

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

**METATHEATRE
AS A POLITICAL TOOL
IN YUGOSLAV DRAMA IN THE 1980s AND 1990s**

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by

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ABSTRACT

The wars in the Balkans in the 1990s inspired great interest in the historical, socio-economic and political aspects of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. These accounts often referred to the actual events as the 'Yugoslav tragedy'. Yugoslav theatre, meanwhile, received comparatively negligible attention.

An overview of Yugoslav drama in translation points to an interesting trend. The plays which made it to Western Europe, particularly in the 1980s, were plays with a definite metatheatrical dimension. At the same time in Yugoslavia, metatheatre spontaneously became the most effective means of socio-political re-examination. The metatheatrical trend re-occurred with a very different function in the 1990s when the everyday Yugoslav reality was highly theatricalised in the media controlled by the Milošević regime. In both 1980s and 1990s Yugoslavia, metatheatre essentially sought to examine the collective audience preconceptions.

Yugoslavia's most renowned contemporary playwright, Dušan Kovačević, is the author of four metaplays studied in this thesis. Other internationally acclaimed Yugoslav metaplays of the period 1980-1999 studied here include Slobodan Šnajder's The Croatian Faust, Ljubomir Simović's The Travelling Theatre Šopalović, Nenad Prokić's The Metastable Grail, Biljana Srbijanović's Family Tales as well as Goran Marković's A Tour and Nebojša Romčević's Caroline Neuber. Contextually, the thesis also features analyses of older Yugoslav metaplays such as Ivo Brešan's The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater and Dušan Jovanović's Act a Brain Tumour or Air Pollution.

The thesis is by no means a definitive overview of Yugoslav theatre and its contexts but primarily an exploration of the metatheatrical device, its political significance and its features in Yugoslavia of the 1980s and the rump-state of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

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Source: <http://www.nystromnet.com/yugoslavia.html>

“The nature of a work of art is to be not a part, nor yet a copy of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but a world in itself, independent, complete, autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world, conform to its laws, and ignore for the time the beliefs, aims, and particular conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality.”

(Professor Bradley in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 1901; quoted in Jeanette Winterson: *Art and Lies*, 1994)

“To those who have not visited them, the Balkans are a shadow-land of mystery; to those who know them, they become even more mysterious... You become, in a sense a part of the spell, and of the mystery and glamour of the whole. You contract the habit of crouching over your morning coffee in the cafe and, when you meet a man of your acquaintance, at least half of what you say is whispered, portentiously. Intrigue, plotting, mystery, high courage and daring deeds – the things that are the soul of true romance are to-day the soul of the Balkans.”

(Arthur Douglas Howden Smith in 1908; quoted in Todorova, 1997: 14)

“When you say ‘the Balkans’ – it’s best to see what that looks like from the plane.”

(Dušan Kovačević, in the preface to *The Balkan Spy*, 1983)

INTRODUCTION

Belgrade. 1999. The dust is settling on the rubble in the aftermath of the precision bombing campaign led by the NATO alliance for 11 weeks between 24th March and 10th June. The skeletons of socialist-realist architecture, gutted and charred, tower over the city which is now a capital of a fragmented, exhausted, seriously demoralised and economically destroyed country. In a rare TV appearance, Slobodan Milošević, the country's president, talks to the nation. His carefully chosen words are packaged with the skill of a lawyer and a storyteller, and his overall assessment of the current situation amounts to – an almost convincing – declaration of victory.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the start of the wars in the Balkans, Yugoslav theatre assumed the role of either a populist entertainer or a political commentator for its own internal audience. There is no space here to explore the reasons why Yugoslav cinema became a more internationally-renowned medium than the theatre, although it should be acknowledged that cinema production in 1990s Yugoslavia was significantly less prolific and technically less accomplished than ever before or indeed in comparison to theatre production. Additionally, many films were often inspired by or based on successful theatre plays, such as, for example, The Powder Keg – a Macedonian play which had a long and successful run in Belgrade in the 1990s.¹ Still, for the Western audiences, these stories were more digestible as films rather than plays, possibly because film as a medium requires no cultural interaction – unlike plays which involve translation and production within the target context.

¹ The film was also released in the USA under the title Cabaret Balkan. For more on Yugoslav cinema of the period see Iordanova, 2001.

It almost goes without saying that in the context of theatre, the process of cultural importation and translation is more discerning – plays are translated and produced on the grounds of transparency, accessibility and on the grounds of the universality of issues they deal with as well as in relation to the target culture's attitude towards the source culture and towards cultural importation itself.² Admittedly, the recent wars in Yugoslavia have, to some extent, increased interest in Yugoslav cultural output and particularly interest in works which attempt to explain their context. On the other hand, the wars have also served as an inspiration or a reference point for Western authors. In Britain, David Edgar, Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, Volcano Theatre Company and Unlimited Theatre Company have all referred to the wars in Yugoslavia in their work.

In the context of numerous socio-political and historical analyses of Yugoslavia and its tragic post-socialist demise, Yugoslav contemporary theatre itself cannot be ignored for several reasons. Firstly, theatre seemingly thrived in 1980s and 1990s Yugoslavia; it was one medium which managed to escape the control of Milošević's regime; it acquired a number of social functions which it did not have before;³ and finally, the story of Yugoslav theatre has never been tackled in any of the recently proliferating literature on Yugoslavia.

Out of the Yugoslav plays which made it to the West, the most significant attention has been given to Biljana Srbljanović – particularly in Germany – and particularly to her absurdist play Family Tales, and to Sonja Vukićević's dance theatre and her production of Medea which was shown all over Europe and also at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in the early 1990s. However, it is probably Dušan Kovačević who has had the longest and the most significant international exposure as a Yugoslav dramatist.

² In terms of Yugoslav culture, Germany and France have traditionally proved more welcoming than Britain.

³ During the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, for example, theatres often doubled as shelters.

The significance of Kovačević's work resides in the fact that he did not set out to capitalise on the temporary interest in the region resulting from the war. On the contrary, his output in the 1990s was relatively limited in comparison to the earlier stages of his career, but the interest in his earlier plays increased in the 1990s and some of those, particularly The Professional (originally written in 1989), received notable productions in the USA and in Britain. Besides, the film Underground, directed by Emir Kusturica – and based on Kovačević's very early play Spring in January⁴ – again brought Kovačević onto the international scene as a co-author of the screenplay for the film which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. Meanwhile at home, his play Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man was ridiculing, comforting, entertaining and attempting to open the eyes of its audience. It did this using the format of a (non-existent) play within the play.

Metatheatre was neither a novelty to Kovačević nor to Yugoslav audiences. The first most significant example of this trend in post-Second World War Yugoslav drama was the Croatian Ivo Brešan's The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater, initially written in 1965 but performed in 1971 and subsequently banned. Similarly the Slovenian metaplay Act a Brain Tumour or Air Pollution by Dušan Jovanović waited some five years for its premiere. Foreign contemporary metaplays, however, such as Weiss' Marat-Sade, Grass's The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising and Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead did receive notable productions in Yugoslavia without delay. Metaplays eventually proliferated in Yugoslavia by the 1980s, but the origins of Yugoslav metatheatre can also be traced in the long-standing intertextual tradition of the re-writing of national history, myths and epics as well as reconstructing the lives and activities of historical characters.

⁴ This play's first production in 1977 flopped, and it has never been published.

The story of contemporary Yugoslav theatre can hardly be told without reference to its history. Also, the story of Yugoslav drama cannot be told outside of its socio-political context. From the point of view of post-socialism and the issues it brought to a head in British theatre of the 1990s – ideological disillusionment, self-examination, re-invention of identity and re-writing of history – it could be argued that these same symptoms actually became manifest in Yugoslav theatre in the 1980s, following the death of Josip Broz Tito. The 1980s also provide the context that led to the wars of the 1990s, and chart the economic decline accompanied by the breaking of cultural taboos. Of course, it was theatre which examined these processes with the closest scrutiny and even anticipated the events that would follow. The most convenient format for this self-examination of a society through its theatre ended up being metatheatre, whereby the entire political content was often disguised through the play-within-the-play. Probably subconsciously – this trend is never actually acknowledged in any of the relevant literature – writers chose this mode, and it was precisely these plays that gained international attention. Slobodan Šnajder's The Croatian Faust (1980), Ljubomir Simović's The Travelling Theatre Šopalović (1986) and Dušan Kovačević's The Professional (1990) are all considered modern classics, they are all metaplays and they have all had considerable international success.

This thesis aims to explore the significance of metatheatre as a political tool in Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s. Unfortunately, this cannot constitute a complete overview of Yugoslav theatre in this period and its most representative examples, as the emphasis is primarily on metadrama wherever it happened to occur. Many features of Yugoslav theatre, its particular manifestations in various parts of the country and a number of other equally significant plays in terms of content or technical excellence are

therefore omitted. The two decades form two distinct political and geographical contexts, which are however interdependent. The first decade refers to the former Yugoslavia and the second to Yugoslavia consisting of Serbia and Montenegro. As a Yugoslav playwright who utilised the metatheatrical device in a most consistent and sustained manner over a number of years, Dušan Kovačević provides a link between the two decades and it is precisely his work, seen in this continuity, that also reflects the process of disintegration of its socio-political context.

The analysis of the ten chosen Yugoslav plays in the period of 1980-1999 is contextualised geographically in Chapter One which explores patterns of socialist and post-colonial re-definitions of the Balkans and also offers a Freudian reading of group-formation in the region. Chapter Two contextualises contemporary Yugoslav metatheatre through a historical overview of the political significance of cultural activity among the Southern Slavs. This chapter aims to equip the reader with as much background information about the cultural-political development of individual Yugoslav nations as possible within the constraints of the title and with relevance to the outlined field of enquiry. Undoubtedly a lot of otherwise significant information about individual nations has had to be omitted. Metatheatre as a device which manages to invoke both emotional and critical audience responses without resort to either sentimentalist fictions or Brechtian alienation is explored in Chapter Three. The chapter does not engage in descriptive analysis of the genre in its various possible manifestations, its genesis and/or its significance in the world history of theatre. Instead it seeks to establish ways in which the audience's epistemic and cognitive processes – suspension of disbelief and reception of the content – are altered in the case of self-reflexive fictions, as these processes will be relevant to the understanding of particular plays analysed in later chapters. Chapter Four offers a brief overview of the beginnings

of Yugoslav metatheatre in the 1970s focusing on three examples from various parts of the former Yugoslavia. The following chapters focus on the chosen plays, their socio-political context and their interpretation by theatre critics at the time. The specified period is divided into four sub-periods: 1980-1986 (Chapter Five), 1987-1991 (Chapter Six), 1991-1996 (Chapter Seven), 1997-1999 (Chapter Eight). The socio-political context is explored at the beginning of each chapter with direct relevance to the plays and the issues they specifically deal with. Inevitably much has been omitted here too in terms of the overview of the events taking place elsewhere in the war-torn area. In these chapters the focus progressively shifts from the political and cultural activity in the former Yugoslavia to Serbia and its cultural-political centre – Belgrade. This is wholly unintentional and is a result of many different factors linked to the disintegration of the cultural space and patterns of occurrence of metatheatre in relation to the circumstances, rather than being reflective of any personal political views. Indeed, many plays studied in this thesis seemed to find me first by means of their international reputation. My field research was then mainly linked to trying to establish the political reasons for their occurrence and the possible effects they had on the audiences – at least by relying on the records of the critics – at the time of their premieres. The Conclusion aims to consolidate the findings of the research in terms of the specific features of Yugoslav metatheatre within its historical cultural context, and particularly in terms of the political significance of these plays, whether as a means of challenging the taboos, dealing with socio-political problems or challenging the audiences' expectations. The thesis simultaneously brings together ten plays which have had both national and international acclaim, ultimately aiming to highlight the political-metaphorical mode as a definitive feature of the 1980s and 1990s' drama in Yugoslavia. Samples of these plays as well as transcriptions of the interviews with some of the authors are included in the Appendices.

1.

YUGOSLAVIA AND THE BALKANS

Postcolonialist and Freudian Readings

“This was a time-capsule world: a dim stage upon which people raged, spilled blood, experienced visions and ecstasies. Yet their expressions remained fixed and distant, like dusty statuary.”

(Robert D. Kaplan in Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History, 1993, quoted in Goldsworthy, 1998: xi)

Construction of the Balkans

Culturally speaking, the story of Yugoslav theatre is in itself a story within the story of the Balkans. The story of the Balkans in turn has often been referred to as a drama – a ‘tragedy’, in particular – rendering this part of Europe a kind of socio-political and historical ‘theatre’. Terms such as ‘a bloody theatre of war’ or ‘a tragedy of a nation’ proliferated, especially in the last ten years in an attempt of social commentators and historians to explain the bellicose post-socialist condition in Yugoslavia.⁵ Since the wars in former Yugoslavia, the Balkans have been increasingly explored as the post-colonialist ‘other’, most notably by Balkan women – Todorova, Goldsworthy, Jordanova. On the one hand, this exploration has involved a considerable re-examination of historical and geographic literature, and on the other, fiction-derived stereotypes.

⁵ The Yugoslav theatrologist Aleksandra Jovičević has also noted media manipulation of theatre terminology within Yugoslavia itself. (1997: 125)

It is worth noting in this context that the outer boundaries of the former Yugoslavia were relatively easy to determine – the country of the Southern Slavs was surrounded by non-Slav nations – namely: Italians, Austrians, Hungarians, Romanians, Greeks, Albanians and, arguably, Bulgarians.⁶ The area referred to as the Balkans was constructed and reconstructed over a number of centuries either geographically to refer to the semi-peninsula stretching between the Balkan mountains in the north and the Mediterranean sea in the south, or politically to refer to the part of the Ottoman Empire within Europe. The Balkans therefore traditionally include much of the former Yugoslavia (apart from, arguably, Slovenia and Croatia), as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece. From the European perspective, the Balkans have often been considered as the space on or beyond the edge of Europe – a troublesome and mysterious place, operating under slightly different, idiosyncratic socio-cultural conventions. Metaphorically speaking, this designated space in the corner of Europe, subjected to the constant gaze of other countries, could even be seen as a theatrical stage. Additionally, much of the historical literature concerning the Balkans initially takes the form of a travelogue whereby the writer/traveller focuses on the exoticism, political intrigue and ‘otherness’ of their chosen subject, thus resembling a theatregoer or even a reviewer in the Samuel Pepys sense of the word.

The process of fictionalising the Balkans, continues and perpetuates the process of stereotyping and detachment. Generally, the Balkans are portrayed as wild, mysterious, flammable, primitive, romantic and volatile. In her study of the representation of the

⁶ Although Bulgarians are originally non-Slavs, their language belongs to the Slavic group of languages. Louisa Rayner notes that the boundary between the Serbs and the Bulgarians was therefore established on the basis of ritualistic differences: “Every single Serbian family has a patron saint and celebrates that saint’s day with a peculiar rite. A man who does not do this is not a Serb. I was told that an Allied commission had used this test when they were rectifying the frontier between Serbia and Bulgaria after the First World War. Race and language shaded off, but every Serb had a *Slava* and no Bulgars, or any other people at all, knew the rite.” (1957: 111-2)

Balkans in English fiction, Vesna Goldsworthy (1998) focuses predominantly on the writers of the modernist period (although she starts from Shakespeare's 'Illyria', via Byron and Anthony Hope's The Prisoner of Zenda) – the core of her study are the writings of Shaw⁷, E.M. Forester, Lawrence Durrell, Evelyn Waugh, Edith Durham, Rebecca West and Olivia Manning. One of the interesting points that Goldsworthy highlights is that it was always impossible for these writers to remain impartial and construe an objective, indisputable image of the Balkans. It was often the female writers who fell in love with the region – possibly because the women could see the parallels between the suffragette movement and the Balkans' striving for liberation, argues Goldsworthy – whilst the men often had a more cynical and disparaging attitude. Significantly the study concludes with the end of the Second World War.

Yugoslavia was first founded in 1918 as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians out of the Slav factions remaining after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the East and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the West. The Kingdom was formed after a referendum and under the Serbian King Aleksandar Karadjordjević who was subsequently assassinated in Marseille in 1934. Destabilised, not yet recovered from its losses in the First World War, and under regency, Yugoslavia was submerged in the Second World War. At first the Regent and the Government signed the Italian-German Axis pact. This was followed by a military coup, the subsequent Axis invasion, the Royal Army's capitulation, and finally an occupation and partition. Croatia and Serbia became individual puppet-states – the Croatian Nazi allegiance proving particularly zealous – and a multi-faceted war of resistance and simultaneous civil war quickly ensued. The Royal Army, as a guerrilla organisation, continued to fight the Germans, but quickly found a new enemy in the Communist Partisans led by Tito, who were also

⁷ Namely the play Arms and the Man.

fighting the Germans. Additionally, the Croatian Nazi formations were particularly efficient in the extermination of Jews, Gypsies and Serbs in their concentration camps, and Bulgaria, aligned with the Axis, occupied part of south Serbia and Macedonia. In other words, the puppets were fighting each other as well as, in some cases, the puppeteer, thus living up to their Balkan reputation.

Deconstruction of the Balkans and Construction of the Yugoslav 'Other'

It could be argued that the notion of 'the Balkans' as a cultural or even socio-political unit became redundant, or at least submerged by a political realignment after the Second World War. Whilst Romania and Bulgaria ended up east of the Iron Curtain and – contrary to geographical logic – Greece joined the Western Bloc, Yugoslavia remained neutral. Situated between Italy in the west, Austria in the north and Greece in the south-east it considered itself European. It was officially a socialist country with its own brand of socialism, and – outside of the Eastern Bloc since 1948 – it teamed up with Asian and African countries to found the Non-Aligned Movement. As a result it enjoyed financial support from the West and friendly relations with the whole of the rest of the world. Culturally, it could have defeated the Balkan stereotype by virtue of its Europeanness and affluence, its socialist liberalism and its pacifism through non-involvement in the Cold War. All of these characteristics would have been the very opposites of the 'Balkan' attributes. Still, even more narrowly defined than before – and defined in contrast to the rest of the Cold War world – Yugoslavia remained an 'other'. And as far as the West was concerned – an insignificant 'other' – a tame and amiable 'other' with nice beaches, cheap holiday resorts, cheap Hollywood resorts,⁸ an object of aspiration for the Western left-wing idealists and the Eastern dissident materialists.

⁸ Yugoslavia was frequently used as a site for Hollywood offshore filming.

Internally, Yugoslavia was a complex story of re-invention and self-repression, progress and self-censorship, belief and dissidence. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was constructed as a federation of six republics – and later – two autonomous provinces within the republic of Serbia.⁹ Six official ‘nations’ – Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Montenegrins, Macedonians and Muslims¹⁰ – each had their own republic while the so-called ‘nationalities’ were the ethnic minorities who often had a mother state outside Yugoslavia – these included Hungarians, Albanians, Turks, Slovaks, Romanians, Italians etc. Internal borders between republics were drawn and redrawn geographically rather than in relation to ethnic concentration. Yugoslav socialism was based on the ideas of ‘brotherhood and unity’ and ‘self-management’. ‘Self-management’ was a notion which nominally gave the ownership of the means of production to the workers, rather than the state as was the case in other communist countries. Finally, Tito’s last constitution of 1974 put an emphasis on decentralisation of the country, giving each republic, and the two autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo) much more economic and cultural independence than before.

Tensions and upheavals, more or less overt, had been part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ever since its promulgation in 1943.¹¹ In 1948 the Soviet suspicions of Yugoslav leaders’ disloyalty and the subsequent expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform strained the relations between Yugoslavia and the rest of the Eastern Bloc. Sabrina Ramet notes that the confusion in the late 1940s in Yugoslavia was such that even songs became a point of contention:

⁹ Serbia as the largest geographical and ethnic unit was divided in 1974 in order to avoid the pre-war tensions rooted in the fear of the other nations’ subjugation to Serbian cultural domination.

¹⁰ Bosnians were ethnically referred to as Muslims although Muslims formed only one section of the Bosnian population.

¹¹ Initially People’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1943, it was renamed as SFRY in 1963.

“With Tito’s expulsion from the Cominform on 28th June 1948, music became potentially dangerous, as many unfortunate Yugoslavs discovered. Singing the wrong song could mean prison or penal labour. Russian songs – in political vogue for the three years immediately prior – were now definitely out. American tunes were just as risky, however, as rival groups struggled to prove their Communist ‘purity’. Even Yugoslav folk songs risked accusations of bourgeois nationalism (even if Tito did like that genre). [...] These factors contributed, thus, to the sudden popularity of Mexican folk songs among the public, above all because they were ideologically and politically safe.” (1996: 92-3)

One of the most sinister and greatest taboos of the late 1940s and early 1950s that later overshadowed and diminished the internal sense of Yugoslav liberalism was Goli Otok (literally – the Bare Island). This was an island in the Adriatic where the staunch Russophiles and Stalinists were sent following the 1948 break-up with the Soviet Union for ideological re-education through physical labour. Some never returned, and those who did, returned reformed and never spoke about it. In other words, it was an instance in Balkan history where it was deemed necessary for sentimentalism to be uprooted ruthlessly, although it was neither the first nor the last time that the Serbs had fallen prey to sentimentalism.

As a reward for relinquishing the Russian connection, Tito decided to give Yugoslavia Hollywood movies and rock’n’roll. Or in the words of Hallam Tennyson “Tito Lift[ed] the Curtain”. This is a Tennyson descended from Alfred Tennyson, and his is yet another travelogue written in the early 1950s when Yugoslavia was still in the early stages of post-war rebuilding and deprivation. It opens thus:

“Ever since reading Black Lamb and Grey Falcon, in which Rebecca West described the lineaments of an obscure and tumultuous destiny loading each tragic Serbian face, the country had exerted a powerful fascination over me. Besides, since then, the fresh legends had accumulated: the fight of the Partisans, the break with Russia, the experiment in ‘liberal Marxism’. [...] It was no wonder therefore that the prospect of my visit filled me with an enthusiasm that was scarcely sane.” (1955: 150)

Tennyson's is probably the last in the line of the exalted, histrionic travelogues. It is significant, though not accidental, that the cultural pilgrimage to Yugoslavia effectively ceases altogether in the 1960s. Tourism – yes, but no travelogues of notable literary value. From the perspective of the country's internal development, this was the period of economic and cultural progress which began to bring about an image of 'sameness' – at least in terms of the self-perception of the Yugoslav people. Culturally, this decade is also crowned by the very first Yugoslav author – Ivo Andrić – winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1961.

Much of the writing about the region from the 1960s onwards takes the form of academic analyses – analyses of the 'self-management' economic system, demographic analyses, political and historical analyses – as well as travel guides and, inevitably, the biographies of Josip Broz Tito.

Arguably, the reasons for this abandonment of Yugoslavia as a literary subject could also be sought in the advent of postmodernism. In the context of this study, it is also worth noting that on the one hand, Lionel Abel's groundbreaking work Metatheatre was published in 1963, as a challenge to the existing theory of tragedy and to the notion of the Theatre of the Absurd. On the other hand, the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (Bitef) was established in 1967 as a festival which would bring together and celebrate the avant-garde of the East and of the West, thus defying the Cold War divisions. In other words, by placing itself as an intermediary between the two worlds, Yugoslavia ceased to conform to the Balkan stereotypes which had previously applied. The exotic destination then became a meeting place instead.

Deconstruction of the Yugoslav 'Other' and Re-construction of the Balkans

In 1991, the onset of the war in Croatia gives rise to a new series of actual humanitarian, military, journalistic or academic pilgrimages. Misha Glenny is probably the most famous in this group of commentators and his 1992 title The Fall of Yugoslavia – The Third Balkan War charts the political upheavals within Serbia and Milošević's unscrupulous rise to power (which he calls "A Dress Rehearsal") and the beginnings of wars in Croatia and Bosnia. In the epilogue (entitled "The Revenger's Tragedy") he returns to the global picture and states:

"After the collapse of communism in the autumn of 1989 [unlike Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Soviet Union] the Balkans were regarded as uninteresting both from a political and economic point of view. Only the United States, which developed a busy diplomatic programme in Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey and later Albania, appeared aware of the importance of the Balkans. This was largely determined by strategic interests in the Middle East and the growing importance of Turkey in regional affairs. American policy in the southern Balkans notwithstanding, the peninsula was considered by the West to be of little value, where trouble could be contained should it break out (although few were predicting destabilisation)." (1992: 177-8)

It is significant that in its consideration of the Balkans, the US initially ignores Yugoslavia as a constituent part. Further Glenny comments that the European Community and the United States failed to guide 'the inexperienced or opportunist Yugoslav leaders towards an agreed break-up of the country', with the diplomats giving the excuse that 'during the run-up to the Yugoslav wars, foreign ministers around the world were concentrating on developments in the Gulf and the Soviet Union'. In addition, the break-up of Yugoslavia was further complicated by misconceptions regarding the notion of self-determination:

“[T]he West understood self-determination to mean the right of East European countries to leave the Soviet bloc. [...] Following the collapse of communism, it was, of course not surprising that Croatia wished to apply this criterion in its own bid for independence. This meant leaving Yugoslavia in those internal borders outlined by Tito, thus taking a partly unwilling Serbian minority with it. With reference to those Serbs, does such a policy mean that the right to self-determination is subordinated to the principle of inviolable borders? Croatia’s leaders failed to address this problem with any seriousness, while Germany ignored it as irrelevant. Germany wished to see its natural allies in the region being granted the independence it felt they deserved.” (ibid.: 179)

Glenny emphasises the split in the foreign policy which occurred between the US and Germany, whereby Germany was too eager to recognize independent Croatia without any thought of the repercussions this would have on potential claim for independence coming from Bosnia. It has been asserted that the US’s response to Germany’s meddling attitude was to counteract it and exert its own influence by concentrating on Bosnia and encourage its claims for independence. In conclusion, Glenny observes that the American strategic and economic interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East focused on Turkey as a key player, thus causing resentments among both Greeks and the Serbs. The economic sanctions simultaneously imposed on Serbia by the European Community also had a damaging effect on the economies of Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria. Warning of the potential danger of the third Balkan war, Glenny concludes:

“Europe is not integrating, it is dividing again along the line of the Great Schism, the most persistently unstable border on the continent.” (ibid.: 183)

This line, drawn in 285 AD between Rome and Byzantium and splitting the Roman Empire into two, has often been quoted by the Southern Slavs as a source of their troubles although they only settled here in the 7th century AD. Driven by the barbarian tribe of the Avars, the Southern Slavs came down from the Carpathian mountains and

settled around the line which divided the Roman Empire and ran from Budva on the Montenegrin coast through Montenegro and across to Belgrade. Slovenians and Croats settled west of the line (and therefore later adopted Catholicism and the Latin alphabet) and the Serbs settled to the east (thus embracing the Orthodox religion and gaining literacy in Cyrillic).

The wars in Croatia and Bosnia brought post-Second World War Yugoslavia to an end thus providing all ingredients for a recreation and resurrection of the Balkan stereotype. In other words, Yugoslavia eventually 'balkanised' itself. The issues that go along with it involve power and self-examination, boundaries and borders, ethnic and historical identities, similarities and differences, egos and superegos, patriarchalisms and liberalisms, freedoms and external dominations. Although post-colonialist theory is often applied in the Yugoslav context to explore the effects of Serbian cultural domination over the rest of the former Yugoslav republics, the new map of Europe – or the New World Order, as it is often referred to – brings back the issues of traditional empires and their renewed interests. In this context, it concerns Turkey, Russia and Germany, all of which attempted to exert their influence over the region once again, given either support, preferential treatment or free rein from the relevant superpowers.

Essentially, the story of Yugoslavia in the 20th century suggests a three-stage process consisting of: 1) emergence of the Balkan cultural stereotype following the Balkan wars at the turn of the century; 2) re-invention of Yugoslavia's cultural identity outside of the confines of the Balkan stereotype; and 3) deconstruction of Socialist Yugoslavia, resulting in the reinforcement of the Balkan stereotype.

This is also a process that can be viewed from the inner perspective and the outer perspective. In other words, the internal dynamics that provoked the construction of a cultural image could be considered alone or in addition to the external perceptions that also contributed to the creation of that image. It is significant that the Balkan stereotype attracted the gaze of the outside viewer, the traveller – the empathetic commentator at the beginning of the 20th century. Socialist Yugoslavia maintained a kind of myopic gaze – creating a positive impression of liberal socialism, cultural openness and affluence – but ultimately failed to communicate the reality of its condition to a generally indifferent outside viewer until it finally reverted to the familiar Balkan stereotype.

Freudian Reading of the Balkans

Demographically the Balkans are populated by Southern Slavs (former Yugoslavs), Bulgarians, Greeks and Romanians. Apart from the Catholic Slovenians and Croats and the Bosnian Muslims, most of these nations belong to the Orthodox faith. Most of these nations are inherently patriarchal and conservative and most of them have had a history of political unifications and conflicts with each other, the example of the former Yugoslavia being the most acute.

In his study Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego Sigmund Freud asserts that any emotional relation between two people or two groups of people who come close together often 'leaves a sediment of feelings of aversion and hostility'. This results in the feelings of jealousy, rivalry and mutual contempt between, for example, neighbouring villages or closely related races. Additionally, Freud argues that the undisguised antipathies and aversions which people display towards each other are

often motivated by narcissism or self-love which is ultimately a manifestation of the self-preservation instinct.

“[T]he whole of this intolerance vanishes temporarily or permanently as the result of the formation of a group, and in a group.” (1940: 55-6)

However:

“[T]he tolerance does not persist longer than the immediate advantage gained from the other people’s collaboration.” (ibid.: 57)

The story of Yugoslavia (1918-1991) can entirely be seen from the point of view of the mechanism of group dynamics as described by Freud. The Freudian notion of ‘ego-ideal’ or ‘superego’ also plays a part here which, in group-formation, is substituted by ‘group ideal’ and personified in a leader. By analysing the phenomenon of ‘being in love’ Freud distinguishes two patterns apparent in adolescents’ experience – ‘idealised love’, whereby the object of love is either idealised as ‘ego-ideal’ and interjected into the ego, and ‘sensual love’ whereby, the object is sexually easily attained whereby love quickly diminishes. It is the ‘idealised love’ that features in group-formation. Here he draws the analogy between idealised love and hypnosis in terms of the individual’s behaviour towards the object of love or hypnotist respectively. Significantly, the process of active ‘suggestion’ which features in hypnosis is also evident in group formation. He examines Trotter’s theory of ‘the herd (or gregarious) instinct’ which he modifies by suggesting that man is a horde animal rather than a herd animal because a horde features a leader. The primal horde is further analysed with particular reference to the leader who is an absolute narcissist and who maintains his power by easily satisfying his own libido and actively suppressing that of his inferiors. The horde has a constant need for approval from the leader whereas the leader is entirely self-sufficient

– a Nietzschean Superhuman. The difference between the primal horde and modern group-formation is that group-formation is based on more voluntary principles, but the process of group-formation features the same elements, primarily – identification, repressed libido, interjection of the ‘ego-ideal’ on the one hand, and suggestion, hypnosis and a leader on the other.

On the basis of this I would further suggest that these processes between an individual, the group and the leader are certainly not permanent or fixed. When they are in any way disturbed – the common interest ceases, or when the leader ceases to be an embodiment of the ‘group ego’/‘ego ideal’ – a crisis inevitably ensues.

Freudian superego or ego ideal in the context of psychoanalysis is often understood as the ethical ‘ego’, being shaped by various influences in the development of an individual coming from parental upbringing, social influences and the education. In a modern context of group formation we can equate the group superego or ego ideal with an ideology. Depending on the nature of the ideology behind a socio-economic or political organization the leader may have more or less attributed power. In the case of ‘communism’ the emphasis was on one exclusive ideology, the leader was often a direct personification of that ideology (or a parental figure) and the group members had little choice over the election of the group ego ideal. In democracy, on the other hand, the power is attributed to a personified ‘leader’ on the basis of a prevalent group ego ideal and is ultimately controlled by the group.

In the event of an established group ego ideal ceasing to represent the interests and the superego of the individual group members, the group may seek to replace the ego ideal or, more probably, the group may begin to fracture and disintegrate. In this case, the

individual members of a group begin to re-examine their own superego in relation to that of the group ego ideal and seek alternate alliances which will satisfy their individual interests. In other words, a reverse process to that of a group formation starts to occur, amounting to a reversal to 'narcissism', in order for a renewed process of group formation to happen again. In a democracy this means that the voters will determine the group ego ideal or the leader on the basis of how the potential leader reflects their individual interests and how it reflects their own individual superego or system of beliefs.

In communism as we knew it in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, this process was far less dynamic. The individual superego was shaped and determined by the group superego or ideology. In order to satisfy their interests the individual often had to conform. The notion of individuality was repressed and reduced to uniformity and, therefore, the notion of narcissism was confined to the leader – a mechanism reminiscent of that described by Freud as a 'primal horde'.

The unification of the Southern Slavs in 1918 into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians was a result of the awareness raised by the Illyrian Movement which emphasised the shared linguistic and cultural characteristics of the Southern Slavs, thus creating an ideological national superego. Evidently, in the aftermath of the liberation it was in the interest of these nations to form a socio-economic union. However, resentments among the constituent groups quickly resurfaced leading to the assassination of the king – the personified 'superego' – in 1934.

The Second World War coincided with a civil war in Yugoslavia, during which the East-West divide widened and – in the process of identifying alternative and mutually

conflicting 'superegos' – a merciless extermination of each other's ethnic groups ensued. This phenomenon can also be explained as an instance of Freudian 'narcissism of small differences' – individual ethnic groups emphasising their differences in relation to each other.

Still, following the socialist revolution, Yugoslavia was re-invented as a multi-national state on the premise of equality and 'Brotherhood and Unity', and existed as such for nearly fifty years. Yugoslavia's own brand of liberal socialism gave an illusion of freedom and easy satisfaction of basic needs. However, the overemphasis on collective responsibility resulted in a loss of individuality and a thorough subjugation of the group to the 'superego', in this case – Josip Broz Tito.

Andrew Baruch Wachtel in his study Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation charts the idea of Yugoslavism from its origins in the German Romanticism of the 1830s and 1840s which involved Serbian cultural hegemony, via a modernist multicultural model of the early 20th century, to the early socialist supernationalist model and the multinational policy of the 1960s onwards. In addition to Wachtel's final assessment of the failure of Yugoslav multiculturalism it is worth considering two other sources:

"Throughout his stewardship [...] Tito worked to prevent his state from suffering the same fate as its predecessor – from falling under the hegemony of the biggest nation, the Serbs, who were twice as numerous as the second biggest, the Croats. Successive post-war constitutions were designed to balance institutional power between the republics, as a way of spreading power among the nations. [...] Tito ruthlessly suppressed any expression of resurgent nationalism. Enforcing his doctrine of 'Brotherhood and Unity', he carried out purges [...]. Nationalists were forced into exile, where they nurtured their resentment in expatriate communities that proved fertile breeding grounds for extreme nationalism. Or they were jailed. By the time of the promulgation of the 1974 constitution (Tito's last), the country was decentralized to an unprecedented extent. [...] After the collapse of the Warsaw pact, Yugoslavia lost its strategic importance to Washington. Preoccupied with the Gulf war, and the future of the disintegrating Soviet

Union, the US left the handling of the conflict to the European Community, which proved lamentably incompetent.” (Silber & Little, 1996: 29)

Apart from the internal and international political miscalculations, the Yugoslav multiculturalism was also troubled by economic factors as well as consequent power struggles among various ethnic groups. In his analysis The Serbs, Tim Judah particularly focuses on the economic problem from the point of view of the Kosovo Albanians who were the biggest national minority in the former Yugoslavia:

“The Albanians would use economic statistics to ‘prove’ that Kosovo was either exploited or not getting its fair share of development money, while the Serbs or Yugoslav authorities would use the same figures to show just how much money was being lavished on the region. [...] By designating ethnic Albanians a ‘nationality’ rather than a ‘nation’ (like Serbs and Croats), the federation withheld from them the right to self-determination. Serbs argued that the nationalities, which included ethnic Hungarians, did not have this right because, unlike nations, they had a mother state outside the borders of Yugoslavia. Hostility between the communities was fuelled by poverty, which in turn became increasingly difficult to redress because of the Albanian population explosion coupled with Yugoslavia’s mounting economic crisis.” (Judah, 1997: 152-3)

The Yugoslavian post-Second World War multiculturalism rested on an active suppression of individual – id-driven – nationalist feelings which had been incited during the war itself. The internal borders were also redrawn with this in mind so to defuse ethnic concentration in particular republics. This affected the Serbs more acutely than other ethnic groups as in the aftermath of the 1974 decentralisation they found themselves to be a minority in a lot of other republics as well as in the newly formed Autonomous Province of Kosovo. After Tito’s death, these resentments, provoked in part by the escalating Albanian movement for independence, the economic crises of the 1980s and the demise of socialism as an ideology led to an explosion of nationalist

movements and subsequent territorial wars. Despite this the Yugoslav years had created a Yugoslav identity. Intermarriage between various ethnic groups and religions¹² was not a rarity, and a lot of the 'ethnically pure' nationals declared themselves as 'Yugoslavs' rather than anything else. As Wachtel points out:

"It is possible that Yugoslavia could have survived as a multinational state had its leaders moved to a multinational cultural policy while simultaneously democratising the country and transforming the basis of Yugoslav identity to an individualistic-libertarian model. But this would have entailed a cultural shift of monumental proportions, and it was not attempted in Yugoslavia. As more and more people saw themselves with less and less of a connection to people outside of their own ethnic group, the possibilities for economic and political compromise diminished." (Wachtel, 1998: 10)

Ultimately, the country's socio-economic, political and geographical organisation led particular groups to feel under threat and the nationalist 'sentiment' was conveniently recruited by the ruling or aspiring elite in their bid for power.

In Freudian terms, Tito had represented an extremely powerful supernational 'superego'. His death resulted in a crisis on all levels – political as well as psychological. As he had deliberately declined to name a successor, in the 1980s the country was governed by a federal presidency (a group of representatives from each republic) and the president of the presidency was elected by the group on a rotational basis. This in itself caused a fracture in the supernational identity. Each republic's individual interests became prominent and the resultant socio-economic problems were in turn blamed on another. The re-examination of individual republics' inevitably caused an ethnic division and the seed of nationalism was sown.

¹² Christian-Muslim marital unions particularly proliferated in Bosnia.

David Miller, a contemporary English philosopher and an advocate of nationalism, equates nationalism to an instinct or a sentiment which cannot be questioned but simply acknowledged and recruited for its potential positive values such as solidarity. Although Miller's views are questionable, they help to assign nationalism to the realm of the Freudian 'id'.

The 1980s in Yugoslavia saw a gradual release of various repressions, an increasing sentimentalism and a gradual iconoclasm in relation to the socialist ideology. In 1986 a secret memorandum from the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences addressing the treatment of the Serbian minorities outside Serbia was leaked to a national paper thus posing a serious challenge to the notion of Brotherhood and Unity. It was in this climate that Slobodan Milošević rose to power. In 1987, he was sent to Kosovo as a minor party official to address the Serbian complaints of maltreatment by Albanians. He let it slip to the complaining crowd that nobody would be allowed to 'beat' them anymore and became a hero overnight. Unconsciously he tapped into the Serbian nationalist sentiment – a tool he would later exploit to its maximum.

It is not difficult to see how nationalism equates with 'narcissism' or national self-love. It is only the question of degrees as to when narcissism or nationalism becomes harmful to others and how it leads to conflict or war. The fact remains that the Serbs have always had a weakness for charismatic leaders. Milošević had managed to stay in power either through the nationalist discourse and personal charisma or through manipulation of power (and a very tight control of the media, unprecedented even by the socialist years). Sadly, his opponents, the leaders of other parties, had often emulated a similar image. Vuk Drašković and Vojislav Šešelj had both exhibited a great charismatic potential through appealing to the sentiments of the people. The election of the non-

charismatic Vojislav Koštunica as a president of Yugoslavia in 2000 was noted in the international media as a result of a cool-headed agreement between 19 opposition parties and their realisation that the individual bids for power would never get them anywhere. Reportedly, Koštunica was recruited as their candidate because his back-seat image was never corrupted by the power struggles over the previous 10 years. Many voters had expressed a desire for change but saw no suitable alternative to cast their vote for. All opposition leaders had become too similar to each other and to Milošević himself. In this instance, the ego ideal has been created on the basis of a desired superego by the voters and the individual members of the coalition, as an alternative to the established ego ideal, and in contrast to the id-incited creation of the existing nationalist superego.

**POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN SLAVS**

“YELISAVETA: And I don’t know why we have to play these ‘Robbers’.

VASILYIYE: Because Schiller is a German writer! [...] And because our audience, our defiant, incorruptible, proud and passionate people with their freedom-fighting traditions – love to watch rebels like Karl Moore! The descendants of the great hero Obilich don’t come to the theatre for art, but for heroism! And they don’t go to church to see Christ and the Virgin Mary, but to see their holy kings and holy warriors!”

(Lj. Simović: The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich; my translation)

The history of the theatre among the Southern Slavs is largely a history of the reasons of its absence. Continuous theatre activity in the Balkans only occurs in the mid-19th century alongside the Southern Slavs’ struggle for emancipation from foreign domination. In considering Yugoslav theatre, however, it would be a mistake to ignore the rich popular cultural heritage – ethnic dances, religious rituals and oral literature¹³ – which was the only form of cultural activity under the Ottomans, and eventually became a political tool. The following overview of the former Yugoslav nations’ cultural traditions and their political significance shows the ways in which these traditions finally culminated in a ‘single’ Yugoslav culture in the 20th century. Individual historical cultural traditions re-emerged in the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the distinctions between them were emphasised in an attempt to re-create individual national identities. The overview will provide insights leading to possible explanations as to why self-reflexivity and metatheatre spontaneously became the most popular means of expression at the end of Yugoslav synthetic culture.

¹³ Although the work of Richard Schechner and Peter Brook is celebrated by the theatre academics in Yugoslavia, sadly, there are no records of anthropological theatre research within the country.

Cultural and Political Development in Southern Slav Regions

Following their settlement in the Balkan semi-peninsula in the 7th century AD, Southern Slavs gradually formed socio-political units and individual kingdoms.

The rule of the Nemanjić dynasty – 1166 to 1371 – represents the ‘Golden Age’ of medieval Serbia. Having won independence for the Serbian Orthodox Church, the son of the first Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja (1166-1196)¹⁴ – Monk Sava was eventually canonised as a saint while his brother Stefan Nemanjić became the first Serbian king to be crowned by the Pope. The notion of a ‘spiritual ruler’ thus emerged in medieval Serbia, while all cultural activity also unfolded under the auspices of the church. Serbian Kingdom expanded significantly under Stefan Dušan Nemanjić (1331-1355) whose sudden death led to a gradual demise. By 1371 individual feudal lords took over the political control of their lands and Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović distinguished himself as the most respectable leader in the wake of the Ottoman invasion. The Battle of Kosovo in 1389 finally marked the end of the Serbian medieval kingdom.

The Croatian kingdom, the first to be founded among the Southern Slavs in 924, lasted until 1089. Croatian culture developed over the next eight centuries under the influence of the Hungarian court, although the Croatian aristocracy retained some independence, and the people preserved their language and culture. Following the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, Croatia finally fell to Hapsburg rule.

¹⁴ Dates indicate the length of rule, passim.

The coastal region of Dalmatia¹⁵ had a distinct cultural development. Since its rise in the 13th century, Venetian control over the region lasted until the brief Napoleonic conquest in 1797 (when Dalmatia was renamed the Illyrian Province). The western Southern Slav regions were mainly Catholic, and therefore the European medieval tradition of religious plays was present here, particularly in the 14th century. The earliest surviving secular play in Croatian was The Slave Woman, written in 1520 by a Croatian aristocrat from the island of Hvar,¹⁶ Hannibal Lucić. The most typical example of Venetian influence was the semi-independent city-state Dubrovnik (Ragusa), whose economic and political power was particularly conducive to its cultural development:

“Dubrovnik possessed an urban concentration and an active social life that favoured the appearances of guest players and entertainers, and encouraged the emergence of local amateur groups. The players, usually engaged and paid by the city government for celebrations such as the pre-Lenten carnival, were sometimes hired by local patrons for family festivities as well. The repertory of comedies and pastorals, influenced by Italian models, was set early in the mid-16th century, first of all by Marin Držić, then expanded in the 17th century by other local authors.” (Klaić, 1990: 1091)

Marin Držić's plays became key classics of Croatian and Yugoslav drama and subsequently enjoyed great popularity.¹⁷ In the 17th century Ivan Gundulić and Junije Palmotić distinguished themselves as representatives of Dubrovnik's Baroque drama, continuing the development of Croatian cultural history in line with European trends.

Although Slovenia was exclusively under German rule from the eighth until the 16th century when it was incorporated into the Hapsburg Empire, the Slovenians managed to resist Germanisation of their culture and language and were eager to join the Illyrian Movement of national reawakening in the 19th century.

¹⁵ Part of the present day Croatia.

¹⁶ Hvar was also the home to the first theatre building in the region since the Romans, built in 1612.

¹⁷ Particularly in the 20th century Držić's play Dundo Maroje (Uncle Maroje) received performances in many other languages and countries outside Yugoslavia.

Bosnia emerged as an independent kingdom at the end of the 12th century, following liberation from the Hungarian rule, and was characterised by its embrace of the heretical faith of Bogumilism. Following the Ottoman conquest, much of the Bogumil nobility and the Christian peasants converted to Islam in return for political autonomy.

