

# SLOVENIAN DRAMA IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Blaž Lukan

I

## DRAMA AND POLIS

This volume includes a selection of six distinctive examples of contemporary Slovenian drama in the eighties and the nineties. The six authors represent the core of current Slovenian writing for theatre, although at least a few other names ought to be added for a more complete picture. The most notable of the senior generation of dramatists, whose works are still performed today, is Andrej Hieng (born 1925), novelist and theatre director, who wrote his last texts for the stage in the seventies. Somewhat younger is Peter Božič (born 1932), the authentic voice of Slovenian drama of the seventies whose fundamental works were written as a response to the European theatre of the absurd. Tone Partljič (born 1940) is a prolific prose writer and dramatist who draws on his personal experience of political life for the contents of his highly popular comedies. Two younger authors, distinguished for their ironic, linguistically rich plays, are Milan Jesih (born 1950), poet and translator of Shakespeare, and Emil Filipčič (1951) who is also a storyteller and author of extremely successful productions, staged at Mladinsko gledališče in Ljubljana. It was on the stage of this theatre that Andrej Rozman – Roza (1956), actor, poet, playwright and leader of his satirical street cabaret theatre Ana Monro, also found an audience with his witty verse paraphrases of traditional and currently relevant themes. Among the eminent young authors are Vinko Möderndorfer (1958), prose writer and theatre director, with his socially acrimonious comedies and genre drama, and theatre director Matjaž Zupančič (1959) with his genre paraphrases of basic existential situations.

The selection nevertheless provides a realistic and vital insight into contemporary Slovenian playwriting. Without significant reservations, the six selected plays – two of which date back to the eighties (*The Wedding* and *The Great Brilliant Waltz*) – can be read as the most characteristic examples of

Slovenian drama in the period of transition. The transition period is characterised by at least two important components. Firstly, phenomena of this period lack a clearly distinct form – at times they seem to replicate themselves and sometimes the contours seem to vanish. And, transitional phenomena are marked by some kind of inner feeling of instability, disorder and even panic. These could be the identifying features of phenomena that correspond to the definition of transition in the corpus of Slovenian drama during the second half of the eighties and the first half of the nineties. Although in most of them we can find elements that defy such definition or are contrary to it, their common denominator is quite clear and refers to the relationship between drama and the politics of the state. The time outlined in this volume (the earliest play, *The Wedding* announces the emerging changes, whereas the rest move further away from transition, already showing signs of stabilisation) is also defined as the time of passage from one state into another, of arrival into the new state and into the time of a new future. The basic common denominator, then, is that of the relationship between drama and polis, while the fundamental components of man's existence can be inscribed on the background of a new political reality.

In Slovenian society – and consequently in Slovenian literature – the late eighties and early nineties were the period of the inevitable final break with the political and social tradition of living in the federal community of socialist republics of the Yugoslav state. The first cracks – seen through the prism of dramatic texts – became apparent as early as a decade after the new Yugoslav state was formed, during transition from the fifties to the sixties. The years of conformist socialist realism saw the emergence of the first conflicts that found a strong intellectual response in Slovenian literature. Authors that gathered around the literary magazine *Perspektive* initiated a philosophical, socio-political and literary dialogue with the exponents of political power. The conflicting nature of this situation found its most intense response in drama and theatre (*Oder 57*). Most of the dramatists from that time are now dead, but the lineage of their existentially committed and politically dissenting voice (*Antigone* – 1960, *Baptism On the Savica* – 1969, by Dominik Smole; *Affair* – 1962, *Congress* – 1968, by Primož Kozak; *Hotbed* – 1964, by Marjan Rožanc; *Alexander Empty-handed* – 1961, by Vitomil Zupan; and others) can still be traced in the works of Drago Jančar, Ivo Svetina, Rudi Šeligo and other authors. Perhaps the last representative of the “Perspektive period” is Dane Zajc, poet and dramatist who vitally renews his poetics in the spirit of new times by continuing to write for the stage.

By the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, the failure to establish a dialogue with the political elite manifested itself in a shift from the objective world to language, frequently in the form of twisted, playful dramatic situations on the one hand and decidedly metaphoric mythical-poetic expression on the other. Two forms characteristic of Slovenian drama of that time are the grotesque, influenced by the European theatre of the absurd, and the poetic play which – unlike Maeterlinckian or Irish poetic plays – is less transparent and highly charged with poetry. Dušan Jovanovič, one of the authors in this selection, is a typical representative of the grotesque in the Slovenian drama of that time (with works like *Postage Stamps And Then Emily* – 1969, or *Act Timor In The Head and Air Pollution* – 1971); Dane Zajc, also presented in this volume, is a representative of poetic drama (*Children of the River* – 1962, *Wanderer* – 1971). A notable exception in the Slovenian drama of the late sixties and early seventies is Gregor Strniša (1930-87), a poet and dramatist whose verse plays are an authentic and dramaturgically effective blend of grotesque, mythological, poetic and topical elements. His organically structured opus of works (*Unicorn* – 1966, *Frogs* – 1968, *Cannibals* – 1972, *Driad* – 1976) is considered to be among the most significant achievements in Slovenian drama in the second half of this century.

