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Slovene Theatre and Drama Post Independence: Four Plays by Slovene Playwrights

Introduction and Translation by Lesley Anne Wade

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Collateral Damage: Slovene Theatre and Drama Post Independence

Introduction

Slovene writers, including playwrights, have always been keenly aware of the European literary tradition, but since Slovenia is a small nation with an unfamiliar language, its own literature has remained outside the general European consciousness. This book hopes to help the process of changing this situation. Its parameters are of necessity narrow, excluding other excellent writers (Dane Zajc, Rudi Šeligo, Evald Flisar, Vinko Mőderndorfer, Ivo Svetina, Milan Jesih, to name but a few) and indeed equally worthy plays by the writers represented here.

Theatre and the Slovene identity

The end of the First World War saw the founding of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Before 1918, Slovenia had been enclosed in that 'dungeon of nations', the Hapsburg Empire (Pintar 238). Even later, when Slovenia became part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Slovene theatre was only known to the outside world as a part of Yugoslavian theatre. Nonetheless, at the earlier time of the Kingdom, all Slovene theatres had been designated national theatres, each with its own theatre school, the most important being in Ljubljana, Maribor, and Trst (which had not yet been given to Italy and renamed Trieste). Later, in the Republic of Yugoslavia, the Slovene theatre had considerable autonomy. Cultural policies were decided by local state committees, as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had no overseeing Ministry of Culture (Pintar 235). Finally, with its independence in 1991, Slovenia began to receive international attention, but it is only since joining the European Union in

2005 that this interest has more completely awakened, and with it, an interest in Slovene theatre.

Historically, Slovenia has been far from isolated, however, bordering as it does on the different linguistic cultures of Croatia, Italy, Austria and Hungary. The capital, Ljubljana, has long been a multicultural centre. Slovene, Italian and German had all been widely used public languages until the end of the First World War, when they were replaced by Serbo-Croatian, only to return during the Second World War. During this war, Nazism and Italian fascism caused Slovenia to turn away from Western Europe to its Balkan neighbours and to the Slavic world in general. After 1945, Serbo-Croatian became the official language of Yugoslavia, but Slovene at least gained the status of official language in its own state.

For decades, Slovenes maintained a sense of their independence as a nation by means of a strong emphasis on their culture. Language and culture have always played a central role in the preservation of the Slovene national identity. During the National Liberation rebellion in the Second World War, Andrej Inkret tells us 'the military units were named after Slovene lyricists and literary men took up important commands in the political and military resistance leadership' (12). The influence of literature in the history of Slovenia has been so great that it was even considered instrumental in the founding of the sovereign state of Slovenia. The theatre was of course a natural home for the celebration and preservation of the language, while audiences looked to it as a reference point for the Slovene identity.

The matter of national identity is of course more complicated and sometimes more surprising than this. The stereotype of weakness and passivity familiar to Slovenes has been contradicted by the sociological research of Janez Musek, which attributes to Slovenes a long list of aggressive tendencies, such as adventurousness, masculinity, ambitiousness and selfishness, more marked than in the people of many other nations, including even Britain and the other countries of former Yugoslavia. Not surprisingly, then, such traits are prominent in some of the characters in the plays in this volume. Musek theorises that Slovenes developed their own stereotype of subjection and bondage as a reaction to the frustrations of their history, in which others stole their freedom and rights. His research has also revealed a

high degree of introversion, which when combined with aggressive traits has produced a high rate of suicide (Šorli 50).

Even after official independence, culture is still considered a force which will keep the Slovene nation alive. (Support of the theatrical arts, for example, is high: in the 1999–2000 season there were one million attendances at various kinds of performances, in a country where the population is a little under two million.) However, the cultural perception of the Slovene identity has become confused since 1991. Perhaps this is inevitable when, as in the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, the criteria of the past have abruptly disappeared and the needs of the future remain unclear.