Never fully conquered by the Ottomans due to its mountainous terrain, Montenegro emerged as an independent state by the end of the 15th century under its own dynasty of bishop-princes. Its famous ruler Petar Petrović Njegoš II (1830-50)¹⁸ was also a distinguished poet, whose works The Mountain Wreath and The Light of the Microcosm used to be considered most significant examples of dramatic poetry in the Yugoslav literary canon. He too joined the leaders of the Illyrian Movement.

Having remained under the Ottoman Empire until 1913, Macedonia subsequently became a disputed territory between Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks. However, the local Slav population had preserved its own rich folk culture despite foreign influences.¹⁹

Literary and Paratheatrical Cultural Traditions

Serbian medieval art and culture was mostly cultivated through the needs and resources of the church. Initially, the only literary genres were hagiographies, eulogies and church services. Marinković (1999) notes that translations of the European novels were less popular than Homer and stories about Alexander the Great. After 1389, the Battle of Kosovo became a key motif in both religious and secular literature.²⁰ Music, which had

¹⁸ Dates of rule.

¹⁹ Rebecca West devotes a significant part of her travelogues to the Macedonian folk culture.

²⁰ Having joined a nunnery, Lazar's wife Milica and another princess-nun Jefimija produced significant examples of poetic eulogies as did Lazar's heir Despot Stefan Lazarević.

its place in battle and in secular celebrations as well as in church services, was performed 'by musicians, entertainers and dancers, who were called *sviralnici*, *glumci* and *praskavnici* in the language of the day' (R. Pejović, 1999: 134). One word of the three – *glumac* (pl. *glumci*) – is still used today as the word for 'actor'.

Petar Marjanović writes that medieval theatre performances had a basically secular and entertaining function. The extemporaneous nature of these improvisations in public places also kept the theatre beyond influence of the Orthodox Church which actively discouraged the congregation from attending the performances. This medieval theatre practice, condemned in religious literature as consisting of 'harmful devilish songs and indecent, rude words' (ibid.), therefore had a seemingly subversive function, although there are also records of thriving cultural exchange between players:

"Serbian rulers, who had a friendly and diplomatic relationship with Dubrovnik, sent their music and entertainment groups for the celebrations of Saint Basius (the patron of Dubrovnik) and artists from Zeta and Dubrovnik visited Serbia (1412 and 1413)." (ibid.: 255)

As monastic and urban cultural activity decreased during the Ottoman rule, only the folk tradition of ritualistic dances and oral literature survived. In relation to the folk culture of the Southern Slavs, Dragan Klaić pinpoints a number of paratheatrical forms found in both Catholic and Orthodox rural traditions:

"Among ritual presentations, best known are the *vertep*, a nativity scene with three kings, and various forms of prayers for rain in the dry summer months.²¹ [...] Other forms sprung out of specific historical circumstances, such as the *moresca*, a dance still performed on the Adriatic island of Korčula, which had a clear narrative line: the liberation of island maidens kidnapped by Moorish pirates. [...] After the arrival of the Turks, theatrical activity of any sort must have been quite scarce: clowns, called *pelivans*, dervish dances, puppet theatre of the Karagoz type." (op.cit.: 1090)

²¹ For contemporary accounts of the (essentially pagan) rituals see Rayner, L.: *Women in a Village*; 1957.

The oral literary tradition, present among all Southern Slavs, consists of epic and lyric poetry as well as prose. The epics revolve around particular historical events or the exploits of individual heroes. Often performed to the accompaniment of a one-stringed instrument – *gusle* – they involve paratheatrical elements too, as noted by the German historian Leopold von Ranke in the 1840s:

“At festivals and assemblies near the cloisters, parties stand forward who have devoted themselves exclusively to singing [...]. Men of real poetic talent, like Philip Wishnitsch from Bosnia are occasionally met with, who collect a circle around them, and often move their audience to tears.”
(quoted in Judah, 1997: 40)

Epic oral poetry also became a political weapon of the indigenous and displaced²² populations as its main function was to ensure the preservation of collective memory and to fuel the desire for liberation. For Serbs, the Battle of Kosovo represented a key event in the national history and even resulted in a new way of calculating time.²³ A poem has it that on the eve of the battle the Angel of the Lord appeared to Prince Lazar and offered him two choices: military victory and a subsequent earthly kingdom, or defeat and a heavenly kingdom. In the context of the tradition of the highly spiritual rulers Lazar’s dilemma is magnified. He knows that he has to place a spiritual victory and the ethical code above pragmatic advantages – or so at least the anonymous poet explains the end of the Serbian kingdom on earth. Interestingly, the devices of divine intervention and ethical code were singled out by Lionel Abel in Metatheatre as crucial elements of tragedy, which in his view made the genre impossible outside of the context of Ancient Greece and its moral codex.

²² The Ottoman invasion at the end of the 14th century caused great migrations of the Serbian population westwards (into Montenegro, Dubrovnik, Dalmatia) and northwards into other Christian states (Austria and Hungary). These migrations continued throughout the period of Ottoman rule. The Serbs who settled north of the Danube in southern Hungary eventually obtained a degree of autonomy.

²³ Serbian epics divide into the pre-Kosovo cycle, the Kosovo cycle and the post-Kosovo cycle. (There are additional cycles about *hajduks* and *uskoks* and a cycle about the mythical hero Marko Kraljević).

The oral lyric poetry²⁴ – created in relation to pagan agricultural rituals – is closely linked with music, dance and mime. The emphasis on action and the fact that this poetry can also structurally appear in the form of a monologue, dialogue or a narrative, establishes a connection between this poetry and dramatic form. Milošević-Djordjević notes however that ‘the monologue, which should be the most suitable form for the direct expression of feeling, is often just a means of expressing imaginary events within which feelings are objectivised’ (ibid.: 159).

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche describes the epic poem as Apollonian and the lyric as a Dionysian form, while the perfect tragic drama is achieved by fusion of the two. Clearly here, the epic which stirs emotions in the audience is also lyrical, while the lyric which objectifies the feelings is epic in tone. Therefore the Nietzschean tragic fusion does occur in Serbian oral poetry, though not in a strictly dramatic form.

It would be difficult to claim that this cultural heritage had no bearing on 20th century Yugoslav drama. The analysis of particular plays in later chapters will inevitably recall certain affinities.²⁵ Also relevant in that context would be Serbian oral prose,²⁶ and particularly the genres of the humorous and ‘traditional’ story. The humorous story uses a number of devices – from witty word play to scenes of humorous situations involving human nature or character comedy:

“The most famous national character type is Clever Era, a peasant who defeats his opponent [...] with his wit and tough resistance. The realistic and sometimes ‘surreal’, humorous corpus includes a large number of various forms which are still being created even today.”²⁷ (ibid.: 161)

²⁴ Lyric poetry is classified into ritual, family, mythological and Christian, work songs and love songs.

²⁵ Ljubomir Simović’s play The Travelling Theatre Šopalović features poetic imagery reminiscent of the folk tradition, while Ivo Brešan’s Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater involves a decasyllabic rendering of Shakespeare and Dušan Kovačević’s The Professional recalls features of the oral prose.

²⁶ Prose appears in a number of genres including fairytales, fables, riddles, proverbs and jokes.

²⁷ Examples have been documented during the Student Protest in 1996/97 and the bombings in 1999.

The traditional story is a form of oral history. Attempting to explain both spiritual and physical phenomena, this genre is particularly concerned with ‘authenticity’, which is achieved by mentioning specific places and relying on ‘eyewitnesses’. Despite such emphasis, these narratives, ‘communicating in pictures with an emotional hue’, have given rise to many widely held beliefs which override logic or historical fact, thus unfairly rendering a number of historical characters villains or traitors.

In the first half of the 19th century, the Serbian cultural giant Vuk Stefanović Karadžić compiled and published four collections of Serbian oral literature in several editions. His ethnographic activity was mentored by the Slovenian linguist Jernej Kopitar, who was a proponent of the Illyrian Movement for Southern Slav unification. Karadžić’s main achievement – which enabled oral literature to enter the canon – was the creation of a new Serbian literary language by replacement of the official Church Slavonic with the vernacular, which included revision of the alphabet.²⁸ Serbian oral literature quickly attracted great interest and enthusiasm abroad. The immediate German reception was facilitated by the existing political and cultural links, but translations appeared in other languages too, including French, English and Russian. The interest in Serbian oral poetry resurfaced on several occasions since Romanticism. Significantly, the fieldwork of Milman Parry Lord in 1930s Yugoslavia and his analysis of extemporaneous performances at the time laid foundations for groundbreaking work in Homeric and classical studies.²⁹

²⁸ Karadžić and the Croatian linguist Ljudevit Gaj laid foundations for the Serbo-Croatian literary language on the principle of ‘a letter for each sound’ resulting in thirty letters in both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. Thus Serbo-Croat was the only language which later had two official alphabets.

²⁹ In 1960, Albert Bates Lord used Parry’s findings in order to study the improvisation techniques behind these epics, eventually developing an oral-formulaic theory which he applied to Homeric epics and French medieval ballads. See Lord, A.B. (et al.): *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

Andrew Baruch Wachtel (1998: 31-8) notes that epic poetry, present amongst all of the Southern Slavs and not only Serbs, often featured similar motifs and heroes, such as Kraljević Marko, and therefore formed a foundation upon which the synthetic Yugoslav identity was built and facilitated the formation of high Yugoslav culture.³⁰ My argument, which could be pursued further elsewhere, also relates to the inherent dramaturgical quality of this literature itself. Additionally, the European travellers' accounts of the epic performances feature the hero of a real-life tragedy – the enslaved Serbian nation – chanting his poem in order to remember the cause of his tragic condition. His instinct is not self-pity and his disposition to his art is not sentimental, his art is purely governed by the instinct for survival. Yet, the gaze of an outsider – a European traveller – frames the subject as a tragic character in himself.

Theatre Culture and the National Liberation of the Southern Slavs

Theatre was beginning to play a political role among the Southern Slavs in the 18th century through school performances in local Slav languages. Members of the Jesuit order initiated schools and school theatres in Latin in northern Croatia in the 17th century which lasted until the dissolution of the order in 1772. Eventually Croatian began to replace Latin on the stage and by the beginning of the 19th century Tituš Brezovacki distinguished himself as a satirist and comedy writer in the local dialect. Most of the rest of the theatre activity in northern Croatia – under Austro-Hungarian influence – revolved around German plays and occurred in the German language. It wasn't until mid-19th century and the increased activity of the Illyrian Movement which facilitated exchanges between the Southern Slavs under the Austro-Hungarian empire, that professional performances began to take place in the Croatian language.

³⁰ In 1989, once again, the Kosovo cycle became particularly relevant to the Serbs. This time the 'poetic' history was exploited in the interest of sentimentalism and the nationalist cause.

According to Marjanović, the first modern Serbian plays, which constituted the so-called 'school drama', appeared at the end of the 18th century among the Serbs in southern Hungary (present-day Vojvodina). Tragikomedija by Manuil Kozačinski (1699-1755) was performed in Sremski Karlovci in 1734. However, The Death of Uroš the Fifth by Stefan Stefanović, performed by high school students in 1825 and considered the first Serbian tragedy, marks the decline of the 'school drama' period. This gave way to the formation of amateur theatre companies. Only after Serbia won semi-independence from the Turks following uprisings, attempts at creating the Serbian National Theatre became possible.

At the beginning of the 19th century, 'Belgrade Pashalik' was a small autonomous political unit on the border with the Hapsburg Empire, under Ottoman governors. The first Serbian uprising in 1804 was initiated by Djordje Petrović, known as 'Karadjordje' ('Black George'). Although initially the insurgents managed to oust and kill the Ottoman governors and take control of the pashalik, the uprising was quashed by 1813 driving Karadjordje into exile. The second uprising in 1815 was led by Miloš Obrenović who eventually obtained a significant degree of independence by diplomatic means.

Under the illiterate but prudent Prince Miloš Obrenović, Serbian culture began to experience rebirth, complemented also by the cosmopolitan activities of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and the Illyrian Movement. The constitutional, legal, cultural and educational policies of the new state were established and implemented. In 1815, Joakim Vujić, a theatre enthusiast, staged a play entitled Black George in Novi Sad, Vojvodina (then Austro-Hungary). This play as well as any other 'which had anything to do with the Serbian uprising' (Stari Novi Sad I, 1991:416) was banned. In 1834, Vujić went to

Serbia and, having founded the Prince's Serbian Theatre in Kragujevac in 1835, he worked in it as the manager, actor, producer, translator and adapter of plays. However, this lasted for only a year. Meanwhile, in Novi Sad, semi-professional activity led to the foundation of the first professional theatre company in 1838. It performed around Vojvodina until 1840, and then in Zagreb, Croatia until the end of 1841 under the name of the National Theatre Company. In 1842 the company merged with the Theatre of Djumruk in Belgrade and inspired the creation of other professional ensembles in Vojvodina, Serbia and Croatia. Dragan Klaić writes:

“[Vujić’s] enthusiasm stimulated the formation of itinerant companies that [...] further led to the formation of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad and of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, both in 1861. These two theatres became important instruments in the struggle of Serbs and Croats in the Dual Monarchy for their cultural autonomy and ultimately their political independence. Belgrade became the site of the National Theatre in 1868, the year of the Turkish withdrawal from their garrisons in the young principality, and a similar Slovenian theatre society was soon formed in Ljubljana.” (op.cit.: 1091)

These theatres’ programming had a predominantly patriotic function, catering for the audiences’ needs, and simultaneously trying to deal with their own financial struggles:

“[U]ntil the end of the 19th century, the repertoire of the Serbian theatres was governed by two basic types of national dramatic work: the historical drama and tragedy of late Romanticism, in which the patriotic feelings and the awakened historical conscience of Serbs were stimulated; besides them, there were joyful country ‘plays with singing’.” (Marjanović, 1999: 258)

Obviously the needs of the audience were related to their own cultural heritage as well as the concurrent struggle for cultural and political emancipation. In addition, the current West European (particularly German) trends permeated the everyday life of the Vojvodina Serbs and therefore had a direct influence on the Serbian cultural elite.

Jovan Sterija Popović (1806-1856) is considered one of the first significant Serbian dramatists. He experimented with pseudo-Classicism and national Romanticism, wrote tragedies as well as satirical plays, but excelled at Realist comedies, which he wrote mostly in the 1830s. Initially reminiscent of Molière, Sterija's comedies are completely adapted to their own social context. The most famous of those are Laža i paralaža (The Liar of All Liars), Tvrđica (The Miser)³¹ and Pokondirena tikva (The Pumpkin Vase), all of which deal with bourgeois pretence, hypocrisy and corruption. This is mainly character-led drama and often intended as a social commentary with didactic purpose. His acerbic satirical play about false patriotism inspired by the 1848 Revolution in Austro-Hungary, Rodoljupci (The Patriots) was never published during his life but remains relevant today. Sterija's foresight is apparent in his preface to this play:

“[A]s long as we continue to learn in our history lessons which of our ancestors cut off how many heroes' heads whilst ignoring their own deviations, so long shall we continue to limp along, never improving ourselves an inch. [...] Let's have a look at our history. The more crazy, excessive, irrational it was, the more proponents it had. The voice of moderation was considered unpopular and treacherous, because everyone is tempted by the extraordinary, and when they don't know that it could lead them to misfortune, they run after it as if blinded, all the time irritated by every word of reason.” (J.S.Popović: Komedije; 1981: 145, my translation)

Other significant poet-dramatists of this period are Laza Kostić (1841-1910) and Djura Jakšić (1832-1878). Kostić is also known as a major translator of Shakespeare who worked directly from English, rather than using German translations, and translated the Bard into the popular decasyllabic verse.³² His own tragedies Maksim Crnojević (1869) and Pera Segedinac (1882), although partially influenced by Shakespeare, primarily conformed to the Romanticist trend of the day, characterised by the audience demand for the national historical themes and epics. Also conforming to this trend in their source-themes, Djura Jakšić's plays – Jelisaveta, the Princess of Montenegro (1868) and

³¹ Also known as Kir Janja.

³² Kostić was an initiator of the tercentenary celebration of Shakespeare's birth in 1864 in Novi Sad.

Stanoje Glavaš (1878) – are however particularly distinguished in their poetic accomplishment. Although overshadowed by some more popular dramatists of the day,³³ Kostić and Jakšić are nowadays considered to have perfected the trend of poetic drama in its stylistics and in psychological development of their heroes.

Apart from historical drama and comedy, a popular genre which distinguished itself towards the end of the 19th century was the so-called ‘piece with singing’.³⁴ Influenced by folkloric traditions, this genre contained authentic songs and dances, and often a romantic story culminating with a wedding at the end. Klaić comments that this genre ‘carried a new set of values to a society that was – while proclaiming its allegiance to the old heroic myths – eager to break through its agrarian matrix’ (op.cit.: 1091).

Although politically unstable, the second half of the 19th century was a progressive period. The 1878 Congress of Berlin recognized Montenegro as a sovereign state and the Serbian kingdom as an autonomous political unit. German cultural influence became gradually replaced by the French as the Serbian government increasingly sent students for education in France. Regarding theatre, popular forms such as comedy, vaudeville and melodrama found fertile ground. Naturalism and symbolism gradually emerged on the scene via Slovenia and Croatia’s continued exposure to German influences.

Ever since the establishment of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb in 1861, there was an emphasis on both the Croatian classics (Držić and Palmotić’s plays) and on contemporary Croatian drama. The Illyrian Movement had given rise to historical and patriotic themes in Croatia too, with Dimitrije Demeter (1811-1872) a theatre enthusiast

³³ The Dubrovnikian Matija Ban (1818-1903) was even considered ‘Serbian Shakespeare’ at the time; however, both Ban and his also popular contemporary Jovan Subotić have since sunk into oblivion.

³⁴ This genre, reminiscent of the German *Singspiel* and Spanish *zarzuela* remained popular well into the 20th century. Janko Veselinović’s Djido (1892) and Potera (1895) are performed even today, while the most accomplished example of this genre probably remains Borisav Stanković’s drama Koštana (1900).

and writer, at the forefront of the Movement here. The versatile author August Šenoa (1838-1881) introduced the social concerns of the life of peasants and lower classes into Croatian literature, though his only complete play Ljubica was actually a comedy. The native of Dubrovnik, Ivo Vojnović (1857-1929) was the strongest proponent of the Kosovo theme in Croatian literature, whose play Smrt majke Jugovića (The Death Of the Jugovićs' Mother), based on a Kosovo-cycle epic and featuring elements of symbolism, premiered at the National Theatres in Belgrade and Zagreb in 1906 and 1907 respectively. This play however had much less subsequent popularity than his Dubrovnik Trilogy. Simultaneously, the Croatian theatre remained open to European influences in both literary and scenographic terms. Under Stjepan Miletić's managerial leadership at the turn of the century, the Croatian National Theatre (also housing the Opera) introduced innovative approaches to the staging of Shakespeare, Goldoni and Moliere as well as Ibsen and Hauptmann and the classical and contemporary Croatian drama. Essentially, psychological realism gradually emerged as the dominant acting style, leading to the establishment of the Croatian Drama School in 1896. Playwrights such as Milan Begović (1876-1948) and the Slovenian Anton Medved (1869-1911) engaged in psychological subject matter too.

The most significant Slovenian playwright at the turn of the century was Ivan Cankar (1876-1918), a distinguished poet, satirist, dramatist and novelist. A new theatre building opened in Ljubljana in 1892 as the previous one had burnt down in a fire in 1887. This was paradoxically an opportune moment for the development of the Slovenian National Theatre and liberation from the German influence. Cankar's enthusiasm for drama was thus fuelled at an early age. Between the onset of his writing career in 1899 and his death in 1918, he completed some 35 works – including 7 plays. Although an exponent of Slovenian modernism, Cankar is best remembered for his

socially relevant, psychologically astute symbolist drama. His most performed plays include Kralj na Betajnovi (The King of Betajnova), Hlapci (The Servants) and Lepa Vida (The Beautiful Vida).

Following the 1903 military coup in Serbia whereby the last member of the Obrenović dynasty was killed, a descendant of Karadjordje was brought back from exile. Under King Petar Karadjordjević – the first translator of John Stuart Mill's Essay on Liberty into Serbo-Croat – the Serbian kingdom thrived culturally and in terms of democratic political life. However, the desire to liberate the Balkan region from the Ottomans led to the formation of an alliance between Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece and the First Balkan War in 1912. The war was successful in driving the Turks out, but Bulgaria and Serbia ended up involved in the Second Balkan War in 1913 over the division of territories.

Yugoslav Theatre of the Early 20th Century

“Of course, [as children] we always played whatever was happening around us. [...] I remember, for example that once we played ‘crisis’. Crisis is a phenomenon which has existed since the very beginning of this state, and it will last as long as this state lasts, just as when a child is born ‘with a defect’, he has to carry it all his life. So, if the political children most gladly play this game, why shouldn’t we have played it?” (B. Nušić: Autobiografija; 1962: 48-9; my translation)

The triumph of Realism at the turn of the century gives Serbia one of its most important playwrights to date – Branislav Nušić (1864-1938). His prolific output as a writer of drama and humorous prose was also complemented by his versatile engagement in various aspects of theatre production and culture both at home and abroad. He wrote his first plays – satirical comedies Narodni poslanik (The People’s Representative) and Sumnjivo lice (A Suspicious Character) – in the 1880s. In 1887 he was arrested for writing an anti-dynastic poem and subsequently shunned satire in favour of other genres. In his long career he explored a number of styles in writing tragedies, historic

plays and dramas but his most significant plays remain his comedies of character, exploring national mentality and bourgeois manners. Due to personal tragedies and the loss of his son in the First World War, Nušić only returned to writing comedies at the end of his life. Bitter in tone and with a realistic rather than a happy ending, these include Gospodja ministarka (The Cabinet Minister's Wife) – 1929, Ožalošćena porodica (The Bereaved Family) – 1934, and Pokojnik (The Deceased) – 1937. His unfinished play Vlast (The Ruling Power) was posthumously revised and performed.³⁵ Throughout the 20th century Nušić's plays have occupied most significant part of the repertoire in Yugoslav theatres, and became undisputed modern classics. The influence of Nušić's work on other playwrights will be revealed in the following chapters.

Alongside Nušić, the Croatian playwright Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981) also grew to represent one of the most significant Yugoslav playwrights of the 20th century. Most of his plays are written in the 1920s and 1930s, of which the first six are in the symbolist and expressionist styles but considered largely unstageable during the first half of the century. Thus his realist plays Vučjak – 1923, and the trilogy Gospoda Glembajevi (The Noble Glembays), U agoniji (In Agony) and Leda – from 1928-31, represent the core of his most valued plays. Krleža was also a left-wing sympathiser, though his early critique of Stalinism left him politically in the shadow until 1948 when Yugoslavia broke away from Soviet influence. Krleža's plays could be seen as being influenced by Central and North European drama, but are distinguished simply by force of the playwright's own vibrant, erudite, intellectual discourse, original ideas, skilful use of the language and psychological depth of his characters. Both Nušić and Krleža have been translated and performed in Eastern Europe as well as Austria and Germany.

³⁵ Some of these plays are available in English translation on <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~kritika/>

Following the proclamation of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918 (later renamed Yugoslavia), subsidy of the theatre and employment of theatre professionals were regulated by the state. The German influence noted above extended to the early theatre production among the Southern Slavs. At the turn of the century various newly-established theatres followed the theatre practice of the Viennese Burgtheater, whilst technologically, Yugoslav theatres relied on Hungarian and Austrian workshops. In addition, the October Revolution in Russia caused a wave of emigration, which brought into Yugoslavia numerous theatre professionals including designers, choreographers, directors as well as acting and ballet teachers. Therefore, in addition to the Central European influences and the simultaneous emergence of Expressionism, the Russian Realist school and Stanislavski's method – also enhanced by two visits of the Moscow Arts Theatre to Yugoslavia in the 1920s – made a profound and lasting influence on Yugoslav theatre practice.

The influence of Expressionism and later Surrealism was restricted to literature rather than theatre. As a result of close cultural and political links with France during and after the First World War, literary tendencies during the so-called 'post-war Modernism' are mostly expressionist in tone. The revolutionary energy of Expressionism and Surrealism was not necessarily directed at social issues and socio-economic position of man in the contemporary society. On the contrary, the movement was marked by a strong desire to break away from tradition and the past. It was primarily concerned with individuation and individualism rather than the traditional – Romantic – collectivism. This also had implications on stylistics and literary expression. Jovan Deretić notes:

“One of the biggest defects of our literature was contained in the fact that its language remained epic, decasyllabic. Even when it attempted to part from the decasyllable, and when different, more modern forms of verse were being sought, the rhythm of our poetry remained slow, monotonous [...].

Even those poets who tried most hard to catch up with Europe, remained under the strong grip of our epic. We entered modern civilisation in a decasyllabic slow stride and therefore it is no wonder that we didn't get far." (Deretić: Kratka istorija srpske književnosti; www.knjizevnarec.co.yu).

The new writers did much to redress this balance, and Belgrade's was the most renowned surrealist movement outside Paris. Although the Yugoslav expressionists and surrealists did not necessarily operate together or in the same genres – and they later adopted realist means of expression – some of these remained especially significant with their contribution to Yugoslav literature and drama at the time. These included Stanislav Vinaver³⁶ (1891-1955) who engaged in prose, essay and art criticism. More significantly, Miloš Crnjanski (1893-1977) left a considerable volume of poetry and prose – mostly novels – and several dramas, some of which had been written during his long exile in London.³⁷ Though not dramaturgically accomplished, his plays establish a trend which might be seen as a predecessor of Yugoslav metadrama. His debut Maska (The Mask), written in 1918, is a poetic comedy set in the early-19th century Vienna, at a mask ball attended by a number of historical characters. His later plays are more realist in tone, but they still deal with historical figures: Prince Aleksandar Obrenović and the military coup of 1903 in Konak (written in 1958), and the most important Yugoslav scientist Nikola Tesla in Tesla (1966).

Left-oriented modernists began to appear in the mid-1920s, referring to themselves as 'neoromantics' and engaging in the themes of social significance. In the 1930s political polarization finally occurred between modernists. Most of them were subsequently classed as oriented to the right. According to Deretić, these also included the writers

³⁶ He features in Rebecca West's travelogue Black Lamb and Grey Falcon where he is referred to as the poet Constantine, West's regular companion.

³⁷ Crnjanski was also important as a founder of an expressionist movement which he named 'Sumatraism', characterised by a desire for overcoming barriers, attraction to the exotic, spiritual and the cosmic and a nirvanistic connection with nature – all of this stemmed from his profound unhappiness caused by the First World War. Other similar movements founded in Belgrade include Zenitism, initiated by Ljubomir Micić, which attracted a number of followers abroad; and Hypnism founded by Rade Drainac, an initiator of a neoromantic, left-wing oriented stream of 'post-war Modernism'.

who initially had leftist ideals, such as Crnjanski. The right-oriented writing is mostly characterised by thematic interest in religious mysticism, themes from the national history and cultural heritage. The most typical representative of this group is considered to be Momčilo Nastasijević (1894-1938) who has left a considerable amount of methodically written poetry. He had taken Symbolism as his initial departure point, and the Symbolist treatment of music as the essence of poetry. His expression is often archaic, combining the rhythms of the epics and the medieval literature, therefore bringing his work into the expressionist framework of communicating with the primeval. He wrote a number of plays either as musical dramas in verse, or in prose.

“In Medjuluško blago he dramatised the basic principle of his poetics: the search for the mother-melody. In the second musical drama, Djuradj Branković, the fate of the family is interrelated with the national fate. The completion of the fall of the Serbian empire in Kosovo occurs as an inevitability, and the acceptance of the fall – as an opening of a path to salvation. His prose dramas oscillate between legend and bourgeois everyday life. Among them the most interesting is Kod ‘Večite slavine’ (At ‘The Eternal Tap’), soaked in the damnation of blood and sin, which – like in a Greek tragedy – passes on from parents to their children, technically achieved through a complex intertwining of different time-lines.” (Deretić, op.cit.; my translation)

Interestingly, Momčilo Nastasijević’s work was selectively explored during the communist years, and mainly with reference to his poetry. It is highly likely that this might have been the result of Nastasijević’s political ‘unsuitability’ during the communist years. Despite its concern with the Serbian cultural heritage, Nastasijević’s work can hardly be perceived as nationalistic in a sentimental way – which is in fact the main feature of the nationalist plays of the latter end of the 20th century.

It could be argued that the above mentioned political polarization within the literary world of the 1930s only occurred by force of the emergence of the left-wing oriented authors, which only rendered the unaffiliated to the right. In other words, the motto

'whoever is not with us is against us' could have been applied in defining the non-socialist writers of the expressionist movement as inherently right-wing. The very emergence of the left-wing authors in the mid-1920s was not accidental. The Yugoslav Communist Party was founded in 1920, recruiting members among the peasantry and the developing working class all across the Yugoslav kingdom. They initially gained a surprisingly large number of seats in the Parliament, but the party was subsequently banned and forced to go underground, from where they maintained links with the Soviet Union.³⁸ King Aleksandar Karadjordjević dissolved Parliament in early 1929, following some in-house shooting between irreconcilable MPs. The act of prohibition of the Communist Party, can have only increased the appeal of this revolutionary and outlawed organisation to some young expressionists. Following the dissolution of Parliament, the king was assassinated in Marseilles in 1934. Meanwhile, the Communist Party grew in size, maintaining its cross-regional organization. Simultaneously, the Spanish Civil Wars provided both revolutionary and literary inspiration to the young Yugoslav communists, some of whom even died alongside their Spanish comrades.

Having won over the support of the Allies during the Second World War, the Partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito, finally established the new state of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1943. During the war, cultural activity continued on a small scale both in the occupied towns and among the Partisans themselves. Following the liberation from German occupation in 1945 the infamous trials of the domestic traitors and German collaborators also targeted members of the theatrical profession.³⁹

³⁸ This act of prohibition could have been inspired by the fear of communists in the aftermath of the October Revolution but was largely a result of some tumultuous parliamentary proceedings.

³⁹ Žanka Stokić – a popular comedienne particularly renowned for interpretations of Nušić's characters – was among the convicts. Although she had managed to escape death penalty, she was sentenced to a loss of civil rights and banned from the stage, on the charges of continuing to entertain 'the enemy' during the war. When her sentence was curtailed and she was finally allowed to return to the theatre – she unexpectedly died. This case was discussed, dramatised – and eventually championed by the members of the theatrical profession – only after Tito's death.

Post-War Yugoslav Theatre

As noted above, the post-war period was the time of cultural and political re-invention in Yugoslavia. The 1948 break-up with the Soviet Union and the subsequent formation of the Non-Aligned Movement represented the definitive moments in terms of the foreign policy and the outward image of the new state of socialist Yugoslavia. Culturally, an emphasis was placed on the reinforcement of the super-national identity and an equal representation in all cultural and political institutions of all the constituent ethnic groups and minorities. However, whereas the cultural policy determined the outward structure of the output, it did not necessarily have as strong an effect on content as was the case in the rest of the Eastern Bloc with Socialist Realism.

A rare record of a European traveller's impressions of Yugoslav theatre and culture is contained in Hallam Tennyson's post-war travelogue Tito Lifts the Curtain. Commenting on a notable artistic standard of the 'aesthetic triumvirate' of Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana, Tennyson observes:

"In Belgrade we paid 50 dinars⁴⁰ for the front row of the dress circle to watch a performance of King Lear. It was a beautiful theatre, with perfect acoustics, plush seating, free programmes, and a numbered coupon attached to each ticket which allowed one to use the cloakroom laid out in efficient alphabetical order down the whole length of the foyer. Of course, expenses are saved on decor and costumes, which looked, in this instance as if they had been ingeniously sewn together from blackout material and coloured dish-cloths, but the performance itself was wonderfully fine and, interestingly, not considered more than good-average by the regular Serbian playgoers whom we met. Edgar, a strange and disturbing part usually better read in the study than seen on the stage, seemed unusually convincing – indeed the whole play had a plausibility and punch which it sometimes lacks in the etiolated atmosphere of twentieth-century England." (1955: 122)

⁴⁰ Judging by Tennyson's accounts, the exchange rate between the Yugoslav dinar and pound sterling worked out at about 841 dinars to the pound in 1955. Theatre tickets ranged between 40-150 dinars.

Commenting further on the non-profit oriented publishing industry,⁴¹ in relation to the generous and relaxed policies of the state, Tennyson also notes a significant ideological shift which occurred in the years since 1948:

“The most respected writer is the Croatian Krleža, art critic, playwright, novelist, who won the highest literary award of 1953. Before the war he was a left-wing intellectual and a critic of contemporary morals and manners. He took no active part in the National Liberation Movement. This year, too, one of the highest awards went to Vladan Desnica, a Dalmatian whose writing is wholly lacking in political and social content. Even the Communist Oskar Davičo is a poet who applies the fruits of surrealism and symbolism to contemporary themes rather than a ‘social realist’. Before 1948 his writing was in disfavour.” (ibid.: 124)

The change of the policy, Tennyson claims, was most graphically portrayed by the fact that four years previously certain academics were expelled from the Zagreb University for ‘claiming Rimbaud, Verlaine and Baudleire as great poets instead of dirty, decadent and bourgeois’. By 1955 these poets were again subjected to ‘learned theses’.

Considerable state subsidy of the arts and theatre in Yugoslavia continued well into the 1980s.⁴² Initially this was an advantage as it laid foundations for the formation of repertory theatres with their own ensembles and encouraged attendance through distribution of cheap tickets. In the absence of institutionalised censorship, theatres were also able to abandon early educational policies of the state and focus on the production values.⁴³ Early post-war Yugoslav theatre was therefore predominantly the

⁴¹ “Authors are paid a wage according to the signs (i.e. letters, spaces, punctuation marks) which they produce. [...] For a book of average length, then, an author can earn about 180, 000 dinars, or £214. Translators get 60 per cent of this fee, and because they work much more quickly are probably today among the best paid people in Yugoslavia – particularly as there is a craze for foreign books. I met someone who was earning 200, 000 dinars for an abridged version of Martin Chuzzlewit [...]. It was not surprising that he should be the only Yugoslav I saw get into a taxi.” (Tennyson, 1955: 123)

⁴² Writing in 1988, Dragan Klaić notes that state subsidy still constituted 85-90% of the theatres’ budget. (1988/90: 1093)

⁴³ Dragan Klaić however expresses great concerns with regard to the Yugoslav theatre system by the late 1980s especially in relation to deep-seated conservatism, lack of concern for the revenue, a growing inertia and neglect of duties among the theatre professionals on the payroll as well as the surplus of administrative and technical staff in individual institutions. (Klaić, D.: Teatar razlike, 1988: 63-94)

directors' theatre⁴⁴ – text-based and in line with Stanislavski's method – with significant playwriting efforts starting to emerge only in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Ranko Marinković, Jože Smole, Velimir Lukić).⁴⁵ Theatre production was also encouraged in a variety of minority languages resulting in the development of significant Hungarian, Albanian, Turkish and Romani ensembles as well as the integration of these languages in the mainstream drama.⁴⁶ By 1988, Dragan Klaić notes the presence of 70 repertory theatres on the territory of Yugoslavia, 'including ten operas with ballet and 15 theatres for children' (1988/90:1092). Each capital city of the six republics had several playhouses as well as there being at least one in another 30 cities. By the end of the 1980s, each capital city also had a drama school integrated into the university system and offering courses in acting, directing, dramaturgy as well as stage-management and other media production.⁴⁷ Several festivals were inaugurated in the post-war period in the interest of either encouraging new writing or challenging strong traditionalist approaches to arts education and theatre production and with a view of cultural exchange. In 1950, Dubrovačke ljetne igre (The Dubrovnik Summer Festival) was founded with a view of site-specific, open-air staging of the national and foreign classics as well as ballet, opera, recitals, dance and other performances. More significantly for us, the Yugoslav Drama Festival – Sterijino Pozorje was initiated in 1956 in Novi Sad as a means to encouraging new writing, and it subsequently grew into an important national institution engaged in publishing, archiving and development of international relations. The Belgrade International Theatre Festival (Bitef) came about in 1967 with a sole purpose of international exchange and with a strong emphasis on the

⁴⁴ Most significantly – Branko Gavella, Mata Milošević, Bojan Stupica, Hugo Klajn etc.

⁴⁵ It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that playwrights really created a place for themselves in Yugoslav theatre (starting with Ivo Brešan, Dušan Jovanović, Aleksandar Popović etc.).

⁴⁶ It is also worth noting that having previously been thwarted, the Macedonian language was only legalised and standardised in socialist Yugoslavia and placed on an equal footing with Serbo-Croat and Slovenian, as one of the official state languages.

⁴⁷ Design was integrated into visual and applied arts schools. Student numbers were often extremely limited amounting to up to 10 graduates on each course, which also led to a straitjacketed, master-apprentice approach to training with very little space for independent enquiry and development.

avant-garde. Similar efforts were also initiated through Sarajevo's Festival of Chamber and Experimental Theatre in 1960, and later the Split Summer Festival, Zagreb's Eurokaz and the Ohrid Summer Festival. By the late 1980s, there were about 30 annual festivals on the territory of Yugoslavia, seven archiving or resource centres/museums and some ten theatre periodicals (including Scena, Prolog and Delo).

As for foreign influences on Yugoslav theatre, a brief research of the post-war theatre repertoires in Belgrade, for example, reveals that French plays still dominated the Yugoslav stages, alongside Shakespeare and Russian drama while German influence waned significantly after the Second World War.

Out of 342 premieres at the National Theatre in Belgrade from 1944 to 1986 just over 50% belonged to Yugoslav drama – these were mainly classics with some contemporary plays receiving encouragement from the 1960s onwards. Out of the 162 translations, 50 plays were originally Russian⁴⁸ most of which were the classics. With 15 premieres Shakespeare is the second most performed playwright after Branislav Nušić with 23. Another 20 English plays feature both the classics and contemporary drama.⁴⁹ A great variety of contemporary French and American plays is significant, while the 12 German plays include five by Brecht starting from the season of 1962/63.⁵⁰

While the National Theatre's repertoire could be seen as 'middle of the road', some of the choices in the process of appropriation of foreign influences are particularly interesting in terms of their dissonant relationship to the official politics – Hollywood adaptations, 'bourgeois' farces, even the French and American avant-garde. On the

⁴⁸ The Russian play Invasion by Leonid Leonov opened the 1944 season and some Soviet plays followed up until 1948.

⁴⁹ Osborne's The Entertainer opened in 1960 and in honour of 5th Congress of Yugoslav Socialist Workers' Union.

⁵⁰ Other German dramatists are included in the repertoire from 1970 onwards.

other hand, the National Theatre as an institution was seen as a vehicle of promoting the official ideology and predominantly domestic literary output. Many productions were purposefully intended for marking particular dates and holidays related to the Second World War People's Struggle for Freedom and were celebratory in tone.

In 1948 Yugoslav Drama Theatre was established in Belgrade with the aim of bringing together the best of the theatre artists from the whole country. It was a super-national institution by choice rather than by interference from policy-makers. The Yugoslav Drama Theatre had a remarkable career in terms of its international activity and cultural exchange. Its 1951 production of Yegor Bulichov by Gorki was highly acclaimed in Russia, having been shown at the MHAT (Moskow Arts Theatre).⁵¹ The leading actor Milivoje Živanović was the first non-Russian actor to receive Stanislavski's Medal for this performance. This theatre was more adventurous than the National in its repertoire and more open to western European contemporary influences. As many as five Sartre's plays⁵² were staged here as well as four by Camus from 1948 to 1986, and in 1965 the world premiere of Mrozek's Tango was staged at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre. Tennyson is most probably referring to this theatre in his travelogues above, as the only production of King Lear at the time of his visit to Belgrade was the one at the JDP (Yugoslav Drama Theatre) and with Milivoje Živanović in the title role.

During the 1990s wars, Yugoslav Drama Theatre experienced another boost by upholding its founding policy and receiving actors of various ethnicities who fled Croatia⁵³ for Belgrade. In the early 1990s the greatest hits in Belgrade included Yugoslav Drama Theatre's productions of Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac and

⁵¹ The same production received accolades in Paris as well where it appeared at the Theatre des Nations alongside the JDP production of Držić's Dundo Maroje.

⁵² Sartre also visited the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in the 1960s for the premiere of one of his plays.

⁵³ Most notably the Croatian actress Mira Furlan was based here for a while before emigrating to the US.

Corneille's Theatre Illusion. A number of foreign directors came to work here too – the Russian director Roman Vityuk directed Wilde's Salome shortly before the theatre burnt down in a fire in 1997.

Atelje 212 opened in 1956 as a theatre that would focus on experimental and alternative forms of theatre. It gradually defined itself against the established theatres. This was also one of the first theatres that would use itself as a forum – sometimes literally by staging talks and discussions and metatheatrical entertainment.⁵⁴ The theatre opened with Goethe's Faust, but the theatre's second premiere – of Waiting for Godot – is often seen as its inaugural production. This play ran for many years, although Alfred Jarry's King Ubu staged in the season of 1963/64 outran it by staying on the repertoire until the death of its leading actor Zoran Radmilović some 20 years later.

In terms of the domestic output, Atelje championed new and innovative drama – Nušić, Krleža and Sterija are here neglected in favour of Dušan Kovačević, Aleksandar Popović and leading contemporary playwrights. As for foreign influences, contemporary French drama is closely followed by the English. Six out of 20 English plays are by Pinter – obviously implying that in this theatre Pinter has the status that Shakespeare⁵⁵ has in the others. Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's Jesus Christ Superstar also found its way here, as did Hair by Gerome Ragni and James Rado. German plays received better reception in Atelje 212 than in any other Yugoslav theatre in the period. Apart from Goethe and Wedekind – plays by Büchner, Kroetz, H. Müller, Fassbinder and Weiss's Marat Sade (1965/66 season) make up some of the 14 German plays staged here. Meanwhile, the first Russian play to be put on was Gogol's A Madman's Diary as late as 1963, followed by an adaptation of Dostoyevski in 1966/67.

⁵⁴ Dušan Kovačević, whose early plays premiered here, refers to this theatre's bar in his play The Professional as a place where his writer character delivered his many dissident speeches.

⁵⁵ Only one play by Shakespeare – and that is a very loose adaptation of Hamlet – appears in this theatre.

Other favourite playwrights include Mrozek and Havel, while Roberto Ciulli also directed an adaptation of Boccaccio here in 1981.

As a result of the trends established by Atelje 212, in 1967 the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (Bitef) was created as a festival with a strong interest in the avant-garde. It featured the likes of Robert Wilson and Pina Bausch several times and most significantly – it was responsible for the promotion of the Living Theatre company in Europe. This was Belgrade's most direct contact with the up-to-date developments in world theatre. Unfortunately the festival never influenced Yugoslav theatre itself in any fundamental way. The general impression is that the Bitef Festival has been a means of intellectual stimulation rather than a form of dialogue or the means of challenging the established theatre practice. One significant example of Bitef's aesthetic influence, however, was the KPGT theatre company set up by the particularly innovative Yugoslav director Ljubiša Ristić. The company's name was an acronym consisting of the initials for the word 'theatre' in various Yugoslav languages (*kazalište* in Croatian, *pozorište* in Serbian, *gledališče* in Slovenian and *teatar* in Macedonian) and the company became one of the most treasured super-national institutions.

Returning to the post-war repertoires of the three leading Belgrade theatres,⁵⁶ it would be significant for this study to note the nature of metatheatricality apparent in these repertoires. Between the three theatres, most of the plays studied in Lionel Abel's *Metatheatre*⁵⁷ feature at least once in the period of 1944 to 1986. These include – Shakespeare's Hamlet, Calderon's Life is a Dream, Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Genet's The Balcony and The Maids and several plays by Racine. In addition we have

⁵⁶ In selecting these theatres because of their particular profiles in the light of the rest of the thesis, I unfairly omitted a number of equally important theatres such as the Belgrade Drama Theatre, the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad or indeed the theatres in other Yugoslav republics.

⁵⁷ The text does not seem to have been translated into Serbo-Croat however.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Ostrovski's Artistes and Admirers, all of Pirandello's metaplays as well as Barrault's Rableis. Sartre's Kean and Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead were premiered one after the other at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in the season of 1970/71, followed by Wasserman's adaptation of Don Quixote.⁵⁸ Havel's Audience, Weiss' Marat-Sade, Dürrenmatt's Play Strindberg, Chapek's essay on The Making of Theatre, Bulgakov's Molière, and most of the significant Yugoslav metaplays opened at Atelje 212. Most significantly, Bulgakov's metatheatrical comedy dealing with censorship The Crimson Island staged at Atelje 212 in 1972/73, was subsequently banned.⁵⁹ Other similar productions include various rewritings of classics, biopics of famous playwrights and actors, plays based on correspondence (such as one between Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell) and plays featuring fictional members of theatrical profession as incidental or central characters.⁶⁰

Another significant intertextual trend in post-war Yugoslav theatre was an interest in the rewriting of Greek myths. This is reflected in both domestic output and in the appropriation of foreign plays – hence, O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, Anouilh's Antigone, Goethe's Iphigenia, Racine's Phedre and Gide's Prometeus. Yugoslav poet and one of the first significant post-war playwrights Velimir Lukić has almost exclusively written such plays as a means of socio-metacommentary, whereas Danilo Kiš's Elektra 1969 was a response to the 1968 reactionary events in Europe.

⁵⁸ Don Quixote is in itself considered a metaliterary novel.

