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From Political Theater in Yugoslav Socialism to Political Performance in Global Capitalism: The Case of Slovenian Mladinsko Theater

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Political theater is a trend that, during the avant-garde 1920s, emerged at the intersection of efforts to liberate artistic forms and oppressed groups in society. It was an influence on Slovenian theatrical artists at the Workers' Stage (Delavski oder) already in the interwar period. A trend towards 'political theater', one of the tendencies of politicized performing arts in the period, flourished in Slovenia and other republics of the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s. Against the background of an identity crisis of the Yugoslav state and its ideology, political theater addressed great stories of History and the Revolution in a post-avant-garde manner. During the transition, political theater initially lost its edge but was reborn in the 21st century. As a post-dramatic practice associated with performance, it now parses its own politics. It is a forum for critiquing small, local stories that nonetheless evince the contradictions of a peripheral nation-state in the era of transnational late capitalism.

Theater and/as Politics

The term 'political theater' seems pleonastic since theater is inherently political: it is an 'object of politics',[1] as well as its active subject. Public spectacles can glorify power, legitimize a ruling ideology, and by the power of illusion afford viewers a temporary escape from the existing order; on the other hand, spectacles present events that act on society as symptoms of actual social contradictions or remembered traces of fundamental divisions in the past. The possible worlds of drama furnish models for evaluating societal conditions and politics in the contemporary world. For this reason, theater became an essential cultural institution, and as such it serves various political ends. Certain historical clarifications are needed in order to consider the

term 'political theater'. The Slovenian theorist Gašper Troha, for example, radically expands the concept. In his view, political theater 'takes shape in the hybrid space between the artistic and social fields, regardless of whether it is so planned or not. Further, it can be a pointedly apolitical or unartistic event that nevertheless has broad social resonance'.[2] The famous hurling of a pair of shoes by Iraqi journalist at George Bush during a 2008 press conference is not quite political theater, although shoeing or shoe throwing in the numerous takes of the Iraqi was portrayed as a bona fide political genre.

Siegfried Melchinger likewise casts a wide net in his history of political theater. He states that it existed in the theaters of Antiquity, where dramas of the Greek classics were staged before large audiences, and that in the modern period it came to life again with Shakespeare, Corneille, and Molière, reaching its apogee with Büchner in the 19th century and Brecht in the 20th. From the standpoint of its implicit humanistic ethics, political theater takes aim at abuse of power, highlights social tensions and inequities, and thus helps form a public that benefits from critical judgment (Ref. 1, pp. 11–19, 414–419). Doubtless the theme of a *polis* was constitutive of Western theater and drama from Aeschylus's *The Persians* to Shakespeare's royal histories and *Coriolanus* and Corneille's *Cid*. In the narrow sense, modern political drama also echoes the French Revolution. In the semi-documentary historical drama *Danton's Death* (1835), Georg Büchner 'confronted the historical revolution with the "fatalism of history" some of which he experienced firsthand' (Ref. 1, p. 281) as a radical artist and persecuted defender of human rights. Büchner's text became a prototypical political drama about the failure of revolutionary ideals, drowned in the blood of fractious infighting, purges, and terror: 'The Revolution is like Saturn, it devours its own children.'[3] It was only in the 20th century that Büchner's innovative profundity was recognized – for instance, with Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1964).

Political theater in the true sense of the phrase – denoting awareness of an effect on social consciousness – arose only in the 1920s. European stagecraft as practiced by members of the avant-garde and modernists around 1910 rejected the bourgeois theater's illusoriness and its imaginary fourth wall. The modernist theater attempted an experimental theatrical language to eject the audience from the comfort of aesthetic pleasure by stylizing ritual, Greek sacred theater, Asian traditions, Medieval spectacle, and the *commedia dell'arte* (Ref. 1, p. 344). This was the basis on which political theater arrived at conceptual self-understanding in Erwin Piscator's modernist staging (in the Berlin Volksbühne and Piscator-Bühne) and his programmatic book, *Das politische Theater* (1929; Ref. 1, pp. 372–374). In his book, Piscator offers not a ready theory of political theater, but by reflecting on his own theatrical explorations and accomplishments in a montage with quotations from programmatic statements, reviews, and newspaper articles he manages to show how he understands the new theatrical trend or generally 'new concept of art: active, combative, political' (ein neuer Begriff der Kunst […], aktiv, kämperisch, politisch).[4] Key for Piscator in the trend towards political theater, the seeds of which can be seen in late 19th-century naturalism, is a strategic alliance of the artistic and political avant-garde – that is,