The political history of events leading up to 1991

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was not typical of communist countries under the control of the Soviet Union in the post-war period. In 1948, Marshall Josip Bros Tito (1892–1980, President of Yugoslavia from 1953–1980) refused to accept Stalin's Cominform resolution, thereby successfully extricating Yugoslavia from Soviet rule and creating a relative autonomy which had a positive effect on the arts.

The death of Tito in 1980 was the catalyst for the disintegration of the federation and an intensification of the already existing economic and political crisis. By 1986, inflation had risen to more than one hundred per cent. President since its creation, Tito had held the federation together, but within a year of his death, unrest in Yugoslavia was marked by a demonstration in Kosovo. Serbian nationalistic activity, supported by the largely Serbian controlled army, attempted to centralise and defederalise the whole of Yugoslavia. Political unrest echoed that already occurring throughout Eastern Europe. The Solidarnost movement had been founded in Poland in 1980, and in 1983 its president Lech Walesa was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. The thaw continued with the election in 1985 of Mihail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. In 1989 the playwright Vaclav Havel became President of Czechoslovakia; the same year saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and of Ceausescu's regime in Romania. In 1990 came the first democratic

vote in Slovenia, with a plebiscite for it to become an autonomous nation. On the 26th of June 1991, the independent Republic of Slovenia was declared, resulting in a ten-day war with the Yugoslavian armed forces. This was followed by wars in Croatia and Bosnia. Finally, in 1992, a crucial step towards stability was taken, when Slovenia was recognised by the European Union which she joined in 2005.

The transition to independence from being a socialist state within the Yugoslavian federation had of course already begun in the late 1980s. The state had held strict control until the mid-1970s, when its power began a slow decline. A minimum of seventy per cent of the population were members of the communist party; a complex and dangerous game of whether or not to obey party directives was played, though later the danger decreased (Kralj). With hindsight, it seems that in the 1980s the state had been at pains to point out how much freedom there was because it knew it was dying, and hoped to avoid retribution after its fall. (A similar phenomenon occurred in other Eastern block countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Poland.) During this long, failed attempt at communism, dreams of the values of a democratic and liberal bourgeois society had been strong, as had the dreams of the free and autonomous individual it was thought this kind of society would enable.

Slovene theatre production pre 1991

After the Second World War, Slovene theatres had been divided into national repertory theatres and small experimental theatre companies. The repertory theatres were financed by the state and produced work largely based on Stanislavski's principles. There are now ten of these (plus one in Trieste, funded by the Italian government). As is required to secure the support of the Ministry of Culture, each produces six premières a season. Exceptionally, one of these, the Mladinsko Theatre, managed to become an experimental state funded theatre at the end of the 1970s, and has been the home of some of the most interesting work since. Other experimental companies in the 1960s

and 1970s, such as Stage 57, staged many new plays by young Slovene dramatists, whose work, influenced by European and American playwrights, combined nihilism, existentialism and the absurd. Directors from the experimental theatres also introduced their aesthetics into the national theatres. Nonetheless, poetic drama, a specific product of Slovene literary modernism, retained its position as the most characteristic form of Slovene drama (Pavlič 240).

Although in the 1980s it incorporated influences from the European theatre (predominantly Brecht, Brook and Peter Weiss, Mnouchkine and Müller), Slovene drama was rarely performed outside the borders of the former Yugoslavia (Toporišič 246). The same period saw Ljubljana change from a small provincial town into a capital of alternative and subcultures, giving shelter to the marginal and the ostracised. The spirit of revolution continued, sparking an inclination to confront the state, a fight for individual rights and the rights of the demeaned. The Cankar Cultural Centre and the private Glej Theatre joined the Mladinsko Theatre in contributing to this explosion. Theatre artists hoped that by evoking figures like Meyerhold, Tairov, Craig, Appia, and Artaud, the theatre could become instrumental in changing the state. 'The buzz-words of the day included provocation, demolition of the established order […]; manifestos, concepts, new Slovene art, new Acropolis, new Europe, and new Slovenia' (Pintar 242).