During the late seventies and early eighties, Slovenian (and Yugoslav) drama began to open up: repressed political themes began to surface, dramatists started to address political issues with direct and embarrassing questions, and the modern linguistically rich, as well as poetic, metaphoric drama of the time became less restrained. The emergence of the so-called political drama after Tito's death brought about a partial vulgarisation of dramatic means in favour of the more relevant *glasnost* in raising fundamental socio-political questions. Unlike contemporary Yugoslav drama of the time, Slovenian political drama was less direct and declarative – as if unable to break away from the existential/poetic model of the sixties. The message of plays like *The Liberation of Skopje* by D. Jovanovič (1979), *Ana* by R. Šeligo (1984), or Jančar's *Great Brilliant Waltz*, presented in this selection, is therefore transcendent, and these plays can now be read in their “pure” form, no longer hidden behind the connotations of their day. The period of transition was reflected most profoundly in Slovenian drama during the second half of the eighties. This was the time of relatively increased political plurality in Slovenian society. In the drama, however, it resounds with somewhat darker tones. Šeligo's *Wedding* is a relentless critique of a closed social model based on bureaucratic (and police) aggression where even pagan rituals and folklore

traditions, whose only purpose is to free the body or soul from the mundane shackles of daily life, are experienced as terror. *The Great Brilliant Waltz*, on the other hand, portrays a metaphoric and factual bondage of the "fragile" subject in the system of absolute police and state control that penetrates the most intimate particles of man's existence.

The end of the eighties, then, is the time that could not and would not avoid confronting the real issues, but it did so in an allegoric way. The second half of the eighties also saw the decline of modernism in the Slovenian drama and the emergence of the first phenomena influenced by post-modernism, whose presence had a deeper effect on Slovenian prose-writing. Traces of post-modern treatment can thus be found in the plays of Šeligo, Jančar, Filipčič and Rozman; genre simulation in Zupančič's dramas is post-modern in its approach, but these are mainly individual and arbitrary examples.

Despite the occasional tension provoked by the publishing or staging of dramatic texts towards the end of our life together in Yugoslavia, the process of transition towards the sovereign state was generally calm and passed without any noticeable literary upheavals. The nineties show some new features. In this period, some playwrights have left the literary sphere for political life. For most Slovenes, the birth of the independent state heralded the beginning of a merciless "time of politics"; and the transition from a linguistic or poetic-metaphoric literary phase into non-literary and political daily practice was experienced by some Slovenian dramatists as an extremely swift and intense change. Nevertheless, in their works, traces of a direct or even vulgar response to the political engagement are hard to find: one should assume that we are faced here with a unique variation of "Havel syndrome", with the future manifested, as I have already pointed out, in a very specific fashion.

In Slovenian drama, the time of transition has not yet seen a deeper articulation of social questions: at the time of rapid social differentiation of the society this is still a taboo area, as is the spiritual differentiation of the society. This is the time of disintegration of global systems, and it resounds strongest with isolated and from the viewpoint of continuity randomly articulated voices. Thus the political aspects of the Slovene drama in the period of transition cannot ignore the voices or works trying to articulate current existential crises and anxieties in a dramatically realistic and psychologically profiled way. Such is the work of Evald Flisar, who does not shun current topics, but prefers to deal with them by exploring the intimate traumas of the contemporary "alienated" subject (*What about Leonardo?*; *Tomorrow*; *Uncle*

*from America*; *Final Innocence*). Dušan Jovanovič resolutely probes into the motives which bring about the crumbling of the human community, from the family to the group (*Wall, Lake*; *Antigone*) and the state (*Military Secret*, *The Puzzle of Courage*), expressing his dismay through the words of his protagonists. More so than in Slovenian drama, post-modernism has found fertile ground in the contemporary theatrical practice: we have seen a proliferation of "silent" physical theatre and narrative theatre of images in which literary text functions as mere verbal fragments.

Given the obstructed passage to the "south" after independence, Slovenian theatre was forced to begin to develop "northward". Its breakthrough (e.g. Mladinsko gledališče, Drama of the Slovene National Theatre, Maribor; Theatre Glej, Ljubljana) in Europe as well as on other continents began in the eighties, and primarily with the original works of authors presented in this volume (Jovanovič's *Liberation of Skopje*, *Antigona*; Svetina's *Sheherazade*, *Gardens and the Dove* – staged as *Babylon*, etc.). Having their works produced by theatres abroad was an even more important part of the process. As an illustration, works of R. Šeligo and D. Jančar were often staged in theatres across Yugoslavia; Americans have put on Jančar's *Godot* and Flisar's plays *What About Leonardo?*, *Tomorrow* and *Final Innocence* have been (or are to be again) performed in London, Reykyavik and elsewhere. Perhaps it is the dictate of this inevitable opening up to the world that inspires contemporary Slovenian playwrights to transcend their traditional preoccupation with daily political life and its tendency to dramatise ephemeral political topics. Or, to put it differently, by quoting the words of Taras Kermauner: "There is no drama that isn't guided by some kind of vision/delusion. There is no drama that would not be a representation of dirt and matter. And there is no drama that could exist absolutely outside tragedy and passion."