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between a modernized theater and the proletariat (Ref 4, p. 41). He himself formed such an alliance after the First World War by means of his Proletarian Theater. In other words, to him this meant searching out a common artistic and political path, a synergy between experimenting with theatrical forms and their political uses. The common goal was to effect a necessary social revolution (Ref. 4, pp. 33, 129, 227, 238). Piscator connects a new, experimental language of spectacle, supported by contemporary staging techniques, film, and theatrical architecture that would disperse bourgeois conceit and egotism with the objective of addressing the masses and transforming theater into an educational tool, a medium for critically enlightening society about contemporary reality ('Knowledge-realization-commitment'; *Kenntnis – Erkenntnis – Bekenntnis*; Ref. 4, p. 7). In his view, theater must become an institution that empowers the proletariat to become a producer and not only a consumer of culture. An important example of his political theater, which also supplied a prototype for post-dramatic forms of Slovenian political theater, was *Revue Roter Rummel*, staged in support of the German communist party in the 1924 elections. In Piscator's words, the propagandistic 'form of the revue' complements the 'disintegration of bourgeois forms of drama' and 'unscrupulously employs all possibilities: music, song, acrobatics, sketches, sport, projections, film, statistics, skits, and speeches' (Ref. 4, p. 65).

Thus, theater as artistic practice achieved conceptual awareness of its political nature only when it traversed the ideological boundary between art and politics after a century of adhering to their functional social differentiation into seemingly autonomous fields. In the process, it cast aside the bourgeois 19th century's aesthetic ghettoization of the institution of the theater. This came about after the bloody destruction of the bourgeois *belle époque* during the First World War, via connections in the international labor movement, the October Revolution, and the historical avant-gardes with their undermining of artistic institutions. Political theater as a historically determined phenomenon is therefore the realization of the communist 'politicizing art,' which Walter Benjamin – deriving it from his acquaintance with Piscator and Brecht – counterposed to the rise of fascism and 'the aestheticizing of politics.'[5]

Three Periods of Political Theater in Slovenia (and Yugoslavia)

Piscator's work, including in his later US emigration, together with Russian avant-garde theater (Vsevolod Meierhold), the Proletkult (Platon Kerzhentsev), and Bertold Brecht's epic theater and didactic pieces, formed political theater's diverse store of tradition.[6] Piscator influenced Slovenian leftist artists in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia quite early. Between 1926 and 1938, the directors Bratko Kreft, Ferdo Delak, Ciril Debevec, and others, founded amateur theatrical groups at the Workers' Stage, under the auspices of a workers' cultural association, and using Piscator's example (Delak had studied with him) they updated staging practices (e.g. with collective acting, projections, light effects, and music) and introduced free adaptations of dramatic and narrative works, as well as 'post-dramatic' forms (e.g. red review).

They understood theater as a forum for social criticism, labor's struggle against oppressive forces, and the formation of class consciousness and propaganda.[7]

After the Second World War, when Tito's communist party assumed power in Yugoslavia, and from the late 1950s, a number of small non-institutional, experimental stages with connections to oppositional intellectuals were part of the Slovenian theater scene. Their critique of the communist order's undemocratic features was preponderantly Aesopian, mythologized, and allegorical. It was poetically abstract or historically cloaked, although sometimes quite realistic. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was theatrical and ludistic in an avant-garde spirit. Troha notes that theater constituted an important bulwark of cultural opposition to communist monism until the very end of the 1980s, although it made necessary compromises with the authorities.[8] The authorities allowed drama and the theater to engage in social criticism, but only as long as – enforcing this with funding and control – they could ideologically contain the effects of criticism and, by exercising relative tolerance, demonstrate the advantages of Yugoslav socialist self-management over Soviet socialism. However, the label 'political theater' was not yet applied to these stages. The term began to promote a new practice of spectacle that attacked the existing political order's ideology by enacting political themes, and it spread across Slovenia and Yugoslavia only in the 1980s.[9] Political theater of the 1980s attempted to break with 'bourgeois socialist' theatrical conventions and the aesthetic formalism typical of 'socialist modernism' by introducing open forms, collective acting, multilingual documentary montage, testimonials, literary fictions, and reliance on avant-garde *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[10] These attempts belong to the post-avant-garde art characteristic of the socialist 'Second World,' since they absorbed 'all of the features of the classic avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, except for future directedness,' and this stamped them as postmodern (Ref. 9, p. 60).

