (the second time, 2014), Gašper Troha points to this post-Brechtian feature of representation they produce (for more details see the chapter by Gašper Troha). Her texts thus produce a specific form of social criticism, which links the reader or spectator with the writer or performer in a specific autopoietic feedback loop, producing the effect in which personal experience engages both at an emotional level.

Semenič thus performs a real post-Brechtian transformation of the *V-effekt*, which has several purposes, but it certainly goes beyond the self-referentiality of the metatheatrical. She is interested in what lies behind appearances and appearances of appearances, in reality, in all its contradictions. Therefore, her deconstruction of the dramatic and the fictional, which sometimes reminds us of Pirandello, produces a special post-Brechtian critique of the real. In this sense, she is interested in something like Anja Hilling: the different layers of truth.

To summarise. The work of Semenič testifies to the fact that modern dramatic writing requires a specific type of theatre, acting technique and other segments of the theatrical sign system. It is the dramatic writing that, after a postdramatic turn (like, for example, the drama of the absurd in Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter), again becomes that which generates theatrical procedures and aesthetics.

Similarly to the works of Hilling as well as that of Frlić and Zupančič or Divjak and Morano (as we will see later), the theatre of Simona Semenič is, like that of Dea Loher, “a theatre of empowerment, a politically engaged theatre that does not leave the bewildered spectator in front of a destroyed history” (Haas 2006, 85).

4 Oliver Frlić on migration, European identity and the (lack of) ethics

Let us continue with Oliver Frlić¹, focusing on selected performances from 2008 to 2016, including *Preklet naj bo izdajalec svoje domovine* (Damned

¹ Some inevitable facts: Frlić, born in the Bosnian town of Travnik in 1976, was a refugee during the war in former Yugoslavia, he finished his studies of philosophy,

Be the Traitor of His Homeland!, Mladinsko Theatre, 2010) and especially his international coproduction *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje* (Our Violence and Your Violence, Mladinsko Theatre; premièred at Wiener Festwochen in 2016).

In one of the interviews about the 2010 performance, Frljić stated that he had wanted to address the topic of the decay of the former Yugoslavia for a long time. His idea was to see what happened with this country, its cultural and political heritage, and why, at some point, the citizens of all republics of former Yugoslavia betrayed the idea of Yugoslavia and its liberating potential in exchange for neoliberal capitalism and national identities. This meant a lot of discussions and improvisations with the actors, but (due to the experimental tradition of Mladinsko Theatre) that sort of experience was nothing new to them. He also knew that he could share the belief that theatre should emancipate together with its audience in two ways: politically and aesthetically. The political situation of Slovenia twenty years after Slovenian Independence and the outburst of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia seemed a perfect time for the show.

In his disturbing, shocking performances, he uses his own personal, wartime and political traumas to ask universal questions about the boundaries of artistic and social freedom. During the last ten years, Frljić has made a habit of touching society's raw nerves. Stories from different parts of the world provide the theatrical framework of his performative laboratory. However, his main point of interest stays with the peripheral sphere of the European theatrical, cultural and political semiosphere: the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s followed by a severe war in Croatia and Bosnia, leading to the genocide in Srebrenica.

In an interview, Frljić states: "What we actually try to do is to perform the institution; we don't try to create a good or bad show but to see how we

religion and theatre directing in Croatia where he lives and works most of his time as a director, writer, actor and theorist. His 2008 version of Euripides's *Bacchae* for the Split Summer Festival in Croatia contained uncomfortable parallels with crimes committed during the war following the breakup of Yugoslavia, called the "Homeland War" in Croatia (1991–1995). Provocative was also his performance *Turbo-Folk* (Ivan pl. Zajc Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka, 2008), a postdramatic Molotov cocktail of sex, violence and Serbian folk-pop that caused a storm with young liberal audiences and offended the cultural mainstream at the same time.

His biggest international success came with the 2010 *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!*, a devised theatre conceived with the actors of Mladinsko Theatre. Since *Damned Be the Traitor...*, Frljić has barely stopped to catch his breath: success has turned him into the most talked-about director in the ex-Yugoslav region. The two years of his direction of the Ivan pl. Zajc Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka caused many scandals, political attacks and even death threats and led to his resignation.