## II

### SIX EXAMPLES (in chronological order)

#### 1.

Rudi Šeligo's initial development as a writer was strongly influenced by the new French prose (Robbe-Grillet). His characters were always placed into a distinct geographic environment with a clear-cut social background. Their description was rendered with minute, precise style. The interpolation of magic into seemingly linearly structured existential situations and relationships, however, enabled him to start writing plays. *The Wedding* (1981) begins as a portrayal of ordinary neurotic atmosphere on a Sunday afternoon in which the idea of marrying a couple of village idiots, Lenka and Yuri, is born. The relationship between the two social macro-structures in the drama is mutually exclusive. The one that frequents the pub, and the one that comes from the outside appear to be irreconcilable, as if two parallel time currents permeated the drama, both expressed with two different languages. The first is split up inside, squeezed out through the body, ugly, brimming with momentary twists and turns, assaulting. The other is in perfect harmony with itself, rolling slowly, beautifully. In a way, both are illogical, although the former is deconstructed, and the latter functions as a synthesis. Šeligo, however, goes deeper. The relationship within a particular social micro-structure is also seen as impossible, which proves true for the crowd in the pub where emotions run high, as well as for the boy and the girl, the erotic couple. Without the mediator, the middleman, there can be no communication between the two sides; and mediation is the concept Šeligo in his play consistently realizes (witchcraft, spell-casting, fetishes and props, proverbs and quotes). After all, Yuri and Lenka are brother and sister, and cannot be married regardless of their desire. Their (primarily Lenka's) desire evokes the significant motif of "longing", an element which was first introduced by Cankar's symbolist drama *Beautiful Vida* (1912).

The problem of Yuri's and Lenka's union does not originate in the bureaucratic nature of the authorities and their refusal to issue a marriage licence, but is rooted in the natural state of both. In a series of expressive pictures *The Wedding* examines traumatic attempts to establish all the nonexistent relationships that finally turn out to be impossible. Šeligo thus

questions the basic social structure, "the cell", revealing a dividing crack in the fundamental relationship between two beings which is ordinarily established by the very nature of the thing. Another crack is revealed in the process: the crack within the subject who now functions only as a schizoid (or Schizophrenic in the most extreme form) – merely a chaotic repository filled with a variety of objective and psychological contents. In the crack, a space opens up in which everything becomes possible (an "omnipotent" space), and which has been filled with (post-modernist) simulation of methods and states of being: pagan ritual, esoteric transcendence, erotic bizarreness. The answer to the question about the possibility of establishing a communication within the subject himself, and of a relationship between two members of society and the social structure, however, is to be found in nature. Protagonists of *The Wedding* are victims of degeneration, they are uprooted from nature which is then seen as a decaying, divided, blocked existential totality which contaminates the skin, the body and the soul all at the same time. In this way we can "justify" all kinds of aggressive excesses in the play, on the social or psycho-physical level. In the play, everything that has been inhibited or repressed in the body, erupts in the light of day, albeit in a twisted form: as series of explosions, thrusts, verbal spouts. To Šeligo, savage human nature is a blend of pre-civilisation and the post-cataclysmic state at the same time. Man became a social being even before his alienation from nature, which is why he has gone wild again after the phase of social cataclysm. We can witness all this gradually happening in the lives of Yuri and Lenka: the primordial state of wild nature is followed by the process of socialisation, the cleaning of their home, purification of their life, language, and transition to new savagery, cannibalism, and death. This is an absolutely total metamorphosis of two fragile creatures, brought about through the apparent ritualisation of life (the wedding in *The Wedding* is theatre within theatre, a metatheatre). Neurotic civilisation not only destroys nature, but also destroys the super-natural in nature. And the order, finally established by a police constable, is just a make-believe: sadness and void are born to remain in the empty space, like destiny, and the "stopped" time trickles lifelessly away.

Šeligo's characters are like mad dogs inhabiting a confined world that is strongly reminiscent of a psychiatric ward. Its distinctly social emphasis makes the work quite relevant, although its reinvention of myth is doomed to failure; the impossibility of the relationship it portrays has also left an impression on the dramaturgy, in a technical sense. Scenes bump into one

another like masses of power-charged imaginary substance, brimming with words gone numb. After his first attempt to deal with the theme of an impossible relationship, Šeligo returned to it in his later plays. In *Ana* he depicts the singularity of a relationship between a revolutionary individual and the possessive totalitarian (Soviet) ideology; in his play *The Wolf-time of Love* (1988) he focuses on the crisis in the social fabric; *Divorce or The Holy Sarmathian Blood* (1995) deals with the dissolution of a fragmented Yugoslav community through the prism of tribal clashes in a primitive society.