In the art world of the time, it appeared that neo-avant-garde progressivism had exhausted itself, so the performing arts joined literature, music, and the visual arts in their regressive postmodernist wanderings through history. In the Yugoslav political sphere, following the death of the leader Josip Broz Tito and pressure from Western lenders, the socialist federation entered a period of severe economic and interethnic stress. For this reason, artistic reflection on the historical foundations of a system in crisis became socially relevant. The term 'political theater,' which theater promoters, critics, festival organizers, and scholars were using a decade before the Yugoslav Wars, pertained primarily to prominent projects by the directors Dušan Jovanović, Ljubiša Ristić, Ljubiša Georgievski, Nada Kokotović, Janez Pipan, and others, who engaged in historical retrospectives on the questionable identity of Yugoslav socialism. Jovanović remembers that 'political drama was the most commercial form of stagecraft' at the time (Ref. 8, p. 510). By criticizing the history of revolutions that resulted in totalitarian regimes, theater professionals paradoxically awakened the original revolutionary ethos and showed it to be something sacred and transgressive. In the name of an 'authentic revolutionary spirit,' which had also inspired, in a contradictory jumble with regressive tendencies, many civil society

movements of the 1980s, political theater formed an imaginary alternative to the ossified ruling class, which was incapable of directing the Yugoslav state in current conditions, in which global capitalism was undermining its 'Real socialist' adversary, while in domestic politics conflicts arose, pitting communist unionism against mutually opposed nationalists who sought recognition from the Western or Eastern centers of a bipolar world.

The prototype of political theater is the staging of *Missa in a-minor* (*Mass in a-minor*) by Ljubljana's Mladinsko gledališče, which the Serbian director Ljubiša Ristić produced in 1980 (Ref. 9, pp. 61–67).[11,12] The play is based on motifs from the short story 'Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča' (A tomb for Boris Davidovich, 1976), a postmodern historical metafiction by Danilo Kiš about a Stalinist trial against a fictional Russian revolutionary (the Serbian Kiš became famous in the 'world republic of letters' after moving to Paris).[13] Kiš's Borges-like story uses biographical citations from contradictory and incomplete historical sources. The thread of the dramatic fragment from the life of the eponymous protagonist includes a Jewish childhood, intellectual formation, terrorist revolutionary activities, police investigation and imprisonment, the double life of a worldly dandy and underground international communist activist, and a confrontation with an examiner who at the show trial attempts to force a confession of conspiratorial cooperation with bourgeois enemies of the Soviet state.[14] *Missa in a-minor* combines scenes from Kiš's story with collective tableaus, multilingual singing and speaking, dance, and imitated rituals. Ristić inserts literary citations and documentary excerpts as background to Kiš's story, thus evoking a grand revolutionary narrative and its conclusion in Stalinist show trials. The scene in which the ritual form of the Mass frames collective reciting with a key text of the revolution encapsulates the play's aesthetic structure. The chorus recites lines from Sergei Nechaev's 'Katekhizis revoliutsionera' (Catechism of a revolutionary, 1869) and sings Ariel Ramirez's *Misa Criolla* (1964), which lent the play its name. The revolutionary raises his pistol like a priest raises a host. The *Missa* is thus a (post-) avant-garde cathartic ritual that provides an allegory of History in categories of tragic *fatum* by presenting the individual as an absurd victim.

Other significant political plays were likewise historically inspired.[15] The stories in these plays generally rehearse Büchner's aphorism about revolution devouring its children. The stories refer to the post-October socialist world, international revolutionary movement, factional infighting, and Stalinist purges. When the Yugoslav federation began breaking apart, Ristić defended Yugoslavism and worker-managed socialism; therefore, like Jovanović, Georgievski, and Pipan, he did not criticize the revolution itself, but its Stalinist deviations. Political theater of this period avoided analytic consideration of the wider social and geopolitical context of proletarian revolutions; it went the way of postmodernist aesthetic mythicization of the historical. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, during the transition to liberal democracy and capitalism, political theater in Slovenia lost its edge. With variations on Classical tragedy, modernist grotesque, or the Brechtian epic, the theater could do no more than moralize about recent military atrocities in the Balkans and their destructive consequences. It appeared that multiparty

politics and a 'democratized' mass media had assumed theater's role as a social forum for oppositional critique (Ref. 8, p. 511). The younger generation of directors (Vito Taufer, Tomaž Pandur, Bojan Jablanovec, and others), which it is true had drawn its inspiration from Ristić and Jovanović, turned its back on political themes in the 1990s and tended towards a theater of fascinating images, postmodern citation of the history of the avant-garde and modernist theater, and to baroque fantasy or crudely realistic corporality (Ref. 9, pp. 67–68; Ref. 12, pp. 97–101).