⁵⁹ Thanks to Dragan Klaić for this remark.

⁶⁰ An adaptation of Mother Courage from the early 1990s featured biographical details from Brecht's life in exile and circumstances surrounding the conception of this play, intertwined with the play itself. This was an extremely powerful commentary on the current war, and Brecht was played by one of the greatest Yugoslav actors who finally ended up in exile – Rade Šerbedžija.

Klaić notes that, although the post-war Yugoslav theatre had a number of very interesting theatre directors – Branko Gavella, Bojan Stupica, Mata Milošević, Dejan Mijač – the process of playwriting was significantly delayed, starting only in the 1960s.

In 1986 Vladimir Stamenković offered a study of contemporary Serbian and Yugoslav drama.⁶¹ Recognizing a strong French influence on Yugoslav playwrights, starting with Gide, Giradoux and Cocteau, Stamenković points out the way in which the tendency towards rewriting of myths as a means of socio-metacommentary is evident in all of these writers' work. The early 1960s in Yugoslavia were characterised by the belief that 'society, and history alongside it, are moving towards an already ascertained, easily identifiable aim'. Citing 'superficial optimism', 'an unshakable faith in progress' and intolerance of any pessimism as the main features of this period, Stamenković also states that Yugoslav playwrights of the day were reacting to and trying to change such a social climate as well as being unsentimental about the historical material:

"In the 1950s the dogma of the socialist realism – which in any case never took roots here – was challenged in Yugoslavia. Ever since then, Yugoslav drama – whether poetic or inspired by myth, or engaged in old historical events – is always alive, polemical, challenging and engaged in a discussion with the given circumstances. This drama is engaged on an essential level, removed from any flirtation with daily topics, whose significance in turn is expressed through grandiose empty rhetoric." (1987: 12, my translation)

In his lengthy essay, Stamenković insists on the 'grotesque' and the 'absurd' as a means of reflecting the impossible situation that an individual is in within a totalitarian society. He also insists on the idiosyncratic nature of the drama which results from this particular socio-political context. Therefore, the technique of these playwrights – seen as reaching for the essence and the inner truth by way of emphasising the artificial and the 'grotesque' – is by no means strictly speaking 'realistic'. However, the plays are

⁶¹ Stamenković's *Pozorište u dramatizovanom društvu* (*Theatre in a Dramatised Society*) is a collection of his reviews and essays focusing on the post-war period.

almost always written in a very accessible way, in realist speech and in popular format, thus reflecting the stronghold of the traditional discourse. Paradoxically, the overall effect of this fusion seems to have been accidental 'realism', hidden behind a metaphor. Subsequent analysis of individual plays, at a later stage in the thesis, will demonstrate that the metatheatrical method was also part of this trend of obscuring the obvious through an emphasis on the artificial, and thus – uncovering the true.⁶²

It could be argued that post-war Yugoslav drama was caught up in the conflict of wishing to express new concepts, in a new style, within an ethically and aesthetically conservative society which had originally based all its literature on either monastic pontification or popular glorification of historical heroes. Naturally, much of this drama was also driven by the desire to oppose itself to these oppressive traditions.

By 1986,⁶³ Yugoslavia was at an altogether different cultural and political point to where it had been at the time of Tennyson's enthused observations. In the forty years since the inception of the socialist political establishment, Yugoslavian intellectuals had enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom and mobility, coupled with the frustrations of having to conform to a single-party political system and a single official ideology. Outdated rituals and inflexible socio-political structures were in place without opportunity for any change or intervention. Following Tito's death in 1980, the country soon found itself plunged in a seemingly insoluble political and economic crisis, but then again crisis was a natural state of being in this part of the world, as Nušić pointed out all those years ago.

⁶² I would certainly like to distinguish the term 'true' from the term 'real' in this context, on the understanding that something may appear 'real' without necessarily corresponding with the actual truth.

⁶³ Stamenković's analysis concludes with the year 1986, although the title is published in 1987.

History Repeating Itself

“I have to note that in Russian the words *glumac* (actor), and *pozorište* (theatre) since the time of Tsar Alexei in mid-17th century to the present day have meant something completely different [than in Serbian]. *Glumac* (actor), *glumlenie* (acting) means ‘teaser’ and ‘mockery’ respectively, and *pozorište* (theatre) means ‘the place of disgrace’.” (Kovačević, M.: *Pozorište i glumci*, 1994: 8; my translation)

In considering the history of the cultural development of Southern Slavs it is crucial to note its inseparable connection to politics. Serbian medieval culture was directly related to the needs of the state and the church, whereas the affluence and political independence of Dubrovnik facilitated a strong influence of the Italian Renaissance in this part of latter-day Croatia. On the other hand, the subjugation of Southern Slavs under the Ottoman and/or the Hapsburg and the Austro-Hungarian Empire resulted in various degrees of appropriation of these cultural influences by the local cultural elites. The folkloric cultural heritage of dances and oral literature in the vernacular, which did survive among the rural populations, eventually became the mark of mutual recognition among Southern Slavs, thus fuelling the desire for liberation from foreign domination. In the mid-19th century, the Illyrian Movement gathered together similarly minded Slovenian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian cultural and political activists.

Written down by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the Serbian oral literature – which was primarily concerned with preserving historical fact rather than the aesthetic mechanisms of creating fictions – eventually became an internationally approved form of idiosyncratically Serbian literature, although this might have been the result of a fortunately timed coincidence – the Romantic nationalist movement in Europe. The fact that the collective author began to occupy the literary pedestal in Serbia, which Homer (a personified collective author?) had occupied in Ancient Greece, Shakespeare in

England or Goethe in Germany, unfortunately made it difficult for any subsequent individual authors to live up to collective expectations. Especially when the collective expectations have insisted on cultural conformism rather than diversification, heroic history rather than imaginative fantasy and the vernacular rather than stylised language

In terms of the specific history of theatre, numerous records have it that the origins of theatre are in 'the place of disgrace' as the Yugoslav actor from the beginning of the 20th century, Mihailo Kovačević, notes above. Although his is an etymological observation, it only serves to confirm the dissident role of theatre in the early Christian Orthodox world. These early entertainers – the urban vagrants, the politically derided social deriders – could not have survived through Ottoman rule because, on the one hand, the urban dwellers were collectively driven away, and on the other, Islam tolerated a limited variety of representational arts. Consequently, the local population retained their folkloric rituals and dances in the privacy of their own subjugation and for their own participatory collective entertainment – Serbian and most Balkan dances have the form of the inwardly inclusive and outwardly exclusive 'circle' dances. This too could only have laid foundations for a collective – either comedic or the Greek-style tragic – kind of theatre rather than morally controversial, individualist dramas. In Yugoslav drama these issues are apparent either inherently or through direct examination. Individualism is highlighted as a socially punishable form of behaviour, even at the expense of moral justice, in plays ranging from Nušić's The Deceased to Brešan's Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater and Kovačević's Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man. In addition, all of these plays – which are analysed in the following chapters – will recall features of the folk literature itself either for the sake of entertainment or as a means of social criticism. Finally, in the early 1980s the Croatian playwright Slobodan Šnajder will give a line to one of his characters which seems to

echo through centuries and can only be understood in the context of the above overview: 'God save me from Croatian culture and Serbian heroism!' It is no wonder that Yugoslav dramaturgy recognizes the form of the 'comedy of mentality'.

Contemporary Yugoslav drama is also here contextualised in terms of its own history. Its early stages in the late 19th century are characterised by either the nationalist heroic-romantic and inherently collectively sentimental fictions, or the 'plays with singing' and folkloric dancing and the comedies of manners. The latter genre was also able to resist the test of time more easily – as the heroic-romantic fictions had had their function only as long as the battle for national liberation was on the agenda. Consequently, the undisputed Serbian classics of all times became Jovan Sterija Popović and Branislav Nušić's 'comedies of mentality', while their Slovenian counterpart Ivan Cankar, for example, did manage to depart from the comic genre into socially relevant drama or even symbolism. The interwar attempts of the Serbian expressionists and surrealists to overcome constraints of the traditional literary discourse and subject matter could be seen as largely unsuccessful in terms of theatre, even if, like Nastasijević, they kept the subject matter whilst experimenting with form. The most significant Croatian playwright of the 20th century, Miroslav Krleža, also went down in history not as an early expressionist but as a realist dramatist whose plays dealt with the decadence of the Croatian bourgeoisie under the Austro-Hungarian empire. They were therefore canonised on the strength of their dramaturgical accomplishment and, later, on the strength of their left-wing views.

The inauguration of the socialist system naturally found a fertile ground among the nation with such a strong collective consciousness. In terms of domestic drama, again, those plays which had ridiculed the bourgeois manners remained relevant and

politically safe. The policy of cultural importation might have been controlled for a while and – as both Klaić and Stamenković note – playwriting only recommenced in Serbia in the 1960s. By this time, the degree of intellectual freedom had become considerable, and theatre gradually rediscovered its function as the seat of political dissidence – as exemplified by *Atelje 212*, among others. The new playwrights therefore sought to find ways of expression which would fulfil a number of criteria at the same time. They had to be intellectually truth-driven, stylistically obscured in order to evade political controversy and at the same time realistic and sufficiently accessible ‘to the masses’. Inevitably, this required multi-layered expression as well as posing numerous challenges to the playwrights. The emergence of metatheatre could be sought in this need for layered drama. However, metatheatre only really becomes a favoured means of expression in the 1980s when the freedom of expression is considerable.

Increasingly critical of the socialist system, its failings and mistakes, the theatre of the 1980s was also forced to re-examine itself and its own function at the time of ongoing crisis. By using the intertextual format of rewriting of history and metatheatre, the theatre of the 1980s was breaking taboos – the Nazi history of the Croats,⁶⁴ the hypocritical history of communism⁶⁵ – and in this way it was also anticipating an inevitable tragedy that was yet to come. The end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s thus saw a gradual rise of nationalism again, another upsurge of the sentimentalist, history-inspired fictions and a consequent break-up of Yugoslavia. Was, however, theatre – or metatheatre – ‘the place of ultimate disgrace’?

⁶⁴ Such as Slobodan Šnajder’s *The Croatian Faust* or Jovan Radulović’s *Golubnjača*.

⁶⁵ A significant number of plays from the 1980s were particularly critical of the post-1948 treatment of Stalinists and Russophiles in Yugoslavia and the Goli Otok camp.

3.

METATHEATRE

In Between Sentiment and Critical Thought

“Take a painting. It produces an illusion of a landscape, a house, the likeness of a human being in a portrait – and the only real elements it contains are paints and canvas. A play also produces an illusion, say, of Hamlet in the castle at Elsinore. But here Hamlet, the young man on the stage – long dead as a historical figure, perhaps never having lived and so a pure figment of the playwright’s imagination – is portrayed by a young man, an actor who really is a young man. And he is sitting on a chair which really is a chair. That that chair is supposed to be in a Danish castle centuries ago is the illusion we are asked to accept, but the chair is a chair nevertheless. Drama in performance, therefore, in contrast to all other illusion producing arts, contains, it might be said, a higher proportion of reality.” (Esslin, M.: An Anatomy of Drama; 1981: 86)

In 1963 Lionel Abel published his book of essays entitled Metatheatre, in which he argued that the genre of ‘tragedy’ – in the Greek sense of the word – did not exist anymore. He claimed that this extended even to Shakespeare’s tragedies, most of which – apart from Macbeth – were actually metaplays. He explained that Hamlet, for example, could not work as a tragedy because its plot was not dependant on the will of gods as was the case in Greek tragedies – or indeed on the presence of supernatural forces as was the case in Macbeth. Greek tragedy, Abel further claims, excluded villains from its universe – all characters were morally motivated, but the tragic ones overlooked their human faults, consequently underwent most profound suffering and ultimately achieved divinity. Further, death of a character can only be justified on the stage by the feeling that their death is destined, necessary or morally inevitable. This in turn can only be achieved if the world of the play is entirely subjected to an inflexible – supernatural – order. Shakespeare, however, acknowledged a much greater complexity of human nature than that which would succumb to any particular moral code.

“[E]ven if we assume Shakespeare to have had some measure of Christian belief, how could such belief have helped him in making a tragedy of Hamlet’s story? The Christian God, with the supernatural realms of hell, purgatory and heaven at his disposal, could scarcely be imagined as intervening in a human action for a this-world vengeance.” (Abel, 1963: 43)

Shakespeare is therefore confronted with the problem of justifying Hamlet’s act of revenge in terms of universal justice and consequently makes his hero contemplate his own predicament. Abel sees this as Shakespeare’s own dramaturgical weakness projected onto his main character. The characters then take on lives of their own and even attempt to ‘dramatize’ each other. In other words, the play’s characters are trying to write their own play – their own plot, their own fate – thus becoming dramatists in their own right. The Ghost casts Hamlet into the role of an avenger, and the Ghost himself is driven to ‘writing his own play’ because his unfortunate predicament has been authored by his brother. However, ‘the reaction of Hamlet is that of a man with playwright’s consciousness who has just been told to be an actor, and is now determined to make an actor of the very playwright who had cast him for the undesired role’ (ibid.: 47). Meanwhile, Polonius is writing his own ‘amateur’ play, treating his children as his actors; whilst Claudius also plots another intrigue around Hamlet with the aid of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and later by instigating a duel between Hamlet and Leartes. Of all the dramatists in the play – Ghost, Claudius, Polonius and Hamlet – all except Hamlet are writers of melodrama.

“Hamlet, then, with his gifted playwright’s consciousness has the problem of rewriting the melodrama he has been placed in, but with no alternative form in view. For he has been expressly forbidden [by the Ghost] to convert this melodrama into tragedy [by killing his mother]. Finally, he yields to the appeal of the one dramatist whose script, like tragedy, involves necessity and places one beyond chance. This dramatist is death. In turning toward death, Hamlet is turning to something outside the play, not fated by the plot as in tragedy, or forced on the plot as in melodrama. He is considering death and accepting it in its universal meaning, not as the fate likely to overtake

him because of his particular situation, but as that fate which must overtake everyone, no matter what situation he be in. Death, which I have called somewhat metaphorically the dramatist in whose script all must act, Hamlet appeals to as an ultimate form. To a modern consciousness is not death equal to the immortal gods?" (ibid.: 51)

This is an interesting slant on Hamlet which is often considered a metaplay simply because it features a play-within-the-play. This slant could also be seen as relevant to the post-structuralist notion of 'the death of the author' – as proposed by Barthes (1977) in relation to the Romantic 'author'. The same notion could be extended to post-socialism and linked to 'the death of a playwright' declared by Adrian Page (1992) in relation to anti-Thatcherite British playwrights. Primarily, Abel's own objective was to address and refute Martin Esslin's notion of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' as being the most relevant new mode of expression at the time. By offering an eclectic review of drama from Racine to Beckett and even the Living Theatre, he then proceeds to place the 'Theatre of the Absurd' into this, metatheatrical tradition. Abel's execution – although programmatic – is not sufficiently systematic and entirely convincing. He gradually defines metatheatre in opposition to tragedy, on the basis of the two main postulates – 'the world is a stage' and 'life is a dream' – drawn from Shakespeare and Calderón respectively. The sheer size of his task, the progressive generalisation of his definition and the subsequent results of his enquiry are all too feeble to uphold his initial argument. Ultimately, having coined the term 'metatheatre' with ambitions that the term itself could not always support, Abel has at least given us some interesting insights as well as the term itself.

Metatheatre as a device can indeed be traced back to the Renaissance – most notably Corneille's L'Illusion Comique – but even further back to Aristophanes' parodies and Euripides' The Bacchae which brings Dionysus himself onto the stage as an illusion-monger. In its various manifestations, metatheatre often introduces an additional

dimension to the world of the play. Thus theatre becomes self-reflexive as it draws attention to itself and its own format. Shakespeare used the play-within-the-play – the Mousetrap – in Hamlet to show how theatre reflects real life and to aid the title character in his quest. Despite Abel's argument that Shakespeare's metatheatre was the result of his inability to write Greek-style tragedies, we have evidence that Shakespeare used the same device in his comedies too. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, he not only uses a play within the play – Pyramus and Thisbe – to parody theatre's artificiality, but also presents the illusionary wood and Oberon's illusion-mongering as real. Zoran Milosavljević in his work Metateatralnost (Metatheatricality) observes that 'with the mechanicals we see presentation without illusion, and in the "nocturnal order" of the wood – illusion without presentation' (1994: 38, my translation). He further notes that A Midsummer Night's Dream was first written for and performed at the wedding of the Earl of Derby and Elisabeth de Verre. Given that Shakespeare's own play features a play within the play which is performed in honour of Theseus and Hyppolita's wedding, this particular fact adds an extra dimension to the entire theatrical event, whereby the theatre comes much closer to mirroring its immediate context (on that particular occasion). Thus the anticipated audience can recognize themselves very clearly and some of the commentary within the play could be construed as direct address whilst coded within the world of the play. These two are the most obvious examples of metatheatre in Shakespeare's work although his oeuvre abounds with similar instances of direct address of anticipated members of the audience⁶⁶ as well as framing of action within action and references to theatre and illusion.

⁶⁶ Stephen Jeffreys in his paper How Shakespeare Wrote Macbeth, delivered on 03.04.1998 at the NSDF, in the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, noted that Macbeth was written directly in response to James I's ascent to the throne. Apart from responding to the new king's interest in witchcraft, Shakespeare was also aware of the fact that James I was a direct descendant of Banquo. Thus, in the first performance of the play an actual mirror was held up to the king in order to establish this connection.

On the other hand, Brecht's method could also be seen as metatheatrical in terms of the use of a narrator and an insistence on the artificiality of theatre through the V-effect. His play The Caucasian Chalk Circle, for example, actually features a play within the play. However, his overall aim is clearly distinct from Shakespeare's. This distinction is most acutely manifested in the two playwrights' attitudes towards their audiences. Whilst Shakespeare might have aimed to trick the chosen spectator into involuntary recognition by keeping him within the world of the play, Brecht discouraged suspension of disbelief and reduced emotional access to the world of the play. In very simplistic terms Brecht's metatheatrical method was mainly the result of the playwright's intention to invoke and maintain critical thinking and a consequent deconstruction of theatre illusion.

It is ultimately Pirandello who is most closely associated with the notion of metatheatre, especially for the way in which he examines the degrees of reality of a piece of theatre and its internal world, and the reality of its context – epitomised in his plays Six Characters in Search of an Author, Henry IV and Tonight We Improvise.

Many European playwrights in the 20th century have engaged in writing metatheatrical plays at least once in their career. The use of metatheatre in these plays is varied and variously motivated. Among Soviet metaplays, probably the most significant are Bulgakov's comedy-allegories The Crimson Island (1927), dealing with censorship and A Cabal of Hypocrites or Molière (1929), dealing with Molière's difficulties in staging Tartuffe and thus being self-reflective of Bulgakov's own problems. In the post-war period, Sartre's 1954 play Kean – The Nightmare of a Genius was a successful re-writing of a play by Dumas about the 18th century English actor, which utilises various aspects of the comic genre in order to examine the notion of identity. Anouilh's plays feature similar concerns and frequent referencing to theatre starting with his 1944 hit

Antigone and also particularly prominent in Colombe. Jean Genet's plays such as The Maids (1947), The Balcony (1956) and The Blacks (1959) represent yet another dimension of metatheatricality by examining different levels of illusion, role-play and in the words of David Bradby the 'links between power and theatricality' (1988/90:385). Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1953) goes even further in exploring the notion of metatheatricality contained in the character's occasional ambiguous referencing to theatre and playing with theatrical immediacy.⁶⁷ In German drama, the most significant and internationally renowned examples of the metatheatrical genre occur in the 1960s with Peter Weiss' Marat-Sade (1964) and Günter Grass's Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising (1966). Both plays revolve around political art and the revolution whereby the first places the emphasis on psychological repression and social equality through a metaphor of a lunatic asylum and the second centres on Brecht himself examining his role in the actual political life of the state. Having occurred ever since Beumont and Fletcher, Kydd and Shakespeare, matatheatre and theatrical self-referencing remained a popular device in English drama well into the 20th century. Osborne's The Entertainer (1957) is considered one of the first significant examples of metatheatre in the post-war period but the format was probably most heavily utilised by Tom Stoppard ever since his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead in 1967. As noted in the previous chapter, all of these plays received significant productions in Yugoslavia in the post-war period and therefore the origins of Yugoslav metatheatre of the 1980s and 1990s can certainly be traced in the influence of European metadrama and these particular examples.

By deduction, I would propose for the moment that the term metatheatre is used to refer to a number of dramaturgical techniques, whereby metaplays can:

⁶⁷ In addition to referring directly to music hall and theatre in the play, the characters also occasionally touch on the fourth wall as in the instance when they discuss how to get to the toilet, for example.

- a) feature a play-within-the-play (which can either be obvious as in Hamlet, or initially disguised as in Tom Stoppard's The Real Thing);
- b) feature an illusionary world within the play which is presented as real (as in A Midsummer Night's Dream or Corneille's L'Illusion Comique)
- c) explore/exploit the nature of theatre itself (through commentary or parody as in Pirandello, through incidental remarks in Shakespeare, or by featuring actors as the main characters in the play as in Chekhov's The Seagull, Sartre's Kean etc.)
- d) mimic theatrical behaviour or the use of role-play (e.g. Genet's The Maids).

Further, there are various reasons for the use of metatheatre as a device. In general, metatheatre is either employed for technical/aesthetic or ideological/thematic reasons, or as a combination of these. Most commonly, metatheatre occurs as a means of:

- a) aiding suspension of disbelief and reinforcing the realism of the outer play by drawing attention to the inner play (e.g. Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and other plays which feature a theatre performance of a play within the play);
- b) amusing the audience through parody or through incidental references to theatre within a play (e.g. Noel Coward's plays)
- c) posing the inner play as a hypothesis for a discussion in the outer play (as in Six Characters in Search of an Author or The Caucasian Chalk Circle);
- d) dismantling the theatre illusion at the end of a play through a commentary, or as a means of conclusion or epilogue (Shakespeare's Tempest, Corneille's L'Illusion Comique)
- e) preventing suspension of disbelief and theatre illusion altogether by continuously drawing attention to the theatre's own artificiality (as in Brecht's use of the narrator and the V-effect).

This chapter is intended to examine the notion of metatheatre – not necessarily in its various manifestations in contemporary dramaturgy, but more specifically, in its cognitive and ideological implications on an audience, at the point of consumption. In addition, Linda Hutcheon's study of metafiction Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (1980) offers a series of relevant insights into the mechanism of self-reflexivity in fiction and its effect on the reader. This thesis, however, sees metatheatre as primarily a political tool. Various manifestations of metatheatre in Yugoslavian dramaturgy are explored in the following chapters, particularly in relation to their socio-political contexts. The main concern of the thesis are the reasons which might have led certain playwrights, consciously or – more likely – instinctively, to employ the metatheatrical device in order to achieve particular effects on their audience. The chosen contexts – Yugoslavia of the 1980s and Yugoslavia of the 1990s – provide two very different patterns of consumption of theatre and fiction in general. In the 1980s metatheatre was utilised as a means of re-examination of history and a political commentary. In the 1990s, general mythomania and a proliferation of sentimentalist-nationalist fictions, followed by distinctly escapist fictions, finds metatheatre struggling to conform to the audience demand whilst also maintaining critical distance. Both of these contexts are characterised by one continuing crisis. Under such circumstances, reality and everyday life are more or less dramatised or theatricalised. I find it extremely pertinent, therefore, to also focus here on the notions of fiction and reality, sentiment and emotion as well as 'belief' and 'suspension of disbelief'. In this I refer to a number of debates which recently evolved in the fields of political and aesthetic philosophy and the philosophy of mind. Apart from helping to justify the possibility of an emotional response to non-sentimentalist fiction and consequently justify non-Brechtian illusionist (meta)theatre, an analysis of these concepts will also be relevant to the particular plays studied in later chapters. For example, Ljubomir Simović often

insists on blurring the boundary between reality and fiction within his plays and this is the predominant theme of his play The Travelling Theatre Šopalović. On the other hand, Dušan Kovačević's play Larry Thompson: The Tragedy of a Young Man, relies heavily on the audience itself and the ritual of 'suspension of disbelief' in the absence of the fourth wall. In conclusion to this chapter, I shall briefly return to the emergence of metatheatre in contemporary Yugoslav dramaturgy, before proceeding with detailed analysis of the most important examples of this trend in the following chapters.

Contemporary Metafictions

Significantly for the context of contemporary trends in European theatre, Ruby Cohn in her title Retreats From Realism in Recent English Drama (1991), quotes metatheatre as one of the ways in which this retreat has occurred:

“During the second half of the twentieth century, realism was submerged under the more general term ‘representation,’ and its opposite became ‘presentation.’ Another antonym for realism is theatricalism, the foregrounding of theatre in performance, which embraces styles from Aristophanes to Ayckbourn. In postmodern critical theory theatricalism has been both anathemised and valorized [sic.], depending on the theorist.” (1991: 95)

On a technical level, Cohn also makes a distinction between the notion of ‘theatre in the theatre’ and ‘play within the play’, suggesting that ‘theatre in the theatre’ can also encompass various other forms of popular entertainment and not only inset plays. Her departure point in this context is Osborne’s The Entertainer (1957). Further she explores a number of metatheatrical manifestations, also making a useful distinction between familiar and fictional plays within plays and focusing on Stoppard, Edgar and Wertebaker, in amongst many others, sadly only up until 1991.

Interestingly, this is exactly the point at which major new retreats occur in contemporary British – and European – drama as a direct result of significant political changes in Europe, namely, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is also important to note here the overwhelming Brechtian influence on the anti-Thatcherite British dramatists of the 1980s. Both Brechtian Marxism and his aesthetics – his ‘Epic Theatre’ – had become major driving forces in the British mainstream theatre of the 1980s. Howard Brenton, David Edgar and Edward Bond had all declared their allegiance to Brecht at one point or another, whilst writing plays in a decidedly anti-illusionist, V-effect manner. Thus, when Cohn talks about two antonyms to realism in the then contemporary English drama, it is highly likely that ‘presentation’ actually stands for Brechtian retreat from realism, and ‘theatricalism’ for an illusionist, non-Brechtian, Stoppard-type metatheatre. Although this thesis is not directly concerned with Brechtian theatre – which would certainly merit an independent study in the context of metatheatre – it is important to acknowledge the implications that Brechtian allegiances generated in contemporary European theatre.

On the one hand, the fall of the wall marked the end of the Cold War and the defeat of socialism as an official ideology in most countries of the Eastern Bloc. Simultaneously, the Brechtian/marxist theatre inevitably lost its credibility. Although discussed by Cohn in her chosen context, Wertebaker’s Our Country’s Good is in many ways a (meta)play which actually belongs to the post-socialist, post-Thatcherite British drama. It belongs to an era of ideological vacuum marked by a profound sense of disillusionment – which was then being voiced by many formerly ‘Brechtian’ playwrights. However, it was Stoppard’s (meta)drama that survived this crisis.⁶⁸ On the other hand, it is also significant for this study to note the near-absence of Brechtian

⁶⁸ Indeed, the proliferation of metaplays in the early 1990s in British theatre – which also includes Stephen Jeffreys’ The Libertine and April de Angelis’ Playhouse Creatures, for example – as a result of the post-socialist disillusionment, is reminiscent of the rise of metatheatre in the 1980s Yugoslavia.

influence on Yugoslav drama and of Brecht's plays in Yugoslav theatre repertoires. This might have been the result of an increasingly reactionary and critical stance against socialism and socialist realism in Yugoslavia over time, although Abel offers an interesting observation which might apply to Yugoslav post-war theatre in general:

“Curiously enough, the Communist theoreticians of the theatre strongly supported realistic and naturalistic techniques in playwrighting, acting, and even stage design. (One must except Meyerhold, but he was liquidated by Stalin.) The Communists were for the Stanislavsky type of theatre, with its concentration on close analysis of individual motivation in a realistic setting. But Brecht, even when he became converted to Communism as a political doctrine, never yielded to the Communist theory of what theatre should be. The Communists of course did not believe in the individual or in moral experience any more than Brecht did, but they did not want to admit this publicly since they were interested in appealing to individuals and justifying Communism morally.” (op.cit.: 103-4)

I would add to this that certainly those early Communist – presumably Abel actually means Russian Communist – theoreticians of socialist realism were very much aware of the danger of any retreat from realism into subversive metaphor or allegory – which is why they had liquidated Meyerhold and a number of symbolist poets. However, theatre – certainly in Yugoslavia, and probably in most other Eastern European countries – became by the 1980s a seat of political dissidence. Given a considerable degree of self-censorship, (non-Brechtian) metatheatre might have become the most convenient retreat from realism, which most resembled realism but could still encode political commentaries through metaphors. Brecht did finally become popular in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s – but this time as an anti-war poet, a personality rather than a politician.

In any case, I find it is important to conclude this digression by highlighting the crucial distinction between illusionist metatheatre (from now on – simply ‘metatheatre’) and Brechtian (meta)theatre. It is certain contemporary examples of (illusionist) metatheatre which might therefore be referred to as postmodern metafiction.

Linking back to the above mentioned ambivalence of postmodern critics towards metafiction, it is worth considering Linda Hutcheon's exploration of metanarratives, intended to address misconceptions applying to this literary device. She notes (in the domain of novels specifically) that metafiction can also be didactic in that it places an emphasis on the process of creation rather than the final product, thus inviting the reader to co-create meanings. This is a more sophisticated – and probably more stimulating and more rewarding – version of didacticism than that offered by some of Brechtian propagandists. Further Hutcheon notes that metafiction – or 'narcissistic narratives' – are open; they often pre-empt the critic's role as commentator, and in this way they could be seen as different to modernist fictions which 'proceeded to orient critics and readers formally and formalistically toward the closed text and its difficulties' (1980: xiii). This might be why metafiction has often been seen as a postmodern phenomenon. They also go hand in hand with a recent trend (also identified by Cohn) of re-examining and re-writing history, whereby the socially constructed reality of historical events – and/or life in general – could just as well be considered socially constructed fictions. In the process of re-writing, these historical 'fictions' then become metafiction. Thus fictions and realities are brought into the interchangeable, if not the same domains. Most importantly, however, metafiction, according to Hutcheon, bestow – or restore – freedom and power to the reader. Addressing the Barthesian declaration of the 'author's death' Hutcheon notes:

"In today's metafiction, the artist re-appears, not as a God-like Romantic creator, but as the inscribed maker of social product that has the potential to participate in social change through its reader. Such an acknowledgement of the power of language is also an acknowledgement of the potential for ideological manipulation by the wielder of that language. The best way to demystify power, metafiction suggests, is to reveal it in all its arbitrariness." (ibid.: xvi)

This relinquishing of fiction's power is probably most obvious in the fact that the shifting perspectives or multiple frames that metafiction offers actually prevent the reader from falling into the trap of sentimentalism or melodrama, which was initially Brecht's concern, leading him to devise the V-effect. However, metafiction does not necessarily interfere with reader's perception in the direct way espoused by Brecht. While not necessarily precluding the reader from emotional engagement, they offer him/her scope for thinking by possibly giving the reader the freedom to choose how and why he/she engages. Sentimentalist fictions, by contrast, often manipulate readers through black-and-white characterisations and pleasing development of plots – which are often distillations of reality rather than strictly speaking realistic.

Additionally, Hutcheon makes another point concerning the paradoxical, two-fold nature of metafiction which makes it possible to achieve both the critical distance required by Brecht and an emotional engagement sought by most readers:

“[I]n all fiction, language is representational of a fictional other world, a complete and coherent ‘heterocosm’ created by the fictive references of the signs. In metafiction, however, this fact is made explicit and, while he reads, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. However, paradoxically, the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. [...] The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented towards the reader.” (ibid.: 7)⁶⁹

Principally, however, Hutcheon aims to devise a defence of the 1960s metafiction:

“‘Narcissistic’ – the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness – is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive, as [an] ironic allegorical reading of the Narcissus myth [...]. Nor are the inevitable psychoanalytic connotations to be taken negatively, as many who have not read Freud himself on the

⁶⁹ I shall elaborate later how important this notion is in the Yugoslav cultural context where the readers/viewers' responses to fiction have often – and particularly in the last ten years – demonstrated total disregard for the boundary between fiction and reality.

subject might tend to do. In fact it was Freud who conferred on narcissism the status of the 'universal original condition' of man [...]. These psychological associations, while likely inevitable, are here however, irrelevant in that it is the narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic." (ibid.: 1)

Hutcheon emphasises that although proliferation of metafiction coincides with postmodernism, they should not be treated as an exclusively postmodern phenomenon, because they originate in a much more distant past, possibly starting with Don Quixote.⁷⁰ Besides, she demarcates her discussion of metafiction from the postmodernist debate, which focuses on either the author or the socio-political, historical, philosophical and psychological causes of contemporary culture's self-consciousness. Instead, she is primarily interested in the emphasis that metafiction places on the imaginative process and the way in which narcissistic narrative is a 'process made visible'.

Even if metafiction could be seen as a postmodern phenomenon I certainly think that they should primarily be viewed on the level of a relationship between the author, the text and the reader. Theatre experience is much less intimate than that, but the model still applies. Susan Bennett notes that Handke's play from 1966 Offending the Audience based itself entirely on the 'assumptions of the [theatre art] and the role of [its] audience' (1997: 35). Although this trend subsequently gave rise to the 'reader-response' theory, the theory itself will not be considered in the discussion below as it is not sufficiently pertinent to our concerns of emotional engagement.

On a metaphorical level, in her analysis of metafiction, Hutcheon also seeks to translate Freud's concept to literature and establish narcissistic fiction as 'the original condition' (of novel as a genre), and more importantly – to acknowledge and reinforce

⁷⁰ Hutcheon is discussing meta-novels, rather than meta-drama which can be traced back even further.

Ovid's observation that, although self-obsessed to the point of self-destruction, Narcissus actually continued to live on in two forms – in the underworld as well as, in a different form, as a flower.

The Phenomenon of Experiencing Theatre Fiction

“[I]t is characteristic of some enjoyments that one should be so wrapped up in them as to forget what one is doing. This is especially evident in cases such as watching plays or films, reading books or listening to music. [...] Such a circumstance is some indication of a high degree of pleasure taken. But it is a condition of this degree of enjoyment that a person should no longer be aware that he is watching a film. Yet it is watching the film that he is enjoying [...]. If it is claimed that he is enjoying his illusion well and good, but he is not aware that it is an illusion and it is essential to his enjoyment that he should not be. [...] Thus the point is just that for anyone to enjoy something they must at least be having some experience where dreams and illusions count as experiences.” (Gosling, 1969: 61-2)

When considering theatre in relation to other representational arts, it is important to acknowledge its own particular characteristics and rules of consumption. As noted by Esslin earlier, theatre features ‘a higher proportion of reality’ than most other illusion producing arts. By this, Esslin is referring to theatre’s immediacy – to the real action which takes place in real-time in a particular time-period and in the presence of an audience. In support of this view, Esslin also claims:

“In the purely academic study of drama, attention tends quite naturally to focus on the element most readily available for study: the text, the play as literature. The quality of other elements, the performance [...], is far more elusive [...]. Yet these are the elements which play the decisive part in attracting audiences to the theatre, and which, if we analysed the impact of a theatrical experience on audiences, would also, I am sure, be found to account for the bulk of the enjoyment the audience derives from a theatrical experience.” (op.cit.: 87)

In this respect, the phenomenon of ‘suspension of disbelief’ is an interactive process – between the multiple co-authors of the actual performance and the audience – which needs to be maintained throughout the duration of the fictional experience. The

interactive element to this particular mode of reception is what distinguishes theatre from, for example, novels – which can be read at the reader's own pace and will.

The notion of 'suspension of disbelief', however, becomes a moral issue when the audience's consent to an illusion is manipulated or abused. It is worth noting that Brecht developed his anti-illusionist Epic Theatre not only in reaction to the bourgeois theatre and the melodramatic genre, nor solely as a result of his allegiance to Marxist philosophy, but also within a particular socio-political context – the rise of Nazism in Germany.⁷¹ Both Hume, and recently, the contemporary philosopher David Miller have asserted that nationalism is an ideology which appeals to sentiment. I would venture to say that most political ideologies in fact, aim to achieve precedence by appealing to sentiment. More importantly, most political ideologies seek to recruit followers by anchoring themselves in sentimentalist fiction. Mark Jefferson (in his debate of sentimentalist fictions, published in the journal *Mind*, 1983) rightly cautions against the sinister aspect of sentimentality as an instrument in inciting hatred, whilst at the same time restricting a moral objection to a particular – black and white – fiction that sentimentality employs. In discussing sentimentality as an ethical and aesthetic defect, Jefferson places an emphasis on an over-simplified (selective) appraisal of the protagonists and antagonists, which – characteristic of sentimentality – leads to extremist moral representation of characters. His criticism is aimed at the nature of fiction rather than the reader, however.

Much has been said in this respect, about Hitler's appreciation of 'kitsch'⁷² – which he undoubtedly saw as a useful weapon. One thing that both ideology and sentimentalist fiction require is undisputed belief and undisputed 'suspension of disbelief'

⁷¹ Incidentally, Pirandello too developed his metatheatrical approach in Mussolini's Italy, though he was not politically motivated against this regime.

⁷² See Gillo Dorfles: *Kitsch: an anthology of bad taste*; Studio Vista, London, 1969

respectively. Essentially then, Brecht was reacting to sentimentality; and his reaction was twofold: aesthetic (against melodrama and kitsch) and political (against right wing ideologies). Questions might arise as to whether it was necessary to dispense with theatre illusion altogether in order to avoid the danger of sentimentalism? Certainly, we have seen that even the greatest tragedies, the greatest literature has often been manipulated and made to serve corrupt ideologies. We have also seen that Brechtian theatre, being itself based on an ideology, has been utilised for political purposes and has ended up appealing to – a different kind of – sentiment. This discussion aims to demonstrate that illusionist metatheatre might have been just as viable an alternative to corrupt or sentimentalist fictions.

Another useful distinction to make is that between sentimentality and real emotion. It has been a subject of debate in contemporary philosophy whether real emotion is at all possible in response to fiction, as fiction itself is not real. Although our concern here is not necessarily the possibility of an emotional response to fiction, it would be useful for this study to establish the general nature of audience's experience of theatre.⁷³

Belief and Suspension of Disbelief

The term 'suspension of disbelief' seems to have been interpreted in a number of ways in philosophical debate. Eva Schaper (1978) in her discussion of the phenomenon departs from the following standpoint: 'unless disbelief were suspended, we could not avoid the puzzle resulting from being moved by what we do not believe ever really happened or ever existed' (1978: 31). This implies an emphasis on a particular active disbelief, which needs to be suspended for the reason of avoiding the quoted puzzle. In

⁷³ This exploration also indirectly addresses Baudrillard's claim that all art is a hyperrealistic simulation which subsequently becomes irrelevant to our concerns.

other words, the puzzle results from being moved by what we disbelieve to be the case and therefore a suspension of the disbelief is necessary in order to be justifiably moved. This departure point is problematic, not least because it seems to imply conscious self-deception. It is necessary, therefore, to reread the expression 'suspension of disbelief' as a double negation: 'suspension' meaning that something does *not* apply to the case in point and *disbelief* being a negation of belief. It is clearly possible to interpret this – like Schaper – as meaning that certain disbeliefs do not apply. However, if we look at it as a mathematical double negation, it follows that 'suspension of disbelief' ultimately equals – application of – belief. Since it is widely held that we cannot believe fiction literally, and since it is also held that we cannot enjoy it unless we believe it, the double negation conveniently indicates that we can do 'the opposite of the opposite' of believing it. 'Suspension of disbelief' also indicates that the act is temporary and – more importantly – that it is an act, which is therefore, at the disposal of our will.

Since 'suspension of disbelief' could be taken to imply a kind of belief, it would be useful to examine the notion of belief itself before proceeding with further discussion.

Most philosophers of the mind seem to agree on the following aspects of belief:

1. the truth-aiming quality of belief (we want our beliefs to be true),
2. beliefs are related to knowledge (our beliefs can be based on knowledge, experience or evidence that something is the case, but need not be),
3. beliefs are related to action (we may act on our beliefs, and our beliefs may be deduced from our actions; we may act to evaluate or modify our beliefs; also, our beliefs may be expressed or asserted, but speech-acts may or may not be representative of our beliefs)
4. beliefs may be related to will (our beliefs arise spontaneously; but we can sometimes control what we believe in relation to 1, 2 and 3 above).

Each of these aspects of belief has given rise to discussion of various inherent problems concerning especially the notion of responsibility for our beliefs and relevant models of control over what we believe. In this respect, Jonathan Cohen offers a useful distinction between 'belief' and 'acceptance', whereby the notion of control and responsibility is restricted to what we accept to be the case rather than what we believe to be the case. Thus, you – the reader, may not believe that what I am writing is the case, but you accept it for the moment within the context of my exposition of an argument. In drawing the distinction between acceptance and belief, Cohen departs from the proposition that acceptance is a mental act (distinct from a speech act) which can be limited in time (as opposed to being permanent) and which implies going along with a premise. 'Belief that *p*, on the other hand, is a disposition to feel that *p*, [it is a mental state], whether or not one goes along with the proposition as a premise' (1989: 368).⁷⁴ An acceptance can sometimes give rise to a belief and vice versa; but whilst acceptance is decidable at will, subject to evidence and conscious, belief is not. In terms of a conjunction or a web of beliefs, therefore, we are not accountable for their logical inconsistencies as we are liable for the logical inconsistencies of a conjunction of acceptances, especially if they entail a speech act. However, although both acceptance and belief may vary with the occasion, acceptance is not a matter of degree like belief is. In other words, we either accept something with stronger or lesser determination or willingness, but we accept it or not, whereas our belief that *p* could be stronger than our belief that *q*.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Further, reasons for accepting something can be ethical or prudential rather than necessarily epistemic, as in the case of a lawyer who accepts that his client is not guilty even if he does not believe it.

⁷⁵ In the context of action, Cohen firstly acknowledges the widely held standpoint that desires and beliefs determine our actions, then draws respective analogies between 1) belief and desire and 2) acceptance and goal-seeking, and assigns the responsibility for action to the latter combination ideally being the case. This piece of analysis is particularly useful for us in considering non-action in response to fiction. Given that we cannot have personal goals in response to fiction, the possible number of permutations is reduced, and given that we cannot always justifiably act on desire, we have grounds for explaining the notion of non-action (which deserves space elsewhere).

Another useful tool that I would like to mention before returning to Schaper is Johnson's notion of 'the threshold of evidence'. Johnson (1976) proposes that what is controllable in respect to our beliefs is the threshold of evidence we need in order to believe something. Thus even if one is not convinced of something, one may – having lowered the standards – decide that one has enough evidence to believe it. Conversely, one may decide to raise the standards if one has suffered from being too gullible in the past. In any case, what Johnson seems to be saying, translated into Cohen's terms, relates to standards for acceptance.

It might be immediately obvious how Cohen's distinction applies to suspension of disbelief, whereby it implies acceptance as a temporary mental act, which can be adopted for other than epistemic reasons. In the case of metatheatres we simply generate two interrelated webs of acceptances. Thus in watching Hamlet, we firstly generate a web of acceptances in relation to Hamlet's own circumstances, and the Mousetrap then demands another web of acceptances, which from our point of view, is directly related to the first. The question remains as to the role of our beliefs (as mental states) in appreciation of fiction. In other words, we may engage with a play through a series of acceptances, but it is still unclear how we can apply our beliefs in the course of a play and thus begin to emote.

The Possibility of Emotional Responses to Fiction

William Charlton (1984) begins his enquiry into the emotional response to fiction by examining the notions of belief and desire. He quotes Colin Radford as claiming that one can only be moved if one believes that something terrible has happened to

somebody and also that being moved entails wanting to do something to help ‘the object of emotion’.⁷⁶ The problem with emotional responses to fiction is that the agent cannot truly believe that something terrible has happened when it is fictitious anyway, and the agent can certainly do nothing in response to the event.⁷⁷ In this respect, Charlton has argued that feeling for a fictitious person is similar to feeling for a real one and that ultimately it is an affirmation of our moral self. In other words, it is enough to hold a moral principle and emotional responses to representational art are a means of affirmation of those moral principles even if they inhibit relevant action.

“[O]ur experience of representational art seems both to belong to our practical life as a whole and to be detached from it. Our feeling of being pulled in these opposite directions is very hard to account for, I think, so long as we explain responding to fiction as imagining feelings, or as suspending disbelief, or simply as irrational.” (1984: 216)

Here Charlton unwittingly connects with Ronald de Sousa (1987) as they both highlight the morally affirmative value of emotions per se. Additionally, this reminds us of the social function of Greek tragedy which served as a means of maintaining the ethical status quo by safely examining morally unthinkable modes of behaviour.⁷⁸

On the other hand, we could take de Sousa’s definition of tragedy (in life) ‘as implying a necessary conflict in which both sides are right and wrong at once and no escape into a third alternative is possible’ (1987: 328) and apply it to theatre in most cases. As Charlton notices, the audience inevitably desires a pleasing resolution – even if they know the end of the play – but they can’t interfere because 1) the convention does not

⁷⁶ One of the objections that Ronald de Sousa (1987), amongst others, has in relation to sentimentality is that sentimentality is ‘contemplative self-indulgence’ whereby the agent does not act in any way.