## 2.

The setting of Drago Jančar's *Great Brilliant Waltz* is a special mental hospital. Jančar, who also writes prose, is undoubtedly the most widely translated contemporary Slovenian novelist and short story writer. His passively-active hero-model Arnož, whose narrative presence has successfully shifted from one paradigmatic historical situation to another without the author's losing sight of his cumbersome and existentially rich solitude, has been effectively transferred into drama, too. Arnož, the hero in *Dissident Arnož and His Lot* (1982), emigrates in an ideologically safe time early in the last century to the promised land, America. Unable to escape his past he meets with failure in spite of his immense desire to succeed. The will and power of the hero are lost, then returned and destroyed together with him. Two other works by Jančar, *Klement's Fall* and *Daedalus* (both written in 1988) elaborate on the drama of this hero. Jančar also develops the image of political totality in the absurdly-ironic *Stakeout on Godot* (1989) and the allegoric *Halstatt*, (1994).

In *The Great Brilliant Waltz* this totality has the shape of a psychiatric institution bearing the title "Freedom Liberates"; an allusion to the Nazi slogan on the gates of concentration camps. This is a transformation-oriented institution, a metaphor for the human society per se, a totalitarian system that doesn't try to conceal its origins: the places referred to are real, and the time referred to is our historical time, marked by the Communist rule. With Jančar, the relations are clear: on the one side we have totalitarianism, and on the other (again) the fragile subject. Although the hero's image is altered, this is merely his own private problem. The totality, however (not the society as such, but its ideological system), violates his privacy, cuts into his drunken delusions, abuses the privacy of his journal, conserves his decaying psyche, desecrates his body. Forced transformation of historian Simon Veber into the object of his own research, Polish rebel Sewerin Drohojowski, is a

complete success: at the end, all that remains before our eyes is a Polish speaking patient who keeps up the appearance of rebelliousness, but is only a helpless product of the transformation. The metamorphosis is a symbolic dramatic motif which evokes the face as well as its mask, the transition from one form to another based on the mechanics of totality. Metamorphosis (a transformation of morphemes of the body into other states of being) is carried out as a process of metaphorisation: a human being is something which must be re-defined, re-named. Totality degrades a human being into nobody and replaces him with its own creation. Jančar poses the question: who am I, what is the self? From the perspective of a totalitarian system the self is he, for Jančar the self exposed to incessant outpours of radiation of totality is an-even-more-self, a self/self, a self without a punctuation mark to distinguish between both. Simon Veber as Drohojowski thus becomes the image of his fleetingly spoken wish. The difference, however, is in the method: Veber could "depersonalize" himself into Drohojowski of his own free will, even in the state of delirium tremens; in our case, however, it is the state with its institution or its representatives which has transformed him into Drohojowski. And although Veber as Drohojowski is now the selfself, he has been pressured into it by somebody other than himself the master who has unlimited power over him. Veber is an involuntary Drohojowski, his existence is fatefully determined by aggression and acquiescence, his freedom is now "liberated".

The omnipresent power of authority is best seen in Jančar's original linguistic solution: the simple introduction of the preposition *in*. A totalitarian system translates everything, as it were, *in*-to something outside of which there is nothing; the institution does have the ability to draw a borderline between the *in* and *out*, but the line can easily be crossed over, as we can see towards the end of the play, when suddenly everyone finds themselves *in*: both metaphor experts (that is, cops), Doctor, Simon's wife Clara and (the surviving) inmates. The illusion of power (power is always on the outside) is nursed only by Volodja the nurse, who is really the executor of power, empowered by the authorities. It is through his assistance and that of other "Volodjas" that the institution (the state) can maintain the tension needed to manifest order as a constant declarative act performed by the state. Volodja is not a metaphor, he is a sign. As a sign, he can have his life prolonged into infinity. Other heroes of the play (citizens of the state) will end their lives in liberated freedom by dying, through total degradation or melodramatic ascension. At some point, even the state itself will complete its life cycle, its

form manifested as ideological system; while the state as totality, the outer field or the atmosphere of space, remains indestructible. Its spores are propagated with the assistance of Volodjas, who produce neither metaphors nor (Laing's) madness nor (Foucaultian) penitentiaries nor cuckoo's nests. Volodjas produce concrete reality which is – after all – always the most tragic and horrible one. Sewerin Drohojowski is a "hero" described in a letter written by Polish ethnologist Emil Korytko (1813-39) during his stay in Slovenia. With Jančar's drama he has become a literary personality of our time, just like Simon Veber, the tragic historian, who has been conjured up by a repressive ideological system. Heroes of Jančar's works are intellectuals, artists, scientists, hidden or outspoken dissidents, critical individuals who grow stronger from one drama to another and no longer feel at home in the time of transition. Jančar's play has retained the popularity enjoyed since it was first performed because of its straightforward dramatic construction and eloquent dramatic turns that keep the audience riveted to the end.