Playwriting pre 1991

The official style of playwriting of the post-war federal state of Yugoslavia had been socialist realism. In 1952, at the Third Congress of the Yugoslavian Writer's Association in Ljubljana, Miroslav Krleža delivered an influential paper which ended the reign of the poetics of socialist realism and enabled a high degree of freedom of creation, despite the fact that a single political party, the communists, ruled the country for almost half a century (Osti 16). Slovene literature's response was the appearance of plays influenced by French existentialism (Camus and Sartre) and the so-called 'absurdism' of Beckett, Ionescou, Pinter and Albee. In the 1970s and 1980s, the poets Dane

Zajc and Gregor Strniša produced modernist poetic dramas, while the novelists Drago Jančar and Rudi Šeligo wrote several political plays. Zajc was one of the authors who had used the literary magazine *Perspektive* to enter into a critical and challenging dialogue with the establishment. Such individual challenges quickly coalesced into a movement.

Both the plays and the prose of the 1980s were products of the politicisation of the times. Political drama and theatre were highly successful, with important contributions from the playwrights Dominik Smole, Rudi Šeligo, Dušan Jovanović and Drago Jančar. Slovene political plays such as Jančar's *The Great Brilliant Waltz* (see below) made their statements less directly than other Yugoslavian drama of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as though unable to break away from the existential/poetic model of the 1960s (Lukan 9). The state tried to control its theatres, but was never fully able to do so, so the unusual amount of freedom given the theatre by the totalitarian regime was perhaps by default. Crucially, the government was only able to check scripts, not censor performances. Not only were taboo issues covertly embedded in the plays, but any script could become dangerous in performance (Kralj). As in Poland and in the former Czechoslovakia, the state was the enemy; allegory and metaphor were often used to avoid censorship (see the state's 'metaphor experts' in Jančar's play).

From the 1950s onwards, Slovene theatre had been experimenting with new theatrical languages, relying on the director as *auteur*, so that it had already grown closer to Artaud's theories and practice by the end of the 1960s. Thereafter, Dušan Jovanović (see below) in his role as an experimental director, played an important part in helping to free theatrical practice from the text. The work of Richard Schechner, brought to Slovenia by Professor Vladimir Kralj, was highly influential in the 1970s. It was not until the 1980s, however, that the text was reduced to being merely equal or subordinate to other elements of theatrical production. Reflecting the influence of Robert Wilson, the visual took on a primary role, coinciding with the development of mass media and late capitalism in the West (Toporišič 245–6). For example, a production of Ivo Svetina's poetic play *Scheherezade* in Maribor, when directed by Tomaž Pandur, retained only two sentences of written text, the rest of

the performance consisting of movement and music (Flisar). The text/performance relationship became a radical treatment of sliding signifiers in the work of this new generation of theatre directors (Toporišič 246).

This radical treatment of the text was all the more significant because of the nationalistic importance of the Slovene language, particularly since the texts whose privileged historical function was diminished by these theatrical developments were contemporary Slovene texts. According to Tomaž Toporišič, late capitalist liberal democratic values had intruded into Slovenia, where they contributed, as they had elsewhere, to the demise of literature's privileged centrality as an artistic genre (247). A creative dialogue between the writer and the theatre artist (embodied in Jovanović as both writer and director) gave birth to new creative processes that produced highly acclaimed collaborative work in that decade. This went some way towards eroding the culture barrier, bringing young people into the theatre as creators and spectators.

Despite the predominance of the visual in the theatre production of the 1980s, the text still retained its traditional importance as a vehicle for the transmission of Slovene identity. It also contributed to the political climate of change, for no matter what the aesthetic preferences of playwrights, political issues pervaded almost all their work. The power of the written word came from authors venturing to tackle taboo subjects, making it the essential representative of non-consenting views and dissidence. As in the former Czechoslovakia, the theatre was the most powerful alternative to a cracking and decaying ruling ideology (see Jančar's *The Great Brilliant Waltz.*). This discourse of political dissent had parallels with the traditional political commitment of the German theatre, and drew on the Polish avant-garde (Mrožek *et al*) as well as French existentialism. Like Havel in Czechoslovakia, some playwrights after independence left playwriting to work in politics. Drago Jančar, for example, was offered a position in the new government, though he declined. In Slovenia, the writers' institute PEN, of which Jančar was president, and the journal *Novo Revijo*, to which he and Jovanović contributed, through its tenacious and critical dialogue with the communist government, played an important role in the establishment of a new society.