The director Dragan Živadinov was the only one to put politics in the theater on a new conceptual basis in the 1980s. In the context of the 'retro-garde' artistic group Neue Slowenische Kunst, which developed and reproduced simulacra of a (totalitarian) state with military discipline, Živadinov played the ambivalent role of a 'state artist' to fashion from politics a code of visual symbols for performances whose totality and eclectic imagination intoxicated or shocked viewers, while leaving the authorities uncertain because of their ambiguous meaning (Ref. 15, pp. 257–258).

In the era of neoliberal capitalism, especially after the outbreak of a world economic crisis at the beginning of the 21st century, we are again witnessing a re-birth of political theater. In Slovenia, it is represented by Bojan Jablanovec and the Via negativa project, by Emil Hrvatin alias Janez Janša, Matjaž Berger, Sebastijan Horvat, Croatian guests Oliver Frljić and Borut Šeparović, and others (Ref. 11, pp. 103–126). The rebirth of political theater corresponds to a general turn towards the political in Western art and the humanities – that is, a redirecting of conservative postmodernist 'formalism' to progressive practices that connect aesthetic concepts with social and ethical responsibility, political activism, and identity politics.[16] The calamities of Southeastern Europe (i.e. increasing nationalism and xenophobia, ethnic cleansing, refugees, oppression of minorities) also demanded a response, as did the inclusion of Slovenia and the rest of the 'Second World' in the global capitalist system. Slovenians' naïve transitional belief in a consumer paradise, democracy, and equality of European peoples soon yielded, after joining the European Union and NATO, to a sober realization of their young, ostensibly sovereign country's semi-colonial dependency and economic peripherality.

Since its very beginnings political theater has opposed limits on equality and freedom. As such, it is becoming relevant again after the ostensible 'end of history.' Troha explains the explosion of politicized theater in Slovenia around 2006 as a response to a conservative government's attempt to faithfully follow the global neoliberal model and privatize state-owned enterprises at any price, reduce the public sector, subjugate the media, business, education, and the arts, and revise the history of Communist-led anti-Nazi resistance on the Slovenian territory. Only in such a context is it possible to understand how Sebastjan Horvat was able once again to create a feeling of solidarity among atomized postmodern spectators by intensifying the tendentiousness of Bor's *Raztrganci* (Tramps), a forgotten resistance propaganda piece (Ref. 8, pp. 512–515; Ref. 2, pp. 54–55, 61–64). New forms of political theater replace the confines of dramatic genres with

post-dramatic performance that uses improvisation, electronic media, life narratives, and documents to undermine mimetic illusion. Hans-Thies Lehmann describes post-dramatic theater as the development in which 'theatre is at the centre,' while 'the text … is considered only as one element, one layer, or as a "material" of scenic creation, not as its master'.[17] This leads to a 'performative cut' – that is, the reversal of representation from the mimetic to the performative: the actor's body and voice lose meaning, cease to be subordinated to the representation of a dramatic personage, and emphasize their physical presence (Ref. 11, pp. 134–136). At a time when 'the theater no longer functions as a center of the *polis* for common consideration of key societal questions,' Lehmann recognizes 'the political in the postdramatic' only in implicit and oblique forms – in performative situations that do not represent politics and are not translatable into existing political discourse, but 'radically *break* with the political as such' and deconstruct its logic.[18] Lehmann's aesthetic poststructuralism, which presupposes a liberal and avant-garde intellectual public, turns up its nose at depicting obviously political themes and presenting actual social polyphony, since by doing so the theater only 'affirms the dominant political truth and the rules of the game in the social milieu' (Ref. 18, p. 9).

Post-dramatic theater moves to performance and directly treats global political contradictions that appear on the local level, including in the Slovene nation state; for example, the question of xenophobia and the oppression of minorities. Thus, in 2007, Emil Hrvatin staged a documentary play entitled *Slovensko narodno gledališče* (*The Slovene National Theater*) in Ljubljana (Ref. 11, pp. 104–108; Ref. 2, pp. 66–71). The performers emotionlessly reproduced audio recordings of civil disturbances among rural residents caused by an allegedly delinquent Roma family, leading to its extrajudicial eviction by the authorities, assisted by the police. In the presentation, Hrvatin discloses the political unconscious, recycled in chauvinistic stereotypes and prejudices, and ironically illuminates the substratum of the nationalist ideology grounding the institutions of the national theater and an independent Slovenian state. Guest performances abroad showed that the subject matter is not uniquely Slovenian, but touches on a symptom of a widespread model of European policies towards asylum seekers and other minorities (Ref. 2, p. 69).