### 3.

Dane Zajc is the poet of dissolution of matter, of returning unto the earth, among the wandering creatures and things. In his poetic world, man is a fugitive from his own deeds that seem to be catching up with him, chasing after him. However, he is expected to act as a responsible being. Helplessness which befalls man in this flawed world does not prevent him from seeking, from hoping, and speaking up. The dramatic world of Dane Zajc is a logical continuation of the metaphoric world of his poetry. His unique mythical portrayal of desert landscapes where time rules supreme and from where there is no way homewards is present already in *Children of the River* (1962); the theme of homelessness is also characteristic and evident in the *Wanderer* (1971) and *Voranc* (1978); *Rocky Peak* (1993) complements Zajc's world with the poetic metaphor of the mountain as mother figure who gives life to hope, but also takes it away.

*Rocky Peak* is a poetic and theatrical universe with a cyclic recurrence of the age-old story about fathers and sons, and of the passing of generations. Rocky Peak is a mountain which determines the life of the community at its foot. Etymologically, the meaning of the original title, *Grmače*, is associated with bushes, thunder and piles of wood; in Slovene, its plural form conveys the impression of plurality of objects, a number of things joined together. It represents a theme which is an amalgam of geographic as well as psychological

and phenomenological components, and contains the entire history of a community living at the foot of the mountain, in the present time, and in the time to come. Rocky Peak represents the mother, for the world below the mountain is the world of males, the world without mother; the only female characters in the play are the Errand-woman (a barren woman, a beggar, and a clairvoyant) and Polona, a girl unable to find the peace of mind to settle down, and who probably won't be able to be a mother. Fathers and sons are divided an ancient quarrel; in Yur's case this turns out to be even worse when he plots against his father with three accomplices. Killing the father therefore is no longer a ritualistic archetypal act, but a vulgar crime committed for personal profit. Although fathers still have the power (father Andrazh keeps his son firmly on the leash), their fate is inevitable. Time is always on the side of the sons, regardless of how cowardly and weak they are. Youth controls time, in spite of their knowing, perhaps, that its power is merely imaginary. Old age is subject to time, although it may be aware that its ideal state is death. The awareness of life on the other side is crucial to the difference between life and existence in the shadow of Rocky Peak. New-age pragmatism, whose protagonists are Matiya, Sevshok, and Kolomch, doesn't recognise the other side. It is from the other side, however, that insight comes, and it is only the other side which essentially defines the quintessence of Rocky Peak; from this side it appears only as a dark two-dimensional background. The other side makes Rocky Peak a sentient and suffering body. And the other side also means death. This knowledge comes to mind with the experience of death, in reality a flight across death. Having experienced delusion, Yur becomes a different man: he loses his shadow, and changes within. His progress through transcendence (expressed in Zajc's linguistically rich and varied pantheism) draws him into isolation.

Rocky Peak is not open towards the other, it excludes and isolates the other. Rocky Peak brings forth new life, but (like the holy Mother Mary) without allowing itself to lose its purity. In its body (the womb) Rocky Peak jealously guards the bones of the forefathers: it is a mountain built of bones. In comparison with Šeligo and Jančar, the sphere of Dane Zajc is frighteningly open, although this openness does not imply freedom. Here everything is doomed to failure: human greed after the Goldenhorn's treasure (the Goldenhorn is a mythical creature from Slovene mountains; whoever kills it, is sure to find great treasure; but the creature is difficult to kill, for red blossoms grow from every drop of his blood, and by eating them he heals his wounds), the desire for erotic union, the instinct to create progeny. Only

grandfather remains alive to the very end of the play (besides the Errand-woman), the only male representative of the third generation. Grandfather is the last of the line which is dying out below the Rocky Peak. Is it his fault not to have died, did he violate the ancient custom? Should the father be blamed for having raised an ungrateful son? Or was it the son who wanted to take the life of his own father for personal profit, and not out of some Freudian drive? Is it the fault of Yur's buddies who had talked him into it? Is it Polona who sets her heart on Yur only after he has become a mere ghost? Or is it the unknowable fate, encoded in the genes of the mountain and the family? Zajc's answer is descriptive: this is a time when tribes and families fall apart, the time of decline of family rules and traditions; Rocky Peak merely witnesses the changes we have been undergoing, and which lead to an inevitable tragic ending, to the uprooting of tribal principle. Rocky Peak is the only thing left of time, but even Rocky Peak is slowly rotting to ashes and dust; time as dust. Zajc's *Rocky Peak* feels time in its historic pulsation. It does not relate the time of a specific year or decade; its language is poetically darkened; its world mythological. (With the exception of the myth about Goldenhorn, *Rocky Peak* contains Zajc's personal mythology; in his dramatic works, Zajc also renews classical European myths, like classical Medea or Finnish Kalevala, in which he recounts – with a poetic diction that is characteristically his own – the old story about guilt and the relation of death to life in this open world without a refuge; see both synopses). The hero – Yur – cannot find life through his own strength, borne from his own flesh and blood. He really becomes alive only when he has become his own shadow, a ghost, a phantasm of what cannot be achieved. In this respect, he is very much like Yuri from *The Wedding*, and Simon Veber from the *Waltz*. Despite his poetic distance and only apparent presence, he creates the impression of being frighteningly alive. Rocky Peak is a mountain that preys on us from somewhere close.

4.