The second half of the 1980s saw a pronounced decline of modernism in the Slovene drama (Lukan 10). The centrality of the writer had been challenged. Andrej Blatnik states that the:

> view of the author as a person who knows what things should be like and imparts his or her knowledge to others, in the form of literature at worst, or even as a national leader or statesman, is in my opinion something that does not belong in this century (86).

With the rejection of traditional approaches, it was, as Blatnik points out, the ideal time for postmodernism to gain a foothold:

> The relativism and occasional irony of post-modern artistic practices just highlight the impossibility and inappropriateness of there being a single, supreme ranking of values and ethical codes, regardless of whether this hierarchy is being imposed by a church, a political party, or a school of thought. A homogenization of values cannot seem desirable in our world (also because of our historical experience of the past attempts of this kind), should we feel it at all possible in the present day dispersion of reality and its perception (86).

Many post-modern productions were staged by the Mladinsko Theatre, the major experimental company where several of Yugoslavia's best actors were employed (including Draga Potočnjak, see below). However, apart from theatrical practice retaining little of the written text, post-modernism had more of an effect on prose fiction than on playwriting.

Transitions are never straightforward. Indeed, as Blaž Lukan observes of the relationship between drama and the politics of the state during the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, 'transitional phenomena are marked by some kind of inner feeling of instability, disorder and even panic' (8).

Political events post 1991

The domino effect of the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes led to war in the socialist republics of former Yugoslavia. For Slovenia, the war was resolved in only ten days. Further south in Bosnia it notoriously took a matter of years (1992–1995), and with a

degree of savagery and inhumanity unknown in Europe since the Second World War (see Draga Potočnjak below). Slovenia received many of its refugees, a subject treated in Potočnjak's *Alisa, Alice*. A few years later in 1999 there was another war in Kosovo, which was belatedly followed by NATO intervention.

The decision of the communists in Slovenia to relinquish power was known as the 'soft transition'. Slovenia got its own country, a multi-party system and freedom of speech, but it still had to undergo the difficult transition from a planned economy managed by the state to a market economy and become a consumer society, quickly accommodating the transition from socialism to neo-capitalistic Euro-Atlantic processes (Brodar 232). Everything playwrights had fought against in the 1970s and 1980s disappeared, as one reality fragmented into many. When the certainties of communist absolutism were no longer there, the Slovene nation lost important rituals of political thought and action. Formerly state-run factories and businesses continued to be run by their former directors, but the latter now seized ownership, gaining a head start on the need to accumulate capital. The threat of the country's dissolution into a broad pan-socialist complex was now replaced by the threat of dissolution into global capitalism and its own kind of authoritarianism.

The advent of capitalism brought things Slovenia had not been told to expect; a struggle began to retain equilibrium in the new bourgeois 'utopia'. In this new environment, a person became an individual rather than a member of a collective without free will. But what happened to this new free will? From being a victim of ideology the individual became a victim of the market. Through the amassing of capital, the individual achieves a sense of identity, an 'identity' supported by what is purchased through their own 'free' choice. Whereas it had been imagined that the new system would be modelled on the best aspects of Western European countries, factories that had provided employment for countless workers collapsed. An elite class with huge, dubiously acquired wealth appeared, as did organised crime, and more poverty (see *The Boozski Clinic* below). Multinational corporations began to dictate 'free' choice through the media. Would the individual, as Ana Kuntarič suspects, now become a 'product of their own television in the hands of the turbo-capitalistic

multi-nationals' (see *The Corridor* below) as in the rest of the western world (my trans. 32)?