⁷⁷ Some writers, especially the proponents of the ‘thought theory’, have also claimed that strictly speaking the object in fiction is ‘thought’ or that it is, by deduction, simply ‘nothing’. (Gron, 1996)

⁷⁸ It might have been this extremely ‘liberal’ content of Greek art that prompted Plato to think of banishing artists and not art per se, as de Sousa seems to interpret it.

allow it⁷⁹ and 2) the tragedy would not be what it is if it had a happy ending (a happy ending would render it closer to sentimental fiction, or even to de Sousa's deplored concept of 'utopia' where there is 'nothing left to desire'). However, the audience can leave illuminated or intellectually stimulated. One hears of theatre offering life-changing experiences, often on a very personal level. In this sense the action in response to a moving situation is merely delayed, and of course misdirected. But what Charlton is also saying is – if someone is moved to action towards real people as a result of their response to a fictional situation, so much the better.

A Case Study: Yugoslav Responses to Fiction

In the early 1990s there were at least two public riots in response to theatre in Yugoslavia. One concerned a play about St Sava⁸⁰ – the 12th century prince-turned-monk. There was something in the newly awakened national awareness (or 'sentiment') that had initially inspired the writing of the play and then provoked popular disapproval of some aspects of it, causing its withdrawal from the repertoire. The second incident involved a production of Brecht's Mother Courage. When the play was on tour in a provincial town in Serbia, local women (most of whom had just had to send their sons to the battlefield in Croatia or Bosnia) staged a protest in the theatre. Nothing much more is known about this incident, despite the fact that TV cameras were there. The regime-controlled media were never allowed to report it.

The point is that this was the age of sentiment (or nationalism) in Serbia, and people's reactions although very differently motivated in the two cases, seemed to be saying that

⁷⁹ Except in the case of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre where the spect-actors, are invited to step in and offer various resolutions to a set up dramatic situation. The process – ideologically inspired by Brecht – also has its own conventions.

⁸⁰ Sveti Sava by Siniša Kovačević is briefly discussed in Chapter Seven.

the theatre at the time was treated as seriously as reality, and conversely, that reality was as theatricalised as theatre. In any case, Brechtian detachment failed given the best of circumstances – mothers had obviously responded to (even the notion of) the play emotionally. Another symptom of the fact that something had gone wrong with the boundaries between reality and fiction in Serbia was a growing addiction to soap operas, proliferation of magical realist novels at best, and of actual magicians at worst, as well as metatheatre – or the kind of theatre that was insisting on connecting with the theatricalised reality. An example of this occurred during the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia when people went to the theatres instead of shelters. At one of the theatres Ronald Harwood's monologue The Guests was on, and the actress, instead of directing the line 'I am so glad you came' to an imaginary visitor, stepped out of character and addressed it to the audience.

The above examples are obviously extreme and very specific. However, my intention is not to blur the boundary between reality and fiction in order to assess the possibility of real emotion in such a context, but precisely the opposite. In fact, what seems to be the case in the above context is a complete chaos regarding agents and objects, causes and reasons, beliefs and desires and principally values. But then again, 'the real' Vronski, made famous as Anna Karenina's lover, is believed to have left his bones in Serbia, where he has a very real grave.

The Reality of Fiction

Charlton mentions in passing the importance of the context, or the fictional world within which we obtain all the necessary information to form beliefs about characters and begin to emote towards them. Dammann (1992) engages with this notion too:

“[W]e have to remember that we are not moved by Anna [Karenina]’s suicide [...] *tout court*, but by the way these events are *related*, that is, related to the whole of which they are a part (stories do not state, they relate). Not to see this is to confuse fiction with (imagined) reality.” (1992: 18)

Particularly significant here is Dammann’s insistence on the integrity of fiction as a domain – evocative of Hutcheon’s ‘heterocosms’. I would further suggest that if fiction is to be considered as a separate domain, then it needs to be considered as a representation or sublimation of our ‘reality’, in which we inevitably need to recognize aspects of ourselves or the world we live in, for it to have a meaning and an effect.

In the course of his examination, Dammann briefly entertains Novitz’s comparison of ‘imaginative response’ to day-dreaming inspired by Coleridge’s comparison of ‘illusion’ (or suspension of disbelief) to dreaming. Although Dammann sees this as a problematic ‘cognitive disengagement’ in terms of object, the analogy is interesting as it tries to imply that the agent’s consciousness is altered, the agent is passive yet engaged and, in Coleridge’s case, the agent is certainly capable of an emotional response to what he clearly perceives as an object outside of himself (as in a nightmare, for example).

I would like to offer a linguistic curiosity here (following structuralist perceptions of the world as well as de Sousa’s observation that language forms our ability to experience life the same way as emotions do). In the Serbo-Croatian language the word for ‘dream’ is *san*. Whereas the opposite of ‘dream’ in the English language would probably be ‘reality’ – the opposite for *san* is *java*; and the word for ‘reality’ is different – *stvarnost* (which has its root in the word *stvar* meaning ‘thing’ or ‘matter’). This implies at least that in Serbo-Croat ‘dream’ is not defined in binary opposition to ‘reality’. There is simply a distinction between the dreaming state and the state of being awake, both of

which could either be part of reality, or completely other than reality if the word for reality – *stvarnost* is taken to apply only to the material world.

Taken further, there is no reason why dreaming could not be seen as ‘a reality’.⁸¹

Additionally, there is no adequate term in the Serbo-Croatian for ‘fiction’ either. The nearest linguistic equivalents include *fikcija* or *fantastika*. However, *fikcija* is indicative of a specific notion or an idea rather than being a generative term (thus we can talk of ‘fictive ideas’ in this sense in both the domain of reality and fiction). *Fantastika*, on the other hand, implies strictly non-naturalistic or fantastic genre of fiction. Instead of ‘fiction’, however, we normally use the more specific terms such as literature, theatre, film, which again indicate an artistic category rather than being the terms that imply binary opposition to reality.

By analogy, there is no reason why theatre could not be seen as ‘a reality of a kind’ too.

Thus, what I am proposing here is a paraphrase of Abel’s quotations of Calderón and Shakespeare as: ‘the dream is a life’ and ‘the stage is a world’.⁸²

The main cause of this entire discussion might have resided precisely in the statement that ‘everyone seems to agree that we don’t mistake fiction for reality’ (Dammann: op. cit.: 13). For if fiction were to be mistaken for reality, then it could not be defined by contrast to it. And if it were not defined by contrast to it, it would have to be defined as a phenomenon of the kind – hence, we can begin to talk of the reality of fiction.

⁸¹ In this context, one can even look for ways in which dreaming could have been an actual predecessor of our urge to create or consume fictions. I have argued elsewhere that the clearest proof of our creativity is the irrefutable fact of the ability to dream (in most people’s cases).

⁸² This is intended to draw further away from Baudrillard, and nearer to the parallel worlds theory.

This automatically addresses the question of belief. It has been seen as difficult to assign belief to something that is obviously 'not real'. However, once fiction ceases to be defined by contrast to reality, the question of belief in ethical terms, ceases to be a relevant question. In any case, voluntary 'suspension of disbelief' already addresses the question to an extent. We choose to suspend our disbelief in order to get pleasure from the experience of watching a play (or reading a book etc.). Voluntary 'suspension of disbelief' further aids emoting towards a character, who is the undeniable object as Dammann has established.

Consequently, our disposition to such a 'reality' of theatre is certainly that of acceptance in Cohen's terms. When we watch a play, we merely accept that, for example, we are seeing Richard III on the stage, that he is evil and that he is a cripple and we further accept all the consequences of his actions as being the case. The above definition of fiction as a parallel or hypothetical reality makes it possible to propose that we are also using our beliefs (as predispositions to feel or mental states) and therefore we might be struck by pity for Richard's physical defect whilst at the same time experiencing anger at his capacity for evil. This possibility of experiencing conflicting emotions about an object in fiction is what prevents us from merely reacting sentimentally.

The Process of Experiencing Theatre Reality

It is important also to acknowledge the highly ritualised experience that is the experience of watching a play, in the context of our debate. 'Suspension of disbelief' is part of the ritual – I would call it 'a point of crossing' from one kind of reality (our

everyday life) into another heightened kind of reality with its own conventions where the speed of events and intensity of experience are often accelerated. This is not dissimilar from the rituals in certain cultures, which involve participation in a series of events that lead to an altered state of consciousness and higher intensity of experience. By convention, in Western theatre practice audiences are passive observers – and it is this fact that seems to be the root of several problems in the current debate.

So what do we actually do by suspending our disbelief? I would say that we completely lower our threshold of evidence for acceptance, rather than actually suspending any particular disbeliefs. In this sense we actually seem to perform the act of *belief by fiat*. In other words, we perform a mental act – which we know will have a temporary effect – and we perform it willingly in order to gain pleasure of experiencing fiction. Given that acceptance can give rise to belief (as explained by Cohen) we also begin to form beliefs about what we see on the stage and these beliefs can, but need not, be connected to our *a priori* web of beliefs. Since beliefs, unlike acceptances can be contradictory, there is no reason why we cannot believe in fiction whilst experiencing it although we do not believe in it otherwise. Also, since acceptance is not a matter of degree, like belief is – we accept the reality of what is going on on the stage and then believe it to varying degrees. For example, having accepted that Richard III has given an order for princes' murder, we might refuse to believe that the princes will be killed, because something might happen to prevent it. This makes up the dynamics of our experience of fiction. And even if we have seen the play before, we might surprisingly catch ourselves hoping that the course of the action will be different than the one we already know. Alternatively, if we do not accept certain aspects of the reality on the stage (on the grounds of 'believability'), our suspension of disbelief suffers an interference and we are not engaged on the level of belief and feeling. For example, we might feel that a

particular actor's performance or an aspect of the storyline is unconvincing or that the set and costumes are distracting, in which case we are not likely to enjoy the play much. In other words, interference with the suspension of disbelief is on the level of what is acceptable (logically, semantically or aesthetically) given that a play features a whole range of aspects to be accepted. Whether or not we accept them is sometimes, but not always, under our control. However, since acceptances cannot be contradictory, as long as we can make a logical conjunction of acceptances regarding one aspect of the play we can begin to believe and engage emotionally in terms of that aspect. If however, our inability to accept other aspects outweighs our ability to accept a certain aspect, suspension of disbelief is impossible because our attention will be drawn to the 'first-order beliefs' – which is Schaper's definition of beliefs relating to fictions as artefacts as opposed to 'second-order beliefs' which relate to the plot itself.

In the light of the fact that whilst watching a play we accept and process all given information using the very cognitive skills that we ordinarily use (in everyday life), we evaluate the characters and their predicaments in relation to our moral values – it is only natural that we could be moved to emote towards those characters as a result of their predicaments. In de Sousa's terms, even if we are participating in a ritual, we seem to reserve a degree of independence as to whether and how we emote (due to our imposed passivity) and as long as the play is not designed to appeal to our sentiment (to which case this entire discussion is irrelevant), this kind of ritual is safe.⁸³

The objection to our non-action towards the object of our emotion, however, is counteracted by the set of conventions which we have accepted (as mentioned before). In other words, the fourth wall is often imposed by the world of the play, rather than

⁸³ I would like to emphasise that my discussion here is restricted to the audience response rather than the authors of sentimental fictions, and that Jefferson's concerns remain. Of course, the audience cannot be controlled in their choice of what to consume.

ourselves. Also, it needs restating that the experience of watching a play has its limited duration. Upon the ending of the play, our 'suspension of disbelief' ends too. It is usually then that we begin to treat the characters as 'not real' in the context of our 'real life'. However, we might be intellectually or emotionally stimulated and the process of intellectual appraisal of our moral norms and emotional responses might continue. All this, of course, happens on condition that we have maintained our 'suspension of disbelief' throughout the play, which is admittedly not always the case (due to a number of possible distractions or our own disposition to the play and its ability to maintain our engagement). All this, of course, happens in illusionist theatre.

Post-show deliberations, for example, involve both aesthetic concerns and – on some occasions – moral ones. Complete suspension of disbelief is rarely possible but it can be aided variably – either by a particular performance of an actor, or a particular device that the writer or the director has used. We judge the play on how well it has maintained our suspension of disbelief (which is assessable in terms of how engaged we became with our beliefs and emotions). The fact that these 'first-order beliefs' emerge at the end of the show, however, does not mean that they are active and have to be suspended before the show.

I might have taken the truth-aiming quality of beliefs for granted, but without going into too much depth, I hope to have established that by treating fiction as a reality of a kind, the question of truth appertains as much as it does in real life. In other words, we can certainly get a glimpse of truth in fiction once we have allowed ourselves to believe in its reality.

The paradox remains that we enjoy fiction even if it provokes unpleasant emotions. However, although this matter deserves separate examination, I would propose here that what we actually enjoy is our ability to maintain the suspension of disbelief and, by implication, our ability to experience a different reality. Especially if this reality is actually some kind of a reflection of our 'moonlit and dream-visited planet' (James, W.: Selected papers on Philosophy, no date).

The Experience of Metatheatre

In Brecht's theatre we are constantly reminded – in a self-referential manner – that what we are seeing is a presentation. The actor constantly reminds us of his/her being an actor who is playing a role. We often get a narrative introduction to various scenes. This of course, does not always preclude emotional impact – in Mother Courage, for example, there are several moments which could be extremely poignant in performance.

It could also be argued that in encouraging critical thinking, Brechtian theatre essentially denies individual response. In other words, through a ready-made commentary of presented action, it actually encourages uniform thinking, and denies individual members of the audience an opportunity to experience, morally evaluate and empathise on their own terms. In that way, Brechtian theatre is not wholly dissimilar from sentimentalist fiction, which encourages uniform sentiment. Ultimately, by denying a full suspension of disbelief, according to Gosling, Brecht interferes with our ability to attain pleasure.

The 'suspension of disbelief' is above all an individual act performed in accordance with an individual audience member's ability to make a series of appraisals and

acceptances, to apply individual beliefs and to engage emotionally with the action on the stage. In Brechtian theatre the process of making 'appraisals' is controlled, as characters and situations are presented rather than recreated in their psychological verity. On the other hand, in sentimentalist fictions – most Hollywood movies, for example – the process of making acceptances is controlled through a black and white portrayal of protagonists and antagonists, the audience is often denied moral dilemmas concerning individual characters and therefore their emotional engagement is reduced to either sympathy for the hero/heroine or antipathy for the villain. In both cases some evidence, necessary for the process of evaluation, is deliberately missing. For example, we are confronted with *Mother Courage*, a war profiteer and a swindler, without having access to her internal battles and her personal reasons which might have led her to resort to such shrewdness.⁸⁴

Illusionist metatheatre functions primarily by maintaining our suspension of disbelief whilst also giving us the power to make our own evaluations, appraisals, acceptances and decisions regarding our emotional engagement. Metatheatre in its nature is probably more cerebral than it is conducive to any kind of emotion. Whether or not we emote towards the six characters in Pirandello's play or towards any of the characters in Hamlet has very little to do with the fact that these plays happen to be metatheatrical. However, we certainly get much more information about these characters and their predicaments than we do in either Brecht's plays or Titanic. Thus I would argue that metatheatre is not necessarily a form of retreat from realist theatre, as Cohn suggests, but often – a form of reinforcement of realism. In the process of watching a metaplay we suspend our disbelief the same way we do when watching a non-metaplay. As soon

⁸⁴ On the other hand, in Titanic we are confronted with Rose (Kate Winslet) and her decidedly unsympathetic fiancé, who only has a few sinister appearances including a scene of violence against the heroine, which gives us no information about his character but only stimulates our siding with Jack (Leonardo di Caprio).

as we are exposed to the inner play we have a choice of temporarily regaining the awareness of the artifice of theatre or making another acceptance in the series of acceptances concerning the world of the play. Thus if theatre can be a part of our reality, than the theatre's being a part of the characters' reality is a fair representation of our own reality. Additionally, the immediacy of our experience is heightened by the fact that theatre is also a part of our reality at the very moment of making that statement.

The possible instance of our becoming aware of the theatre's artifice will most likely occur only if it is required by the world of the play, and not necessarily interfering with our suspension of disbelief in the Brechtian manner. In that case the notion of the theatre's artifice will be presented as a possibility rather than a generalisation, as in Chekhov's The Seagull, for example. However, it is precisely our own recognition of the theatre's artifice – rather than the play's statement of it – that is the source of pleasure. When the mechanicals in A Midsummer Night's Dream are discussing the possible effects of their play on the audience, we are not necessarily reflecting on our own predicament as an audience and our own gullibility, which the mechanicals are ascribing to a hypothetical theatre audience; but, on the contrary, we derive pleasure from feeling superior to their own gullibility.

Hutcheon emphasises an openness of metafiction which makes it possible for metafiction to pre-empt criticism and for readers to co-create meanings. Thus, a play which states: 'I am a play, I am artificial, but we are both pretending that I am real' reduces the possibility of being judged on whether or not it has succeeded in its realism. Criticism often assumes a degree of superiority over the object of criticism, aiming to point out its weaknesses. If a play already offers its own self-appraisal like Pirandello's Six Characters..., it is likely to facilitate a philosophical rather than an aesthetic

discussion. This notion might be useful for us in considering the emergence of metatheatre in Yugoslavia, where as Vladimir Stamenković points out, critics had the power to fail a play on its artistic merit if they found its ideological content threatening:

“The ideologists fear the force of the verdict made by art. That is where we should be looking for an explanation as to why [the post-war] Serbian drama – for example Lukić’s work – was immediately greeted with mistrust, why the then most influential official critics, whose opinion was the only opinion available to us, chose to ignore what these plays were really about and masked their own ideological resistance to them by disparaging the plays’ value and aesthetics. That resistance easily reappears even today, as soon as a play undertakes to bring to the light of day that which is hidden, forgotten and removed from the public view.” (1987: 13)

This is certainly not to say that metatheatre is aesthetically accomplished and that there are no bad examples within this particular trend. On the other hand, by bestowing a certain power on its readers (or the audience members), metatheatre also delegates a certain degree of responsibility onto them. For example, by revealing the way in which theatre can be used as a means of ideological manipulation, as in Slobodan Šnajder’s The Croatian Faust, the playwright has at least warned the audience against accepting the given play as a means of ideological manipulation, without interfering with their suspension of disbelief. Instead, the raised issue becomes apparent at the end of the play, or in a paraphrase of Hutcheon’s words the power is demystified by being revealed in its arbitrariness. This is not remote from the Brechtian ambition to activate the audience, but it is certainly very different from the kind of reception that sentimentalist fictions dictate.

Finally, Hutcheon’s attempt to rescue narcissistic metafiction from banishment into the underworld and restore to them aesthetic value in their own right (by analogy with the resurrection of Narcissus as a flower) is to an extent evocative of Abel’s attempt. In arguing that metatheatre is a consequence of the tragedy’s inability to exist without the

will of gods, however, Abel inadvertently renders it inadequate. In order to compensate for this, he attempts to then elevate metatheatre onto the level of an all-pervading, all-encompassing phenomenon in contemporary dramaturgy.

It would be enough for our purposes to adopt Hutcheon's mission and establish that metatheatre is simply a phenomenon of its own kind, born out of a need to assert itself and its inner workings within the domain of realism. In a way it is a conciliatory device which seeks to acknowledge and subject itself to the audience's need for 'suspension of disbelief' and resultant pleasure, however it aims to provide this for the audience by letting them in on the process of theatre-creation itself. Thus the inherent narcissism only becomes a developmental stage within the learning process (as in Freud), which ultimately leads to a mature, self-sufficient and intimate mutual understanding between the theatre and its audience.

Yugoslav Fictions and Realities

"TEYA: You see, Mr Grabynski, our neighbourhood is full of pitiful, poor and unfortunate people; they are the same as those people who we have great understanding for when we are reading about them as heroes of good literature. As soon as we close the book, however, that's when we should really try to understand them – to help them, before they make their way into the world of literature. If we did that, maybe there would be less good books around, but certainly there would be less unhappy people."
(D.Kovačević: Claustrophobic Comedy, my translation)

In August 1997 Slobodan Šnajder, an exiled Croatian playwright and dissident from the Tudjman regime, made what he called a 'semi-public' appearance in Belgrade's Centre for Cultural Decontamination – a cultural institution set up in opposition to the Milošević regime. During the interview, Šnajder was inevitably invited to comment on the Serbo-Croatian conflict, which he summed up as a case of Freudian 'narcissism of small differences'. The German people, he noticed, differ enough from region to region

to be able to live together – Serbs and Croats do not. In an attempt to redefine themselves and their differences, Serbs and Croats fell into the trap of ‘narcissism’. The rest of the story is known – self-destruction, followed by banishment into the underworld.

This thesis attempts to look into the reasons and conditions which ultimately led to the banishment, from the point of view of theatre and its role in the escalating crisis. As noted before, it would not be impossible to view the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia from an entirely Freudian perspective of group formation and the ‘idealised ego’ embodied in a charismatic leader.

The connection between national narcissism and nationalism is obvious. Further connection between nationalism and sentimentalism has also been established. It could be argued that the traditionally ‘id’-driven Balkan people indirectly created a necessity for metafiction and metatheatre – which actually denies them the authority of the playwright’s vision and a single possible interpretation of a given play. Authors, however, found the solution instinctively, spontaneously, unconsciously. My interviews with the playwrights Dušan Kovačević and Ljubomir Simović (see Appendix 2) also point to the issue of power, though from very different perspectives. Whilst Kovačević is interested in the power of the media, and his plays also often examine the notion of patriarchal power structures, Simović demonstrates a greater interest in poetry than politics, and particularly the notion of blurring the imposed boundaries.

In terms of the genesis of Yugoslavian metatheatre, we can initially trace the playwrights’ motivation to challenge and subvert the existing power structures within a society, in the grip of an ideology. Metatheatre becomes a convenient means of viewing the given context from the point of view of theatre, whereby the inner theatre then

becomes a safe metaphor for the given political context. The consequence of this is a potential empowerment of the reader/audience member as suggested by Hutcheon. An unanticipated consequence of this was also the accessibility of these plays to the audiences outside the country. As Yugoslav theatre had initially originated from culture-specific myths and concerns, rarely ever venturing into examining universal issues and narratives, metatheatre became the only mode of expression which managed to fuse the universal and the specific, without having to resort to footnotes.

The issue of empowering the reader was further complicated in the case of a highly fictionalised reality in 1990s Yugoslavia. The nationalist ideology of the early 1990s was increasingly relying on political manipulation of sentiment in both real life and the theatre. With the outbreak of the war, real life began to borrow heavily from the theatrical terminology of 'fratricide', 'patricide' and 'rehearsal for a total war' (Jovičević, 1997), and the theatre was subjected to perpetuating politically suitable sentiments. Whilst in the 1980s playwrights often chose to set their plays during the Second World War, as a means of re-examining history or re-examining the function of theatre in extreme circumstances, the 1990s offered a very real war as an authentic new setting. Even though it only recurs in 1996, metatheatre in the 1990s was political by virtue of refusing to follow the sentimentalist mythomania or offer merely escapist entertainment – but playing with those audience expectations. However, the impact of these plays, as well as their artistic quality by international standards, was variable by comparison to their predecessors of the 1980s. The current war, after all, was once again a culture-specific phenomenon.

THE BEGINNINGS OF YUGOSLAV METATHEATRE

“**meta-** /'metə/ *comb. form* 1 denoting change of position or condition (*metabolism*). 2 denoting position: **a** behind. **b** after or beyond (*metaphysics; metacarpus*). **c** of a higher or second-order kind (*metalanguage*) 3 *Chem.* **a** relating to two carbon atoms separated by one another in a benzene ring. **b** relating to a compound formed by dehydration (*metaphosphate*). [Greek *meta-*, *met-*, *meth-* from *meta* ‘with, after’]”
 (The Concise Oxford Dictionary; Ninth Edition, BCA, 1998: 855)

Before proceeding with an analysis of the most significant Yugoslav metaplays of the post-war period, it would be worth revisiting Stamenković’s study Theatre in a Dramatised Society which defines the period 1956-1986 in Yugoslavia through the notions of the ‘grotesque’ and the ‘absurd’. A strong influence of existentialism and the French theatre of the absurd on the post-war Yugoslav drama, Stamenković claims is mainly reflected in the general view of the world rather than the dramaturgical form itself. Yugoslav playwrights, for instance, always maintained a linguistic register accessible to the masses,⁸⁵ rather than experimenting with language the way that a lot of absurdist playwrights did.

Taking Ionesco’s definition of the absurd as ‘that which does not possess a function or an aim’, he offers a loose definition of the ‘grotesque’ in relation to Yugoslav drama as a montage of disparate tragic and comic elements the succession of which gives ‘deformed features to the object of observation’. Stamenković further observes that the grotesque is an unlikeable form – it affects the illusion, interferes with suspension of

⁸⁵ An interesting example in this context is the language of the Serbian modern classic Aleksandar Popović whose comedies of the absurd, although deeply immersed in the Serbian culture and the popular discourse, often feature deconstructionist approach to language. Translation of his work has proved particularly difficult.

disbelief, desubstantiates, decomposes and negates the object of observation. The grotesque is a reflection of a discord between the actions that the society imposes on an individual and that which is inbred in man 'it most often resides in the antithesis of the visible and invisible, real and unreal, truthful and conventional'. More significantly:

"The grotesque is often popular at a time which lacks strength to debate the existent, and in which the optimistic and the pessimistic view of the world co-exist without a compromise." (1987: 10, my translation)

However:

"In [Yugoslav] plays the existence is not absurd because people are toys in the hands of some blind, nameless metaphysical forces, but because they are the victims of either a mythologised, deified history, or an ideologized, totalitarian society, both of which bring them into impossible, hopeless situations." (ibid.: 10)

Recalling also a significant Aristotelian influence on the Yugoslav playwrights' understanding of the function of drama in society, Stamenković notes their affinity with the didactic and efficacious rather than the entertaining in theatre. Thus in the 1960s these playwrights were mainly motivated by the need to challenge current socialist optimism as well as treating the historical material with scepticism:

"The challenge to an optimistic view of the world is accompanied by a doubt in the supposition that society has reached the stage when man is freer than ever before. The politics and history derived material is treated selectively, taking only that which deserves attention, from the point of view of a sceptical mind, and then new scenic heraldics are formed, helping us to find our way in the chaos of facts and fabrications. Such plays which disclose the hidden truths about politics and history, also show a more urgent kind of political and historical reality than that presented by the official ideology. This provokes political condemnations – rarely public, more often inaccessible to the public – and more understandable if we remember Pirandello's claim that artistic fiction is more convincing than reality, than the so-called factual truth, which itself is fictional, because a work of art owes its truth to the possession of convincingness as its *sine qua non*." (ibid.: 12-3)

Evidently, the 'grotesque' became the most effective means of political communication between the playwrights and the audience as it provided simultaneous engagement with the theatre illusion and a metatheatrical – though non-Brechtian – alienation effect. Arguably, Brechtian critical approach would have been impossible if it were applied to Yugoslav drama, as the object of criticism – Yugoslav socialism – would not have tolerated open critical debate. The interference with the audience's suspension of disbelief was essentially aesthetic according to Stamenković's comments above, however it also served the purpose of raising issues and involving the audience into a latent political debate. Links between the 'grotesque' as defined by Stamenković, and the metatheatrical device are immediately obvious. Aesthetically they are different forms – although metatheatrical can also feature the 'grotesque' as will be shown in some examples below – however, technically both metatheatrical and the 'grotesque' achieve similar effects on the audience in terms of invoking a critical response.

Ivo Brešan: Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja (The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater)

Described by the author as a 'grotesque tragedy in five scenes', The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater is set in a Dalmatian village in the early post-war period and written largely in local dialect. The play focuses on the attempts of the villagers to stage and relate to Shakespeare's story by adapting it to their own context and cultural tradition, whilst at the subplot level, the story of a young man, trying to avenge his wrongfully imprisoned father and expose the corruption at the local management level, begins to mirror the plot of the play itself.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Thus, the story of The Stage Play of Hamlet... is reminiscent of Nikos Kazantzakis novel Christ Recrucified, and subsequently Bohuslav Martinu's opera The Greek Passion although there is no evidence that Brešan was influenced by either of the two.

Although completed in 1965, Ivo Brešan's play was first performed, in a revised version, by a small theatre company – ITD Theatre – in Zagreb in 1971. By the following year the play was awarded two most distinguished drama prizes (Branko Gavella Prize in Zagreb, and Sterija Prize at the Yugoslav Theatre Festival in Novi Sad). However, Petar Marjanović writes:

“Despite favourable reviews [of the play], articles began to appear in the Yugoslav press at the beginning of 1973 (as part of an ideological offensive in culture against the phenomenon of the ‘dark wave’ which it was believed had permeated many of the arts – particularly the film) suggesting that Brešan's play was ideologically unsuitable. With the exception of the ITD Theatre, all the theatres in Yugoslavia removed the play quietly from their repertory [sic]. Despite the Sterija Festival rule that every play that is awarded a prize should be published in its ‘Modern Yugoslav Drama’ series, the play was not published in this prominent series.” (*Scena*, 1985: 27)

The play's metatheatrical structure opens up several dramaturgical opportunities for the playwright. Principally, he takes on the notion of *The Mousetrap* being intended to test the King's moral conscience, in order to pose an absence of – both individual and collective – moral conscience as the main theme of the play. He links this theme directly with socialism, but the link is disguised through the parody and its metamorphosis into the grotesque. The central characters of *The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater* (in Dedinac's translation) are Jughead – the highest local official and the party secretary, Meatball – the president of a local committee, Joe Schmoe, a young man whose father is wrongfully imprisoned at the beginning of the play, Angie, his fiancée and Meatball's daughter, and Skull-Drag – the village teacher. With the exception of the teacher who is coaxed into adapting and directing the play, the above characters are all cast into the relevant roles – Claudius, Polonius, Hamlet and Ophelia, respectively. The rest of the villagers make up the rest of the cast, while Hamlet's father remains an off-stage character on both levels of the play. The five

scenes are linked through radio commentaries which are intended to help contextualise the play temporally – the bulletins comment on the socio-economic organization of the country, instances of corruption on the management level, and on productions of Hamlet in post-war Croatia.

The entire play⁸⁷ is an extended version of the Mousetrap scene, the main difference being that here, the protagonists of the ‘real-life’ drama are actually involved in staging the play which reflects it. Additionally, this version of the Mousetrap becomes the primary play, and the ‘real-life’ drama of young Joe Schmoe and his wronged father becomes secondary by being treated within the subplot. Whilst the playwright’s premise seems to be that theatre doesn’t really change anything on a moral level, he simultaneously exposes possible problems of the socialist system as implemented in this particular context. Yugoslavia’s own brand of socialism put an emphasis on self-management and a collective ownership of the means of production. By focusing on the low level corruption, the playwright also tests this Marxist principle of giving the means of – cultural – production to the people, and shows the way in which the subsequent power will be used to sustain and encourage corruption. Aesthetically, he also diverts attention from the thematic content of the play by focusing on the authenticity of the Dalmatian dialect, and its comic potential when juxtaposed against Shakespeare’s play, the juvenile characteristics of the peasants, and even the villain – Jughead’s – inherent charm in his ability to logically maintain his own defence. This kind of a likeable villain occurs often in Yugoslav dramaturgy, most often in Nušić’s work. Brešan also fuses the notion of traditional storytelling and Brecht-type narrator in the character of Big Simon at the opening and closing of the play, thus showing the way in which a narrator filters the evidence regarding the story and controls the audience’s reception of it.

⁸⁷ Please see Appendix 1 for detailed synopsis and extracts from the play.

In his discussion of the play, Marjanović highlights the ways in which Brešan's play has given rise to criticism. On the aesthetic level, the main objections focus on the play's realism, which was, allegedly made to suffer at the expense of dramatic construction. Marjanović gives the example of the rehearsal of Ophelia's spying, immediately followed by the real-life spying of Angie. Further:

“Also unrealistic is the fact that the villagers of Lower Jerkwater are more interested in what is going to happen in the story of the Prince of Denmark than in the investigation of the money stolen from the village co-operative farm, for which one of their fellow-villagers has been sentenced to a long term in prison.” (ibid.: 29)

This objection, although plausible, could certainly be justified by either political resignation through repression, fear, or simply the escapist appeal of storytelling and theatre. On the ideological level, however, Marjanović reports the following criticisms: Brešan's 'high-culture', bourgeois views of the people of Lower Jerkwater as not being worthy of Shakespeare, and by implication, not being worthy of freedom; Brešan's 'metaphysical and gentlemanly' anti-humanism, reflected in Schmoe's final exclamation: 'There is no man left anywhere!'; and the portrayal of the Lower Jerkwater Hamlet as a 'petite-bourgeois persiflage of the revolution'. Finally, Marjanović notes that the 1971 version of the play, in particular, had received additions which were intended to ridicule the Yugoslav revolution more directly. This is often seen by critics as a reflection of the time, or in Marjanović's words 'these changes were linked to the period of nationalist⁸⁸ and counter-revolutionary euphoria that appeared at the time in Yugoslavia' (ibid.: 30).

⁸⁸ In 1971 "Yugoslavia was experiencing a surge in the open expression of nationalist sentiments, particularly in Croatia. The rebellion that grew in Zagreb during this period began [...] mostly among the middle-class intellectuals and students, and primarily for economic reasons. [...] Croatia saw a large portion of its income being siphoned off. In 1971 this portion neared thirty per cent. So, in November of 1971, the students of Zagreb took to the streets." (Barnett, D.C., 1998: 43-4, unpublished PhD thesis)

I would suggest here that – despite different attempts at classifying this play within the tradition of Yugoslav and Croatian dramaturgy – it broadly falls into the category of the comedy of manners⁸⁹ and is probably closest to Nušić (whose late comedies – such as Pokojnik (The Deceased)⁹⁰ – also often end on a subliminally tragic note). However, Brešan's ridicule of the peasants – as well as the satire of the Yugoslav revolution contained in the Mousetrap scene within the play – was understandably much more of a thorn in the side of the socialist critics than Nušić's ridicule of the petit-bourgeoisie might have been. In his own defence, Brešan, as quoted by Marjanović, has said:

“The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater represents first part of a trilogy (the other two plays are The Devil at the Faculty of Philosophy and The Apparition of Jesus Christ in the Barracks of Military Post 2507), in which I tried to realise a principle that I've had as my esthetic [sic.] ideal since I was young, namely to link the sublime and the ridiculous. In this case it is linking Shakespeare's Hamlet and all the relationships within it, with the banality of our everyday lives. I was convinced that the bringing together of these disparate entities, like the bringing together of positive and negative charges of electricity, would produce a spark of exceptional brightness, in which the banal would rise to an artistic vision with all the characteristics of the grotesque, and the sublime would reveal its tragic inability to become genuine.” (ibid.: 27)

Marjanović notes that most of these other Brešan's plays end with ‘a grotesque mass scene in which the positive hero is definitely defeated, while the forces of evil triumph, and they illustrate their triumph by physical indulgence’ (ibid.: 29). This is indirectly evocative of the early mode of Yugoslav dramaturgy – the ‘piece with singing’, which traditionally ends in a mass celebration. Brešan's parody could therefore be perceived as a thematic parody, on one level, and a parody of a genre, on another.

In his Anthology of Contemporary Yugoslav Drama, Ognjen Lakićević notes:

⁸⁹ More precisely, the play fits the category of the ‘comedy of mentality’ – peculiar to Yugoslav dramaturgy – whereby an ethnic group's characteristics are self-critically employed for comic effect.

⁹⁰ See Appendix 1 for the translation of this play.

“Brešan brought his Hamlet to the level of the grotesque, knowing that ‘the grotesque is more cruel than tragedy’ (Jan Kott), and in that way portrayed the people he found in his field of vision. The essence of Shakespeare’s Hamlet is cruel. So is the essence of Brešan’s. However, as we read Shakespeare’s Hamlet we are likely to perceive it more as literature and less as real life. As we read Brešan’s play – we are likely to think of it as real life faithfully depicted in literature. [...] Thus the whole play is brought down to earth.” (1984: xi-xii, my translation)

Most significantly, The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater also addresses the concern voiced by Lionel Abel, regarding justification of Hamlet’s procrastination. While Abel attempts to explain it in the absence of tragic divine intervention, Hamlet’s dithering ‘brought down to earth’ in the context of Lower Jerkwater is finally justified, as illustrated by the exchange between the teacher Skull-Drage and devastated Joe Schmo:

“SKULL-DRAG: I must say, young man, you surprise me. [...] I’m a man in my years already, I have a family and I find it hard to swim against the current. But you’re still young and independent. I simply don’t understand what ties you to this play!

SCHMOE: Huh, if I knew myself teacher... How many times did I say t’ myself: I’s quittin’! Gonna tell ‘em all to go to fuckin’ hell... and then I suddenly reckon maybe I’ll lose Angie... and I ain’t got the strength to walk off... but then again I reckon... they ruined my Pa... and again I wanna go... but then it sorta comes into m’ head it might be better to stick around and find the crook and reveal him to ev’rybody... and so I stay on and now I don’t know what I want anymore, nor what I don’t want... And time’s passin’ and I’s still in this stupid play... and I got this notion that m’ brains gonna burst...

SKULL-DRAG: Joey, my dear boy, you are still green! Do you think that finding the crook and pointing your finger at him will solve anything? Obviously, you don’t know who you are dealing with. Why one and all, as many as there are, will stand up in his defence and they’ll even accuse you for the theft. Perhaps you don’t even have an inkling of who is prepared to trip you up.” (1985: 18)

Unlike Hamlet, Schmo is not interested in vengeance *per se*, but instead, his main objective is to restore justice, find the real culprit and bring his father back from prison. His method is naïve in its honesty and innocence, and he is not fit to play Jughead’s

game, as he is not even aware of how far-reaching it is. The teacher, having tasted the threat of 'going against the current' (he had previously lost several teaching posts elsewhere) is aware that Schmoe's only option is to give up his quest in order to evade the wrath of the socialist 'gods'. It is therefore the codex of socialism – in its corrupt version – that replaces the notion of divine intervention in this tragedy. And the tragedy itself is contained in the impossibility of individuality and of moral conscience on an individual level.

Ultimately, Brešan's play utilises the paradox of metatheatre in order to simultaneously present a political critique and render it ineffectual, by rendering a theatre act *per se* ineffectual. The critique works at the subplot level, whereas the main plot shows a process of deconstruction of a theatre text. By questioning and deconstructing meanings at the primary plot level, the playwright implies the post-structuralist notion that every text can be made to mean different things depending on the reader. Thus his critique at the secondary level acquires the flexibility of interpretation, which could finally justify the author's own intention. In other words, he poses his aesthetic approach as a primary aim, at the expense of his critique which is, in any case, implicit. However the paradox itself functions in the following way:

1. Brešan, in opposition to Shakespeare, claims that a theatre act, at least in this context, does not have the power to change anything on a moral conscience level – it does not have any fixed political power and can be manipulated to represent different things;
2. Brešan states his own political critique implicitly – by showing it, not by articulating it;
3. As this critique occurs within the play – it is made ineffectual by claim 1, above; i.e. the playwright secures his own defence.

The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Lower Jerkwater was translated and performed in a number of European languages including Polish, German, Russian and Hungarian. According to Marjanović, reviews of various productions testify that there hasn't been a single unsuccessful production of the play. The Zagreb critic Dalibor Foretić notes that following the withdrawal of all – except the ITD – productions of the play from the Yugoslav theatres in 1973, Brešan's 'acceptability' in the country is only restored in 1979. The ice-breaking production was the Zagreb premiere of An Official Dinner at the Undertaking Company (which received its world premiere in Lodz, Poland). Thus The Stage Play of Hamlet receives major new premieres in Zagreb, Rijeka and Belgrade in 1984, 1987 and 1988 respectively, as well as in other theatres throughout the country.

Dušan Jovanović: Igrajte tumor v glavi ali onesnaženje zraka (Act a Brain Tumour or Air Pollution)

Dušan Jovanović's play Act a Brain Tumour or Air Pollution suffered a similar fate to Brešan's Hamlet in that when it was first offered for consideration to the Slovenian National Theatre, 120 copies of the play were distributed to the artistic and technical staff, and all 120 copies were 'lost'.⁹¹ The play was published in 1972, but it only received its first production in the Slovenian town of Celje in 1976. Directed by a distinctly talented young director Ljubiša Ristić, the production met with public and critical acclaim, though it did suffer some political disapproval in the early stages. Lesley Soule, who translated the play into English, notes:⁹²

⁹¹ According to Lesley Soule (1994/95).

⁹² Both Soule's translation and her commentary are slightly tinged with the popular, media-derived anti-Serb sentiment – she seems to suggest that the play was sidelined because the director of the Slovenian National Theatre was a Serb, and translates the title of the Serbian edition of the Yugoslav daily Borba as 'the Serbian Fighter', which has elsewhere been translated as its closer semantic equivalent – The Struggle. All of this is surprising in the light of the fact that Jovanović himself is ethnically a Serb.

“Because of the provocative nature of the play, the Celje theatre became a psychological battleground. A war of nerves was waged throughout the rehearsal period. The theatre’s technical staff in particular objected to the play and various acts of sabotage followed [...]. Some of the actors remained loyal, but others frequently failed to appear at rehearsals.” (Supplement to The Studies in Theatre Production, 1994/95: 4)

As much as it is evocative of a typical socialist Yugoslav – and generally Balkan – attitude to work and duty, it is also likely that a certain degree of political anxiety might have been provoked by the play’s content. At its centre is a rift between the members of the Slavia theatre company, whereby the representatives of the ‘progressive, avant-garde’ faction decide to expel the representatives of the more traditional persuasion from the company and lock themselves away.

Foretić writes:

“Those who came to see Dušan Jovanović’s play Act a Brain Tumour or Air Pollution at the Sterijino Pozorje Festival, found the door of the theatre closed. Boarded up, at that. Instead of going in, they received a leaflet which said that a handful of lunatics had invaded the theatre and locked themselves in, having thrown out the ‘real actors’ onto the street – however, the performance will happen; the audience is requested to follow the instructions, which will take them into the theatre by a round-about way. After a short introduction, which is happening in front of the theatre, where a demonstration is going on and where an old, respected actor gets wounded, the performance continues in a nearby gym, where an improvised newspaper office had been set up.” (1988: 144, my translation)

The play itself however starts off in a newspaper office, where its first act is set, and then moves to the theatre where the second and third act unfold. By directorial intervention – which actually reconstructs the reports which arrive to the newspaper office – the play acquires a degree of ambiguity as to the line between the real and the theatrical. Soule quotes a review which states:

“In the end, we no longer know anything with certainty... Everything is possible and true, but at the same time everything is completely unbelievable. Suddenly we get a flash: everything is theatre, nothing is true! Then immediately we have a foreboding: everything is true, this is no longer theatre.” (Soule, 1994/95: 4-5)

Foretić also notes that Jovanović wrote the play in response to a similar real life event - a protest of the members of the Slovenian National Theatre ensemble, which in the 1960s was one of many – fashionable at the time – protests of theatre artists. Thus the likelihood of something going wrong in the theatre was certainly not excluded for the audience who came to see this play (unless they had prior knowledge of the play). However, it remains unclear whether the parody of the ‘avant-garde’ experimental group in the play could have been aimed at any particular example in Slovenian or Yugoslav theatre at the time. Overwhelmingly traditionalist and Stanislavskian in its essence, Yugoslav theatre might very well have benefited from increased cultivation of experimental theatre. As it was, the Bitef Festival remained the only source of the new currents in the world theatre, which were eagerly observed but rarely tried out. One exception to Yugoslav traditionalism was Ljubiša Ristić – the director of this play – himself, and his theatre company KPGT. In relation to this, Stamenković’s review of the play offers the following interpretation:

“[I]n the final scene it becomes clear that the author does not know whether those with the modern or those with the traditional views are right, but he shows us that both are condemned to suffering and struggle. [...] In Jovanović’s play every individual scene is a small world; and the entire world is some kind of theatre; and in both cases, the stage is a place of struggle where one can see – in keeping with Pirandello’s own model – the power struggle between different social groups, but also the conflict between different spiritual persuasions, which determine the spiritual climate of our epoch.” (1986: 131)

Thus he elevates the play into the context of contemporary European drama, and beyond the geographical and socio-political boundaries of its context. As for Ristić’s

direction, Stamenković is particularly appreciative of the way in which the staging of the first scene in an improvised newspaper office emphasises the theatrical in ‘the real life’, while the subsequent transition into the theatre and into ‘the artificial life’ then begins to emphasise the real and the everyday.