Dušan Jovanovič has dedicated his life to the theatre – as a director, playwright, long-standing artistic director, essayist and lecturer. His dramatic oeuvre is quite extensive and ranges in scope from genre and grotesque plays (*Madmen*, 1968, *Postage Stamps and Then Emily* 1969, *The Life of Country Playboys after WWII or Three Cuckolds*, 1972) to conceptual plays (*Act Tumor in the Head and Air Pollution*, 1971), documentary-lyrical plays about individual growth (*Liberation of Skopje*, 1977), to intimate plays in his later, mature stage, with

a structure that expresses his renewed interest in the destiny of the individual and the collective (*Wall, Lake*, 1989, *The Puzzle of Courage*, 1995).

In *The Puzzle of Courage*, based on Brecht's famous epic *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Jovanovič asks the riddle of the Sphinx related to theatre: what is the relationship between the stage and the auditorium, where does the play end and life begin, what is more real, theatre or the world? He immediately gives an answer: "Theatre is the only place in the world where nothing, absolutely nothing resembles life." And he goes on to prove it right to the end – with a slight correction: the stage, too, is life. For a man of theatre like Jovanovič, the stage represents a lens, a kind of focal point where all life converges in a single hot spot. The stage does not always exist in a relationship with the auditorium, or life, but can also exist in a relationship with itself. Questions "How to act a part?" or "How to stage a play?" are born on the stage. Or: what is it really at the bottom of it all – the part, the play, what is their substance? A simple answer would be: life. But what is life? Jovanovič probes deeper in his attempt to find a more definite answer about life which must create an effect on the stage. Not every life is life. To live, theatre needs life that can activate it, turn it on. Not life as such, but life in a condensed form. Some sort of life within life, a double life so to speak. And such life is war. In Slovenia, the close proximity of the Bosnian war (and earlier the war in Croatia, as well as the ten-day war for Slovenia) has put the question about life forward in a radical form: what kind of life are we talking about, the life of another, my own endangered life, or life in general?

It is an old truth that the truth about life as such is discovered through the experience of being in danger; not a philosophical, literary, abstract truth, but a concrete, tangible, physical truth. This truth always has a body which is not abstract, speculative, but real, our own; this body takes part in the drama in the form of Bosnian refugees. Still, this truth (of Bosnian refugees) is not what we imagine it would be at first glance, it is not as we would like it to be. It has its own life, the life of the other. The life of another life. If we want to make use of it in the play, it slips out of reach. The life in question therefore is not our own life, it is life of somebody other than ourselves, a life overpowering our own. And although it may seem that in this play everything takes place on the stage, scenes with Bosnian heroes are different: they radiate life which is stronger than everything else. This is not a sentimental attitude towards the war and the refugees, it is the attitude to life itself. Life itself, according to Jovanovič, can really be the substance of a theatrical performance, but it has to provoke an irreconcilable challenge to our own life. As...

support it. Although she can still identify herself with Brecht's mother Courage, which she'll play, she is no longer up to playing the part of a Bosnian woman named Maria. This is not a problem of theatrical identification; it is about letting the other person come so close to you that she/he comes under your skin. To let the other come so near, under your skin, into the body: such is the ontology of life faced with the reality of war. This is no longer a matter of theatrical text, of words, but a matter of physical proximity. And Irene finds this intensity untenable. To her, the stage and life become twisted into a Gordian knot; she snaps under the burden, and in the last part of the play disappears, goes into a hallucination and vanishes. Theatre cannot be restored; to be more precise: theatre can be restored only by a director who is not interested in anything but the stage. The director is a man of the theatre which – for him – is itself a form of life.

Jovanovič already dealt with the theme of the Bosnian war in *Antigone*. Empathy with the tragic fate of the once brotherly Bosnian nation is also reflected in other contemporary Slovenian plays, most notably in *Final Innocence* by Evald Flisar. In these works, war is seen primarily as the horror of the possibility made real, and as an awareness of being trapped in the current of history from which there is no escape, except by chance; or, as in the case of *The Puzzle of Courage*, by perseverance and defiance (let us call to mind Maria's ingenuity in the changed circumstances).

Jovanovič's play, however, loses its momentum at some point before the end, as if it were appalled at the fact that nothing connected to war can be erased, as if these things were all linked to some deep recollection that can never be adequately expressed on the stage. Theatrical memory is short, it lasts as far as the next performance; human memory of a life lived survives however hard one may try to forget. And theatre is the place of forgetfulness. Here – in oblivion – theatre and life probably merge and find a common, albeit insignificant point of contact on the surface. This could be the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx (the riddle of Courage). Jovanovič offers a third possibility: to go on searching, looking within oneself, to experience joy, suffering, hope – and to keep on acting.

5.