After the war of independence, cultural exchange between the countries of former Yugoslavia ceased for most of the 1990s; opportunities for the publication there of Slovene literature disappeared, as did multiple touring venues for theatrical productions. Slovenia was forced to turn more fully to the west, exacerbating the question of a post independence Slovene identity. It encountered an already formed capitalist system, itself rapidly changing with globalisation, which, together with Slovenia's entry into the European Union in 2005, has made the question of identity even more urgent. One ironic effect of the new 'openness' that it would be assumed independence would bring is that Slovenia now appears more closed in on itself and the Slovene people more aggressive than before. Bojana Kunst observes that 'problematic issues […] buried deeply under the processes of reunification' have emerged. 'This hidden violence is returning to the centre of our contemporary society: for example, in the form of impatience towards other people and minorities' (40). Unity in society now lies in the recognition of difference, hence the Declaration of Human Rights. This moral vision does not of course match reality and is one of the key issues engaging the playwrights in this volume.

There has been a further increase in disappointment with the new capitalist system since the United States went into Iraq. Frustration has increased, for the new world is perceived as a post-modern world, in which there is no longer one large truth or even two, merely fragments without hierarchy: 'So many perspectives, so many truths', says Starka in Jovanović's *Antigone* (1993). There is still suspicion of State institutions and the political mechanisms of democracy. The Slovene population has very quickly caught up with the West in its strong conviction that politics is nothing more than a procedural game, even that those who still vote are mostly radicals. 'Depoliticisation' is a frequently heard word. People are unwilling to express political convictions, to the extent that there is now a need in Slovenia to mount strong advertising campaigns to whip up protest against government reforms that create further inequality in order to stimulate a flagging market.

Slovene theatre production post 1991

In the 1990s there were broadly two kinds of theatrical art in Slovenia: on the one hand plays as literary texts intended for staging, on the other a broad palette of hybrid forms, interdisciplinary and intermedia, generally devaluing discursive speech. As a consequence of the increasing nationalistic momentum, movements with alternative aspirations were marginalised, while the centrality of national cultural institutions was reinforced. At the same time, the global neo-liberal capitalist mentality began to influence Slovenia and, after a wasteful bureaucratic struggle, theatrical production withdrew into intimacy and the familiar was preferred to the new. In the 1999 season, according to Mojca Kreft, there were twelve Shakespeare productions in Slovenia, whereas it was difficult to get new Slovene plays produced (59).

The problematics of Slovene theatrical production are various. Before independence, while art was in a tense relationship with political authority, it did not suffer economically. But increasingly in the new world, a European perspective is adopted in Slovenia itself, and the plays of a small nation, even at home, are exposed to competition from contemporary European drama or classics. A native playwright whose work is wanted for production by major Slovene theatres may be considered mainstream, but abroad the same playwright is perceived as 'foreign' and performed only in small alternative venues. At the same time, only a very few high-quality foreign touring productions cross Slovenia's borders.

There has been a lot of interest in imported drama in the repertoire. Jan Fabre, Robert Wilson, Mark Ravenhill and Sara Kane are all popular. The structure of Ravenhill's and Kane's plays is admired, even if their ideological content is not, although no one in Slovenia writes like this. The more conservative interest in text-based drama has helped make it easier to transfer text-based European drama into the Slovene repertoire. The plays of the popular Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhardt, for example, are performed regularly. (No contemporary French dramatist has been done in the last twenty years, however, though French poetry and prose have been published.)

Commercial considerations may be contributing to the apparent lack of new playwrights. Home-grown drama is still not considered viable by the commercial theatres, while directors in choosing plays they want to do and offering them to theatres, turn to proven successes. Rather than encouraging new Slovene plays on topical subjects, more commercially viable new writing is preferred, such as adaptations of foreign classics. For example, for the most recent festival of native-written plays, an adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was commissioned, to be offered as 'Slovene drama'. Another contributing factor might be that the means of production in the Slovene theatre are contained within a closed system of participants with a hierarchy of influence it is difficult for new participants to break into.