More importantly, the emphasis on the metatheatrical dimension of the play and the cognitive level of its reception, once again renders the thematic content of the play as ‘secondary’ or incidental. Thematically, the emphasis is on the state of corrosion and gradual death, which nobody is aware of even when they are actually dead. Thus the play moves from what Soule calls ‘metatheatrical realism’ at the beginning, to a fantastic dystopism at the end of the play. The dialogues in the newspaper office are written to appear completely spontaneous and realistic, yet each random line is imbued with possible connotation. When one of the characters asks the other to read them their horoscope, the reply is: “You have allowed yourself to be lulled by promises. Insist on the plain truth. Very soon what you have been desiring for so long will take place.” (1994/95: 19). Although its plausibility in terms of a horoscope entry is indisputable, so are its possible connotations on a more general level. The play’s provocative nature is therefore contained in the details (particularly when the text is read, before being interpreted in performance). Undoubtedly, the notion of subversive behaviour of the theatre artists is also in itself provocative, even if the playwright then proceeds to ridicule the pretentiousness and elitism of the self-proclaimed secessionists. It is not only the division that occurs between the avant-gardists and the traditionalists, but also the internal division among the avant-gardists themselves that might have been perceived as a challenge to the monolithic unilateralism of socialism as a system. The Chief of the newspaper – whose catchphrase is ‘No dramatising!’ – comments on the situation:

“Who is going to take responsibility? Who is going to raise his voice and say: ‘This is a violent gang of insurgents, we demand their liquidation! If nothing else will do it, bring in the army!’ Who? Who’ll raise his voice for freedom for the avant-garde, for a dynamic, daring radical solution? For a new kind of theatre? They will! Let them do it themselves! Why don’t they state publicly what they want? Why don’t they put their ideas to the test of democracy? Why are they hiding like mice in a hole?” (ibid.: 21)

On a more general level, the playwright uses the notion of theatre illusion, taken to extreme, in order to justify apparently illogical proceedings. When in the second act the journalist Križnik arrives in the theatre, he witnesses a number of para-ritualistic exercises led by the director, the dramaturg and a specially appointed doctor who controls psycho-physiological states of the actors through hypnosis and medicines. A visibly pregnant actress, Ida, at first makes a desperate appeal to the journalist, wishing to leave the theatre and look after her unborn baby appropriately, but almost immediately after, the doctor explains to the journalist that she is only apparently pregnant – this is an instance of ‘hysterical pregnancy’, induced hypnotically for the sake of the actress’s role. Both accounts – though contradictory – become immediately ‘acceptable’ as possible ‘truths’ – the playwright denies the viewer an opportunity to take sides with either of the characters, and the viewer is left to make their own mind up. However ‘the truths’ and ‘lies’ of the second act become irrelevant with the arrival of the third. The third act, instead acquires a dream-like quality, where characters from both inside and outside the theatre begin to appear to the journalist, implying that he is now required to offer his own performance. Another character gets shot twice, but he is still alive. Thus all possible boundaries are blurred. The only line – as Soule notes – is ‘the dead line’ and the question at the end of the play remains as to whether this line will be crossed.

Despite the potential political metaphor – and an evident prophetic quality of the play in that respect – the critics, particularly Foretić hailed this work as a requiem for the dead theatre forms – whether they pose themselves as ‘traditional’ or ‘the avant-garde’ – which clears the way for the new, living, and more palpable forms of theatre.

Dobrivoje Ilić: Joakim

In addition to these two examples, it is also worth briefly mentioning the play Joakim by Dobrivoje Ilić, written in 1976 and premiered at the National Theatre of the southern Serbian city of Niš in 1978. In comparison to the other two examples, this play did not generate as great a critical interest when it was first performed, although it entered Vladimir Stamenković’s anthology of the most significant examples of contemporary Serbian drama,⁹³ as well as receiving special attention in Theatre in a Dramatised Society (in the collection of the same title, 1987).

Ilić’s play is a simple naturalistic act of revisiting history and focusing on Joakim Vujić, who crosses the Danube, from Vojvodina into Serbia, in order to set up the first professional Serbian theatre. Typically, he is facing problems and opposition from both the political authorities – the illiterate Prince Miloš Obrenović – and the cultural elite – particularly Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, who ridicules Vujić’s old-fashioned, highly educated manner of speech. The following discussion by Stamenković highlights the play’s thematic essence and its place in contemporary dramaturgy:

⁹³ The ten best Serbian plays in Stamenković’s opinion in the period of 1956-86 also include The Travelling Theatre Šopalović, The Metastable Grail and Hristić’s rewriting of Oedipus Clean Hands. Aleksandar Popović and Dušan Kovačević – two of the most significant Serbian comic playwrights of the post-war period – were not made eligible for this short-list as their works are discussed separately in the context of their own specific comic genre. However Stamenković’s analysis of Serbian drama in terms of ‘the grotesque’ also applies to these playwrights’ work.

“True, the heroes of Ilić’s play are historical characters, Prince Miloš and Joakim Vujić, and the stage for these events is the time of the middle of the last century when the first Serbian professional theatre was being set up in Kragujevac; but its real protagonist, the unfortunate father of Serbian theatre, is everything but a person with tragic dignity. He is a creature who continually has his vision about himself and his aims ruined by the authorities, and their insistence that he has got lost in a wrong world. He is defeated, desperate, forced to travel the journey from being an enthusiastic, free man to becoming a miserable, crashed-down creature, whose only ambition then becomes to be a newspaper censor in a retarded society, in a primitive, totalitarian system, where everything is determined by one will and one hand. Ilić too, wants to speak about the present by speaking about the past, warning us that the past can repeat itself today. [He] shows the relationship between an artist and a ruler, where the first has to be servile and unnoticeable and the second is all-powerful, unscrupulous and indifferent towards art – he is only interested in it if it can aid him in political manipulation. In such a world social progress is a mere mirage, and the role of an artist is dispensable – grotesque.” (1987: 23, my translation)

Stamenković, therefore, sees this play as continuing the old tradition of revisiting history and simultaneously introducing the new significant theme of an individual – often an artist – who is in a conflict with the representative of the political – often totalitarian – power. The grotesqueness of it is less explicit than in other plays – as this play remains very much in the domain of the realist satire and the ‘comedy of mentality’, reminiscent of Nušić – however, the grotesque is probably most graphically evident in an instance of the Prince being more interested in seeing an elephant, who arrives for the first time in Serbia, than watching the rehearsal of Vujić’s play. Still, some of Ilić’s concerns will later resonate in for example, Prokić’s play of a very different style – The Metastable Grail, as well as possibly in Simović’s collision between the world of art and the world of a primitive province, at the time of war.

THE BREAKING OF TABOOS WITH A WOODEN SWORD**Yugoslav Metatheatre of 1980-1986**

The year 1980 marks a significant point in Yugoslav history. This is the year in which Josip Broz Tito died. For some, the event was a moment of relief, and for others, it was a moment of profound bereavement. For most people, however, the death of Josip Broz signalled an impending crisis and the necessity to address the tensions which had previously been kept firmly under the surface.

By 1986 a number of theatre critics and commentators had also begun to write more openly and acknowledge the increasingly overt political content of contemporary Yugoslav drama. In the same year, Dragan Klaić in an essay for the annual English issue of *Scena*, entitled “Obsessed with Politics: Currents in Yugoslav Drama”, notes an increasing popularity of new Yugoslav drama, which is also caused by a financial crisis and an inability to pay foreign royalties. This drama is primarily concerned with serious subject matter:

“If, today, the most sensitive topics are being publicly discussed as hardly ever before, one can claim that theatre is making a valuable contribution towards a climate of tolerance and self-examination. The Yugoslav stage was an early public forum for certain issues, even before they were raised in more appropriate places – in political circles or in the media. It was the theatre – both writers and the audience, who broke certain taboos and provoked discussion of themes previously avoided in the public arena. Thus theatre not only benefited from a democratisation of public life, but itself made a significant contribution to that process.” (1986: 7-8)

Klaić further observes that the provocative new works often won their place in the repertoire by virtue of the fact that any attempt at censorship would have only increased public interest in a particular play. In addition, the decentralised nature of the Yugoslav federation often made it possible for occasionally banned works in one part of the country to appear uncensored elsewhere. Most importantly:

“[D]rama critics have supported the politicisation of theatre; they have stood by the authors, directors and theatre groups. Together they stimulated and widened the ongoing debate on the nature of Yugoslav society, its recent past, its crucial problems and contradictions, its perspectives and perils. This debate was often carried further to important sections of the press, prominent political and professional organization and even to a state level, and generally raised public consciousness.” (ibid.)

Thus the early socialist critics, which Stamenković refers to as being resistant to ideologically provocative drama (1987: 13), had clearly become a thing of the past. Most evidently, what seems to occur in the 1980s is the polarisation within the Gramscian hegemonic elite into the mutually opposed political and cultural factions. It might be argued that the increasing economic crisis of the 1980s was an important factor in the popularisation of the political. On the one hand, the traditionally subsidised Yugoslav theatre was beginning to suffer from inadequate budgetary support, and on the other, controversial topics were bound to bring in audiences and therefore boost revenue. The economic factor, however, might even be seen as a trivialisation of the overwhelming urgency and a burning desire of the Yugoslav people to finally address in public certain issues which had been banned for such a long time.

Klaić identifies four – intrinsically interrelated – currents in the contemporary political drama and explores the most significant examples of each. The topic which emerges most explicitly in the 1980s is Yugoslavia’s break-up with the Eastern Bloc in 1948. The events surrounding this date had become a taboo due to the fact that Tito’s method

of dealing with staunch Stalinists and reactionaries to the break-up was not dissimilar to Stalin's own gulags. The most (in)famous one of these was the camp on the island of Goli Otok in the Adriatic. The topic eventually became, in Klaić's words, 'a legitimate theme for Yugoslav boulevard theatre, [inserting] a fair amount of political satire and mockery of ideological slang into the perennial fare of extramarital affairs' (ibid.: 10). This mainly referred to Aleksandar Popović's play Mrešćenje šarana (The Spawning of Carp), which written in Popović's idiosyncratic comedic style, belongs to a kind of 'theatre of the absurd'-farce rather than strictly speaking boulevard theatre. However, Klaić's point was that the topic was not only explored, but even thoroughly exhausted.

The second current which Klaić identifies is a continuation of the topic which had been explored in different ways ever since the 1960s – namely that of the Yugoslav socialist revolution. The 1980s however bring about attempts of rethinking the Yugoslav revolution in an international context and in line with Weiss, Grass, Bond and Müller who 'counter the optimistic eschatology of revolution, characteristic of Brecht, with a sceptical vision that is more anthropologically than ideologically based' (ibid.: 11). Klaić sums these plays up as being 'neither acts of loyalty nor gestures of dissidence' and therefore 'disappointing'.

Thirdly, within the current of revisiting the Second World War, Klaić also identifies the view of this period through the 'prism of theatre life':

"Several themes are interwoven in this approach: Yugoslav resistance to Nazism and the horrible record of interethnic strife; the attitudes of the theatre professionals under the occupation, their moral responsibility for being active in these trying times; the relationship of theatre and political [power], [and] of creativity and ideology." (ibid.: 13)

Here the focus is on the already mentioned The Croatian Faust, The Travelling Theatre Šopalović, The Metastable Grail as well as Pivara (The Brewery), a lesser known play by Božidar Zečević.

Finally, the fourth current of contemporary political drama consists of the plays set in the present day which explore either the generation gap as in Hi-Fi by Goran Stefanovski, or Brešan's by now trademark Jughead-type characters, self-willed and semi-educated, who abuse their own position of power to set themselves up as local despots and oppressors of their community. In both playwrights' work the notion of patriarchal power structures is shown as penetrating the socialist power structure. This might have been a reflection of the political power-struggles that unfolded on a general level in the country, following Tito's death; but more importantly, they reveal the essential problem of the monolithic, increasingly non-libertarian nature of socialism in practice, in the given context. Additionally, plays such as Jugoslovenska antiteza (The Yugoslav Antithesis) by Jordan Plavneš, which explores the growing disunity and interethnic strife in the country through a metaphor of a family drama, and Balkanski špijun (The Balkan Spy)⁹⁴ by Dušan Kovačević, in amongst others, are mentioned in the context of this final current. Most of these plays, in fact, ponder the present both as a consequence of the past mistakes, and as an anticipation of a bleaker future.

In relation to the metatheatrical trend in the Yugoslav drama of the 1980s, Klaić notes that it was closely linked to a re-examination of attitudes towards theatre during and immediately after the Second World War:

⁹⁴ Interestingly for us, The Balkan Spy combines the already inherent topic of 1948 with the present-day context, where one of the former 'inmates' of a reformation institution applies his own dislocated frame of reference and interprets his reality as a distorted picture of potential threat. Thus, as a self-appointed agent, he begins to pursue his lodger, a former *Gastarbeiter*, as an international spy.

“The occupying authorities attempted in 1941 to ‘normalise’ theatre life in the major centres and to fill the repertory with mainly German classics and domestic light comedies. If the appearance of actors on the stage could initially be rationalised on any ground, it became increasingly questionable with the escalation of the occupier’s brutality, the mass suffering of the populace and the existence of a growing partisan movement. Public gestures such as acting were seen as unpatriotic, performed under supervision of the enemy, as acts of collaboration. After the war, several theatre professionals, active under occupation were tried for their activity and condemned to a temporary loss of civil rights. At least two actors were executed. While the theatre life of the period and its consequences have remained mainly unexplored in any systematic manner by theatre scholarship, the theme has curiously emerged in a few plays.” (ibid.: 13)

Here it would be important to establish whether the post-war prosecution of actors was indeed instigated by popular demand or whether it was part of the new state’s general policy of prosecution of former German collaborators. It is possible that a nation whose word for theatre – ‘pozorište’ – draws its etymological origin from a word for the ‘place of shame’ would be inclined to view actors with moral intolerance. In Simović’s play, it is the peasants who are portrayed as being morally intolerant of – particularly – actresses. It is doubtful however, that this would have been a strong enough motivation for people in general to want to see the theatre artists executed after the war. Another complicating factor would be that the partisan leaders – or the new authorities – often did come from the unprivileged backgrounds and saw their revolution as a way of attacking and appropriating everything that belonged to a bourgeois domain, including the theatre. A closer study of these plays will reveal what exactly was the playwrights’ focus of criticism and pardon.⁹⁵

On the whole, it is also evident that Klaić’s analysis features a certain degree of caution. In voicing his disappointment with most of these trends of political drama as being insufficiently capable of inaugurating or provoking any significant change on a socio-

⁹⁵ Also the 1987 film which was advertised as the first Yugoslav horror film *Već vidjeno (Déjà vu)*, directed by Goran Marković – by posing early socialism as a traumatising factor which brings a former bourgeois boy to a pathological state in later life and leads him onto a murder rampage – also featured the motif of the post-war punishment of actors by the authorities and ‘in the name of the people’.

political level, his discussion remains on the plane of the general rather than offering any specific alternative suggestions.

Slobodan Šnajder: Hrvatski Faust (The Croatian Faust)

Although rooted in historical fact – and seemingly extensively researched – the play The Croatian Faust is a non-naturalistic (meta)play. Its structure is representative of ‘fragmentary’ dramaturgy style, whereby the length of scenes varies and the connections between various scenes are not always established. Characters are often referred to by different names throughout the script. For example, the main character – the Croatian actor Vjekoslav Afrić – is variably referred to as either Actor or Afrić or Faust⁹⁶ – his role within the play. This is by no means indicative of playwright’s carelessness or idiosyncrasy, but of his profoundly metaphysical relationship to his work. Thus every such change of denominator is in fact a reference (possibly even an instruction to the actors and directors) regarding the level from which the character operates in a particular place in the script.

In his commentary of the play, Marjanović (Scena, 1985), first of all singles out a traditionally non-communicative nature of Šnajder’s plays. Šnajder, the person, however, is anything but. Coming from a family of writers, he was born in Zagreb on 8 July, 1948.⁹⁷ He was exposed to theatre and drama from an early age, but went on to study English and Philosophy at the University of Zagreb. The year 1968 – and the student rebellions in Europe – coincided with his own student days. As a result, he became one of the founders of the theatre periodical Prolog – a mouthpiece for the

⁹⁶ Faust remains a role which, like other roles from Goethe’s play, are double-cast in the course of Šnajder’s play: i.e. the roles are first played by actors and later taken on by Ustasha representatives.

⁹⁷ Their name is of German origin – Schneider – but has become croaticised, and even when his plays were being published in German, Šnajder insisted on keeping the Croatian version of his name.

radical student theatre movement, with a definite political edge – which he also edited for many years thereafter. Between 1969 and 1981 he wrote eight plays, some of which were based on famous writers but most of which feature a typical metaphysical dimension. His play Držićev san (Držić's Dream), for example, published in 1979 and performed at the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb in 1980, focuses on the first significant Croatian playwright Marin Držić. The theme of this play, in Marjanović's words, is 'the time of the Croatian renaissance [...] illustrated in the fate of its greatest writer Marin Držić (1508-1567) who was murdered by the Dubrovnik aristocracy because his ideas and his work were contrary to the ideology of the ruling class' (1985: 222).⁹⁸ While also following the popular Yugoslav trend of rewriting history – or theatre history – The Croatian Faust distinguishes itself by shifting its focus onto the theatre rather than a particular historical fact or person. The opening words of Šnajder's preface to this play, entitled "Who is Speaking Here?" are: 'The subject of the drama The Croatian Faust – and therefore that which speaks – is a performance, and therefore – fiction' (Šnajder, 1983: 7).

This declaration too is indicative of a certain degree of political defensiveness. The play was certainly among the first ones to tackle one of the taboos of recent Croatian history, namely that of Croatian Nazi allegiance during the Second World War. It was awarded the leading Croatian award for Yugoslav drama – Gavella's Prize – in 1980/81 and published for the first time in Prolog in 1982. Its first premiere in Split was immediately followed by a premiere at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade and another Croatian production in Varaždin – all in 1982. In 1983 it won the Sterija Prize at the Yugoslav contemporary drama festival – the Sterija Festival in Novi Sad. Significantly, the play was never staged at the theatre where the action is taking place – the Croatian

⁹⁸ This is resonant of, though not necessarily related to Dobrivoje Ilić's revisiting of the Serbian theatre history in Joakim – his play about the father of Serbian theatre.

National Theatre – although both the Belgrade and the Varaždin production were shown there on tour. Additionally, Roberto Ciulli created a German version of the play in 1987, which played for four years, whilst Hans Hollmann directed the play for the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1993. In the 1990s the playwright spent a lot of his time in Germany where his new plays are being staged with great frequency and success.

The actual premiere of Goethe's Faust – which is 'the subject' of this play – was on 31st March 1942 in Zagreb.⁹⁹ At the time it was hailed as the most important Croatian production of all time and, being intended as an expression of the Croatian (Ustashi) authorities' allegiance to the Third Reich, it was seen as a point of entry of the new Croatia into Europe. Similarly to Nietzsche's appropriation and manipulation by the Nazi German authorities, Goethe's Faust was also seen at the time as a cultural symbol of the Third Reich. In relation to this, Marjanović notes:

“One should also mention Šnajder's observation that the very essence of great works must contain something that enables them to be used for repressive ends. Šnajder believes that The Croatian Faust shows that the theatre can operate very well when driven by some 'state reason', and that the social context of the 1942 Faust portrays the links between theatre and power, and often the sublime and very indirect connection between great art and political violence. In this case Faust is blasphemously linked to genocide.” (1985: 224)¹⁰⁰

Additionally, one of the most significant aspects of this play, which is often pointed out, is that Šnajder did not use a single line from Goethe's text, therefore focusing on the particular interpretation of the original play.

⁹⁹ Directed by Tito Strozzi and designed by Žedrinski – according to Marjanović (1985) – the production was referred to as truly spectacular by those who saw it.

¹⁰⁰ In relation to this, in his review of the play entitled “The Glory of Fate, the Nothingness of Power”, Svetislav Jovanov also observes: “The essential openness of The Croatian Faust is most obvious in its rejection of the notion of immobility (and unchangeability) of the story, which in this case originates from the theatre of History and the history of Theatre. [...] Šnajder equally avoids both the common traps of 'documentarism' and the impotent allegories of quasi-historical drama (a component which is still present in our drama). [...] The author not only uses Goethe's work exclusively as a problem-forming reference [...], but it also leaves the mechanism of the theatre-within-theatre on that level, turning it into the object of transcendence.” (Književna reč, 25.12.1982., my translation)

“In a particular sense this is a meta-discourse with the original. What is not said appears to be said. Thus what in fact is not said is symbolized even more powerfully and attention is drawn to it. I feel that this is the job of the theatre and of plays in general.” (Šnajder, quoted by Marjanović, *ibid.*: 224)

The action of Šnajder’s play, therefore, follows and mirrors that of the original, imbuing his text with parallel dimensions of meaning. For example, when Faust and Mephistopheles are striking a deal in Goethe’s play, Afrić and Rakuša – the respective actors, in performance, are actually simultaneously negotiating Afrić’s entry into the resistance movement.

Another historical fact that serves as a point of focus in this play is that by the third night of Faust’s performance in Zagreb, seven members of the Croatian National Theatre – including the leading actor, Vjekoslav Afrić, and two other members of the cast – left the theatre to join the partisans. The production, however, with a continually changing cast, remained on the repertoire until the end of the war. Janko Rakuša, the actor who initially played Mephistopheles, and spent most of the rest of the war in the resistance movement, was eventually caught by the Ustashi – the Croatian Nazi authorities – and consequently tortured and hanged on Christmas Day 1944. Additionally, Afrić’s party contact – Nevenka Tepavac, who was not an actress but in Šnajder’s play she appears as an actress playing Margareta – was also caught and tortured and finally taken to execution in a bag because she couldn’t walk. In Šnajder’s play both of these acts of brutality are actually placed on the stage of the theatre in front of the cheering nazified bourgeoisie. Thus Šnajder’s stage begins as a theatre stage within the context of a particular society in the first act, and – in a non-naturalistic turn – by the second act it grows into a metaphor of that society with its corruption exposed.

Conveniently, the Walpurgis Night and the dance of the witches are here translated as the proceedings of liquidation in the Jasenovac concentration camp. Nevenka-Margaretta's torture and Rakuša-Mephistopheles' execution are shown on the stage of the theatre and overseen by Faust who is now played by the Ustasha Žanko:

“FAUST: Do you know what this is?

He shows him a Chetnik pamphlet.

Here is what will be left of Croatia when the Serbs arrive.

He shows him the pamphlet.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Oh, yes, beyond all measure. The entire world ought to pay for Kosovo, and especially us Turks.

FAUST: Do you hear the bloody drums from across the Drina: Serbs are gathering, and these here; Croats to their own! What are you?

MEPHISTOPHELES: Faust, you mortal: you're asking a drop of water in the sea whether it came from this or that river.

FAUST: Only God can help you now, Satan.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Oh, fine, then it will be fine if it is up to your God. God, father of mine, who loved me more than all your angels because I shouted NO when all shouted YES: Father, deliver me from Serbian heroism and Croatian culture.

DEPUTY-HEAD-OF-STATE BUDAK (*Screams from the loge*): Now that's enough!

FAUST: Mr Budak, we have cleansed this institution three times from top to bottom in our great racial house-cleaning, and this actor has deceived us all. It took quite a while to come up with flawless evidence.

He slips a noose over his head.

[...]

VOICE: Pull out the chair!

The Deputy-Head-of-State gives the sign and they hang Mephistopheles.

HEAD DIRECTOR (*Leaping out of the audience*): I most fervently protest! Why, this is a cultural institution. In these thousand years of ours we have never slaughtered in theatres! I shall write to the ministry.

DEPUTY-HEAD-OF-STATE: Complaint lodged!

USTASHI: That dog did know how to make us laugh!

CRITICUS: He was a born comic talent, a kind that is rarely born, since we Croats, are more suited to tragic roles. The place of Janko Rakuša will remain unfilled in the history of recent popular acting. This true loss must be grieved today by all those...

VOICE: Now we have no Mephistopheles.

OTHER VOICE: That was one powerful actor.

VOICE: He was a Communist.

OTHER VOICE: For the hell of it.

VOICES: Amen.

Margaret [sic.] watches them from her sack. She moans. Darkness.”
(English *Scena*, 1985: 216-7, translation: Ellen Elias-Bursać)¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ See Appendix 1 for a full transcription of this scene.

“Father deliver me from Serbian heroism and Croatian culture!’ This paraphrase of Krleža’s thought, spoken by the actor Janko Rakuša, Mephisto [...] has aroused spontaneous applause at every performance of the play at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade. Opportunities for applause to the acting bravuras abounded even before this moment. However, the audience was tensely soaking up every word from the lips of the actors, as if they didn’t care for the formal values of the production. The first moment of real catharsis and relief in applause arrived at the right place.” (1988: 118)

The audience, Foretić claims here, was applauding the director’s emphasis on resistance to myths and ideologies of any kind.

Though not in any way a central scene in the play, the quoted scene – like any other in the play – articulates and epitomizes the play as a whole. By merging the ‘theatrical’ and the ‘factual’ into a non-naturalistic ‘heterocosm’, the play simultaneously heightens the poignancy of human suffering under repression and prevents a sheer sentimentalist response. The horrific historical fact, which is trivialised by the inner play’s theatricalisation, thus becomes even more tragic. This is also emphasised by the juxtaposition of the play’s cheerful, almost comedic beginning against its progressive ruthlessness. However, the playwright’s discourse too is a combination of ‘faustisms’ and the official jargon – whether it is the jargon of the theatre critic, or the communist or the jargon of the nazified state.¹⁰² Both of these linguistic devices lend the play a feeling of a grotesque parody, whose atmosphere is also much more macabre than, for example, Brešan’s metaplay.

Simultaneously, the play’s fragmentary nature also extends to the characters, in that none of them is portrayed as a villain or a hero *per se* – the protagonist, after all, is the play – and the responsibility for the crimes against art and humanity remains on the

¹⁰² Throughout the play references are repeatedly made to the then official purification of the Croatian language against serbisms.

level of the collective, as does moral conscience, on the other hand. In this respect, the play, at the subplot level, also explores the juxtaposition between the collective and the individual – which also becomes a recurrent theme in the context of the 1980s and 1990s’ re-examination of socialism. The central character – the actor – and his journey, remain at the level of the subplot. Afrić begins as a *bon vivant* and a womaniser, but having obtained the knowledge – which he hadn’t bargained for – ends up amid destruction, alone and a victim of a vicious circle of history. The collective at the beginning of the play features ordinary people as well as some authentic international Nazi dignitaries, local authorities and the staff of the theatre. In the course of the play the collective becomes homogenized around the Nazi ideology whilst the remaining individuals can only attempt an escape. By the end, Afrić is the only survivor, standing alone in a deserted theatre. He is accompanied by a new Mephisto – a partisan commissar who offers him a new deal – to do a new Faust,¹⁰³ to re-invent Croatian theatre in line with the new ideology. The third act is a single unnumbered scene – a snowscape. Faust, Mephistopheles and Margareta merge into ‘a transcendental triad’:

“FAUST (MARGARET): I’ve been everywhere and I’ve died twice.
MEPHISTOPHELES: History has had its full [sic.] of me.
I’ve mastered many a trade.
They’ve beaten me and I have beaten.
They killed, I have killed.
They’ve sliced open my uterus. They took my breath and progeny.
I’m not certain whether I am the exact same goose I was at the beginning.
What was in the Beginning?
The Word? The Deed? The Will?
[...]
Where is the land of my unborn children?
The roar of the oncoming tanks.
When will the dawn break?
Snow.
Upright, I walk my question.
I say ‘yes’ to this youthful madness.
I age.
I feel very [cold].

¹⁰³ “COMMISSAR: I know: Faust is a German play, but then again, Marx was German. We fought with Hitler, not with the German people.” (1985: 220)

Faust/Margaret/Mephistopheles stares into the snow which falls more and more densely. It covers the fallen stalagmite [sic] without inscription."
(1985: 221)

In his Preface, Šnajder proposes reading this play from its end:

"Is it not the case that *a certain* philosophy claims that the whole history is brought to an end, and is it not the case that thus *all* its dramas have finished? The play finishes with an image: a field on a winter's day, maybe at the time of socialism in its youthful madness, covered in snow which erases the difference, but also protects new growth from its total freezing."
(1983: 7)

However ambiguous, Šnajder's standpoint is at least that of cautious questioning in relation to Marxism and the Yugoslav revolution. By focusing on a factual event of the staging of a fictional story he places an emphasis on the specific rather than the universal – the Faustian metaphor. However, having shown that a work of fiction can be used for 'repressive ends' he also indicates that ideologies – whether left or right – can end up using the same text. It is possible that he was also pointing at the fact that both ideologies ended up being equally repressive. Once again, it is an instance of a playwright using a self-sufficient 'heterocosm' (like Brešan did before him) to justify his intention, and once again this 'heterocosm' remains open to interpretation. However, unlike the inner play – in both Brešan and Šnajder – which has a universal value and can thus be translated into any context, the outer play is a 'heterocosm' which also provides a very specific context. The audience is then invited to deliberate their own understanding of it.¹⁰⁴ Whilst Brešan avoids making statements by concentrating on the comical, Šnajder does the same by concentrating on the abstract.

¹⁰⁴ In his preface, Šnajder further writes: "For whose soul Mephisto would have placed a wager today and with whom? Which knowledge would Faust wish for today when in his gothic chamber he has so many encyclopaedias? Which knowledge, which structure of knowledge can he wish for when the knowledge of the first and the last thing, Faust's knowledge, is inadequate for 'an electronic processing of data'?" (ibid.: 8) Again, though seemingly rhetorical, the question conveys a possible answer implicit in the play – the knowledge of what might follow upon breaking out of the vicious circle presented in the play.

In a final word of pre-emptive defence, he concludes:

“It is not simply that there is no desire to explain the whole world and its history out of what is nevertheless a limited entity like a nation, but quite the opposite. Sometimes attempts are made here to explain things from the point of view of history as a whole. Faust liberated some of its participants and then they liberated it. The Croatian Faust takes into account that it might be read both from an emancipated and an emancipatory point of view. I believe that it will be understood that The Croatian Faust does not contain any unheroic or anti-cultural speeches. This drama of hate bears a message of love.” (as quoted in Marjanović, 1985: 224)

Marjanović also offers a particularly illuminating quote from Darko Gašparović’s unpublished manuscript:

“Šnajder’s play, [...] poses the question of the impossibility of predicting the way in which a liberated human being will make use of his new-found freedom. It also conveys the categorical message that freedom cannot exist in a society which demands that art should serve as its ideological coverage.” (ibid.: 225)

Thus the ultimate question which the play poses, in both its content and format, is the question of freedom. The freedom of its interpretation applies to the director, the audience and the critics – the latter being the only one at our disposal.

Directed by one of the leading Yugoslav directors, Slobodan Unkovski, the Yugoslav Drama Theatre’s production was mainly hailed as a masterpiece at the time. Significantly for us, in his discussion, Marjanović (1985) links this play and production to the kind of aesthetics established and pursued by Dušan Jovanović and Ljubiša Ristić. In an essay on Unkovski’s poetics, László Végel (English Scena, 1986: 183-4) reads his direction of this play as an attempt at tackling national mythomania, summing it up as a ‘poetics of neomythologisation’ which leads to a kind of dystopia, thus confirming Barthes’ claim that ‘myth is [the] free speech of politics’. Svetislav Jovanov

(op.cit.) however, also pinpoints the way in which Unkovski's interventions with the play evoked Shakespeare's Hamlet. He sees the premiere of Goethe's Faust at the beginning of the Second Act as a 'Mousetrap' scene, and the Commissar's attempt at persuasion at the end as a paraphrase of Hamlet's speech to the actors. Unkovski's most significant decisions, which were picked up by most critics, however, were: positioning of the inner play's audience on the stage opposite the real audience ('thus emphasising', according to Stamenković 1986:140, 'that theatre is a world and that the world is a theatre'), the set's ceiling consisting of plastic tubes which gradually fill up with blood, and a cinematic intervention at the end of the play – a montage of footage featuring Afrić¹⁰⁵ as well as the films of Predrag Manojlović¹⁰⁶ – the actor playing Afrić here. The montage replaced the final scene of 'the transcendental triad' as well as the reference to 'youthful madness'. The opinions were divided particularly on the point of the rewritten ending.

Marjanović finally concludes by reviewing colleagues' responses:

"Vladimir Stamenković regards this [ending] as a massive anti-climax which takes us back to the real world outside the theatre and puts the distance between us and the play we have just seen by using a different, colder medium. Jovan Ćirilov considers that this effective play, which resembles in terms of form a synthesis of some of the avant-garde movements of the sixties, has taken on an unnecessary ending in this 'film finale', which does in effect destroy the impact of the impressive final monologue when the artist concludes his fate with the words: 'I'm very cold'. Most critics did not dare to attempt a more detailed interpretation of the 'film finale', which represents the sharpest critique of post-war Yugoslav society ever seen on the Yugoslav stage, so the performance of this play can be regarded as an illustration of just how much artistic freedom [there is]." (op.cit.: 226)

¹⁰⁵ Klaić (op.cit.: 14) notes that the real Afrić was only involved in making the first Yugoslav post-war film – Slavica – and then went on to teach theatre direction. Inserts from this film feature in Unkovski's production.

¹⁰⁶ The very ending, where Manojlović shoots at his own image on the screen, thus acquires yet another level of self-reflexivity incorporated into the metatheatricality of the play.

To this I would add one of the views which clearly engages with the political rather than the aesthetic effect of the final scene. Looking at both Varaždin and the Belgrade productions as shown at the Sterija Theatre Festival, the critic Dušan Popović highlights the way in which the text's openness allows a variety of interpretations. He interprets the ending of the play as meaning that the young Commissar represents the Stalinist, pre-1948 version of Yugoslav socialism, which the mature Afrić is apprehensive of, and calls it 'the madness of youth'. Evidently, Popović makes his conservative interpretations in line with the official ideology. This is particularly obvious here:

"Moral reality is the second point where the difference between the directing of the two productions can be clearly seen. Can the artist, actor, fighter and communist Vjeko Afrić, who to the end of his life was true to his partisan sympathies as an artist and man and who remained firmly committed to the self-managing development of the Yugoslav socialist revolution, can such a man be shown as a confused intellectual sceptic who, feeling himself deceived in the victory of 1945 because of his own revolutionary choice in the war, fires in his own disappointment at his own image as a fighter? Yugoslav society cannot permit the historical figures of the Yugoslav revolution to become the target of dealers in dead souls, who can no longer defend themselves, nor the butt of speculations that attempt to transform the shape and character of the revolution into a parade of opposing flags." (1986: 63)

This account at least, might go some way in explaining why much of the political drama of the 1980s still left Klaić dissatisfied and frustrated.

It is also significant here that the Serbo-Croatian Second World War hostility is openly discussed, admittedly within the ironic discourse.¹⁰⁷ Whether or not the breaking of this post-war taboo in the theatre context had in any way led to the events of the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia is not clear. In any case, Šnajder's play was the first significant attempt of tackling the phenomenon of national mythomania, which had

¹⁰⁷ The Serb playwright Jovan Radulović's *Golubnjača*, which also dealt with the Ustashi persecution of Serbs from children's perspective, had indeed provoked controversy a year before. In 1982 Dejan Mijač's production at the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad led to further troubles.

inspired Yugoslav theatre ever since its inception. The play, therefore, addresses the national taste for myths, the re-writing of history and confronts the audience with an 'unpleasant' version of this trend. Or in the words of the Croatian critic Dalibor Foretić:

"The original Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge. Šnajder discovers a common Croatian variation of the same mythical motif, whereby a peasant sells to the devil a piece of bloodied flesh in exchange for happiness and peaceful life. [...] Starting from historical fact, Šnajder in his poetic inspiration, charts the process of the [devil] billing [the peasants] for that blood." (1988: 116-7)

Ingeniously, by incorporating this trend into a metatheatrical framework, the playwright manages to elevate the play to universal significance and create accessibility even outside the borders of Yugoslavia. The line 'Father, deliver us from Serbian heroism and Croatian culture', however, retains an inwardly sinister tone, which obviously continued to ring true to the end of the 20th century.

Nenad Prokić: Metastabilni Graal (The Metastable Grail)

"(Archduke Visconti comes out before the audience. He stands in one place, on the proscenium, in front of a black curtain. His face is powdered and his cheeks are painted. With a smile and some affectation, he addresses the audience as if reciting very sensitive love poetry.)

ARCHDUKE VISCONTI: Life can very rarely surprise us. Life in general – not this life of yours or this life of ours, individual, little insignificant life. First of all, stable states of being are replaced by metastable states of being. In this country, the state of being is metastable. [...] I would like to state that the crisis has spread to all spheres of life – work has lost its moral value. One thing that is particularly worrying is the crisis of knowledge with contradictory tendencies. One tendency is an attempt to put knowledge at the service of reality, or alternatively, to put knowledge at the service of nihilism and hypercriticism. Consequently, just as midnight is the right time for werewolves and vampires, so metastable states are convenient for firing up the passions and appetites of professional benefactors and saviours of humanity. Because... people in such states like to believe and invest their hopes in the New; [...]. In this country, one can sense a certain kind of discomfort. One can't call it either nostalgia, or despair, or shock, or disgust – it is simply one big discomfort. As if life has lost not only its essence but also taste. My country!

As the light goes down, the black curtain simultaneously and very quickly disappears as if sucked into a point in the middle. Music - the Italian anthem. Lights go up. The archduke Visconti is in the middle of a big splendid hall.

ARCHDUKE VISCONTI: My country: Italia, Italia..."

(Prokić: Metastabilni Graal; in Stamenković (ed.): Savremena Drama; Vol. 2, 1987: 229; my translation)

The opening of the play is deceptively explicit. A character delivers a speech, which devoid of any context, becomes a direct commentary on the current situation – Yugoslavia in the 1980s. The prologue is highly abstract and generalised, it is neither satirical, entertaining, nor strictly speaking theatrical. The only theatricality is indicated by the stage direction which suggests a certain degree of affectation. It could be proposed that the speech is a reflection of the typical – alienating, unengaging, pontificating – political rhetoric of the day. As soon as the character comes close to defining the state of affairs in ‘his country’ however – we are taken into the socio-metacommentary world of the play: his country is Italy in 1925.

The play is structured as having three acts and two interludes. The first act and the first interlude is the first part of the play-within-the-play, which is also called The Metastable Grail. The main characters of this play are the cultural elite of Mussolini’s Italy – including Marinetti, Croce, Gentile, Malaparte, d’Annunzio, Pirandello¹⁰⁸ – who are gathered at the Archduke Visconti’s Christmas Eve party, passionately discussing their own sharply juxtaposed ideological differences and opinions. The first interlude is

¹⁰⁸ “ARCHDUKE VISCONTI: Mr Pirandello claims that he is one of the rare people capable of understanding the beauty of Mussolini’s continuous creation of reality. Even though he doesn’t care about politics he doesn’t hide his admiration for the Duce either. Human life is theatrical, Mr Pirandello, and you are right to think so.

PIRANDELLO: I am sure that everybody else is wrong and that only I am right. Reconstructing the order, Mussolini managed to impose his own reality onto life: and that is more than my characters – suffering from the lack of their own identity – are capable of. Moreover, I think that Mussolini has solved the antinomy between life and form. I do not hide my own admiration for the Duce, because when power is in the hands of one person, he knows that he is alone and has to please many; but when many people rule they only want to please themselves and it is then that we have the most ridiculous and the most terrible tyranny: tyranny under the mask of freedom. Mussolini is the real man of theatre (*he kneels*), the hero of Revelation, that God gave Italy at the right moment. He participates in the Theatre of centuries both as a writer and as a protagonist” (Prokić, op.cit., 1987: 310; my translation)

a church service, where two of the archduke's guests engage in a sexual intercourse behind the benches. In a dramaturgical anticlimax – the second act reveals that this has been a play within the play and proceeds to establish the actual context and identities of the characters.¹⁰⁹ The central character, Ivan Marojević is an author, director and the leading actor¹¹⁰ in this parable. Thus, the second act is an exposition to the actual world of Prokić's play, whilst the first act and the interlude were an exposition to the thematic world of the play.¹¹¹ Prokić exploits this parallel historically removed context in order to examine certain ideological concepts – specifically fascism and socialism,¹¹² as well as religion – in a relatively safe and justified way. The second act of Prokić's play offers a temporal determination,¹¹³ and covers the period between the end of the rehearsal and the following morning. At the beginning of the second act we see the manager and the dramaturg of the theatre giving a positive verdict about the play despite the author's own concern about his 'philosophical tone'; and we also learn about the internal relationships between the members of cast – Marojević is having an extramarital affair with a young actress in the presence of his wife's consenting silence. By the end of the second act, the following morning, the management of the theatre return to ban the production 'on behalf of the working people of the theatre':

“MANOJLO VESELINOVIĆ: I will be very brief. The play The Metastable Grail by Ivan Marojević [...], is dramaturgically a badly written and badly directed piece. My doubts, which I had expressed at the very beginning toward the entire project, have unfortunately proved themselves true. In this text of dubious morality, there emerge some strange metaphors and

¹⁰⁹ This approach is technically reminiscent of the beginning of Tom Stoppard's play The Real Thing.

¹¹⁰ In yet another instance of self-reflexivity, one of the characters in the play comments to Marojević: “You appear in a three-fold role, this is so to speak, your complete authorial piece. There are rumours that this is also an autobiographical play. That would then mean a four-fold role.” (Prokić, op.cit., 1987: 326)

¹¹¹ “The first and the second part are two independent wholes. The thematic and temporal periods are articulated in characteristic idioms. Prokić's play itself is metastable: in the first part it is thrown off-balance, it swings on non-dramatic principles – a decorative rhetoric, with ascetic, underdeveloped action, so that in the second part it can consolidate itself, and eventually fall into the areas of declarativeness and wit.” (Avdo Mujčinović: “A Theatre Essay”, Politika Ekspres, 30.03.1985)

¹¹² The characters even talk directly about Karl Marx in relation to Croce's neo-idealism.

¹¹³ Whilst the play-within-the-play is happening on Christmas Eve 1925, we find out that Prokić's play is also happening on Christmas Eve 1983.

pretentious comparisons, which do not reflect the actual state of affairs. Briefly – they do not reflect the truth. By that I mean particularly the second part of the play, and particularly the monologue of Ivan Marojević.¹¹⁴ I, as a professional, as a communist and a secretary of a party organization...

BRANA: That's a good one, you motherfucker! A professional communist! That's what you are! You are the one who goes from one meeting to another and – for days, months and many years – you have done nothing at all; but officially you believe and swear by socialism, and personally you are obviously in some other system already!

RADOMIR PETROVIĆ: Enough! You'll be going before a disciplinary panel because of this!

MANOJLO VESELINOVIĆ (*pointing at Brana with his finger*): Provocateur! An enemy of the self-management system.

(*...A fight ensues....*)”

(Prokić: op.cit., 1987: 334; my translation)

This extract functions on several levels. It first of all illustrates the arbitrariness of critical interpretation of a piece of art, the unpredictability of an act of censorship and the undisputability of political power. The same character in the same scene declares two entirely contradictory verdicts – probably because of a decision which came from above him. The authority figures – who are also theatre professionals – have a full name and surname, thus denoting official and alien presence in the world of the play. In a significant step forward from Brešan's portrayal of an omnipotent and threatening authority figure through Jughead, here the authority – in its diminished form of an agent – is directly challenged and opposed both verbally and physically. In terms of the play's self-reflexivity – in Hutcheon's terms – it anticipates an exact possibility of what might happen to the play itself. Hence, the play does not only disarm the reviewer's criticism:

“The king of trap and a cunning Yugoslavian debutant Nenad Prokić is listening from the sixth row to his own sentences which defend him: ‘it is too intellectual, philosophical, slow etc, etc...’ The critics immediately give up on an intention to slate the young playwright.” (Branka Krilović: “Prokić i Magelli, Grazie Molto”; review in NIN, 07.04.1985)

¹¹⁴ We haven't seen this part of the play-within-the play. Although a monologue of Ivan Marojević is indeed yet to come, this is a monologue of Marojević's defence before the management of the theatre rather than a monologue from the inner play. In this way, the ambiguity of this particular instance of self-reflexivity can be interpreted to apply to Prokić's as well as Marojević's play.

but also aims to disarm the censors themselves:

“There were some rumours around the Grail as well, but it came out precisely because the censors could not penetrate the structure and pinpoint what the play was actually about. They saw that the play was about the Italian fascists in the 1920s and they probably ascribed all the sentences they didn't like to the Italian fascists.” (Nenad Prokić, interview, 29.03.2001; see Appendix 2 for full transcription)

The ban of the production represents the culmination of Prokić's play, which then examines the young man's profound struggle with his own beliefs and his own predicament within the given socio-political and spiritual context. In the second interlude,¹¹⁵ in defence of the play, Marojević displays considerable bravado, which only hides his inner turmoil:

“(All the actors are sitting on chairs arranged in a row, before the black curtain. They have lighted cigarettes in their hands, but nobody is smoking, nobody is moving. Ivan is sitting in the middle).”

IVAN: I operate with illusion as a tool. As at the present time there is no single healthy substance, [...] I can only conclude that it shouldn't seem any more ridiculous or crazy that I should ask my fellows for a certain amount of illusion, which in any case is much less illusion than anyone invests in stupid causes everyday.[...]

[Your] objection: the intelligentsia gives dubious speeches. I know that you would like the intelligentsia to chew over its formulas and ideas in some obscure reservation camp and refrain from causing unrest. In the Balkan wilderness, the 'pragmatic', the one who finds a way has always been particularly admired. As long as that is the case, the 'ratio' will be in the opposition. [...]

You know what? After our death, you are free to examine both what we were and what we wrote, but whilst we are alive you can only do the latter. [...] I've told you several times already, you are the party-members, you have to do whatever the Party requires of you. I don't. I could never agree with the kind of Marxism which is infiltrated with a kind of messiahism in the sense of Bloch's claim: Jerusalem is wherever Lenin is. And we will never establish whether my writing and my directing represent ideological diversions. [...]

(Everybody's cigarettes have burnt out. All get up and exit. Only Ivan is still sitting down. Brana stands above him and sings into his ear Brecht's 'Über den Selbstermord'.)”