If *The Puzzle of Courage* is set in a universal space – on the theatre stage, somewhere in these parts or anywhere in Europe, for that matter, *Final Innocence* (1996) by Evald Flisar takes place in the heart of Bosnia, in a cabin in the

and gunshots. Flisar is a literary cosmopolitan: he writes novels, meditative prose about travels, stage plays and plays for the radio. He divides his time between London and Ljubljana and is familiar with different spiritual traditions, from esoteric Eastern lore to Cartesian and European (he has travelled in over seventy countries). Flisar is preoccupied with man's identity; this is the key to understanding his characters in *Tomorrow* (1992) and the patients and doctors in *What About Leonardo?* (1992). In this search he is not motivated by the mere logic of genre; his foremost interest is in the existential dimensions of his heroes. He is not concerned with the senseless production of madness, but with the manipulation of the depersonalized subject. Even in his lighter works (*Uncle from America*, 1994; *We're falling!*, 1995) he remains ethically engaged and never strays from the frame of contemporary tragicomedy.

If we agree that Bosnia was treated like an isolated spot in the heart of Europe, the cabin in which *Final Innocence* is set represents a condensed allegory of this isolation. Here, chance brings together two typical protagonists of the Bosnian war: a journalist and a British military officer. They both watch the ongoing tragic developments from the sidelines, so to speak, but nevertheless become fatefully involved in them. The concept of the plot implies that no one can pretend to be an innocent bystander, unconcerned and uninvolved. Here we are not faced with the trivial saying about a small world, but rather the necessity of taking a side. In the world where everything happens on the inside one simply cannot remain uninvolved. With Flisar, however, it is not the ideological totalitarian state that matters, as is the case with Jančar, but rather the totality of existence. Bosnia is an open wound on the body of life, a wound in the awareness of this flesh. This, indeed, is an event that cannot be ignored, which is the reason why one must become involved in this war: at least by publicly stating one's view, with ethical decisions, compassion or mercy.

John and Mary (the biblical couple!) take part in this war out of their own interest – this, too, is a legitimate stand. In ethical vocabulary, John's motive could be labelled as taking personal advantage or as war profiteering. In spite of his ethical commitment, Flisar refrains from passing any moral judgement: his job as a dramatist is in bringing to a dramaturgically sound end the unusual destiny of both Westerners caught in the Balkan furnace, "at the end of the world" where old notions are replaced by new definitions. Each of them carries their own existential burden which they cannot get rid of even here, behind the closed door, however hard they try. What is more, it



spurs a fatal conflict. John and Mary's traumatic entanglement in their stereotypes is cunningly exploited by a Gypsy, who at first appears to be connected with nature (like Yuri and Lenka in *The Wedding*, Yur in *Rocky Peak*, or Maria in *The Puzzle of Courage*), while in reality he is afraid of it: he flees feverishly from the beast that follows him. The beast is war in its animal image. The Gypsy regards the war (with deep snow, the sound of machine guns and wolves) as some kind of natural state of things; unlike John and Mary who, closed in the cabin, find themselves in an extreme situation. He does not dramatise his situation (like the refugees in *The Puzzle of Courage*) nor does he deny it; he simply lives it. This is his advantage over the neurotically tense journalist and the officer who both serve their own interests, and this is what gives him an upper hand. The Gypsy's interests are short-term, his first goal is survival. Survival – the fight for one's life – implies pure factuality and negates memories, whereas the journalist practically lives on memories. She is willing to endure anything to find her father, although at the time when survival is at stake this is an irrelevant discovery. In these parts memories die of frost bite. And the revelation of the Gypsy as the journalist's father is just as irrelevant. The officer's crucifixion, too, has no cathartic effect. The sacrifice needed to stop the war becomes absurd at this point, a form of some meaningless western utopia. In this cabin, Christ's death is futile. There is no world able to see and understand his parable. How many Christs have died in Bosnia without being seen or recognised by anyone?

But who in this world is still innocent? Let us answer with Flisar: everyone (who was) there. Participation is a living presence in the event. It presupposes the experience of pain, fear, joy and hope. No one who has lived with this war can be judged guilty. John, who wanted to make profit, is no more guilty than Mary who wanted to find her father. The Gypsy who lived with the war as if he were enduring a snow blizzard is not guilty either. And the beast, unable to survive without human blood is not guilty, nor is the war itself, the defenders or the killers; war is always the work of those who remain outside, who are not directly involved. Those alone are not innocent. To take our point to the end, the truly last of the innocent are those who will have to live here after the war has ended, and create a new heaven from this hell through their own strength, without God who, in some resplendent solitude, listens to hymns sung in his honour and glory – odes like the one in the (frighteningly ironic) dedication at the beginning of this drama. Living in a world without metaphysics requires real persistence and

rebelliousness: it requires innocence. Nobody in Flisar's drama possesses it; the Gypsy, too, will be caught unawares and torn apart by the beast – his own masked image.

Flisar's play with its common sense straightforwardness and ethical engagement, and its conceptual structure within genre, is an exception in the contemporary Slovenian dramatic production. The Gypsy is an active hero whom even the war cannot prevent from exercising the will to power. As inevitable as it may be, war does not take the form of absolute evil, like in *The Great Brilliant Waltz* where the hero can rebel only by passive withdrawal into delusion. The totality of *Final Innocence* still allows the hero to take active stand; it leaves a chance to those who are still innocent.