Vladimir Kralj has noted that the decreasing number of premières of new Slovenian drama, along with the increased reliance on European plays, has not been conducive to improving the creative dialogue between text and performance, so vital a part of theatrical experimentation. One indication of the decline in experimental theatre is the fact that the experimental Mladinsko Theatre, having lost the urgency a political and social thrust had given its work, has relinquished its position as Slovenia's leading theatre company, although it has never altogether ceased its experimentations. One of its directors in particular, Vito Taufer, retains a sense of social commitment which he expresses through a poetic use of the elements of contemporary theatrical performance.

Despite such a decline, experimentation continues as a significant, if less major element in Slovene theatre. Much of this is owing to a group of highly skilled and creative directors who, having explored everything from philosophy to technology, began transforming Slovene theatre practice in the 1990s (Pintar 242). Undermining mimesis itself and supported by twentieth century theatrical theory, these artists created a wide range of hybrid performances, taking a post-modern leap into an interactive treatment of the current confused social and historical situation. These experiments did not, however, result in new fragmented, non-logical, non-causal texts, but rather created a new interdisciplinary approach which informed new relationships with the text, both in the theatre and in a broad range of literature (Toporišič

248). Unfortunately, this important artistic development received only minor financial support from the Ministry of Culture.

Before 1991, the repertoire in the state-run theatres, with the exception of the Mladinsko, was language dominated. Since then, Slovene post-dramatic theatre has often reflected the American avant garde theatre of the 1970s in its constant reappraisal of theatrical form. Dragan Zivadinov, for example, infiltrated so-called classical theatrical production with physical theatre, creating post-modern performances based on a recycling of modern art, which led to collaborative creations by playwright and director at the Mladinsko Theatre. This work, formalistic and spectacle-oriented, with a strong commitment to the exploration of concepts and images, is still partially funded by the state.

Outside the traditional 'establishment' theatres, where the season-ticket system has survived, ensuring plentiful audiences, other theatres are struggling. According to Vladimir Kralj, a new phenomenon has emerged. Small town private theatres are the real phenomenon of the new era. In the suburbs of Ljubljana, for example, there is boulevard theatre, created for financial profit and catering to a semi-rural audience with lots of sex, local humour, low comedy and generally poorly paid actors. Guest actors, sometimes borrowed from the national theatre, are well paid, but they have to perform poor, politically and aesthetically unambitious scripts. As happened in Austria between the world wars, specialists trawl the old Slovene and German repertoires to find comic nuggets. Theatres such as Spas teater and Café teater stage mostly imported theatrical hits based on vaudeville and slapstick comedy. Audiences for this type of entertainment are easy to get. Commercial theatres such as the popular Ljubljana City Theatre (Mestno gledališče Ljubljansko) have introduced a simpler content into their repertoires. (Exceptionally, Grejpfrut, run by the playwright Iztok Lovrić, does produce its own topical and inventive plays.)

Despite such difficulties, however, Slovene drama and theatre have been remarkably dynamic and diverse. There are now eight journals which regularly publish plays and a valuable innovation of the 1990s was the widespread use of substantial theatre programmes,

containing critical essays and interviews, together with a complete play text.

While capitalism now dominates society and the political system, it has not so far had much influence on cultural policy. Audiences still think of the national theatre as a state theatre: it is indeed state-subsidised, but not state-controlled (according to its former artistic director, Vladimir Kralj), though Miran Mohar has raised an interesting question: can there ever again be such a thing as left wing funding (Gržinić 8)? The Slovene National Theatre (Slovensko narodno gledališče) still thrives, retaining an outstanding repertoire, which includes world classics, the newest contemporary texts from abroad (often from Britain) and new Slovene plays. Its actors are trained to the highest standard at the only theatre school in Slovenia, AGRFT (the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television) at the University of Ljubljana (taught by two of the authors in this volume, Jovanović and Zupančič), a standard so high that, according to Vesna Jurca Tadel, there is a danger that the skills displayed in performances is so great that it might elicit only a purely aesthetic response from audiences. Plays dealing with current topics are staged on the small stage of the national theatre, which the Artistic Director Janez Pipan has dedicated to young directors' individual projects and to contemporary texts from other small nations.