(Prokić, op.cit., 1987: 336-40; please see Appendix 1 for the full scene)

¹¹⁵ Reminiscent in atmosphere of a possible antithesis to Handke's Offending the Audience

In the interview Prokić gave me, he explained that his was an affinity with Karl Popper's pragmatic philosophy and the notion of an 'open society'. This position, he claims, was a position of 'the intelligentsia who chew over their formulas and ideas in some obscure reservation camp' and are neither interfered with nor powerful enough to change anything. The 1980s were a 'metastable' time, in which the right of free speech was becoming increasingly exercised. Prokić sought an analogy with Mussolini's Italy not only to draw the similarities between different oppressive regimes but because he optimistically – and mistakenly – believed that Yugoslavia would emerge from its 'soft' communism unscathed, the same way that Italy emerged from the 25 years of fascism. Of course, Yugoslavia's own 'Mussolini' was yet to come, whose resemblance to Pirandello's description of the Duce in the play is uncanny. In this way Prokić's play acquires even unanticipated prophetic¹¹⁶ qualities.

Despite this stated optimism Prokić's play does not offer an optimistic ending. The third act begins amid the semi-deconstructed set of the undestined play,¹¹⁷ with Ivan alone on the stage – which image, in its sinister grotesqueness, is also reminiscent of Afrić alone at the end of The Croatian Faust. His estranged half-brother – a priest – arrives to try and entice him to at least recognize God and find a solution. Upon his failure and departure, Ivan at first performs a theatrical suicide by running a dagger into his heart. The actor Brana then arrives with the news that the play will go on after all, but Ivan proceeds to shoot into his own mouth, thus committing suicide 'for real'.

¹¹⁶ In an interesting coincidence, Prokić actually does try to bestow a prophetic quality on Archduke Visconti's introduction of various characters who arrive at his party – using the self-reflexive fact that he is writing with the knowledge of what later happened to these historical characters. That device also allows him to voice through Visconti the fact that Italy would emerge from fascism unscathed.

¹¹⁷ "(A black curtain is raised. The dismantled set of The Metastable Grail emerges, also some iron construction, a cupboard, a big canvas with a painted sky, the lights and the props thrown all over the stage)" (op.cit., 1987: 340)

The Metastable Grail – Nenad Prokić's theatre debut¹¹⁸ – was voted the best foreign play by Theater Heute in 1985. Its premiere production in March 1985 at Atelje 212 in Belgrade was directed by the domiciled Italian Paolo Magelli. The play's appearance interestingly coincided with a recent ban of Jovan Radulović's Golubnjača – a play which dealt with the Nazi Croatian prosecution of the Serbs and which caused a great furore at the time – although Prokić¹¹⁹ had probably finished writing his play before this event. This timing of the two events certainly influenced the audience's reception. Many critics at the time note the fact that the monologue of the second interlude, despite its risky length, gained a rapturous applause every night. The young debutante was also placed by many in the tradition of Krleža's (cosmopolitan) dramaturgical style. Whilst Vladimir Stamenković¹²⁰ singles out the eschatological human need for beliefs and ideals as the main thematic quality of The Metastable Grail, the Croatian critic Dalibor Foretić is particularly interested in the author's search for illusion in theatre:¹²¹

“For Prokić the world is theatre. Then the stage is just one place where that theatre happens. Maybe it is an even better and a more interesting place than the others because in it illusion is at work [...]. His play therefore engages with the fiction of fiction, but not in order to show their inter-relation, but in order to part them both [...] and to observe the real state of the spirit of the world. In that way, the illusion is not a lie, a mirage or self-deception. It is equally real as reality itself. And it is worth fighting for as much as life itself. It is equally necessary as bread.¹²² [...] Just like it is important to win the right to life and freedom, it is important to win the right to illusion.” (Foretić: “The Right to Illusion”, Danas, Zagreb, 25.06.1985)

Interestingly, Foretić also insists on the often overlooked aesthetic and poetic qualities of this largely philosophical play, singling out for example, the dialogue between

¹¹⁸ He had previously written Dom Bergmanovih (The Home of the Bergmans) in 1981, which received a premiere after The Metastable Grail.

¹¹⁹ In the interview he gave me, Prokić is even seemingly disparaging towards that play.

¹²⁰ “Marojević commits suicide not because he is defeated in his personal life, nor because he believes that his play is banned, but because the eschatological impulse within him dies when he realises that in modern history optimism leads to violence, to the victory of the totalitarian tendencies.” (1986: 28-9).

¹²¹ This search for a right to theatre illusion will be taken to a greater extreme in Simović's play below.

¹²² The notion of equation between bread and illusion is hinted at in the play itself, whereby the inner play features a scene of receiving holy communion – a piece of bread – at the church service.

Marojević and his mistress as the most beautifully written romantic dialogue in contemporary dramatic literature. This poetic quality of the play was also reflected in Magelli's direction,¹²³ which was hailed at the time as his best ever. Foretić suggests that Magelli might have found his own 'grail' in this play, not least because he also applied the notion of the grail to theatre itself. Thus when Marojević reaches for his dagger at the end of the play, he opens a props cupboard and 'some strange light is shining out of it'. In another directorial intervention, instead of shooting at himself with a revolver, as instructed by Prokić, Marojević is shot by a mysterious hand behind the wings. It is, therefore, the theatre – 'too strong an illusion' – that kills the young man.

Similarly unaware of Prokić's play and Magelli's reading of it – as Prokić had been unaware that a real life incident with another play would pre-empt the events of his own – another playwright, Ljubomir Simović, was at the same time finishing a play which centres on another young man's death by theatre illusion.

Ljubomir Simović: Putujuće pozorište Šopalović (The Travelling Theatre Šopalović)

"On the first level, [there] is obviously a moral problem. The question that one policeman asks – 'Do you not mind the shadow of the gallows on your stage?' – is the sharpest articulation of the moral problem of that play. Then you have the relationship between reality and art – when we use those terms we inevitably simplify those things in the worst way, and I do not like simplification – but for the sake of this conversation we can allow that. So, the relationship between reality and art; and then that which interests me in particular and which I suppose is obvious from my other plays – I like the theatre very much as play. I like theatre play. [...] I like plays with lots of characters, with lots of play in different senses of the word, so we have interweaving of many relationships, the conflicts of very many different levels of reality, because – hand on heart – art is nothing else, maybe, than one of the possible levels of what we call reality. Like, for example, I have never acknowledged the notion of fantasy as something that is separate from

¹²³ Although Mujčinović in his review ("A Theatre Essay", op.cit.) claims that the director staged the play as a theatre essay.

reality, but have always treated fantasy as a kind of reality – a reality which is more difficult to prove, more difficult to understand, but which is no less real only because it is more difficult to prove.” (Ljubomir Simović, interview, 29.03.2001; for full transcript see Appendix 2)

Ljubomir Simović was born on 2 December 1935 in Užice, Serbia. Having obtained a degree in the History of Yugoslav Literature at the University of Belgrade, he embarked on a very successful career as a poet, writer and dramatist – he has published over ten collections of poetry, four collections of essays and four plays. His first play Hasanaginica¹²⁴ was premiered at the National Theatre in Belgrade in 1974, directed by Željko Orešković; followed by the premiere of Čudo u Šarganu (The Miracle in Šargan) in 1975, at the Atelje 212, and under the direction of Mira Trailović. Putujuće pozorište Šopalović (The Travelling Theatre Šopalović)¹²⁵ premiered in October 1985, in the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, and was directed by Dejan Mijač. His fourth play Kosovski boj (The Battle of Kosovo) has not had a significant theatre staging, although it served as the screenplay for Zdravko Šotra’s 1989 film with the same title. The Travelling Theatre Šopalović is Simović’s internationally most renowned play, which has been staged in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, in various theatres all over France, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada and even in Casablanca, Morocco and in Seoul, South Korea. The play was published in Polish and Russian theatre magazines, and in the French language it received two independent publications in 1989 and 1995. He is a recipient of most major Yugoslav literary awards, and his first three plays have all received the Sterija Prize for the best text (the productions of two of which also received the best play award at the annual Sterija Festival). Since 1994 he has been a regular member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

¹²⁴ Inspired by a Serbian epic of the same name; also translated as Hasanaga’s Wife in the English Issue of Scena, 1985.

¹²⁵ Also translated by Alan McConnell-Duff as The Travelling Troupe Šopalović in the English Issue of Scena, 1987. In my translation I have transcribed the Serbian names, hence the title version – The Travelling Theatre Šopalović. Within the thesis I will be referring to the play as The Travelling Theatre Šopalović.

The idea behind The Travelling Theatre Šopalović is the transformative, humanist and life-affirming power of theatre itself. Here, theatre is not in the hands of an ideology, though its power and modus operandi is seriously restricted by a very specific socio-political situation – that of the German occupation during the Second World War. This metaplay in fact doesn't even feature a play within the play, or a particular play around which the plot evolves. Instead, the travelling actors arrive in a provincial town in Serbia to perform Schiller's The Robbers, as they are only allowed to do German plays. They encounter a considerable amount of hostility both from the local authorities and the inhabitants; and finally their plans are thwarted because of the assassination of a local official. Their own play never gets performed; however, from their arrival at the beginning of our play until their departure some twenty-four hours later, at the end of the play, their presence in this town has occasioned major changes and left a significant impact on the initially uncooperative inhabitants.

The author's decision to set the play within the extreme circumstances of wartime, he explains in the quoted interview, was motivated by the desire to examine the power of theatre in the 'sharpest way' possible. Apart from the fact that the actors are presented as a certain kind of heralds, who are then gagged by these extreme circumstances, the conflict between art and the bleak reality also brings out a number of disparate perspectives from which the theatre is viewed. The inhabitants see the actors' activity as immoral, or at least tactless in the face of their daily suffering; the police authority – Meitzen – is primarily concerned with bureaucracy and his 'Do you not mind the shadow of the gallows on your stage?' is the comment of an actual cold-blooded executioner. Milun, the prison guard, however, a small man with power, is deeply mistrustful of the actors' behaviour which he interprets as criminal. The fact that the

actors are advertising their play in a public place is interpreted as inciting the masses, their props are seen as serious weapons, and the fact that they call each other by different names is seen as a use of false identities. The uneducated prison guard has a particular set of criteria for the assessment of dangerous behaviour, his threshold of acceptance of anything other than his view of reality is extremely low, and being entirely unaware of theatrical conventions, he takes the actors' behaviour too literally – as real, and therefore, dangerous. In this respect, he is not dissimilar to the young actor Filip, who however, takes theatre reality as an ultimate reality and refuses to treat real life as being outside the conventions of theatre. Thus the wooden sword is equally real for Filip as it is for Milun, in that both of them refuse to acknowledge the existence of the dividing line between reality and fiction, whilst stubbornly inhabiting their own position on either side of the line. The rest of the characters are more flexible in this respect, and the older actress Yelisaveta is both intolerant of the fact that the police force doesn't have 'the minimum of theatrical education' and of the fact that Filip immerses himself in his parts too much. However, whilst Sofia's view of the theatre is often defensive of Filip's passion, she is primarily in love with the beauty of nature, life and art, which she insists on even despite the harsh reality. Vasilije, the leader of the troupe, and Yelisaveta are insistently more pragmatic – in an almost parental fashion to the youngsters. They see their craft as primarily a craft which they should continue doing just as 'the baker continues making bread'¹²⁶ and other crafts-people continue doing their craft at the time of war. Thus the four actors are most of the time explaining themselves and their art to themselves and the habitants of Užice – which does not exclude disputes amongst themselves – and at the same time their own art is running its own course and taking its own effect.

¹²⁶ Interestingly, this particular analogy concerning bakers and actors, almost literally recurs in Emir Kusturica's 1996 film Underground, scripted by Dušan Kovačević.

The key event in the play is the assassination of a local official, committed by a young Party activist Sekula. Sekula remains an off-stage character while his parents appear as the immediate neighbours of the actors' landlady, Simka. His mother, Gina, is an outspoken and abrasive laundry woman, and his father Blagoye, an incorrigible drunkard, who takes a – temporarily transformative – liking to the young actress Sofia. On the edges of this entire collision between the world of the actors and the world of occupied and enslaved Užice, we also have the character Drobac (in my translation - Clobber), a torturer, who is referred to in the play as 'an animal' and 'an inhuman being'. His entire perception of life boils down to his relationship with his victim, by which means he dictates horror and a self-imposed alienation from the rest of the world. Eventually, Sofia's beauty inadvertently entices Clobber away from his latest victim, Sekula, and her atypically friendly attitude towards Clobber, inspired by a scene from some play which she remembers, finally results in his profound inner transformation. Sofia is in turn punished for this 'friendliness' by the habitants of Užice, who, led by Blagoye, cut her hair in retaliation. Meanwhile, for Filip the real life events in Užice – the specific circumstances of the assassination of the local official and his mistress – as well as Sofia's scalping, begin to resemble events from Euripides' Electra. In the penultimate scene of the play, as the corpses of the assassinated are brought out, Filip suddenly emerges with a wooden sword at the scene, and having cast himself as Orestes, announces to 'the citizens of Argos' that this was his deed. Implicated as the actual murderer, he is immediately executed on the spot. The remaining members of the troupe leave Užice, financially impoverished, robbed of their licence to perform further and largely morally defeated. Still, in a final encounter with Simka who runs after them – visibly transformed from a self-oppressed widow into a white-clad, carefree woman, resolved to make the best of her life – they learn that young Sekula has been released from prison and that everybody is ashamed of the way they had treated the actors. As

they leave, indifferent to this news, Simka also shouts that Clobber was found hanging by his whip and holding a scarlet pimpernel – a token from Sofia – in his hand. But – ‘they don’t hear...’

This ending is in many ways analogous to an ending of a performance. They have handled the obstacle of having their stage requisitioned by life, they rose above the sentiments of a disapproving audience, they used their skills, made their own, very serious, sacrifices – and now they are leaving the stage on an anti-climax, largely unaware of the most profound effects they have initiated. There is a suggestion even within the play that at the moment when Sekula’s arrest is announced to his mother – and this is also quickly followed by Clobbers’ horrifying speech on how he tortures his victims – that the actors have now become the audience to Užice’s ‘bloody theatre’.¹²⁷ However, if they are an audience, they are certainly not a hostile, or even a passive audience. They might be oblivious to the real-life everyday suffering, they might be completely detached from the ‘bloody theatre’ they are witnessing, it might even be said that Filip’s ‘theatrical lunacy’ and Sofia’s flirting with the torturer were entirely self-centred acts: in the former case driven by a pathological complex, and in the latter by the instinct for survival. Ultimately, it is art, operating through these actors, that interferes with real life and changes it.

In his analysis, Jovan Hristić views the play from the point of view of the tradition of ‘plays which set their plots against life’:¹²⁸

¹²⁷ “In [the reality of occupied Užice] the actors become audience and those that were to have been their audience become participants. The outlook on events is altered: the actors remain outside the current of events, and their art – about which there is no illusion from the very beginning – reveals itself as too frail a fiction before the onslaught of reality.” (Jovan Hristić, English *Scena*, 1987: 269)

¹²⁸ Note that almost no commentator uses the term ‘metatheatre’ in relation to any of the discussed plays, though Hristić is the closest here to identifying metatheatre as a separate genre.

“It could even be said that from the time of Beaumont and Fletcher’s Knight of the Burning Pestle to Anouilh’s The Rehearsal, [these plays] constitute a minor genre in dramatic literature. But in contrast to his predecessors, whose fictitious world and real world were mutually reflected in a single way and comparison between them was effected in a single direction, Simović has succeeded in achieving an interplay between the theatre and life in several ways so that as the drama unfolds, the relationship between the two becomes increasingly complex.” (English Scena, 1987: 269)

He further proceeds to identify three ways in which theatre and real life encroach on each other, by examining the actors’ different attitudes to their art and the consequences of their attitudes on real life. Thus, following the banning of the performance, Yelisaveta and Vasiliye are shown on a moonlit balcony, packing. They are resigned to their miserable fate although slightly nostalgic about the past; they discuss the difference between Shakespeare’s ‘machinery of blood-spilling’ and the Chekhovian autumnal ennui. Essentially, they are clear on the difference between theatre and reality, and in a Chekhovian fashion, proceed to bear their cross.¹²⁹ Still, as Hristić points out, under this same moonlight,¹³⁰ almost simultaneously, Sofia enacts her own philosophy of her art, managing ‘not only to save herself from reality but even to transform it’. Hristić calls this scene ‘The Beauty and the Beast theme’, whilst Zoran Milosavljević (1994: 108-10) also discusses this scene in relation to the famous Ivo Andrić’s allegorical novella Aska and the Wolf – where a sheep called Aska, who loves to dance, leaves her herd despite her mother’s warnings and is then forced to dance her way out of danger, in an encounter with a leering wolf.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Hristić, however also sees these characters as potentially comic: “We could even envisage a Nušić one act play about actors whom an uneducated and confused policeman apprehends and takes to a provincial police station.” (op.cit.: 269) This notion is indeed reminiscent of Nušić’s comedy Sumnjivo lice (A Suspicious Character). However, whilst Kovačević’s play The Balkan Spy is in many ways resonant of A Suspicious Character, the policeman who does not understand theatrical conventions will also be found in his later play Larry Thompson.

¹³⁰ “But there in the Adžić courtyard, the moonlight looked like kitsch; here on the banks of a river it becomes a conspirator in mysterious transformations.” (op.cit.: 270)

¹³¹ Taken further back to mythology once again, this could also be compared to Sheherazade who is forced to resort to storytelling – for 1001 nights – in order to save her life.

Finally, the third line which Hristić identifies as an example of interweaving of art and reality in this play is the scene where Filip¹³² implicates himself as a murderer of the local official and is executed due to the policemen's mis-understanding of his words. This takes place soon after the 'Beauty and the Beast' scene and the immediately consequential scalping of Sofia, however, 'the moonlight has gone and the wind is blowing'. The role of the moonlight in these three or four consecutive scenes can very much be seen as analogous to the use of lighting in theatre, and thus the final scene is left ambiguous in terms of its belonging to either the temporarily established 'para-theatrical' or a 'real-life' domain. Hristić concludes:

“[I]n Filip's big scene, the life of the travelling actor is raised to the level of tragedy, and by raising itself to tragedy also raises life to tragedy. The performance of The Robbers was banned and never played – in the reality of the occupation, Schiller's melodrama is a mere lie – but the great scene from Electra was played instead, a scene in which the theatre became truth and revealed the truth of life.” (ibid.)

The motif of a saviour – Filip taking on the fault of another – as observed by Hristić, and also in the enclosed interview – was present in Simović's previous play The Miracle in Šargan. However, whilst Filip unwittingly saves the real culprit, in Šargan, a mysterious beggar has taken it upon himself to relieve people of the sources of their suffering, thus only making life worse for the unsuspecting victims of his generous sacrifice. The origins of this poetic sublimation could most obviously be traced to Christian faith, but it could also be argued that this notion is reminiscent of the way in which the heroes of the Second World War and the Yugoslav revolution were hailed as our collective saviours. By exploring the saviour motif, Simović was then suggesting in the first instance, that 'salvation' was sometimes unwelcome and even had disastrous

¹³² Some critics have metaphorically interpreted Filip's action as Don Quixotesque (Milutin Mišić, "A Metaphor about Actors", Jedinstvo, Priština, 1.11.1985), whilst others – because of references to a dragon in Filip's poetic monologue in the second interlude – as analogous to St George (Hamdija Demirović: "A Stage in the Shadow of the Gallows", Oslobodjenje, Sarajevo, 23.10.1985)

consequences for particular individuals, and in the second instance, that the 'salvation' was only an accidental consequence of an act of madness. In the final scene of the play, the remaining members of the troupe speculate what might have led Filip to commit this 'sacrificial' act, even wondering whether he might have been an under-cover Party-member. Their only conclusion is that 'he was killed by the theatre', and that therefore he died for or because of his art.¹³³ Marjanović also offers the possibility that '[Filip] pays with his life for his right to live a personal freedom, to realise a personal dream' (2000: 285). The playwright's own clarification consists in the following:

"We have too many prejudices regarding reality itself, we think we know what reality is, if we believe that reality is what can be seen, touched, heard, measured and so on. I always call on Laza Kostić – he was much bigger than he is credited for around here – who said that fantasy and dreams are just as real as is rain for example. And that is where the key is, and the answer. So, hand on heart, what is art in amongst other things – it is full of proofs that reality is something much more complicated and much richer than we think or know." (Interview with Simović; see Appendix 2)

Stylistically, this is reflected in the play's composition, its images, its language,¹³⁴ its rhythms and the use of metaphors. Thus, for example, the second introductory scene ends in the laconically imbued statement 'And you don't mind the shadow of the gallows on your stage?'; the stage directions often give such pointers as 'the consequences of this moment will become apparent later'; the characters – who are nevertheless completely rounded people – are depicted through a characteristic or an object which becomes their physical extension and acquires further significance, such as

¹³³ Hristić also argues: "It was a brilliant idea of Simović's to choose the art that is not that of great creators in the theatre and to mingle it with life. He chose rather the art of travelling players. There is in this a slight dig at the expense of art, but also an expression of faith in the fact that art is art even in the hands of travelling players" (op.cit.: 270). Simović in my interview, however, declares that it was never his intention to portray the actors as second-rate or amateur artists.

¹³⁴ Indeed, most Simović's other plays have been written entirely in blank verse, 'laconic' verse, without embellishments, and 'verse which retained live contact with everyday speech' (Hristić, op.cit.: 271).

Gina's washing tub or Clobber's whip; and most significantly – Clobber's bloody trace which he leaves behind him, and which is eventually transferred onto Blagoje.¹³⁵

Hristić, also offers the following observation:

“In the best instance, a ‘poetic drama’ is an attempt to revive the drama as a formula for reality as Greek tragedy was, and not only as a picture of reality such as realistic drama is. At the worst, by rejecting all links with everyday reality it loses itself in the rarefied atmosphere of unreal events and verbal lyricism without genuine dramatic justification. But Simović is aware that art finds it hard to give up a field it has conquered and that drama today – Waiting for Godot is an exception which proves the rule – can become a formula for reality only if it first is a picture of reality.” (op.cit.: 271)

This loss of a ‘formula’ might have been exactly what Abel was bemoaning. This metaplay as a definite ‘heterocosm’ which can then generate its own poetry, is another example of how the totality of Greek tragedy¹³⁶ can be restored through metatheatre.

In conclusion, Marjanović examines the notion of the boundary between reality and theatre, quoting from Simović's letter to the director Dejan Mijač from 1985:

“[T]hat conscious or unconscious interweaving, dividing and overlapping of reality and theatre, the fact that the boundary is constantly erasing itself, hiding, moving and then suddenly emerging in unexpected places – that is the basic ‘play’ of the drama. That boundary divides us, moves us from one of its sides to another, it underlines or questions that which demarcates and determines us. In a word, that boundary plays with us.” (2000: 289)

Discussing this notion further, Zoran Milosavljević is also reported here as saying that Sofia had moved that boundary in order to bring Clobber in and ‘present to him a world which had extinguished itself within him and outside him’. Her effort is only

¹³⁵ “[T]his bloody track does not have the effect of something extraneous and imposed, attempting by artifice to achieve what the plot has not managed to do. Quite the contrary. The bloody track is a poetic image, a powerful dramatic turn in which the events reveal their hidden meanings.” (Hristić, op.cit.: 271)

¹³⁶ Marjanović interestingly observes that “Having fallen in love with Sofia, [Clobber experiences] a realisation of his sin and a catharsis through death, like a classical character.” (2000: 284)

momentarily effective and akin to Filip's wooden sword, which doesn't save her from an angry mob minutes later. Filip on the other hand, is punished because he refused to acknowledge the existence of the boundary and attempted to 'turn the entire world into his own stage'. In an interview, Dejan Mijač told me that in relation to it, he as a director, positioned himself right on the boundary (see Appendix 2), for as Milosavljević concludes, 'that boundary exists, otherwise we wouldn't be able to recognize the existence of the theatre; however it is movable, for if it wasn't, it would not be possible to intervene in the world through theatre' (in Marjanović, 2000: 289).

Yugoslav Metatheatre of the early 1980s

Having first called The Travelling Theatre Šopalović a kind of 'Mid-Occupation Night's Dream'¹³⁷ in a review of the premiere, Dalibor Foretić then wrote about the play's multi-award winning performance at that year's Sterija Festival in Novi Sad:

"It is a mute, proud apotheosis for the actor, of his wonderful ability to make the world a magic place, and of his trembling inability to change anything in it. Someone remarked in conversation on the occasion of this performance that the theatre can do anything: it can change a monster into a beauty and alter fate through the holy madness of acting. I added that theatre can do all that but only in the theatre. Its magic ends in the moment when we leave the theatre.¹³⁸ It can enrich us with emotions, clarify problems, and help us to realize [sic.] what kind of world we live in but it cannot help us to confront the world in the whirlpool of all its gloomy contradictions. The theatre's flickering resembles a flaming candle. In order to preserve it, one has to keep it in the warmth and security of one's hands. Then it knows how to repay that warmth. If we expose it to the cruel winds of the world, they will extinguish it." (The English Issue of Scena, 1987: 11)

In relation to Simović's play directly, Foretić's comments can be seen as slightly unfair, because the play seems to be saying that it is not the theatre in its usual *modus operandi* that changes the world it has visited, but it is its 'priests' who, by the force of habitually

¹³⁷ The title of Foretić's review in Serbo-Croat is "San okupacijske noći" (Odjek, Sarajevo, 15.11.1985)

¹³⁸ This opinion is also expressed by Dejan Mijač in the interview he gave me (see Appendix 2).

abiding to the rules of the world of theatre in their everyday behaviour, effect the changes that even they are not aware of. Foretić's observation however, is a useful warning of the danger of falling into the trap of l'art pour l'art which metatheatre could very easily become, and it is useful in its demand for bigger efforts than those offered up to that point.

The selection of plays covered in this chapter includes only the most significant, aesthetically most accomplished and thematically most effective examples of the Yugoslav metatheatre of the period 1980-1986. Certain basic similarities can also be established upon reading the plays side by side. The first and the third of the above plays are set in the Second World War. The second is set in the 1980s but the initially disguised play within the play is set in fascist Italy. All three plays explore the political significance (as well as various social functions) of theatre. The first and the third deal with the communist reinforced myth about actors' moral dubiousness. The second deals with artistic authorship and with the repressions of socialism in the 1980s directly. Most importantly, all three transcend the traditional local themes and forms, assume a wider European relevance and receive translations or productions outside of Yugoslavia.

The selection excludes¹³⁹ the play mentioned by Klaić – Pivara (The Brewery) by Božidar Zečević, which is also a play about a group of actors performing in the occupied Belgrade during the Second World War. This play seemed to concern itself with the entertaining forms of theatre, remained in the culture-specific domain, and was quickly forgotten. Such was also Vida Ognjenović's attempt on the life of Joakim Vujić Kako zasmejati gospodara (How to Make the Master Laugh), written and performed at the National Theatre in Belgrade in 1985. Another example worth mentioning is

¹³⁹ Similarly the selection in other chapters excludes a number of relevant titles which might have had an acute impact at the time of performance but failed to transcend the local context or enter the canon, such as the Macedonian metaplay R by Jordan Plavneš which was overshadowed by other plays at the time.

Slobodan Šnajder's Gamlett, which similarly to The Croatian Faust explores a historical theatrical event – the Croatian director Dr Branko Gavella's production of Hamlet in Sarajevo in 1942. Foretić sums up the play which was premiered in Sarajevo in 1987:

“Whilst in The Croatian Faust theatre runs away from itself so that it could, in the inhuman times, save its art, Gamlett shows theatre at the same bad time, steeped in its powerlessness.” (1989: 129-30)

The aesthetic is still seemingly mainly onereic, only this time the play calls for breaking the mirror that the theatre is to life. This example also points out that it wasn't only the critics who lost hope in the power of theatre to change anything, but that dramatists too were becoming aware of the fact that, having broken the taboos that had to be broken, there was nothing much else they could do.

Similarly to Foretić, Dragan Klaić is also sceptical in his verdict on theatre-within-theatre as a political current in contemporary Yugoslav drama:

“One could argue [...] that the emergence of this device in Yugoslav drama, its very use by the dramatists, indicates the growing importance of theatre in the public mind. Theatre has to play a significant role in society in order to serve as a metaphor for it, its conflicts and moral dilemmas. For the important issues of the present and of the recent past to be probed through attitudes of theatre people, for them to emerge as dramatic characters whose behaviour matters outside the profession, the theatre itself has to enjoy a certain prestige and the status of an important institution. Thus plays such as [these] indicate not a self-centred obsession, but an awareness of the changed position of the theatre in our society, of its growing impact on public opinion.” (1986: 15)

Even if Klaić's conclusion entirely encapsulates the ultimate political achievement of the Yugoslav metatheatre up until 1986 – it is something at least. However, the following chapters will clearly establish that what had been achieved by these plays was probably much more than was evident at the time. Not least because of what, for example, Prokić happened to have foreseen:

“ARCHDUKE VISCONTI: You have to understand them, my dear lord. Their country was on the verge of an industrial catastrophe. The Lira was continually falling, and budgetary losses were getting to unimaginable amounts... In many towns, local councils took over control over procurement. The crisis could only partially be resolved through foreign loans and galloping inflation. The government’s instability put enough arguments into the hands of a certain political anti-parliamentary group – Fasci si Combattimento. And that’s how the Duce came about. The Duce who claims that Italy wants peace and quiet. And he promises that he will give it to her, through love, if possible, or by force, if necessary.” (Prokić, op.cit.: 314, my translation)

FROM POLITICS INTO ART AND BACK AGAIN

Dušan Kovačević's 'Trilogy' – 1987-1991

It was no accident that in 1986 a number of drama critics and theoreticians started to acknowledge and write openly about the (in)significance of political theatre in the contemporary socio-political context. The year 1986 was also taken as the beginning of the end of the 'Yugoslavian dream' by Laura Silber and Alan Little in their study of The Death of Yugoslavia (1995/6). The key event, they claim, was the leaking and publication of a secret memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the mass-circulation daily Večernje novosti on 24th September 1986.

“The Memorandum argued that the country was disintegrating and that forty percent of Serbs had been left languishing beyond the frontiers of the motherland. The blame, it said, rested with the Comintern legacy, the national policy of the Yugoslav League of Communists and their faithful and ignorant Serbian followers. The seventy-four-page tract accused Slovenia and Croatia of conspiring against Serbia.” (1996: 32)

The Memorandum was largely a result of the mounting crisis in the country which manifested itself on the economic, political and, ultimately, also on the ethnic level. The more affluent republics resented the fact that they had to bear the brunt of the federal economic crisis and finance the poorer ones. On the other hand, the rise of the separatist Albanian movement in Kosovo was seen as a direct threat to the Serbian population in the region. The issue of any particular ethnic group's status, however, was taboo in the context of the country's policy of 'Brotherhood and Unity'. This was seen as an especially dangerous issue as it came from the Serbs, who were twice as numerous as the second largest ethnic group – the Croats.

In response to the publication of the document, therefore:

“The Serbian press outdid the other republics in the severity of its attacks on the Memorandum and the Academy. Indeed, the Slovene daily, Dnevnik, praised the Belgrade media for its determination to get rid of nationalism. Croatian politicians bashed the document. Liberals who disagreed with the text itself, supported the Academy’s right to speak its mind. In the midst of the political furor [sic], only a tiny handful of Academicians spoke out against the document.” (ibid.: 33)

It is also worth noting here that the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences – as well as its counterparts in Croatia and Slovenia – alongside the Writers’ Union, ‘was one of the few institutions not totally controlled by the Communist Party’ (ibid.: 32). Being removed from public life, it had enjoyed relative political independence for over a century. The nationalist tone of the Memorandum did not have any bigger impact beyond the temporary breaking of taboos, which in turn provoked a relatively healthy public debate. Politically however, although it was not solely responsible for the eventual rise of Serbian nationalism, it began to shake up the power-structures within the Communist Party on the federal and the local level. Slobodan Milošević, the president of the Serbian Communist Party at the time, resorted to neutral silence – until 24th April 1987, when he was sent to Kosovo to talk to local leaders on behalf of the Serbian president, Ivan Stambolić. A spontaneous demonstration broke out, whereby the local Serbs gathered to complain about Albanian oppression and became embroiled in a conflict with the police.

“Apparently shaken by the screaming outside, Milošević said he wanted to see what was happening. He watched the crowd from the balcony before coming downstairs to give what was to become one of the most important speeches of his career. ‘Nobody should dare to beat you,’ he bellowed, unwittingly coining a modern Serb rallying call. [...] ‘This sentence enthroned him as a tsar’.” (ibid.: 37-8)

This was certainly Milošević's point of departure in his quest for personal power, which he continued to pursue quietly over the following few years through under-cover political intrigue and manipulation of his high-powered friends and supporters.

Simultaneously, however, the weakening of communism in the rest of Eastern Europe aroused certain optimism in Yugoslavia, which saw itself fit to make an easy transition to democracy. An increasingly liberalised and pluralist atmosphere was being nurtured – particularly in Slovenia – which had its roots largely in the youth culture and various campaign movements.¹⁴⁰

To a certain extent, this promising atmosphere extended even to Belgrade, as Matthew Collin notes in his study of Belgrade's media and popular culture *This is Serbia Calling*:

“1989: only a matter of months before the dramatic fall of the Berlin Wall and the glorious victory of Prague's Velvet Revolution. Refracted through the jarring realities of what happened afterwards, this one short year has become blurred and softened by nostalgia. [...] But this much is true: Belgrade was in the midst of an economic boom after a decade mired in financial crisis as debts to the West, run up by Tito, were called in after his death in 1980. Now after the reforms of [the Croatian] Ante Marković, the last prime minister of a united Yugoslavia, inflation was falling and wages were rising. The city began to feel good about itself for the first time in years. [...] Belgrade the capital of both Serbia and Yugoslavia had never been a cultural backwater; these were not people who dreamed of tasting the forbidden fruits of Levi's jeans and Beatles albums, or would trade their entire wage packet for a box of Marlboros. [...] For Belgrade youth, affluent and carefree, life in 1989 seemed like one long party.” (Collin, 2001: 10-2)

The end of the 1980s was characterised by two distinct streams in national consciousness, either of which could have taken the country into a completely different future: on the one hand there was the prospect of democracy and entry into Europe and,

¹⁴⁰ Slovenia had a well developed liberal atmosphere featuring human rights groups, peace, ecology, feminist and gay rights movements, and a whole new wave of youth culture going under the name of *Neue Slowenische Kunst*. The politically controversial band *Laibach*, which belonged to the movement, attracted a large following in Europe.

on the other, there was Milošević's promise of protection from corporal punishment. The tragedy was that, at the time, both of these felt comforting enough, and mutually non-exclusive. Illusions abounded: the illusion of togetherness, the illusion of entry into Europe, the lull of affluence, and to top it all – the willingness of politicians to offer peace of mind and 'parental' guidance.

Meanwhile, the warnings of drama critics that political theatre wasn't political enough began to be proved true. With most taboos broken, the period of 1987-1991 is largely characterised either by aesthetic experiments, attempts at europeanisation, exercises of freedom of expression with regard to communism but also an increased interest in national mythology, in line with the awakened national sentiment. Particularly sinister was a marked proliferation of chauvinist cabaret and variety shows, which gained increasing popularity. One new theme which also arises at this time concerns the pre-Second World War bourgeoisie and their subsequent demise, as exemplified particularly in the plays and dramatised novels of Slobodan Selenić¹⁴¹ – whose work is largely characterised by an erudite and decidedly cosmopolitan mode of expression.

Dušan Kovačević – Biography

The most accomplished dramaturgical achievements at this time, however, remain the plays of Dušan Kovačević. By 1987, Dušan Kovačević was already an established playwright. He first rose to fame in 1973, at the age of 25, with his graduation piece from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, University of Belgrade, Maratonci trče počasni krug (The Marathon Runners' Victory Lap) – a dark farce about several generations of undertakers, whose youngest member is trying to defy the family tradition and pursue

¹⁴¹ Selenić was a Dramaturgy lecturer at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade until his death in 1995.

his own dreams, only to be defeated by the end of the play. There are elements of the Theatre of the Absurd combined with farce and allegory in this play, which lays the foundations for Kovačević's later work. The play was staged at Atelje 212, it won the Sterija Prize in 1974 and, having been made into a film in 1982, it subsequently acquired a legendary status as an urban tragi-comedy. His second play Radovan III, followed almost immediately after the Marathon Runners, in 1973, and stayed in Atelje's repertoire for more than ten years, until the death of the leading actor Zoran Radmilović in the mid-1980s. These two plays, together with the 1980 film for which Kovačević wrote the screenplay Ko to tamo peva? (Who's Singing Over There?)¹⁴² – winner of the First Chaplin Award and the First Prize at the Cannes TV festival – quickly established him as a household name all over the country.¹⁴³

In the eighties, Kovačević started to deal with some more universal themes and metaphors as well as more explicitly with socialism and its system of values under the cloak of domestic tragi-comedy. Sabirni centar (The Gathering Place) in 1982 deals with the parallel worlds of the dead and the living, while his second most famous play Balkanski špijun (The Balkan Spy) in 1983 was an absurdist study of the effects of communist brain-washing on an individual. Both of these plays were made into films,¹⁴⁴ and The Balkan Spy, directed by Božidar Nikolić and Dušan Kovačević also won the First Prize at the Film Festival in Montreal in 1984. In 1986, there came a play which was largely atypical of anything Kovačević has written before or since. This was Sveti Georgije ubiva aždahu (St George Slays the Dragon) – inspired, as the author himself has explained, by a story his grandfather had told him about the handicapped Serbian

¹⁴² Who's Singing Over There? was directed by Slobodan Šijan, who also subsequently directed the film The Marathon Runners' Victory Lap in 1982.

¹⁴³ "Within the former Yugoslavia his movies have achieved cult status. And the often cynical new generation, which has paid in blood for the nationalist dreams of its leaders, recites his lines like mantras. 'Don't let them kill you until we've won,' taken from the play Radovan III, is like dozens of other lines, part of the vocabulary here." (no author, New York Times, © 1996, Nando.net)

¹⁴⁴ The film The Gathering Place – a.k.a The Meeting Point – was directed in 1989 by Goran Marković.

veterans from the Balkan Wars and their fateful mobilisation in the First World War. Besides its historical, ethnic and war themes, the play is also a love story, subtitled “An Adaptation of an Unwritten Novel”, and Kovačević has often said that this was his favourite play.¹⁴⁵ On its production at Atelje 212 in 1986, the play caused some political controversy when the Macedonian theatre critic Petre Bakevski accused Kovačević of ‘nationalist mythomania’ in his review in Nova Makedonija on 26. 11. 1986.¹⁴⁶ Kovačević strongly denied any nationalist motivation and even reported problems with the Serbian nationalists who accused him of portraying Serbs as ‘invalids’.

By 1987 Kovačević had written a total of ten plays and five screenplays, in which he explored a variety of themes and styles, always preserving his trademark wit and his ability to create memorable plots and characters. Until that date, Kovačević was most closely associated with Atelje 212 where most of his plays were premiered, except for The Balkan Spy which opened at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre. From 1987, Kovačević began to direct his plays at the Zvezdara Teatar in Belgrade.¹⁴⁷

Klaustrofobična komedija (Claustrophobic Comedy) in 1987, Profesionalac (The Professional) in 1990 and Urnebesna tragedija (Roaring Tragedy) in 1991 were not necessarily conceived as forming a trilogy, although certain elements recur in the three

¹⁴⁵ “I definitely think that it is my best play. I like it the best. Probably it is not the best, but I like it the most.” (Kovačević quoted in Barnett, 1998: 276)

¹⁴⁶ Momčilo Stojanović commented on this affair in Zagreb’s Vjesnik on 24.12.1986: “Taking [Bakevski’s] review without any reservations, the socio-political organizations of [the Macedonian town of] Prilep came forward with sharp reactions addressed both to the author himself [...] and Atelje 212. No one in the political management in Prilep has read Kovačević’s text, or seen the play, but the qualifications of Petre Bakevski – that Kovačević seems to ‘call for a resurrection of the old ghosts’, then the quotation ‘Serbia wins wars and loses the peace’ and particularly the song ‘Prilep’ [...] – were enough for them to conclude that all of that is offensive to ‘the national sentiments of Prilep-people and the whole of the Macedonian nation’.” (Stojanović: ‘Aždaha’ između Prilepa i Beograda). Atelje’s artistic director Ljubomir Draškić offered no comment except that he did not want to engage in a debate with people who haven’t seen the play, and that the play was approved by the local party organization in Belgrade.

¹⁴⁷ At the time he gave the explanation that the director whom he had in mind was unavailable to direct this play, therefore Kovačević took on the job himself. As for the change of venue he explained that speed was the main reason (see Lekić, J. Radio TV Revija, 13. 11. 1987). The Zvezdara Teatar, unlike most other theatres in Belgrade, does not have its own ensemble but engages artists on a contract basis.

plays.¹⁴⁸ Most notably the character named Teya Kraj – a failed writer – appears in the first two plays, although his characterisation in each play is secondary to the plot itself, and he is therefore not necessarily represented as a hero around whom the plays evolve. In Roaring Tragedy, one of the main characters is the artistic director of a theatre. Here the emphasis is again on political conflicts which arise among several generations of a family. The three plays are evidently self-reflexive in as much as they might have been reflecting the playwright's own struggles as a writer within a particular socio-political context. An additional self-reflexive dimension, which is particularly interesting here, is Kovačević's tackling of the metatheatrical device. Claustrophobic Comedy has the most evident metatheatrical dimension of the three plays. But the other two also represent interesting examples of at least a metaliterary approach in the case of The Professional and a metanarrative approach which was particularly heightened in the subsequent film version of Roaring Tragedy – entitled Tragedie Burlesque – which was directed by Goran Marković, and also won the Best Screenplay and Best Direction Prizes in Montreal in 1995.

Kovačević also wrote the screenplay for Emir Kusturica's film Underground – Once There Was a Country¹⁴⁹ – inspired by one of his early, less successful plays Proleće u januaru (Spring in January) – which won the Palme d'Or in Cannes in 1995. Dušan Kovačević is currently the artistic director of the Zvezdara Teatar in Belgrade where his most recent plays Lari Tompson – tragedija jedne mladosti (Larry Thompson – the Tragedy of a Young Man), Kontejner sa pet zvezdica (A Five-Star Container) and Doktor Šuster (Doctor Cobbler) were premiered in 1996, 1999 and 2001 respectively. He is also an associated member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

¹⁴⁸ Vesna Jezerkić, a lecturer in Dramaturgy at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, suggested to me in an informal conversation that these three plays could also be seen as a complete trilogy in terms of their exploration of the principal genres of classical Greek drama, i.e. the first is called a comedy and the last a tragedy, whereas The Professional can then be treated as a satyr-play.

¹⁴⁹ This is also in many ways primarily a metacinematic film.

Klaustrofobična komedija (Claustrophobic Comedy)

“In the case of [writing] the play St George... there was a degree of being bewitched [by it]. That story came to me a long time ago, I carried it for a long time [it took a lot of effort], it took ten years of my life [to write it]. After that I wanted to write a story that was very close to art. Claustrophobic Comedy has a certain distance to both classical and modern art, in it various genres are mixed, I am directing¹⁵⁰ it as a series of classical pictures. Simply, amid all the misfortune, suffering and the poverty which surrounds us, I craved something classically beautiful. This play is my escape into beauty.”

(“*Mi smo uvek neko treći*” – “We are Always a Third Someone”, interview with Dušan Kovačević by Branka Krilović, Književne novine, 1.11.1987)¹⁵¹

“Pozorište potkazuje život” – “Theatre Informs on Life” is the subtitle of this three-fold play, written by a playwright who had graduated from the Belgrade Faculty of Dramatic Arts with a thesis on Pirandello.¹⁵² The real dramaturgical achievement of this play, however, is the fact that Kovačević goes beyond the Pirandellian enquiry into the real and the fictional and transfers onto the stage the playwright’s process as well as the entire world which contains theatre as a crucial – though off-stage – phenomenon. The quoted interview which the playwright gave immediately before the premiere demonstrates unprecedented levels of self-reflexivity. The magazine containing this interview will be held by a politician character in the first scene of the play, he will be criticising the magazine from a political standpoint and claiming that he has been named in it in a derogatory manner.

The play opens as Teya Kraj is working on a translation of Othello and talking to his brother Yagosh, who is unpacking a shirt and leaving the pins in an ashtray on the table. Yagosh is a politician and the two brothers’ political views are in conflict. Upon

¹⁵⁰ This is the first play Kovačević directed and he has directed all his premieres since.

¹⁵¹ A longer extract from this interview is enclosed in Appendix 2.

¹⁵² See my interview with Kovačević in Appendix 2.

Yagosh's animated departure, Teya buries himself in the script again, only to be interrupted by his sister Joy¹⁵³ who denies that Yagosh was present there minutes ago. The fact that Teya is working on the script may suggest that what has just happened was only in his imagination. But then again, Joy is referred to as being half-blind, and she may have not noticed Yagosh whom we have seen. Her claim is however supported minutes later by the fact that she talks to Yagosh on the phone in a way which seems to confirm that Yagosh hasn't visited them for a while.¹⁵⁴

Apart from the three characters presented here, the play features another five characters, of which one – the Polish poet Grabynski – is almost completely dispensable and serves no apparent function in the play. In the penultimate 'whole cast' scene,¹⁵⁵ for example, the characters are struggling to communicate with the Polish ballerina, and the Polish poet, who is present, makes no attempt to facilitate their communication. The key characteristic of the eight characters' relationships, on the whole, is an inability to communicate with each other. Each character has his/her own perspective on his/her reality and often these perspectives clash. In the above scene, the clash of the perspectives between the two brothers is merely political, and therefore realistic. However, the audience's own perception is brought into question when confronted with the clash of perspectives between Teya and Joy. This juxtaposition of views can only be justified if we assume that Teya's conversation with Yagosh belongs to the realm of Teya's imagination, which then suggests that the play would be operating on two levels: the actual level and the level of the writer/translator's – i.e. Teya's consciousness. This would then explain Grabynski's inaction in the penultimate scene, as he may belong to the realm of the actual, whereas everything else that happens on the stage would be on

¹⁵³ In the original her name is Vesela, which is not a common female name, and is here translated as its semantic equivalent Joy.