Twenty-first-century political theater no longer recounts the great narratives of revolution. It is dedicated to small narratives and local events in which class, gender, ethnic, and other conflicts are foregrounded under the worldwide aegis of trans-national capitalism. Or, as Aldo Milohnić writes, 'just as Politics with a capital P has broken down into an unsurveyable multitude of identity politics, so contemporary theater invents its proper political nature in ever more identity "niches"' (Ref. 11, pp. 17–18). Therefore, political theater incorporates meta-reflection on its social effects and the economic terms of theatrical production.

Staging Politics: From History to the Everyday

In conclusion, I will summarize the differences between the two periods of Slovenian political theater by comparing examples that are institutionally and

thematically connected. Thirty years after Ristić's *Missa in a-minor*, the 1980s prototype of political theater, the same ensemble (now named the Slovensko mladinsko gledališče), which owes its international renown to its experimental tradition, in 2010 staged the play *Preklet naj bo izdajalec svoje domovine!* (*Damn the traitor to his homeland!*), directed by Oliver Frljić. After the prologue in which the actors present their intimate recollections of Tito's death, the play takes on the form of a temperamental fashion review of nationalisms and choreographed mass killings. Frljić's copying of a fashion show alludes to Jovanović's epochal *Žrtve mode bum-bum* (*Victims of the fashion boom-boom*; Mladinsko gledališče, 1975). The display of garments – the flags of the former Yugoslav republics and their independent successors – is accompanied by pop Balkan music, while knives in the hands of models foreshadow violence on stage. The mass slaughter of 'enemies of the homeland' is stylized as a dance, interrupted by shocking gunshots. The entrance of an actor who, in the spirit of Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (*Offending the audience*, 1966), attacks the Slovene spectators, disrupts the comfort of aesthetic consumption. He accuses them of distancing themselves under the secure protection of the West from the violence in other Yugoslav republics. Scenes of wartime killings recur to a degree of becoming meaningless, while actors rising from the dead disrupt the stage illusion. There follows a medley of chauvinistic stereotypes and hate-speech that suffuses the media and politics of post-Yugoslav nation states, including Slovenia. The verbal violence mutates into scenes which reveal tensions between the actors during the process of studying the project. One group produces verbal and psychological violence against one troupe member because their adherence to stereotypes causes them to suspect in him an un-Slovene 'traitor to the homeland.' Then an argument erupts between an actress who was to sing a Serbian nationalist song and troupe members who strongly oppose her ethical decision, including on the grounds of theatrical professionalism. Thus, the actors step out of the roles in which each embodies a social habitus and collective clichés, or they present their own, partially ironized experiences and views. In so doing, they express a generational gap, which corresponds precisely with the distance between the two periods of political theater, in which the protagonist was the same ensemble. Older actors are nostalgically inclined to Ristić and Jovanović's political theater of the 1980s, which in its resistance to the one-party regime was deemed to demand personal risk, supposedly no longer necessary in a democratic 2010. In their opinion, political theater therefore no longer makes sense. A representative of the younger generation of actors thinks, on the contrary, that such theater is provocative in the context of contemporary global capitalism because 'the political dictatorship against which [older troupe members] so strenuously fought is a piece of cake, a baby dick in comparison with the neoliberal capitalism we're living with today.'[19]

A comparison of the two performances at the Slovensko mladinsko gledališče reveals certain key differences. Although the productions dating from the period when socialism came to an end cultivated an antirealist, post-avant-garde, and post-dramatic poetics, they still treated politics in mimetic codes of representation. They depicted social problems in terms of relations between dramatic personages, whether historical or fictitious. They relied on literary texts to establish coherence

between other elements of the artistic structure. In the most radical forms of contemporary Slovenian political theater, which is transforming itself into performance, actors or performers no longer represent other persons (historical heroes); they rather present themselves as actual individuals, or they allegorically embody the banality of evil and the politically unconscious. Documents, biography, or dialogues written or improvised by the actors supplant the centrality of drama. While political theater of the 1980s devoted itself to history and criticized totalitarian deviations from revolutionary ideas from the standpoint of a brave, upright, or dissident individual, or a Hegelian beautiful soul, its 21st-century counterpart is immersed in the contemporary world. For this reason the latter cannot assume an ideal stance external to observable phenomena, but requires painful self-examination. This is the source of the marked meta-theatrical discourse that continually addresses the presentation's social situatedness, production factors, and its possible political effects. It is also the source of rediscovered intentionality of a purposefully political theater between the World Wars. Once again it is a question of two intersecting liberation drives – aimed at theatrical form and oppressed social groups.

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