The situation remains unsettled. According to Pintar and Pavlič:

> the danger for art does not arise from the omnipresence of populist trends, but from the absence of cultural policies and from the refusal of public officials to take responsibility and interfere, intimidated as they are by the negative experience of one-party monotheism, which totally abused its right to exert influence upon any sphere (245).

Ferdo Delak's view is that:

> the theatre of today, which can justifiably be described as decadent, is in a state of grave crisis. The situation can only change if the theatre ceases to be the subject of various speculations – individual, capital, and administrative ones alike (30).

One element in particular arouses concern among playwrights. Perhaps partly as a result of some degree of popularity for non-textual

experimental theatre and certainly a consequence of television and film, young people in Slovenia today seem to like dance theatre, spectacle theatre, music theatre and visual effects, which, because there is no language problem, have the additional advantage of being good for touring abroad, but they are not interested in the national theatre or even in the experimental Mladinsko theatre. Also, young actors want to train for film and television rather than the stage.

Playwriting post 1991

In any country, the socio-cultural matrix of plays changes quickly (Toporišič 183). Two elements in what was seen as a crisis in playwriting in the 1990s were that no great political dramas had appeared since independence, and that few had engaged with the themes and motives of war. The fratricide accompanying the disintegration of Tito's socialist brotherhood of Balkan nations was primordial in its ferocity. The question of how to be a writer in such times was ethical and existentially crucial, for as the poet Boris Novak wrote: 'Words are swallowed by ever greater shadows' (269). Playwrights saw the traditional world falling to pieces, so that many plays were composed of scraps, sometimes becoming a scenario, even a synopsis (e.g. Jovanović's *Who's Singing Sysiphus?*).

Ana Kuntarič is critical of what she perceives to have been 'the indifference of dramatics [*sic*] in the face of radical changes of the value systems and the nascent social tensions' (233). However, Draga Potočnjak responded directly to the war with *The Noise Animals make is Unbearable* and her *Alisa, Alice* focuses on the problems of refugees, as does Jovanović's *The Puzzle of Courage.* The Bosnian war raked up troubling questions for the Slovenes about hidden elements of their own past that some feel should now be brought to light. Drago Jančar's *Halštat*, for example, features an archeological dig of Celtic bones, which are actually the bones of people who died in the post Second World War massacres. Jovanović produced his Balkan trilogy, *Antigone*, *The Puzzle of Courage*, and *Who's Singing Sisyphus* in response to the chaotic situation of the Bosnian war and recent changes in society. Such dark times called for dialogues with

both the archetypes of classical tragedy, and with Brecht. Slovene high culture's preoccupation with tragedy has long been in evidence with such adaptations of the classics. *Antigone* seems to have been felt as particularly relevant: including Jovanović's, three more adaptations have been written since Dominik Smole's in 1960. Boris A. Novak responded to the Bosnian war with *Cassandra* (2001) and Evald Flisar with *Final Innocence* (2001).

Most Slovenes, however, distanced themselves from the south and the war, and wrote about smaller things. There were 'small' plays at first, influenced by plays by contemporary Irish authors, dealing with small social problems and emotional problems caused by the new society. Although Slovene drama had lost its principle antagonist, communism, the memory of the large concerns of the 1980s remained in the theatre (Jančar). Once the obligatory function of providing a forum for political dissent had fallen away, playwrights needed time to readjust and find their new role and new conflicts. They discovered, however, that in capitalism the enemy is harder to define, a consistent problem in the literatures of all the former Eastern block countries. The loss of a common morality left playwrights searching for one. As a result, many were experiencing difficulty in setting up a dramatic conflict. Because each person must build their own moral code, conflicts in the plays are generally no longer against the problems of society, as they had been in Jančar's *The Great Brilliant Waltz*, but appear within the moralities of segments, and are less explicit. The language used is less radical than, say, in 'In Yer Face' theatre, because the themes are less immediate.