¹⁵⁴ Please refer to the play enclosed in Appendix 1.

¹⁵⁵ The presence of the entire cast on the stage at this point is structurally reminiscent of the 17th century comedic convention, most often utilised by Molière, although its function here is not the same, i.e. it doesn't lead to a satisfactory resolution of the plot and a happy end.

the level of the imaginary – i.e. Teya’s consciousness, which Grabinyski is witnessing together with the writer/translator. Grabinyski’s inaction is therefore the inaction of a reader in response to fictional events. The boundary between the two levels is however thoroughly blurred, always suggesting that the imaginary may well have been real – as at the end of the first scene, for example, when Teya is left holding the pins which Yagosh has left behind.¹⁵⁶ Thus the general dynamic of the play is that of a continuing see-saw effect – a tennis match between the two realms where the audience is made to keep switching sides and accepting or supporting both mutually clashing hypotheses, intermittently.

If we take this division of realms to be the case, then some characters belong only to one realm and others belong to the other – or both. Joy could most certainly be taken to belong only to the realm of the actual as well as Grabinyski who is far more sympathetic to Teya than Joy is. Teya belongs to the realm of the actual, although at some point he is invited by Sava the Chimneysweep to interpret between him and the ballerina. Here he is invited as a neighbour rather than an author, and therefore, if the story of the love triangle were a product of Teya’s imagination, than he would be casting himself into a role within the play. By extension, this also could be the case with Kovačević who might have actually cast himself as a playwright into the role of Teya whilst writing the play. The Chimneysweep however, does belong to both realms as he is a neighbour – and a kind of paternal figure to the Krajs – and Joy refers to him as such in the first scene. Yagosh belongs to both realms, although Joy’s and Teya’s projections of Yagosh are crucially different. The ballerina and her ballet dancer fiancé

¹⁵⁶ By comparison, in Simović’s case, the playwright’s consciousness remains outside of the play and he leaves fewer ambiguities in the play than Kovačević does here. In other words, Simović offers a more objective view on the clashes of the subjective perspectives in the play, whereas Kovačević instead engages with various subjective perspectives and simply lets them manifest themselves in the play, thus causing deliberate ambiguities, to which he offers no objective solution. In addition, Kovačević also directed the play, and it remains unclear how much the script was shaped within the rehearsal process.

belong largely to the realm of the imaginary. The ballet-dancer who is continually looking for his fiancée is seen in the scene of the African visit, however, he does not interact with any of the characters and is therefore only recognized by the audience. The Policeman could also belong to both realms.

Teya is not given the role of the author within the play – the author ultimately remains Kovačević himself who determines the ambiguities that the characters find themselves in. Teya, the poet, is translating Othello – or writing an adaptation of it as it is suggested in the script – and he may actually be the author of the story of the ballerina leaving her ballet dancer fiancé on the stage of the National Theatre where they were dancing the ballet of Othello, being subsequently rescued by the chimneysweep who then falls in love with her, and finally being taken away by the politician – Yagosh. However, Kovačević gives this writer/translator the name Teya and his brother the name Yagosh.¹⁵⁷ The two names are most probably derived from Othello and Iago, although Teya could resemble a Serbian nick-name and Yagosh actually is a Serbian name. Additionally – and most significantly – the entire play that we are watching is presented as ‘real life’ which has incidentally already happened in the play called Claustrophobic Comedy. Teya is also one of the characters in this play. The time lines are blurred – we are watching something that has already happened and at the same time we might be witnessing the creation of a play within a play concurrently as it happens in the head of the writer Teya. Additionally, however, Kovačević suggests that these events are happening as Teya writes them, that he too is anticipating the ‘real events’ rather than just imagining them.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ In the original script the names are actually Teja and Jagoša. I transcribed them in accordance with the English phonetic rules, and decided to remove the final ‘a’ from Jagoša in order to avoid the wrong gender denomination, Jagoš without an ‘a’ also exists as a male name in Serbia.

¹⁵⁸ This same temporal ambiguity is utilised in a more obvious way in the play The Professional.

”My poet is not a poet in his poetics and in whatever he has achieved, as he is a man who has achieved almost nothing and who can achieve almost nothing. Therefore the whole play revolves around the vision which he is writing, and which is actually happening, which, however, he does not realise, and is only trying to escape into the world of Shakespeare.” (Kovačević in an interview by Jasmina Lekić, Radio TV Revija, 13.11.1987)

References to Othello the Moor are also multiplied and do not necessarily belong only to the realm of Teya’s consciousness as he is translating the play. On the one hand, we have Leopold Vazhik, the Polish ballet-dancer who plays Othello in the ballet, from the performance of which the ballerina runs away during the jealousy scene. Further, we have the Chimneysweep, who is dressed in his black uniform, and his face and hands are always blackened. Additionally, there is a visit of an African prince from one of the ‘friendly and neighbourly’ countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, who is on an official visit in Belgrade. He remains an invisible character in the play while we actually witness the Chimneysweep, Yagosh and the Policeman (who all know each other) as they watch the procession of the African prince. In terms of the possible realms of the play – it is also unclear whether this instance belongs to the realm of the actual or to the realm of Teya’s consciousness, or possibly to some third realm – simply the realm of Kovačević’s consciousness itself. The reference is certainly ironic and intended to make a parallel between the political apparatus in African countries – which are referred to as always experiencing some *coup d’état*, revolution or counterrevolution – and the shaky nature of political power in Yugoslavia at the time. In response to this tackling of the then topical aspect of Yugoslav foreign policy, Kovačević explained:

“Today, when I am 40 years old, I ask myself why I am not on an equal footing with a Frenchman or an Englishman [...]; I ask myself why I am on an equal footing with a tribesman, on the level of the tom-tom. Because, besides everything else, I think I write plays at least as well as English and French playwrights, and I want absolute equality with them – a civilisational equality.” (Lekić, *ibid.*)

One of the key-scenes which explains the subtitle of the play is the arrival of the Policeman into the flat of Sava the Chimneysweep at the end of the First Act and their conversation at the beginning of the Second. Half-way through the First Act, at the procession of the African prince, the Policeman is advised by Yagosh to go and see Claustrophobic Comedy. So, the following day the Policeman visits the Chimneysweep. Their conversation at the beginning of the Second Act consists mainly of the Policeman's bizarre stories from his home-village, delivered in a tense attempt at casual chit-chat. The Policeman used to be a lodger of the good-hearted Chimneysweep when he first arrived in Belgrade to study medicine. The unarticulated point of the Policeman's stories is that he wouldn't like to risk losing his job as he has nothing to return to. Due to their long-standing friendship, the Policeman eventually agrees to allow the Chimneysweep more time to try and save the ballerina before coming back to arrest her. Significantly, the Policeman ignores the ballerina's presence and she is never referred to until the Policeman finally mentions the play he has seen:

“SAVA: I'd only like to know one thing. Who told you?

[..]

POLICEMAN: No one... I saw it all in the theatre last night. If you had come with me, Sava, you would've been awe-struck. I have never seen or heard anything like that in my entire life.

SAVA: Someone in the theatre told you she was here.

POLICEMAN: No! I saw it all on the stage. How the ballerina danced in the ballet, and how she was in the container while the chimneysweep and the policeman were talking, and how the chimneysweep brought her home, and how he bought her a gramophone so she could practise...

SAVA: Where did you see it, Vule? What are you talking about?

POLICEMAN: I wouldn't believe you either if you were telling me. A play like that is on at the theatre. One ballerina – just like her, one chimneysweep – just like you, one policeman – just like me. And all this I'm telling you, and you listening to me, and the car waiting for me outside, and her shaking on the sofa – all of that, exactly the same. I swear, Sava, exactly the same, only, for example... if there was an auditorium over there and if I was sitting in the front row.

He is pointing at the auditorium, where there is a uniformed policeman, Vule's lookalike, sitting in the front row.

POLICEMAN: All the same. Me – on the stage, me – in the auditorium. The audience recognizes me on the stage... and in the auditorium... and then

the people were turning towards me. And when I was coming out of the theatre they asked me: 'Will you really arrest the ballerina? It's a bit awkward, she is in the home of your friend. But you will have to, now you know where she is.' And they asked the same questions of that policeman in the play, and he told them: 'I'll have to. I wouldn't like to hurt my friend, but now everybody knows where she is.' And in the play, he told his boss about it in the morning, and the boss issued an order for her arrest. And he goes to your place and after a chat about his village, you ask him a favour not to arrest her until later that evening. And he agrees... And in the play the car hooting was also going on like this... And the policeman also shouted from the door: 'Wait a minute! Wait!'

The policeman goes to the door, while talking about 'that policeman' and shouts at his colleague in the car to wait for him.

SAVA: Dear God, Vule, what are you saying... You're telling me that the theatre is informing on life?

POLICEMAN: I don't know, Sava, but I couldn't sleep all night... I'll see you tonight. Take care.

[...]

SAVA: [...] What's the ending of that story like?

POLICEMAN: Which story?

SAVA: In the theatre?

POLICEMAN: You mean, the very end? Well... quite dark, for that chimneysweep... Like, he... Leave that now... Theatre!!!

SAVA: What happened?

POLICEMAN: Nothing.

SAVA: Tell me.

POLICEMAN: Well, like you... like he... commits two suicides.

SAVA: Two suicides?

POLICEMAN: Yes... I went last night and – never again! It's better that you didn't go. I'll be back at six."

(1998: 108-110, my translation)

When the Chimneysweep finally brings the ballerina to Teya's flat in order to ask for Yagosh's help with her stay in the country, Yagosh is at first hostile towards her as he usually is towards artists. Interestingly, Yagosh does not seem to have any recollection of the ballerina although he has seen her – in actuality in the ballet from which she ran away, and in Teya's consciousness in Claustrophobic Comedy – in any case he is also the only character present who has seen the play. The Polish poet is also present and the ballerina finally succumbs to the Chimneysweep's numerous requests, agreeing to perform a little dance for the Krajs. At this point her fiancé also appears in the flat and engages in the pas de deux which they never finished on the stage. When his jealousy proves to be a little too real and he starts to strangle the ballerina, the police are called

and, thoroughly enticed, Yagosh orders the ballet-dancer to be arrested on a charge of 'attempted murder off-stage'. Talking to her in French, he then takes the ballerina away with him, leaving the heartbroken Chimneysweep behind. By the end of that scene the news arrives that the Chimneysweep has jumped off the top of the roof of Yagosh's block of flats. The final scene unfolds around his hospital-bed where he is unconscious and receiving a blood-transfusion. The official story – related by the Policeman – is that the Chimneysweep fell off by accident while at work, or at the worst that he had been pushed. Teya insists that he tried to commit suicide because of the ballerina, but nobody believes him. Yagosh, of course, denies that he has met any ballerina, let alone taken her away. By now hysterical, Joy – who consistently doubts Teya's sanity from the very beginning – finally turns Teya's statements against him as a proof that he has gone mad. As soon as we have been convinced that it was all a fantasy and that the Chimneysweep might have really only fallen off by accident at work, he is left alone and:

“[He] moves his hands. Opens his eyes. With some effort he reaches a pipe on the bottle, tugs the arm bandaged with [the ballerina] Nina's handkerchief and stops the flow of blood into it. The arm flops by the side of the bed, and some blood starts dripping from the pipe on the bottle. With the other hand he takes off the oxygen mask. The beeping noise of the electrocardiogram starts fading away. Losing consciousness, Sava the chimneysweep whispers:

SAVA: Nina... Nina... Nina...¹⁵⁹

And while the lights on the stage are fading, replaced by a sticky darkness which envelops the unfortunate chimneysweep, in the auditorium, the uniformed policeman – Vule's lookalike – is the first to leave his seat in the front row and exit from the auditorium. He is leaving deep in thought, and somewhat confused, as if he had been in the theatre for the first time or as if the story disturbed him or moved him to leave straightaway.

One day, there will hopefully be

The End”

(1998: 125, my translation)

Evidently then, the two realms – the actual and the imaginary – remain intertwined until the very end thus constituting the very essence of this play. If the imaginary is further

¹⁵⁹ This is the only line that Leopold Vazhik had throughout the play as a refrain.

dissected then we would find that it is not a single play that constitutes the play within the play, but that it further consists of a number of fictional levels posing as reality, constantly morphing and metamorphosing itself before our eyes. Looking at it as a whole – without any attempt at separating the two constituent realms – another metatheatrical dimension imposes itself: the multi-layered play we are watching and the off-stage play which the characters are referring to. From the Policeman's account above of the play he had seen, it is possible that the play that is referred to is slightly different from the one we are watching. The Policeman, for example, claims that his double in the play went to see his boss the following morning. We, of course, do not see this scene, because the play we are watching does not engage in the pedestrian and the realistic. Yet what we are led to believe throughout the play is that we are watching 'real life' which – by comparison to the realistic off-stage play – seems to be more sublime and more extraordinary than the theatre.

Kovačević's statement in The Literary Magazine interview (included in Appendix 2) is that the play was concerned with human destinies.¹⁶⁰ In this respect, the off-stage theatre is also used as a pre-deterministic, fatalist mechanism, which seems to suggest that even though the characters' destiny has already been written and they are given access to this script, they cannot change the course of events.¹⁶¹ On a possible metaphorical level, this could be suggestive of the limited choices that socialism as a system offered – even if this was a subconscious metaphor. On a very simple universal level, this device could be saying: theatre cannot change life, it cannot change the world. Foretić and Klaić have commented before in response to early 1980s metatheatre that theatre cannot change anything because as soon as we leave the theatre, it has no impact on our lives. Kovačević takes this one step further and claims that indeed theatre

¹⁶⁰ The play was inspired by a real life story – see the interview.

¹⁶¹ Much as Oedipus, for example, is unable to change his destiny, even though he has knowledge of it. Here again metatheatre recreates some of the possibilities lost with the loss of Greek tragedy.

cannot change life even if life was an exact copy of what went on in the theatre. However, Kovačević's stance is ironic rather than pessimistic – his primary aim is play, a game with art and theatre, with occasional irony and satire. In an interview he gave me, Kovačević offered several insights which are useful for understanding this play. First of all, his aesthetics:

“In principle, I don't like realism because I have too much of it in my private life. [...] I have too much of the stories which are based on the formula that two and two makes four. I know that, that two and two is four, although I don't know maths very well, but I am terribly interested in how to prove that two and two makes ten and in such a way that people in the audience believe it.” (Interview, 04.04.2001, enclosed in Appendix 2)

Secondly, his personality and his beliefs:

“I have the trait of stubbornness and determination. And I think that had I gone and pursued painting, I would've become a good painter.¹⁶² Because I would have pursued my ideas and beliefs until the end, with very small compromises, which one has to make from time to time in life, but the fact that I accidentally went [to the Faculty of Dramatic Arts], probably wasn't accidental, somebody probably takes care of what you do. And all you do in life probably isn't accidental, it's probably written somewhere, it probably says in some book what you will do in life, how, what are your limits and what is your end like. And it is only good that we don't have that book in our hands and can't read it.” (ibid.)

On the one hand his determination is reflected in his absolute commitment to the multiple dimensions he sets up in his plays. This then results in an absolute engagement of the audience too.¹⁶³ Additionally, the fatalistic determinism of this play is also apparently reflective of Kovačević's own understanding of destiny.

And finally an insight into his dramaturgical approach:

¹⁶² Kovačević always wanted to be a painter rather than a playwright.

¹⁶³ “As soon as my stage managers and the techies are sitting around not doing their job and have to be tugged by the sleeve because they are enticed by some scene, I know that that awesome kind of communication with the audience has been established and that the play is following the line of intense emotion, engaging the attention and not leaving anyone indifferent.” (Kovačević quoted in Lekić, op.cit.)

“[In] Claustrophobic Comedy [there are] constant double games and the kind of layers which, in terms of dramaturgy, I would like to be accessible to a shoe cleaner – and that the story for the shoe cleaner is *very* simple and that he gets engaged and says: yes, that story is about a ballerina who ran away from some country and was found by a chimneysweep – and to the people who know Shakespeare who can see how one ordinary story about one chimneysweep turns into a story about Othello. [Between] those layers – from the shoe cleaner to a Shakespeareologist, a literature professor – we have a terribly big range, we have several layers in between for possible interpretations.” (ibid.)

At the time of the premiere in 1987, the dramaturgical complexity of Kovačević’s play led many of the critics to description rather than any significant interpretation. The text draws attention to its structure first and the numerous metaphors seem to be multiplying themselves and evading definition.¹⁶⁴ The analysis in this chapter is also only partial and sections of the text have been reproduced because the play really speaks best for itself. Its political significance is many-fold and intuited from the play’s tone and irony; its aesthetic significance is thoroughly intriguing, however I have largely attempted to analyse it here only as a unique example of metatheatre. Interestingly, this play has not achieved the canonical status that some of his other plays have, possibly because it is less satirical and less concerned with the local ‘mentality’ than his other plays. The play’s dramaturgical complexity has been repeatedly stressed by the author himself too:

“Kovačević’s play seems like it has been written in one go – it is so dense, compact, sturdy. The writer says that it only seems that way, and that is all [due to] terribly hard work. In numbers, that terribly hard work translates as – two years, or ten drafts. He was writing it for such a long time so that ‘it would be good’. He could have, he says, written three bad plays or five terrible plays or two average plays in that time. But he didn’t want that. He wanted a play that will be played in twenty theatres straightaway and which would be translated.” (Lekić, op.cit., 13.11.1987)

¹⁶⁴ Stamenković singles out the significance of the fact that in this play ‘the political predetermines the existential’ and he heightens the importance of the inherent ‘unsettling warning of what would happen if politics permeated [all aspects] of our lives’. (Review in Stamenković, V.: Kraj utopije i pozorište, 2000: 31). Foretić, on the other hand, is more sceptical and emphasises the play’s beauty – which is however ‘ephemeral’ – at the expense of anything else including the play’s ‘pamphletism’ (1989: 236-8).

The universal level of the play – which would then qualify it for translation – is contained in the ‘paraphrase of Shakespeare’. Lekić states that the play was already translated into two languages before its Yugoslav premiere. However, the play’s relevance to its own context seems to have outweighed the universal dimension over time. What is particularly interesting in that respect is that the play achieved relevance to its immediate context at the time of the premiere although it had been conceived two years previously. Lekić’s article opens thus:

“Despite its name – Claustrophobic Comedy – it is doubtful that anyone would really find this play hilarious [...]. More precisely, there is some space for laughter here, but the rest is – tears! In the words of the author, the text talks about the year 1987 in Belgrade, what’s more – about this very autumn, the autumn of passionate feelings rooted in trepidation and fear. So, there is little space for humour in it. Instead there can only be space for bitter irony and sharp cynicism.” (ibid.)

Inevitably, the times changed in between the date of the play’s inception and the date of its premiere to which the play became acutely relevant. The key word here is anticipation – not only the anticipation of the economic bleakness of 1987 two years previously, but also an anticipation of the events that were yet to happen. In that sense the play’s magic is also ephemeral, working only in the present moment. Dramaturgically, the play was indeed written so that its magic was strongest on the opening night – with all the time scales intertwining – references to the ‘last night’s premiere’ of the play of the same title and so on. Effectively, this was what the play itself seems to have achieved when viewed from this time distance too – its impact was strongest in 1987 and then the play also anticipated the imminent destruction of the country too. The story of the two quarrelling brothers was largely a metaphor for what was happening and was yet to happen on the general political level. As for the half-blind sister Joy – ‘she is a victim who has to bear it all without envisaging any solution. She is – Yugoslavia’ (ibid.).

Profesionalac (The Professional)

“LUKE: We were sitting together in a train. You and I and several of your friends, writers. That’s when you made the speech about Havel, which my Miloš later included in the book of Orations. [...] ‘Vaclav Havel, plays himself in a drama without an end. Along the way, while he is free, he transcribes a page or two. The main character in a tragedy without intervals. His plays start when he wants it and they end when the court decides. He plays his part according to Stanislavski. When he carries sacks in a brewery, he carries real sacks and his back is his own back, not the back of a man who plays a man who is carrying sacks in a brewery. Everything is his own, apart from his own life. The oh-so-necessary and modern distance is – non-existent. The distance occurs later while we are watching his plays. That is when art starts and life finishes. ‘The actors’ around him are top class professionals. And the smallest parts of real convicts are perfectly cast. The direction is not the best, but it is certainly the strictest. After his plays, no velvet curtains fall, but iron bars instead. A Czech writer of international descent. Lucky for the dramatic literature and unlucky for Vaclav Havel himself.’

TEYA: They always sentenced him in the name of the people, and when they asked the people for the first time – the people elected him President”
(Kovačević, D.: The Professional, 1998: 144, my translation)

Probably Kovačević’s most internationally renowned play, The Professional – subtitled “A Sad Comedy after Luke” – is at the first glance a simple story about a writer who, having never written anything in his life is visited one day by a retired policeman, who brings him all his unwritten works. The explanation for this slightly absurd concept is the fact that the policeman had secretly followed the dissident writer on an assignment for many years, watched him get drunk with his friends and collected all the things that the writer lost or absent-mindedly misplaced. The writer Teya Kraj’s collected unwritten works are simply the stories, speeches and memoirs he had shared with his friends, which Luke, the policeman has carefully recorded and kept in his police dossiers. An additional twist to the story is the fact that the writer and the policeman are now in reversed status positions. The writer is now the director of a publishing house, which position he secured with a political changeover of the management. Luke,

however, was forced to retire from the police and take up taxi-driving instead when his son, a university professor of literature, included these 'unwritten books' by Kraj on the syllabus. It is gradually revealed that Luke had only collected Kraj's 'works' at the request of his own son to save Serbian literature from disappearing in 'drink and smoke' and in an attempt to bridge the rift with his son caused by their own political differences. As he is about to go for a major medical operation, Luke has finally brought Kraj his belongings in exchange for a favour – to contact his son who has in the meantime emigrated to Australia and tell him that they parted as friends.

As noted above, at the time of its premiere in January 1990, The Professional was announced as the second part of the trilogy which began with Claustrophobic Comedy. There is little evidence however, that the Teya Kraj of the second play is the Teya Kraj of the first, thus loosening the realism of the former play even further in the light of The Professional which features a higher degree of psychological realism. Whereas the first Teya was portrayed as a slightly eccentric, impoverished scribbler eager to escape an unsatisfactory political reality, the second Teya is probably closer to Kovačević himself, in at least sharing his own authentic memories and his own sensibility.

“Three years ago I [wrote] Claustrophobic Comedy as a play that someone is writing on the stage [...]. I simply found a foundation in the main hero called Teodor Teya Kraj. He is a poet and an eccentric man, and from the point of view of a man who is firstly emotional and then an intellectual, I am trying to consider one big part of our past, but not from the point of view of our political duel with the past, but from the point of view of the emotional wasteland that those times caused. Those two plays are dedicated to that deconstructed emotionality of ours, and I think that that is even more tragic than some other material values which have disappeared.” (Interview with Kovačević by Nevenka Opačić, Radio TV revija 19.01.1990)

Unlike most other plays by Kovačević, the cast-list for this play features only four characters:

“I – Teodor Teya Kraj
Luke Laban – the professional
Marta – the secretary
And one, completely normal, Lunatic”
(1998: 127)

Similarly, unlike most other plays by Kovačević, which made it primarily to the countries of Eastern Europe, this one received significant runs all over Germany and in the USA. Translated by the American director of Yugoslav descent Bob Djurdjević, the play received publication by Samuel French Inc. in 1991, 1992 and 1996. Djurdjević’s adaptation interfered with the original in many potentially misleading and unfavourable ways. In response to the events in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the translation incorporates additional dimensions into the mise-en-scene that were not envisaged by Kovačević: most of the off-stage events implied in the original play (such as the Lunatic – a ‘scriptomaniac’ – making phone-calls to Teya throughout the play) are brought onto the stage, as well as some fairly stale metaphors incorporated into Djurdjević’s proposed setting – a graveyard, ‘debris and wasteland’ etc. The play was produced by a number of companies, most famously directed by Peter Craze in San Francisco in 1992 and subsequently, with a different cast, in New York and London. Intrigued by the experience, Dennis Barnett – the artistic director of the production company in San Francisco, who also played Teya in the production – subsequently completed a PhD thesis on the works of Dušan Kovačević in 1998 – in which he refers to the playwright as ‘the world’s most popular unknown playwright’. His thesis, attempting to define and establish Kovačević’s political dissidence, features invaluable transcriptions of extensive audio footage of interviews with the playwright – thus also constituting an interesting examination of postcolonial mechanisms of communication and cultural exchange between the two contexts. Barnett quotes numerous problems in appropriating and presenting this play to an American audience at the time. Apart from the political

context, one of the dramaturgical problems consisted in the fact that the play was written in a very particular way. Kovačević's play – in the original version – opens thus:

"My name is Teodor¹⁶⁵ Kraj. My mother called me Teya. My friends too... Whilst I had them. My name probably means nothing to you. I am a writer... I hope I am... I am forty-five years old. Until now I have published two books.

A book of poetry and a book of short stories. Depressingly little! And I look like I have written twenty novels. Magnificently bad.

WHERE ARE MY UNWRITTEN BOOKS?

The story which follows is incredible but true. And it constitutes a reply to this uncomfortable question. I am writing this script in one go, straight into the typewriter, the way it all happened. The meeting with that man changed my whole 'former' life. Is it possible for someone to change your 'former' life? It is possible! How is it possible? Easily, if you have as much luck and brains as I do.

I was sitting in my office, leafing through the recently arrived manuscripts [...] And the telephone was ringing persistently [... Finally].

I: Hello? Yes... Yes...

I was right, of course. It was a writer for whom I felt great contempt and whose name made me disgusted. I thought, spoke and wrote all the worst things about his books... But here, at this position, I wasn't privately I, I am now here Somebody, who has been named by Somebody before Somebody else to take care of Something. Despite great nausea, I tried to talk calmly. However...

I: Yes... Yes, it's me..."

(1998: 129, my translation)

The play then begins to unfold through dialogue. At first Teya's secretary and secret lover Marta comes in to announce that a strange visitor is waiting outside. Teya is reluctant to see him at first, but Luke's manner gradually intrigues him. Luke is addressing Teya as the closest of relatives, demonstrating a frightening amount of detailed knowledge about him, while Teya struggles to maintain his denial and disbelief. Gradually it becomes a story of complete hypnotic transformation for the main character who begins to face and embrace his past with increasing sentimentality, and by the end grows into a grotesque picture of a man weighed down by his past – clad in his lost coats, hats, with his binoculars hanging around his neck and holding in his

¹⁶⁵ In Claustrophobic Comedy he is only referred to as Teya, not Teodor.

arms all his lost belongings which the ex-policeman has brought back to him. The play is written throughout in this combination of drama and prose, Teya being marked as 'I' in the dialogue. Having received all his unwritten books, neatly classified and bound by 'the professional' Luke, Teya is baffled when Luke concludes his visit:

“LUKE: There you are, your books are there and your drama is there too...

I: Drama? What drama, comrade Luke?

LUKE: Well, your drama.

I: My drama?

LUKE: Yes.

I let out a laugh of embarrassment. I began to leaf through 'my books' looking for 'my' unwritten drama.

I: Comrade Luke, I wrote poems, stories, novellas, essays, but never a single drama, believe me. Never.

LUKE: Yes, you did, Teya.

I: When, when did I write it?

LUKE: Now.

He went over to the table, took his bag and pulled out a police tape recorder from his bag. The spools were still revolving, rolling the tape which was still recording. He gave me the recorder with the look of a proper professional.

LUKE: I put it on before I came in. It's still recording. When I go, you only need to rewind it, insert some paper into your typewriter and transcribe it.

I: Comrade Luke...

LUKE: You'll have to be a professional for once. As I was. My [son] Miloš is not here, so you will have to type it all up yourself and add those... those... what do you call those descriptions between the dialogues?

I: Stage directions¹⁶⁶.

LUKE: Yes, stage directions. You see, I used to be and I still am a professional. And were I not sacked, they would be listening to this tape in the police station now like a radio-play. As it is, with those...

I: Stage directions.

LUKE: With those stage directions, it could even be played in a theatre. You, me, Marta and the Lunatic. Brilliant characters, brilliant destinies.”

(1998: 159- 160, my translation)

And upon Luke's subsequent departure,

“I went to the table, inserted the paper into the typewriter, sat in the chair and pushed the button of the tape recorder again. Very quickly, in one breath, I started to transcribe the drama which has just been recorded.

LUKE'S VOICE: Good afternoon.

MY VOICE: Good afternoon... How can I help you?

[...]

¹⁶⁶ Djurdjević chooses the Greek-derived term *didaskalias* which is closer to the original term in Serbo-Croat *didaskalije*.

NB: When I have transcribed the entire dialogue and inserted the stage directions, there will be
The End”
(1998: 162, my translation)

Thus, as Barnett observes:

“In a reversal of the situation in *Claustrophobic Comedy*, Luke has made it possible for the theatre to present ‘life as it really is’. To conceive of the true scope of Kovacevic’s [sic] postmodern turn here, we must revisit [...] Teya’s opening speech.

[...]

As the play ends, the narrative becomes a *mise en abyme*, endlessly repeating the ‘which came first’ koan. Teya pushes the button of the tape recorder allowing the audience to hear the opening scene with Luke again and begins to transcribe the dialogue. The narrative of this play, particularly if Teya begins the play by reading his opening monologue from the page in his typewriter, becomes the theatrical and temporal equivalent of the Möbius strip.” (1998: 303-4, unpublished thesis)

Another reversal of the situation from Claustrophobic Comedy is the fact that we have been given complete access to the writer Teya’s consciousness which is now the sole subjective perspective of the play. The fact that the play is written in a combination of prose and drama may be an extension of the fact that Teya is an inexperienced writer of drama and therefore writes it in a non-conventional way. He also acknowledges fully the fact that it is an auto-biographical, personal drama and writes it completely in a confessional tone, treating the stage-directions as an introduction. It therefore becomes possible for him to refer to himself as ‘I’ in the dialogue. What prevents this drama from being written in prose, which would otherwise be a most natural medium for such an idiom, is the fact that the dialogue has been recorded and that this story actually only consists of that dialogue. Kovačević, however, lends this entire story his own professionalism as a seasoned dramatist, who has mastered his craft so well that he can now experiment with the form in unlimited ways. He does not need to state the difference between professionalism and amateurism; he offers no superfluous

explanations, he is a playwright who can now illustrate everything most economically, let everything become self-evident – even amateurism itself. Thus the metanarrative approach here, in Hutcheon's terms, is that of uncovering the writing process which belongs to someone else – an amateur who also does not hide the fact that he is an amateur; while the actual master playwright is playing with the conventions of theatre and transcending his own level of accomplishment. Kovačević's approach is by no means either patronising or condescending – he writes the play primarily with the emphasis on the content – some of which is very personal even to himself – and therefore the idiom is also a suitable reflection of that utter honesty.

It was precisely this fusion of prose and drama that posed a problem to the American production. Barnett notes that the inner speeches (contained in the stage directions) were baffling as they didn't seem intended to contribute to the action and could only become an 'interpretive tool, feeding the director, the actors dialogical clues to the playwright's perspective'. On the occasion of his interview with the playwright, Barnett confronted him on this:

“D.B. One thing that is similar between *Claustrophobic Comedy*¹⁶⁷ and *The Professional*, stylistically it is very strange for an American director to be confronted with the sections of prose you have written. [...] I wonder if you can explain what you were doing?

K. As time passed I was trying more and more to write the didascalias as literature and in the future I wish to write something which will be, at the same time, a novel and a play. For example, when my play is at Atelier 212 [sic] and the people read in the newspaper that it is there, for example... many outside of Belgrade can not see that play and probably they will wish to read it. And if they wish to read the play, the writer should make it possible for them, I don't like the technical didascalias. The explanations of technical matters. For example, the postman is coming into the house... I'm improvising now. In the house we have one table, four chairs, one stove, etc.

¹⁶⁷ The story of the Ballerina breaking off in the middle of the performance and running away is related in the form of a journalistic report/ballet review which gives no indication as to what should be done with it in performance. This, however, is not terribly unusual as a device, as it had been utilised before in Yugoslav dramaturgy – e.g. the use of the radio bulletins in *The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater*.

I prefer to write – ‘When the postman comes in, it was the morning of that day. One man was lying down in his bed.’ That means that I mention the bed. And then I shall write further, ‘The postman sits besides the table.’ That means that I mentioned the table now. And for me that is much much nicer for reading now.” (1998: 313-6, unpublished thesis)

Additionally, Barnett concludes:

“Though Kovacevic’s reasoning clearly stems from a Balkan perception that is culturally different than in the United States (I teach an entire class how plays must be read different than prose) his specific paratextual choice is not itself a Balkan convention.” (1998: 318)

Indeed I would add that Kovačević’s choice is probably more evolved in this respect than most Balkan drama. In many ways his lack of anticipation of what should happen on the stage would probably constitute a director’s or set designer’s dream elsewhere. Shakespeare himself had bears running across the stage if he had any stage directions at all, and more recently Sarah Kane has placed even bigger demands on the director and cast with her stage directions or the lack of.¹⁶⁸ I would like to re-inforce that Kovačević’s choice of a prosaic mode here is only an imaginative – and in the light of his account, pragmatic – use of the stage directions, which may not have worked as well in the hands of a less experienced dramatist. Additionally, Barnett notes elsewhere in his thesis that the presence of a dramaturg in the Yugoslav theatre as a mediator in the creative process testified to the great levels of freedom with which Yugoslav directors approached, dissected, interfered with and deconstructed texts so that they often ceased to resemble the original. Thus playwrights often wrote with this in mind and aimed to make their plays less vulnerable to such interventions. Even if Kovačević finally resorted to directing his own plays, he continued to nurture his craft in ways that would limit intervention or keep the dramaturges and directors busy unravelling the original itself when they worked on subsequent productions of his plays.

¹⁶⁸ Stage directions have also been variously utilised in the European dramaturgical tradition either excessively as in Holz and Schlaf’s extreme example of naturalist playwriting in *Papa Hamlet* (which consists only of stage directions) or are completely absent as in much of Heiner Müller’s work.

As mentioned before, another level of significance of this play is in relation to its political context and the historical reality. This is the play that finally gives credibility and voice to political dissidents of the Communist – Titoist – era. In evoking his memories, Teya and Luke talk about very real people and places, and thus the play almost becomes an homage to a particular generation of actors and writers who used to gather in the backstage bar of Atelje 212. Zoran Radmilović, who had made Kovačević's character Radovan III part of everyday discourse,¹⁶⁹ is mentioned and his anecdotes related. More significantly, Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz – who wrote three plays and several books of essays in his lifetime – was one of the most famous writer-dissidents who is also mentioned in the play, and whom, according to Barnett, 'Teya was actually patterned on' (ibid.: 40):

I: Comrade Luke, you often sat with us in the Atelje?

LUKE: Yes. For years.

I: How is it possible then that I don't remember you?

He poured a drink. Drank half of it, looked at me and smiled.

LUKE: Eh, dear Teya. You and your friends spent all your time either in big drinking or in big narcissism. Usually both. Only once Zoran said to me: what are you hanging around there for pretending to be a postman when you are a policeman! And he attacked me as a policeman although I was in a postman's uniform. You tried to defend me but he pointed at the dog who was then playing in *The Dog's Heart*¹⁷⁰ and said: If he was really a postman then this dog would bite him straightaway, as it is normally a custom for the dog to bite a postman. However, he is a policeman so the dog is afraid of him too. He didn't have such a big nose for nothing, that Zoran.

I: He was a great man.

LUKE: Anyway, that night was the decisive moment for your books. After the play, my Miloš came down to the bar. We sat there till dawn. You were all there, the whole team. The representation of the Bar 212. Story after story. Of course, Mihiz was talking the most. And the best. How many books he left in that bar!... On our way home, Miloš says to me: 'Why don't you form a Department for the salvation of Serbian literature in the Police?.' (1998: 151-2, my translation)

¹⁶⁹ The 250th performance of this play was recorded on 27th March 1983 for the Archive of the Theatre Museum and was subsequently released and re-released on video many times achieving record sales and entering almost every household which owned a video player.

¹⁷⁰ An adaptation of Bulgakov's novel which was indeed staged at Atelje 212 in 1979.

Thus the real protagonist of this tragedy seems to be Yugoslav literature – and dissident literature in particular, whose potential authors remained in drunken stupor – during communism. The reference to Havel is intended to heighten this notion, as he at least managed to record his personal suffering caused by communism and create an international profile for himself. Yugoslavia – whose theatres staged Havel’s plays sometimes even before they were staged in Czechoslovakia – was lulled by its illusionary freedom, and its writers achieved no comparable prominence abroad.

In relation to this, in an interview Kovačević gave at the time of the premiere, he first explained that the writers were often placed under police surveillance ‘because they are witnesses’ and ‘because written word is one of the most terrifying, most concrete testimonies’. And further, in the same interview he explained the need for preserving lost literature, which is the theme of this play:

“Oral literature is my most favourite theme.¹⁷¹ The best books, poems, plays, the best theatre performances have happened outside of that which has been written. Do you know how brilliant Serbian tavern literature alone is, do you know what kind of masterpieces we would have if all those stories and anecdotes were written down? Then the told and never written books, the scenes from the Atelje 212 bar where, only in the last 15 years that I have witnessed, there unfolded more first-class comedies by world standards than on the stage alone. And all of that ends with the opening of the door in the morning, and all of that just evaporates, with the smoke...”
(Opačić. N., op.cit., 19.01.1990)

Ultimately, The Professional is an optimistic play and Kovačević’s optimism is contained in the fact that the former political enemies are at least now able to part as friends. The year 1990 – the date of the play’s premiere – was also the year when the multi-party system was implemented all over Yugoslavia. In the years to come, the reconciliation of political differences would prove an unlikely option.

¹⁷¹ In the context of a culture which canonised its oral literature as the ultimate classic – this is hardly surprising.

Urnebesna tragedija (Roaring Tragedy)¹⁷²

Belgrade. 1991. A family reunion fraught with anxiety. In an attempt at casual chit-chat Ruža, the hostess, asks her husband's brother Kosta how his book business is doing. He complains that it's not going well and observes that it used to be better before, under the communists. In response:

“Milan approaches his wife [Ruža] whose hands are trembling. He tries to calm her down, sensing an onslaught of hatred and anger.

[...]

RUŽA: It used to be a better time!? When they were arresting people, beating them up, when nothing close to the truth could ever be published, when because of some song, they would incapacitate people by beating them, when they arrested my father – a solicitor, and beat him to death only because he sent a plea to the communist evil-doer Broz to stop arrests and beating! They beat him up to prove to him that they do not beat anyone! Without beatings they couldn't persuade anyone of anything!

[...]

RUŽA: In this house it is forbidden to utter the word 'communist' unless as a synonym for genocidal murderer! It is forbidden.”

(Kovačević, 1998: 177, my translation)

In his own defence Kosta explains:

KOSTA: I am not talking about communists, sister, I am talking about books. About book sales. Books used to sell much better when communists banned everything. Even the smallest inkling of truth used to sell like hot cakes. If there was any kind of attack on communists – people would buy it without asking the price. [...] And now when everybody is attacking them, when everybody is spitting on them, now books are not interesting. It takes a long time to write a book, but the truth about their crimes comes fast now. A book can't compete with that speed. [...] Little notebooks with aphorisms used to sell better than the collected works of former dissidents sell now, former dissidents, who are now by the way either in the government or close to it. I don't understand the essence of literature, but I understand the essence of people, and people only like victims and martyrs. As soon as I

¹⁷² “In Serbo-Croatian the title is *Urnebesna Tragedija*. Though *urnebesna* certainly contains 'roaring' as a partial equivalence, there is more to it than that. Kovacevic's title contains an ambiguity that is very difficult to achieve in English with any degree of semantic accuracy. In discussing the title with Kovacevic, it would seem that a more appropriate translation would be to call the play 'The Uproarious Tragedy'. That said, in order to be consistent, I will still refer to the play by its published title – *The Roaring Tragedy*.” (Barnett, D., 1998; 286-7, unpublished thesis)

see some great former dissident joining the government now, I withdraw his books from the shelves and replace them with cookery books.” (ibid.)

Following the first ‘free elections’ in Serbia at the end of 1990, Slobodan Milošević emerged from the general uproar as its president, and Kovačević’s play Roaring Tragedy went into rehearsals in early 1991. At the time, the Gulf War had just started, and Kovačević, who had previously refused to discuss politics in his interviews, gave a lengthy interview to one of the opposition papers at the time commenting angrily on the current situation:

“The play which I am currently working on at the Zvezdara Teatar is called ‘Roaring Tragedy’. I think that that title is a most adequate reflection of my feeling about the present day situation. This is a tragedy, but not an ordinary one – an uproarious, richly ornamented tragedy. It’s so much richer today as you have something that is self-evident as a forged democracy. We all know how we got to this ‘democracy’ and how it works. [...] Our communist terror was an operetta-style communism. It wasn’t a serious opera, it wasn’t a classical version. For fifteen minutes there would be a solo, and then they sing a duet, and then the audience went out for a drink. After the interval, again – a solo, and then again a duet. It was a corrupt, cunning, peasant-style system. And it just happened to come across the same kind of a people here, who are also corrupt and cunning, and who are prepared to sell themselves for a small thing.” (Interview by Aleksandar Cvetković, Srpska Reč, 04.02.1991)

Whilst many of Kovačević’s previous plays had explored border-issues, and parallel realities, the atmosphere in Roaring Tragedy is that of an entire world being on the verge of exploding. The main theme is madness, in various senses of the word – either as a mental illness, as manifested in unpredictable hysterical reactions or ‘madness’ as derogatory term and an insult. In terms of punctuation, exclamation marks predominate in this play (whereas by comparison, Claustrophobic Comedy abounds in question marks and The Professional features full stops and occasionally three dots). In terms of its relevance to the other two plays, Roaring Tragedy, probably as a result of the necessity of talking about the quickly changing situation, seems to betray the author’s

original intention of creating a trilogy, although its title does suggest a kind of antidote to Claustrophobic Comedy. Additionally, both plays feature an off-stage theatre which seems to be in some way related to what is going on in the lives of the characters. In Roaring Tragedy, the off-stage theatre – just like everything else in this play – is a source of an unsettling energy. One of the main characters, Milan, is the artistic director who keeps receiving panic-calls from the theatre where everything seems to be falling apart and the main actor is refusing to go on the stage, threatening to kill himself and others. Meanwhile, at home, Milan and Ruža have invited Milan's brother Kosta and his wife Julka to dinner, as well as the Doctor who is looking after their father Vasa, a former communist and an inmate at a mental institution. Unbeknown to the two brothers, their father had just got married that day to a German woman, Rajna, who had killed her previous husband some years ago and is also being treated at the mental institution. At the centre of this story, however, is the twelve year old boy Neven, Milan and Ruža's son, who finds most of the proceedings funny, much to the consternation of his parents, who in turn see these proceedings as ordinary, if not tragic. Thus, again we have a number of individual perspectives clashing at the point of what should be perceived as 'normal'. The fact that the boy should find it funny that his constantly quarrelling uncle and aunt arrive at their house – by crashing a car into the gate, having driven it together – with broken limbs and on crutches, or that the doctor arrives with a bandaged head, could in some ways be perceived as 'normal'. However, the world of the adults, decimated by various breakdowns and conflicts, has acquired different standards of 'normalcy'. In this way, Kovačević's enquiry into parallel realities, continues, though in a less obvious way – through a juxtaposition between sanity and insanity. This juxtaposition is sharpened up when Vasa finally arrives at his son's house and refuses to acknowledge that Neven is that same little boy whom he remembers from some years before. The old man has seemingly lost the ability to accept the fact that

children grow over time, and he gradually develops his own theory that his grandson had actually been killed and that Neven is an adopted child. Absurdly, his conviction is confirmed when Neven decides to play a joke on his grandfather's dislocated frame of reference and tells him that 'little Neven had drowned in the shit', a reference to 'the shit' of the everyday, and a concept he must have picked up from the adults' discourse.

There is much shooting or threats of shooting in the play. The latent alcoholic Kosta, keeps wielding his gun throughout the play, whereas Ruža continually looks for a culprit for her father's death by a bullet many years ago. Although her father had actually committed suicide, Ruža at some point claims that it was a communist bullet – fired by the likes of Vasa, and other communist executioners – which travelled for many years and finally killed him.