## 6.

Ivo Svetina's *Thus Died Zarathushtra* (1996) is the most recently written play in this volume. Svetina is a poet and dramatist; in the seventies he was a member of the experimental theatre group Pupilija Ferkeverk, and co-founder of the Pekarna Theatre in Ljubljana. In his dramatic works, written with poetic diction that owes its metaphoric frame to the exotic landscapes of the East and its sacred books (A Thousand and One Nights, Gilgamesh, Tibetan Book of the Dead, etc.), he remains faithful to the ritualised concepts of that theatre. Outspoken eroticism, ecstatic mysticism, metaphor-laden dramatic construction are the distinctive features of Svetina's dramatic writing from the beginning. His first play, *The Beauty and the Beast* (1985), moves in the familiar circle of longing, whereas *Scheherazade* (1989) and the *Gardens and the Dove* (staged as *Babylon* in 1996) are already sensual theatrical works with veiled dramaturgy.

In *Thus Died Zarathushtra* Svetina succeeded in building a mythological and poetic world, inspired by the well-known Nietzsche work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. But Nietzsche's Zarathustra was still alive and speaking, whereas Svetina's Zarathushtra is dying and losing his voice. In fact, he is dying at the end only, while his words seem absurd from the very beginning: his announcement of the birth of higher man in high noon is heard only by his animals and his own shadow. Who does Zarathushtra address? Are the snake, the eagle, the donkey and the shadow really his only audience? True enough, Zarathushtra speaks only to hear his brain rattle. He heralds the higher man with resounding words (and only empty words resound with a hollow echo), but the day declines from high noon into the evening, and the evening

becomes night, and the night ends in another morning, and nothing happens, except Zarathushtra's passing away. In spite of this the play is not without dramatic tension. The myth itself is brutally tragic, and the metaphors linking and separating elements of the narrative structure, the micro-scenes as they might be called, are dramatic, too. Zarathushtra's solitude provides the frame with the basic tension in the play. He has the company of animals and his shadow (which leaves him only at night, but the night blots out everything, including Zarathushtra), but he is nevertheless alone, for he lives in the wasteland, where he had fled from a woman. The wasteland, etymologically a place devoid of life, is now his habitat – yet he does not fill it with memories or complaints, but has made it a place of rebirth, the birth of a man who is more than man, closer to being a god or the sun – and he is that man. He has to turn away from his own humanity to become a higher man, and must withdraw to the heights from which he can look with pity on his own life. Zarathushtra lives in delusions, not in reality. The heights are in fact the depths that ensnare those who keep running from themselves. His body creates absence, deprivation, and Zarathushtra becomes his own slave longing to be master, although he cannot even control himself, let alone others, "hosts of the suffering and the yearning", the mob or the riff-raff. Zarathushtra in fact feverishly wants a master – himself, to rule over him and the world. His true master, however, is a woman, the one he had left and who had borne him a son, whom he denied. Having denied his son and wife, Zarathushtra denied love. Love is the only weapon capable of overpowering time. And since he has lost love – although he ceaselessly preaches love which is god, solitude, himself – he's at a loss for words to defend himself with when his son appears, leading his blind mother. The son is time which reminds father of his mortality, and tells him that time to die draws near. Zarathushtra's prophetic stance is a substitute for lost love; it is an escape from the truth past and present, and a search for truth in the time to come. But prophesizing is no true power in itself – true power is in love and acceptance of the other. Zarathushtra's teachings thus prove useless, absurd, an absolute zero in comparison with life, which is everything. They serve no-one; not even the beggar, the shepherd, nor can the tightrope walker find any use for them. All that is left to Zarathushtra, then, is to lie down in his own shadow and die, and let the donkey take his place.

In Zarathushtra, Svetina depicts a philosophically intoned literary cosmos in the tradition in Slovenian poetic drama, and in the tradition which he himself has established with his own plays. His dialogue is a blend of

dramatic adages, aphorisms and metaphoric definitions. Zarathushtra's world is the prehistoric desert which by definition does not allow euphoric Zarathushtra's words to take root: they vanish in the infinite metaphysical void. The dialogue contains a slight irony that dulls the tragic echo of Zarathushtra. The play, after all, is ironically subtitled as an "asinine tragedy". Zarathushtra is a hollow waxen idol, a false prophet, and as such an emblematic hero of the time that does not need myth to identify with the story, but rather to remove itself from it to a distance which, nevertheless, still pulsates with the memory of past closeness.

### III

#### BETWEEN THE TRANSITION AND THE FUTURE

With some notable exceptions, the language of Slovene dramatists is mythologically and poetically grounded rather than psychologically based, while expressionism, with its assertive symbolic elements, seems closer to them than realistic dramatic "economy". Nevertheless, any conclusive judgement of the Slovenian drama in the period of transition must be postponed, for the process of transition is still under way; enough time must be allowed for this tribe to settle in these parts for good, not only in transition, to find inner balance and redirect its attention from the past towards the future, regardless of Zaje's prophecies that it is doomed to extinction (but Svetina has given us a good lesson about such prophets). The making of the future implies new beginnings, new developments – and new transitions.

*Translated by Mia Dintinjana*