It is difficult to neatly summarise the trends since 1991, for it has been a time of uncertainty and instability. Plays take off in various directions. Some use mythical themes, a few the Bosnian war, a few are politically engaged, some focus on personal history, most use at least two of these. It is however clear that in this period the focus has changed from society to the individual. The Slovene hero or heroine has become the little man, someone on the periphery of society, an outsider, a loser, a poser, a tramp, an alcoholic or a subordinate; a character who would previously have had only a supporting role. Another important characteristic of the writing of the period is that an increased number of playwrights are theatre practitioners, either

directors (Dušan Jovanović, Matjaž Zupančić, Vinko Mőderndorfer) or actors (Draga Potočnjak, Saša Pavček).

Evald Flisar recalls that when he returned in 1990 from seventeen years in London, 'you could cut the energy in the air with a knife'. At that time, he and Vili Ravnjak from Maribor and Vesna Jurca Tadelj founded the Slovene Chamber Theatre, to do plays about interpersonal relationships, putting the actor back onstage, as it were (Ravnjak 91). Flisar's plays are usually tragicomic and focus intimately on the human condition. He writes about what it means to be personally free – where this freedom begins, ends, where responsibility begins, and about how much freedom a person can take. His characters' personal psychological choices drive the action forward, although this microcosm of course relates to wider social change. As a result, his work tends to be viewed by theatre critics through sociological eyes (Flisar). A similar focus on the human condition and a balance of the individual and the social is also seen in the varied oeuvre of Dušan Jovanović, Matjaž Zupančič and Draga Potočnjak.

These plays of the 1990s were however not representative of what was happening in the Slovene theatre as a whole. New plays about wider global and philosophical issues emerged, paving the way for Matjaž Zupančič. An older generation of very good playwrights had withdrawn and visual theatre had become more fashionable. Confusion in the post-socialist world was reflected in performances which undermined both the notion of theatre as mimesis and the logocentricity of dramatic theatre (Toporišič 247–8). Audiences began to get bored with image theatre, however, and there was soon a revolt against it. Writers also saw the importance, as Dušan Jovanović has remarked, of retaining the written play text, as it is a basic form for cinema and television.

Dramatic writing survived as an art form, reappearing at the end of the twentieth century with new possibilities. Slovene plays are confronting the problem of social and economic transition, but they do not often analyse capitalism. Zupančič's *The Corridor*, for example, is his first overtly social play. The tradition of poetic drama has still occasionally been revived (e.g. Dane Zajc's *Grmače*), though without its former subversiveness. A post-modern mixture of style, theme, and genre is explored by others, Jovanović in particular. Writers of

comedy, such as Vinko Mőderndorfer (and Jovanović in *The Boozski Clinic*) use subjects from everyday Slovene life, while the influence of the situation comedy of American television can be seen in the plays of Boštjan Tadel.

Nationalism has lost some of its power as a motive force. With the Serbian experience in mind, Josip Osti wrote that 'nationalism does most damage to the very nation whose objectives and higher interests are presumably its rationale' (21). Although such nationalist obsessions have not disappeared, cultural exchange in the new millennium has begun again among the countries of former Yugoslavia between theatre companies and particularly amongst young writers. At the same time, countries of the European Union are showing an increased interest in those of the former Eastern block as they look to expand their commercial market, which is of course also a cultural one.

Like the rest of us, Slovenes can no longer locate the forms of resistance in a capitalist world where artistic creativity and innovation are absorbed for corporate use and almost anything you do can be pre-empted by advertising. Disturbing questions arise: where does a late-arriving 'second' world country fit into the 'first' world capitalist narrative? How does it develop its own resistance to this narrative, and can it at all? And what can the role of the contemporary Slovene theatre be within its present economic constraints? Resistance may have come to seem impossible, but artists still search 'for different, parallel ways of acting, for other territories and spaces' (Kunst 43). Like Jovanović in *The Boozski Clinic* and Zupančič in *The Corridor*, Slovenes are asking 'into whose future are we breaking through and what is it that we are leaving behind?' (Kunst 43). The four plays in this collection all lay bare aspects of what can be called the collateral damage inflicted by profound changes in the socio-political system, and specifically the plight of the outsider as victim within that system.