The play's structure is also emblematic of this constant tension between the characters. In the first act, the characters are often loudly arriving into the house, and in the second act, which is set in the courtyard, the characters are shown as attempting to leave each other, and never really managing to escape. When Milan receives a threat over the phone from the actor in his theatre who wants to kill him, gun-wielding Kosta insists that he accompanies his brother to the theatre. Accidentally, the gun fires and grazes Milan's hand, but Milan only gets angry when Kosta and Julka's arguments get so far out of control that Kosta eventually wants to shoot her too. Begging his father to kill him and end his suffering, Kosta gives the gun to Vasa, who then insists that the brothers make it up with each other. Paradoxically, Vasa and his wife Rajna – who is largely rejected by everyone as a foreigner and a dangerous woman – are by comparison to the rest of the characters, surprisingly calm, conciliatory and the only ones who demonstrate distress at all the shooting and shouting. They are also the only one of the

three couples whose genuine love and mutual devotion is most articulated and evident. This is significant in the light of the fact that they are both 'murderers' – and that Vasa had progressed from a fervent hatred of Germans during the Second World War, upon which he had built his career, to marrying a German woman. Thus the theme of reconciliation between former enemies recurs here too. When the characters' intolerance of Vasa and Rajna for a variety of reasons reaches its highest point, Vasa goes into the house. As the news arrives over the phone that the actor in the theatre has shot himself, a shot is heard inside the house. Everybody runs in, apart from Ruža, who on advice of the Doctor is keeping Neven outside, the same way that she was kept outside of the house when her father had shot himself. In a final twist, Vasa triumphantly comes back out again, declaring that he now knows that his sons love him and that Ruža doesn't care. As all the guests leave, and Milan rushes off to the theatre, Ruža still remains on the stage with Neven, who incessantly repeats one and the same question – 'Who am I?' In the absence of an immediate plausible answer, he shuts his mother's questions and explanations off by putting his favourite Elvis Presley at full blast on his walkman, and proceeds to his swing in the garden.

In the award-winning 1995 film, Tragedie Burlesque,¹⁷³ based on the play and directed by Goran Marković, the family story is reduced to only one narrative level, and the off-stage elements – such as the nearby orphanage, the inmates of the mental institution and the theatre which keeps interfering in the family's affairs – are brought into the overall narrative too. Whilst the play itself, when it was first performed in 1991, abounded in nervous energy, restlessness and what Barnett has called 'tame' absurdity, the film's atmosphere is much bleaker and profoundly unsettling. There is a disturbing sound

¹⁷³ In Serbo-Croat both the play and the film have the same title Urnebesna tragedija. However, the film has been referred to as Tragedie Burlesque in translation, whereas the play translated by Vladislava Felbabov and published by Samuel French has the slightly unfortunate title Roaring Tragedy, as already noted by Barnett above.

effect reminiscent of pigeons' warbling throughout the film and the implied violence off-stage is understated, thus seeming much more sinister. Interestingly, the play which is supposed to go on in the theatre is shown in the film as a copy of what goes on in reality. One scene from the play – the scene between the grandfather and Neven in the garden – is placed on the stage of the theatre in the film. In that way, the theatre scene in the film, therefore begins to resemble the actual performance of Roaring Tragedy,¹⁷⁴ the play. In the film, the corresponding scene from 'reality' is shown to be happening simultaneously as it happens in the theatre. However, while the grandfather and Neven are talking in 'reality', the actor playing Grandfather in the theatre is just sitting on the stage in his costume (identical to Vasa's costume in 'reality'), refusing to say anything, and causing tension in the auditorium. The juxtaposition of the theatre dimension and the 'reality' dimension continues up until the point of Vasa's feigned suicide. The shot with which the actor in the theatre kills himself on stage and Vasa's shot are fired simultaneously. However, in a clever reversal of fiction and reality, the theatre shot is 'more real' and has more tragic consequences than the 'shot' in real life, which only constitutes a feigned suicide attempt. Thus the film's title Tragedie Burlesque – is justified: on the level of 'real life' all we have is a parody of theatre and therefore a burlesque, and on the level of fiction, we actually get a real-life tragedy. Additionally, Kovačević's 'off-stage theatre', first conceived as a pre-deterministic force in Claustrophobic Comedy, is here brought into full view, but now has a crucially different relationship with its corresponding reality. Whereas Barnett has noticed that in the intermediate stage – in The Professional – it was made possible for the theatre to show 'life as it really is', in Tragedie Burlesque – it only scratches the surface of 'real life' as

¹⁷⁴ What is particularly reminiscent of the actual production of the play is the fact that Neven was played by an actress (Anica Dobra) in the first production, directed by Kovačević. In the film also, the theatre scene features an actress in the role of the boy, whereas Neven in the film is played by a boy. The film was made in co-production with a Bulgarian company. Therefore, the silent characters on the stage are played by Bulgarian actors. Although many of Kovačević's plays were staged in Bulgaria, it is not clear whether the theatre scene in the film might have actually been filmed on the real set of a Bulgarian production of this play. Had this been the case, the whole film and its source-play would have acquired another one in the series of fiction-reality dimensions.

it simultaneously unfolds and begins to show life as it essentially 'really is' underneath the more light-hearted surface of pranks and games with death. The real life tragedy is therefore contained in the fact that none of its protagonists actually realise the seriousness of their predicament.

In response to the play's premiere in 1991, Stamenković wrote:

"While he treats one of the eternal motifs of comedy, the conflict between fathers and children, Kovačević aims both higher and further than standard comedy writers. Essentially, the point of manifestation of this play's problem is in its pre-history: the fault of the fathers. And the real victim is a twelve-year-old boy who is metaphorically speaking, hit by a wandering bullet, fired some fifty years ago by his grandfather, a war hero, and the signatory of many death sentences immediately after the war. Essentially, this is the story about [...] the deconstruction of the superego, about its confluence with the ego, about a miraculous fusion of the conscious and the unconscious, which opens a path for all sorts of manias: from the habitual wearing of a gun in one's belt to the placing of a walkman on one's ears, so as to stop all communication with the outside world which can no longer be accepted or understood." (Stamenković, 2000: 35)

Finally, Stamenković's elaboration of the play concludes in trying to pinpoint 'the drama of our youngest generation':

"[This drama] is not contained in the fact that one maniacal social system produced many individual manias, caused mental illness in some people, ruined the lives of others and withdrew the right to a better future from the third. [...Kovačević] above all tells us that once sown, seeds of evil give long-term, unpredictable results, [...] that our heirs will have to live for a long time with an inner chaos in themselves, and that they will not be able to find out who they are even through a most radical act of rebellion." (ibid.: 35-6)

Interestingly, the play opened a week or so after the anti-government, pacifist student demonstrations on 9th March 1991. I saw it several weeks before the war broke out in Croatia on 28th June 1991.

Dušan Kovačević's Metatheatre

There are several possible reasons why Dušan Kovačević might have chosen metatheatre as his main means of expression. Whereas in the early 1980s, metatheatre was a useful device for containing certain allegories and at the same time exposing the process in which theatre functions in a given socio-political context, by the time Kovačević started using the device extensively, freedom of speech had increased significantly to the extent that he was able to refer to 'the communist evil-doer Broz'¹⁷⁵ in no uncertain terms in 1991. The origins of his metatheatrical approach can be found in his early influences by other playwrights, such as Pirandello – his general aesthetic approach and also his level of craftsmanship – which made it possible for Kovačević to transcend the accepted conventions of playwriting.¹⁷⁶ In an interview he gave me, Kovačević repeatedly referred to 'his sense of the world' as well as his interest in what he called 'the frontier areas' or 'the border'¹⁷⁷ issues. Thus, it is metatheatre chiefly in the context of 'parallel worlds' that interests Kovačević as a playwright, and one play in which this interest was manifested outside of the metatheatrical mode of expression was his 1982 play The Gathering Centre. Here we have a story of an archaeologist who finds an ancient stone – which he believes is an entry to 'the other world' – the world of the dead. Incidentally, he experiences a heart attack and clinical death, at which instant he is transported to the other world and remains there until the point when he experiences an equivalent of the 'heart attack' there and leaves that world in order to come back to life briefly once again. This transition back and forth between the two worlds is again a source of many humorous, confusing and distressing situations. One more detail which

¹⁷⁵ Barnett, in his thesis focuses on this level of freedom of expression extensively, though he quotes the line in Felbabov's translation 'the communist murderer Broz'. The original word is *zlikovac* – its etymological root is *zlo* which means evil. The word can be translated as evil-doer, murderer or villain.

¹⁷⁶ In this respect, it is my general conviction that artists can only invent a new mode of expression if they have mastered the existing modes of expression fully – Picasso for example is known to have mastered naturalistic painting to the utmost level before he proceeded to seek a different kind of expression. Hence, Cubism was a result of the *zeitgeist* as well as the artist's level of craftsmanship.

¹⁷⁷ The original adjective is *(po)granično*, derived from the root *granica* – border, frontier, boundary.

elevates this story to the level of universal significance is the fact that it happens on the day of the first expedition to the Moon in 1969. Thus, when the station on the Earth is reported to have lost the contact with the ship – the ship is shown to be cruising through the gathering centre – the parallel world.

Metatheatre, on the other hand, was first utilised to an extent in Kovačević's 1977 play Šta je to u ljudskom biću što ga vodi prema piću? (What is it in a human being which leads him to drinking?), which was later turned into a screenplay for the 1980 film Poseban tretman (Special Treatment).¹⁷⁸ Written as a mock-community play intended for the use of a campaign against alcoholism, the author of the play is supposedly a certain Doctor Ilić, who has devised a treatment for alcoholism, consisting of apple-diet, Wagner's music, physical education and amateur theatre. He is, however, a latent alcoholic himself, which only becomes apparent when his experiments go wrong.

In addition, Kovačević's play The Balkan Spy features a clash of individual perceptions of 'reality', whereby its protagonist is shown to misread events around him although in a consistently logical manner. He continuously finds supporting evidence for his suspicions, even though his suspicions are based on a wrong hypothesis.

In response to the question why theatre-within-theatre occurs so often in his plays, Kovačević told me:

"I think that that story, as I said, ends as some kind of – not an experiment, but my sense of the world. It has gone through those five plays [Claustrophobic Comedy, The Professional, Roaring Tragedy, Larry Thompson and Doctor Cobbler]¹⁷⁹ and it ran through as one running thread, one running sense of where in our private life we are that which we are, and

¹⁷⁸ This film was directed by Goran Paskaljević.

¹⁷⁹ Larry Thompson will be discussed in the following chapter. Doctor Cobbler, his latest play, is not strictly speaking a metaplay although it features an off-stage theatre as a passing reference.

where we are playing someone else. [...] Or where we are actually misusing acting – or using it well – because of some kind of effect or personal interest. That story is inexhaustible and I know it very well because at the age of 18 or 19, I entered the theatre world when I did my first amateur production and effectively I have been in the spotlight for thirty two or three years since. I am working and I can say for myself that I am an old theatre cat who has spent so many years on the inside. And probably that is why I am so interested in the theatre because I know [it] – not from the outside, as a writer who is ex-cathedra and self-sufficient – because at this moment, after three years [of overseeing the building of a new auditorium], now I have become involved in the process of theatre building, and I know how theatre is made physically. All of that together is my sense of the world which I know very well. It is very difficult for me to get into the part – if I had to write a part of a nuclear physicist tomorrow, I would have to get into space and a world I do not know. I would enter some kinds of relationships which I would have to learn artificially, but if I have a story about an actor who comes home from the theatre tired, I know what it feels like. I wouldn't have to invent much, it would be very convincing because I have spent two thirds of my life in the theatre, with theatre people, starting from the porter to the theatre manager.” (Interview on 04.04.2001, see Appendix 2)

Although this – slightly disappointing – explanation might be as self-evident as some of his metaplays are in their self-reflexivity, it is only the first level of an explanation as to why Dušan Kovačević writes about theatre. It was elaborated by the author himself at the time of Claustrophobic Comedy, that his referencing to Shakespeare was a way in which he aimed to reach a bigger audience and encourage translation of his play. He only achieved this to the highest extent with The Professional.¹⁸⁰ Apart from the fact that none of the characters have unpronounceable names for a Westerner and no surnames which end in ‘-vić’, this play’s timing was also favourable. As Prokić also noted, in Yugoslavia a playwright was often expected to write in response to local events and problems, and the critics and audiences didn’t take nicely to Yugoslav plays which tried to be foreign. Being written in 1989, at the time of general affluence, well-being and prosperity in Yugoslavia, The Professional had no pressing local issues to

¹⁸⁰ “One trait of this play is the fact that it comes much nearer to the European model of modern comedy than any other of Kovačević’s plays [...]. It insists neither on the regional [issues], on the critique of the ‘Serbian mentality’, nor on the fact that such a combination of character traits is in fact the result of unfortunate socio-historical circumstances imposed upon a particular group.” (Stamenković, 2000: 38)

tackle and it could then take into consideration a more universal level, and speak in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In a fast reversal of events in Yugoslavia, the third play – Roaring Trilogy – seems to have departed significantly from the initial idea of a trilogy and the recurring themes of the previous two plays. Though the presence of an off-stage theatre – by now increasingly chaotic and in a highly critical condition – remains.

Despite increased levels of aesthetisation, the political dimension of his work has persisted:

“Politics are a passion for me. Politics is my way of thinking and I think that we are all in some way politicised – whether we are working in politics professionally or are just victims of it. In any case, politics is our fate. Regardless of which system and which society you are in, politics on a general level will determine your private life. In one country politics will be better, in another worse, and in yet another – catastrophic. More or less we’ve been going through something tepid and cold, it was never warm. It has always been something undefined and indeterminate and for sixty years we’ve lived in one totalitarian, strictly controlled – I would say – gaol system. Everybody rebelled in their own way against it. [...] Of course, politics must not be a placard. I was always trying, like in The Balkan Spy not to create a clean, socialist realist play which rebels against socialist realism, because then I would achieve nothing. I tried to ridicule that system and make it stupid and funny, and it worked much better than if I tried to say that communism was something terrible – because that means nothing.” (ibid.)

Since 1987, Kovačević had been dealing with the notion of ‘the end’ which was looming in a variety of ways. Claustrophobic Comedy tentatively states ‘One day there will hopefully be the end’. The Professional concludes with a prognosis of the now foreseeable end (‘When I have transcribed the entire dialogue and inserted the stage directions, there will be The End’), even though the play itself is caught up in a vicious circle. The Roaring Tragedy ends, but with a huge identity question.

In the aftermath of Yugoslav socialism, Kovačević's political and playwriting drive temporarily ceased. Although loudly opposed to Milošević's regime, his personal sympathies always lay with mild nationalist ideologies, even if this was not overtly apparent in his work. In any case, it took five years for Kovačević's next theatre play to appear. Without any reference to the actual political events and the devastating war which had just come to an end, Larry Thompson would simply view the current state of affairs in Belgrade through the immediacy of a theatre performance which cannot happen because of the external socio-political circumstances.

It is ultimately Kovačević's impeccable ability to capture the zeitgeist and even anticipate the future that continues to amaze. His more recent work and his examination of the phenomenon of 'the actor', which he mentions above, will be expanded upon in a later chapter. In the meantime, the following account might help to illuminate Kovačević's plays further for the reader:

“Like in chess, it was possible to anticipate. If you play a game which opens hard, then, you know, you can anticipate the next move. Politics are a kind of hard chess game. And [...] you can anticipate two or three options which will certainly happen. If those two or three options happen, two or three new options will happen as a result, and like in chess, you can anticipate the end of the game. If you are also well informed in addition to that, then you know how that game will go – but all of that doesn't interest me in terms of labels, I am interested in the entire mechanism of the system of power and rule.”
(ibid.)

YUGOSLAVIA'S THEATRICALISED REALITY

Metatheatre of 1991-1996

“You should have seen it! Indescribable. At half past nine the locked out actors tried to break into the theatre by force. They'd dragged along iron bars from somewhere. Like the middle ages. One, two, and ram the door with the iron bars. Suddenly the defenders inside appear on the balcony and roof-top of the theatre wearing weird coloured rags, smothered in powder and make-up, and start pelting everybody with smoke-bombs and tear-gas. The people outside go wild. Smoke and hell and all hell breaks loose. People who up to this point have only been hecklers literally go frantic, absolutely wild. All of a sudden they push the locked-out actors aside, and before you can look round the whole pavement on the opposite side of the street has been dug up, and the crowd is attacking the theatre with granite blocks. Someone shouts: 'Let's burn the rats out,' and all of a sudden they are lighting torches. Some of them run through the theatre to set fire to the theatre. And then the police ruin everything, they come in with truncheons and break up the whole works. Then, when the firemen come storming in with all their paraphernalia, spraying everything in sight, the bunch inside the theatre start swearing at the crowd and playing rock music over the loudspeakers. Finally, an ambulance turns up, loads up the wounded, including Knez, and drives them off to the hospital.”
(Jovanović, D.: Act a Brain Tumour or Air Pollution, 1994/95: 28-29)

The first free elections in the Yugoslavian republics happened throughout 1990. The campaign was first initiated in Slovenia the year before, followed by Croatia, followed by Serbia and the other republics by the end of the year. The Slovenian elections unfolded relatively smoothly and democratically, despite some intimidating vigilance from the federal authorities.¹⁸¹ The situation in Croatia was more complicated. In 1971 a nationalist movement in Croatia was quashed by the then authorities and some of its members were driven into exile where they continued working for their cause. One of those members – Franjo Tudjman – however, remained in the country as he had

¹⁸¹ The contentious point, according to Silber and Little (1995/6) was whether or not the newly elected party would advocate separation of Slovenia, which the Yugoslav National Army was opposed to.

managed to retain his credentials by virtue of the fact that he had fought with the Communists during the Second World War, was promoted to a General at a young age and even received an honorary title from Tito himself. He was also a doctor of philosophy and despite his political imprisonment on several occasions – and his unrenounced dissidence – he enjoyed many privileges from the authorities. Ever since Milošević's famous speech in Kosovo in 1987, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, nationalist sentiment was gradually nurtured all over Yugoslavia. Tudjman's far right party The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) – which drew its inspiration and insignia from the Second World War Croatian Nazi faction Ustaše – operated under the shroud of secrecy to begin with. The organization was perceived as at least threatening by the Serbian minority living in Croatia as it evoked the cultural memory of their persecution some fifty years earlier. In February 1989 it had its first public meeting, although it was only legalised in December 1989, when the Croatian multi-party elections were called. Meanwhile, in Serbia, the 600th anniversary of the famous Battle of Kosovo happened on 28th June 1989. Encouraged by Milošević's pro-Serbian and anti-Albanian attitude, hundreds of thousands of Serbs flocked down to the Kosovo Field to celebrate. Following the election call at the end of the year in Croatia, Tudjman organized the first HDZ Congress for 24th February 1990. The most significant feature of this event was the overwhelming presence of the Croatian émigrés – who would also fund the campaign. According to Silber and Little (1995/6), the Congress raised the issues of not only Croatian secession but also expansion into other republics, peppered with nationalist and anti-Serb sentiments. Slobodan Praljak, a theatre director who later became a commander of the Bosnian Croat militia, described his impressions of this:

“I knew at the time that we would win. And so this declaration was a feeling similar to that of a director on an opening night. There is joy and also sadness that something had finished. We were no longer this exclusive

group of 30 or 40. We were no longer bound to this shadow of secrecy and illegal meetings.” (Silber and Little, 1995/6: 87)

Soon after the Congress, rebellions of the Croatian Serbs ensued around Knin, and in the region known as Kninska Krajina.

Although Tudjman’s nationalist drive was a kind of reply to Milošević’s, Tudjman saw himself as an opposition leader, whereas Milošević stood for the established Communist government. However, when the multiparty elections were scheduled in Serbia for December 1990, most of the opposition parties in the run-up declared similarly nationalist leanings. The election campaign in the media – which were controlled by the government – was run mainly in favour of Milošević’s Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), subtly discrediting the opposition parties. The SPS gained a landslide victory. As a result, Vuk Drašković – a novelist and the charismatic leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) – protested against the media management early in 1991.

Not only did Drašković’s demands for a reform of the media regulations fall on deaf ears, but he was also personally labelled as Tudjman’s collaborator on TV Belgrade. Managing to gather all the opposition parties around him in his bid for media reform, Vuk Drašković called a demonstration with the aim of the overthrow of the ‘TV-Bastille’ on 9th March 1991:

“From the balcony of the National Theater, opposition leaders called for freedom of the press as the police moved in. Drašković cut a striking figure with his great mane of black hair and flowing beard. He called for the Bolsheviks to step aside in favour of radical change. [...] The police tried to disperse the crowd with water cannon and salvoes of tear gas canisters. Drašković urged his followers to resist and bellowed ‘Charge! Charge!’ Seconds after rows of police, clad in full riot gear, surged forward. The demonstrators tore apart fences, grabbing iron bars and sticks for the fight. In vain, Drašković appealed to the security forces to rally behind the people against the regime.” (1995/6: 120)

A fight ensued between the police and the demonstrators, which the demonstrators were winning.

“By around three o’clock it was over – the fight ended and the whole centre was cleared of police. It was like a free territory. All the windows were broken [...]’ And two people lay dead – one policeman, and one teenage student [the seventeen year old Branivoje Milinović] who hadn’t even been involved in the protest. He [...] had only come down to town to buy some tapes when he was shot in the head by one of Milošević’s men. As Misha Glenny noted bitterly: ‘For four years, Slobodan Milošević had been exciting Serbs with tales of the terror and discrimination that they faced. The first Serb to die in political terror since his rise to power was murdered by Serbian police working in the name of President Milošević.’” (Collin, 2001: 39)

Frightened, Milošević ordered the army to send tanks out on the streets. Collin rightly points out that this was a threatening gesture which effectively meant that the Yugoslav army was ‘invading its own capital’, trying to win back territory occupied by the people. This of course was not the last time Milošević would attempt a display of force and power against his own people.

Simultaneously the liberal radio-station B-92 and the independent local TV-station Studio B – who were reporting on the demonstrations – were raided by the police and banned. In the evening, Drašković was arrested. What was even acknowledged by the government as a potential copy of the Romanian revolution, had a momentary impact, but ended disastrously.

The demonstrations were taken over the following day by students who came out to the Terazije fountain in the centre of Belgrade to protest against the police brutality, the killing of a teenager and the government’s ‘tank-ocracy’, and to uphold Drašković’s demands as well as calling for his release. Lasting for almost a week, the

demonstrations¹⁸² just about managed to yield some short-term results before they dissolved – the management of the state TV resigned and Drašković was released (although he was later charged with attempting a coup).

Whether or not, events would have taken a different course if Drašković had indeed managed to invoke a coup, 9th March 1991 remains a significant date in the history of Yugoslavia. Silber and Little note that the Terazije demonstrations – which brought out ‘Belgrade’s liberal élite’ – ‘managed to re-create, fleetingly the atmosphere of tolerance’ (op.cit.: 122) by singing ‘Give peace a chance’, even though Serbian nationalist songs were sung too on the occasion. There was a great deal of disbelief and denial that the war in Croatia would ever happen, and in addition, Milošević kept Serbs busy with internal problems whilst he was plotting the war strategy. Collin reports a widely held opinion among the Serbs that ‘Milošević only decided to lead the country to war because the mass protests showed how vulnerable his position was and he therefore needed to create conflict to distract the population’ (2001: 46). The fact is that the mobilisation of reservists and the formation of additional militia forces was taking place months before Slovenia and Croatia declared independence on 25th June 1991. Simultaneously, the presidents of all the republics were meeting continuously in an attempt to find a peaceful solution.¹⁸³

The ‘invasion’ by the Yugoslav National Army of independent Slovenia began on 27th June and the ‘war’¹⁸⁴ finished with the recognition by Belgrade of the independent state of Slovenia on 4th July. The demands of the Croatian Serbs gradually intensified

¹⁸² The actor Branislav Lečić was one of the prominent participants in the student demonstrations. Since the political changeover in 2000, he has been the Minister of Culture.

¹⁸³ Silber and Little insist that all the while during these lengthy deliberations Tujman and Milošević had their own mutual secret agenda regarding the break-up of Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia.

¹⁸⁴ By comparison to what would happen in Croatia, and worse still in Bosnia, these terms are indeed only figurative.

following the Croatian declaration of independence. By the end of August there was shooting which then escalated into a full-scale – although undeclared – war.

“In the liberal circles of urban Belgrade, it hardly seemed real. And of course it wasn’t, yet: war was something that Belgrade’s youth, like people across the rest of the world were only watching on TV.” (2001: 46)¹⁸⁵

Meanwhile, the state TV, which still remained the mouthpiece for Milošević’s SPS party, did its best to demonise the Croats and keep nationalist sentiment burning. In many ways it succeeded in achieving this, although when conscription for the war began in Belgrade, there was little response. Young men either tried to avoid receiving the call-up papers, emigrated, or feigned mental illness. According to Collin only thirteen percent of those eligible for mobilisation in Belgrade made it into the army. Milošević’s control of information and of critical thought extended to encompass not only the media but also the judiciary, the army, education – particularly the University which he now saw as a source of danger – and all the cultural institutions. He purged the staff and replaced the management by his own people.

The war in Croatia was brought under control through foreign intervention by February 1992, but almost simultaneously, tensions built up between the Serbs, Muslims and Croats in Bosnia. Whilst Muslims wanted their own state, Bosnian Croats and Serbs held allegiances to their respective mother-states. As the tensions gradually escalated, the Serbs in Serbia, who had sobered up during the Croatian war, put up increasing resistance to the regime, and anti-war organizations and campaigns began to be set up:

“When the first barricades between Serbs and Muslims were erected in Sarajevo in March, a prelude to the three-year, four-month siege of the city, [the independent radio-station] B92 staged a stunt in central Belgrade,

¹⁸⁵ Collin further quotes ‘one wit’ who joked that “War is a continuation of prime time news using other media.” (2001:48)

setting up barriers and blocking a street in an attempt to bring the reality of ethnic division home. [...] A petition calling on Milošević to resign attracted 840, 000 signatures. In March 1992, the opposition parties rallied 50, 000 people outside St Sava's cathedral in downtown Belgrade. Students returned to Terazije to continue their protests." (2001: 51)

In addition, the Belgrade's Centre for Anti-War Action made its own appeals.¹⁸⁶ Paradoxically, none of these appeals and calls for political change in the country ever reached inner Serbia, let alone the West, in any significant way. By now Serbs were being increasingly demonised in the Western press on the grounds of their nationalism, but were never fully aware of their image in the West, as the state-controlled media only ever relayed the story that suited its purposes. Western disapproval of Serbian policy resulted in a demonisation of the West in the Serbian media – conspiracy theories raged, the entire nation was cast in the role of victims and forced to see itself as a martyr. The only comfort the nation was given was its moral victory against all the odds in Kosovo in 1389. Above all, the Serbian media continually denied that the country was involved in a war, thus perpetuating the image of the moral, just and victimised Serbia: '[T]hat was the biggest victory of his politics, convincing people that we were not at war', Collin quotes a reluctant witness. It is clear therefore how this situation provided the roots for the creation of a parallel reality – and a reality in binary opposition to the reality outside of the isolated country: Serbs were simultaneously represented as 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', 'victims' and 'aggressors' – depending on who was creating the narrative about them.

¹⁸⁶ Collin describes an action organized by the Centre and B-92 radio, whereby, at the height of the Croatian War and the devastating siege of Vukovar in November 1991, they brought together three rock bands – *Električni orgazam* (The Electric Orgasm), *Partibrejkers* (The Partybreakers) and *Ekatarina Velika* (Catherine the Great) – to form a super-group named *Rimtutituki*. Unbeknown to Collin, the name of the group was a slang code, which is untranslatable, but amounts to an expletive. The hybrid-band recorded a pacifist single entitled *Slušaj 'vamo (Mir, brate mir) – Listen Here (Peace, Brother, Peace)*, which they performed on a truck, cruising the streets of Belgrade and distributing copies of the single to the crowd – on 8th March 1992.

Bosnia had stereotypically represented a symbol of Yugoslavia's multiculturalism, which was also reflected on the level of multi-ethnic families and thoroughly inter-mixed neighbourhoods. Even if Serbs and Croats had had unresolved historical grievances against each other and in-bred fears or intolerance, this was never really the case with Bosnian people. When Bosnia was recognized as an independent state by the European Community on 6th April 1992, few people could really believe that bloodshed would ensue. Those few people also had the power to make it happen – the Serb Paramilitaries and Yugoslav Army units began shelling the city of Zvornik on 8th April – from Serbia proper, Milošević feigning ignorance and lack of power over the Bosnian Serbs all the while. In order to demonise Bosnian Muslims – who were largely descended from Southern Slav converts to Islam during the Ottoman empire – the Serb media had to work much harder than before, drawing on the 600-year old grievances against the Turks, or ascribing Islamic fundamentalism to Bosnian Muslims who allegedly 'wanted to set up a Muslim state in the middle of Europe'.

The subsequent war was certainly brutal as numerous records testify, but Collin also quotes Veran Matić, the editor and the main initiator of B-92 radio, championing those who refused to fight:

“Once a whole unit rebelled and said they wouldn't go to the front. The commander of the unit said: 'OK, those who want to go to war step this side, and those who don't go that side,' There was only one guy who kept changing sides and at the end stood between them and shot himself. This story became symbolic of the anti-war movement.” (2001: 53)¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ According to Collin, Matić on one occasion got on the phone to a Muslim commander on the battlefield who was threatening to blow up a dam and cause a major flood in Višegrad after his unit was cornered by the Serbs. “I was in the middle of my show and didn't expect to get through, and I was like: 'God, what do I do now?', so I just said: 'Hi, what's up?' He said: 'Tell the army to withdraw or else I'll blow the dam up'. The interview became a kind of psychotherapeutic negotiation with me saying: 'Don't do it, there are people living in the valley, you'll kill them as well' I tried to argument [sic] that there were Muslims and their children living there, but he just responded: 'If we can't live together, we'll swim together'.” (2001: 54)

Despite its outspoken opposition to the wars, the radio station B-92, it is worth mentioning, could not transmit its programmes beyond Belgrade; the rest of the country had only one source of information – the state-run media. As Collin notes:

“The entire cultural life of Belgrade, now dominated by the dead hand of Milošević’s ideology, fell under the shadow of the war. Warfare became culture, culture became warfare. The two were inseparably intermingled, driving each other forward into a grotesque symbiosis of spiralling hatred.” (2001: 55)

As the war in Bosnia unfolded, an economic crisis, exacerbated by UN economic sanctions (imposed on 30th May 1992), drove the rump-state of Yugoslavia into total isolation, darkness and despair. According to Collin, the hyperinflation reached 200 percent by February 1993 and 313, 563, 558 per cent by January 1994. Several pyramid schemes completely finished off the state economy and the impoverished middle-class. Stratification of society resulted in the super-rich mafia on the one hand, and the poor masses on the other. In addition, an estimated 150, 000 people left the country in the first half of the 1990s, causing a devastating brain-drain.

Both Collin and Eric D. Gordy¹⁸⁸ identify the so-called ‘turbo-folk’ music as a crucial cultural phenomenon during the early 1990s in Yugoslavia. In Collin’s words:

“Turbo folk was indigenous Balkan disco, a gloopy melange of chirpy techno-pop and traditional folk melodies [...]. It was optimistic and patriotic, modern yet nostalgic, tugging at the heart-strings of rural folk who left Serbia’s farmlands in search of big-city prosperity, poor wistful refugees arriving in Belgrade on the run from Bosnia, and soldiers caught up in the conflicting emotions of wartime. It was a music which nourished and was nourished by Milošević.” (2001: 80)

¹⁸⁸ Eric D. Gordy: The Culture of Power in Serbia, Penn State Press, Pennsylvania, 1999.

Gordy describes how turbo-folk created an imaginary world through music videos – a glamorous, feel-good world, which was a complete antidote to the miserable reality of the everyday. The underlying themes and aesthetic of this music genre also permeated other cultural spheres:

“Turbo-folk became a metaphor for the colonisation of everyday life by the symbols of xenophobia and backward looking Serbian traditionalism [...]. Its ideology, the twisted mentality of the regime permeated films, fashion, literature. [...] It even manifested itself in architecture; in the high kitsch abodes of war profiteers and gangsters like Arkan.¹⁸⁹ [...] The popularity of turbo-folk was boosted by the launch of a series of new television entertainment channels: relentlessly upbeat stations with names like TV Pink and TV Palma, their sets a riot of day-glo colours, their presenters flashily-attired and irrepressibly jolly.” (2001: 81-2)

Evidently the regime was using the mass-media and the popular culture as a means of either re-enforcing the nationalist sentiment and rhetoric or cultivating a state of denial in relation to the horrors of the everyday reality. Acts of cultural and artistic dissidence were few and far between, partly as a result of powerlessness, resignation and financial poverty and partly as a result of a highly theatricalised reality which usurped the domain of fiction. In other words, television became the most dominant cultural medium.

In writing about the theatre of the 1990s, Aleksandra Jovičević notes that the tradition of political drama identified by Klaić in 1986 became non-existent in the early 1990s. She identifies two trends in the contemporary Yugoslav (by then – Serbian and Montenegrin) drama – the escapist trend (epitomised in musicals, the staging of Hollywood movies etc), and the romantic-sentimentalist rewriting of national history. Commenting on the traditional esteem of the Serbian public for those playwrights who ‘glorified national myths and legends’, and their hostility for those who tried to

¹⁸⁹ Željko Ražnatović Arkan was a former criminal who distinguished himself as a paramilitary leader and a political figure during the wars in Bosnia. Following the wars he entered into a high profile marriage with one of the turbo-folk singers. He remained on the Interpol’s ‘most wanted’ list until his assassination by another mafia faction in 2000.

'ridicule, unmask or re-examine' this subject-matter, Jovićević quotes the example of the play Sveti Sava (St Sava) by Siniša Kovačević – which caused riots in Belgrade in 1990. In the play, the Serbian medieval prince who became a monk and was later canonised as a saint was seemingly portrayed in a less than flattering light, according to some newly impassioned Serbs – the founders of the St Sava political party. According to Stamenković's review of the play (reprinted in 2000: 75-7), the title character was portrayed as a human being rather than a saint that he later became. This also involved a 'drastically' naturalistic portrayal of the Serbian medieval court, 'Rimbaudesque' portrayal of the characters, 'Machievellian' portrayal of their relationships and obscene dialogue. Although Stamenković disapproves of the forced imposition of these emphases, he also condemns the protests and the consequent banning of the play's performance in Belgrade, led by the people who haven't even seen the play, and in the name of 'democracy'.

Jovićević further claims that this event and the consequent street riots marked a shift of public interest from theatre to other 'manifestations of social life':

"The theatre became completely marginalized and was replaced with various ritual ways of expressing authority, hatred, and conflict. The mass media took over real life dramas. Most political discussions were framed in the language of theatrical metaphor. In many ways this expressed how language and thinking evolved in Yugoslav culture: euphemisms such as 'global theatre game', 'dress rehearsal for a total Balkan war', etc. were used almost daily, while actors in this absurdist drama (politicians, journalists, commentators and anchor people) terrorized citizens with their psychological games that were devised to dramatize even more horrifying manifestations of war." (1997: 125)

And, most significantly in the context of this study:

"Theatrical metaphors became the most prominent elements of their high-flown rhetoric, along with terms once used to describe Greek tragedies:

'patricide', 'fratricide', 'genocide' etc. But that theatre offers a metaphor for war should not be a surprise. It is the most social of art forms, and invites participation, which is a basis of war psychology when it needs to mobilize a country. This can be a profoundly disturbing way of thinking because it sees war only in terms of spectacle. Supported by growing media and communications, this new and twisted theatricality values form more than content, representation more than real events. It is based upon the assumption that reality can be entirely fabricated through the manipulation of public imagery. The Yugoslav tragedy became a commodity for mass-consumption, manipulation and even seduction, but rarely protest." (ibid.)

In her paper – delivered at an international Conference in Ljubljana – Jovičević aims to pinpoint the most significant examples of 1990s Yugoslav drama. She mentions in a footnote the 1992 premiere of Aleksandar Popović's play Tamna je noć (Dark is the Night), in which the playwright – a major representative of the 1960s Yugoslav Theatre of the Absurd – departs from his previously established style and for the first time writes a conventional drama, inspired by the 1992 pacifist student demonstrations. The play was directed by Egon Savin and staged in a chamber theatre – Kult, thus also inadvertently implying that it was a non-commercial play which could attract a relatively small audience. Despite this, the play had a sell-out run and left a huge emotional impact on its audiences – even if that impact was only a result of good timing and a lack of suitable alternatives. In other words, the play is restricted to a footnote in Jovičević's analysis precisely because it could not speak to any other audiences at any other time than the disillusioned Belgrade students and intelligentsia in 1992.¹⁹⁰

Of the two plays that Jovičević singles out as the most representative of (good) contemporary Yugoslav drama, two are metaplays: Dušan Kovačević's Lari Tompson – Tragedija jedne mladosti (Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man) and Goran Marković's Turneja (A Tour). The third is an adaptation of the novel much translated in the West – U potpalublju (In the Hold), written by a young Yugoslav author Vladimir

¹⁹⁰ The play was adapted into a screenplay by Popović with the film director Dragan Kresoja and made into an award winning film in 1995 (even winning a cinema award in Moscow).

Arsenijević, and again focusing on the events of the early 1990s from the point of view of a destroyed new generation. Jovičević acknowledges the 1980s trend of ‘theatre in the theatre’ as epitomised by Šnajder’s The Croatian Faust and Simović’s The Travelling Theatre Šopalović,¹⁹¹ although A Tour and Larry Thompson are not analysed here within the context of the tradition of Yugoslav metatheatre. Instead, Goran Marković’s play is analysed in response to current affairs, whilst Dušan Kovačević’s play is discussed largely in the context of his idiolect and aesthetics as epitomised by his early plays, namely the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd as well as the self-ironic tone characteristic of Eastern European dissident writers, and Kovačević’s own recurrent themes of family, national mentality and the relationship between the individual and authority.

It is worth mentioning that all three of these plays only appeared following the end of the Bosnian war, in 1996 – In the Hold opened in the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in the spring season as did Larry Thompson in Zvezdara Teatar; A Tour opened in the autumn season at Atelje 212. It is significant that at the end of a particularly barren period for Yugoslav theatre in general, the most notable examples which emerge are actually metaplays, though very different to the kind of metaplays in the 1980s.

Before proceeding with an in-depth analysis of the latter two plays, we can observe that the period of wars in the former Yugoslavia undoubtedly rendered theatre one of its casualties. It is also crucial to note that from 1992 onwards the term ‘Yugoslavia’ in this thesis relates to the loose federation of Serbia and Montenegro. This is not to say that the other republics’ cultural output ceases to be interesting at this time – on the contrary, some of the most powerful theatrical events ever occurred precisely in besieged

¹⁹¹ This play, she also notes, has been one of the most internationally renowned Yugoslav plays of all times, on the strength of its universality, achieved through its gradual construction of a ‘poetic reality’.

Sarajevo¹⁹² – nor is it to say that the theatre output in Serbia and Montenegro in any way continues the tradition of what used to be called Yugoslav theatre. Serbia and Montenegro continued to call themselves Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s and I have no other term at my disposal in order to demarcate the difference. In addition, as federal cultural institutions collapsed following the break-up of the country and all cultural exchange diminished, it became very difficult to trace relevant sources and obtain information about Slovenian, Croatian or Bosnian theatre in Serbia, which was my main source of material for this research. Also the main focus of this thesis is metatheatre rather than an analysis of Yugoslav theatre in general, which maybe unfairly reduces the focus of this study further to Belgrade – where most of the metaplays happen to appear – to the exclusion of other cultural centres in Serbia and Montenegro.

The impact of the war on Yugoslav theatre of the early 1990s was probably less disastrous than the impact that Milošević's 'smart' dictatorship had on the general corruption of culture. The economic collapse too had major repercussions on the theatre which continued to be largely state-funded, as well as on the spending power of the audiences. Additionally Milošević demonstrated no interest in attending cultural events – least of all theatre – and consequently he paid little attention to the repertoire and whether or not it was politically acceptable. This resulted in a resignation of theatre artists who knew that the number of people they could reach was much smaller than for example TV audiences, and an increasing number of actors in particular gave priority to TV engagements, which were better paid. Some of the best theatre artists and actors also left the country – the most famous example being Rade Šerbedžija.¹⁹³

¹⁹² One of the interesting examples which generated worldwide debate at the time was Susan Sontag's (largely patronising) staging of Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo.

¹⁹³ Subsequently he appeared in several Hollywood movies as well as Stanley Kubrick's Eyes Wide Shut.

In terms of metatheatre, interest in the trend did continue and it manifested itself through foreign plays which were staged at the time to great acclaim. In 1991, the Yugoslav Drama Theatre staged a particularly successful production of Corneille's L'Illusion Comique, directed by Slobodan Unkovski.¹⁹⁴ More significantly for us, Ronald Harwood's The Dresser, directed by Dejan Mijač at Atelje 212 in January 1994 became one of the key productions in the early 1990s in Belgrade. Its success was enormous – it resulted in a whole series of Harwood's plays being staged in Belgrade and the playwright becoming a regular guest and recipient of many awards in the country. Interestingly, the play, set during the 1940s German bombing of Britain, became particularly relevant during the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia – thus 'fiction' actually became 'reality' once again.

The war in Bosnia ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement in November 1995, signed by the three republics' presidents at the time – Serbian Slobodan Milošević, Bosnian Alija Izetbegović and Croatian Franjo Tuđman. Milošević returned home triumphant and confident that his success would bring him victory in the next elections. However, at the time of the elections a year later – in November 1996 – he was in for a surprise.

Goran Marković: Turneja (A Tour)

Having graduated from the Prague film school, Goran Marković – the son of the leading Belgrade actors Olivera and Rade Marković – became one of the most important Yugoslav film directors in the 1980s. His films received major awards both in the country and internationally and since 1997 he has increasingly worked in France. He is the author of three theatre plays, the first of which was A Tour in 1996.

¹⁹⁴ Its run ended when one of its leading actresses – originally Croatian but married to a Serb – Mira Furlan also decided to emigrate to the USA.

Set in 1993, the play opens with a group of renowned actors – playing cards in between rehearsals, resigned to their empty lives and negligible salaries – accepting the proposition of one of their lesser known colleagues to embark on a potentially lucrative tour around the war-torn Krajina region. Structurally, the play is a simple – though fragmented – story of their journey which becomes illuminating, dangerous and even traumatic for the ensemble. They encounter and struggle to relate to various participants in the conflict, trying to respond to them through their art. In many ways, the play is reminiscent of Simović's The Travelling Theatre Šopalović, at least in terms of its treatment of actors as a separate species, with their own particular strengths and weaknesses which come into conflict with the reality of war. Marković's thesis however, is much less optimistic than Simović's. Even though the play is envisaged as a comedy and never highlights the subliminal levels of the characters' psychology and the collision of the two worlds, it ends on a profoundly dark note – as a statement of disillusionment in the power of theatre to really do anything, apart from struggling for its own survival. The lightness of tone also heightens the poignancy of incidental comments and situations which relate to the harsh reality of war. On their arrival at the border and their first encounter with the war-torn landscape, the actors comment:

“LALE: Oh... This is all ruined and burnt out.

SONJA: Terrible...

ŽAKI: Come on, we've seen it all a hundred times on TV.

SONJA: Only on TV it looks like a theatre set...

LALE: And this is real.

JADRANKA: And where are the people?

MIŠKO: There are no people.

JADRANKA: How come – there are no people?

Miško doesn't answer her. The Soldier turns up again.

JADRANKA: Excuse me, may I ask you something?

SOLDIER: Go on.

JADRANKA: What happened to the people who lived in these houses?

[*End of scene.*”

(G. Marković: 1996: 14, unpublished manuscript; my translation)

The actors' encounter with a war-scape is intended to be reflective of many Serbian people's detachment from the reality of war created through the 'cold medium' of television. On the other hand, the unanswered question left hanging in the air, in the dark of the scene change, might well have been posed directly to 'the people' watching the play – Marković's imagined audience. Thus the obvious answer becomes even more chilling by being implied through the juxtaposition with the youngest actress's naivety.

With their arrival in a Serb-held town, the actors are informed that they are to perform first for the civilians in the town and then for the soldiers on the front line. The hosts turn out to be largely uninterested in the actors who are starting to experience the reality of war – electricity cuts, lack of heating, lack of sleeping room, lack of safety and constant background shooting and explosions. In the improvised playhouse, the audience is huddled together primarily for the benefit of body heat. The actors are performing Anouilh's Colombe – which is itself a metatheatrical farce.¹⁹⁵ When a member of the unengaged audience decides to leave announcing his decision to a friend at the other end of the auditorium, this provokes an attempt by the local teacher to point out the importance of theatre for the people. Meanwhile, the tour organizer Stanislav, has been blackmailed into donating all the proceeds from the tickets to a humanitarian organization. To the surprise of the actors, this is announced to the audience who immediately warm to the ensemble. Before their departure for the front line, the actors are only given one piece of advice by the cynical commander who had been their host: 'And please, don't play this rubbish to the soldiers! Play something from our, Serbian history! Understand?' (op.cit.: 36).

¹⁹⁵ In a further ironic reflection of what is actually happening to the protagonists, they are playing out a scene in which an actress donates a statue called "A Young Man and Death" to the students suffering from tuberculosis only so that she can outdo Sarah Bernhardt's act of charity which involved a donation of a statue which she had made herself.

A Belgrade surgeon on an assignment at the front offers coffee to the actors who have just arrived at his makeshift hospital in a school:

“The surgeon is distributing coffee cups with his hands in blood-soaked gloves. Jadranka looks at her bloodstained cup in horror.

JADRANKA: Thanks, I don't drink coffee...

The surgeon takes off the gloves and washes his hands in a basin.

SURGEON: At this time, after twilight, it calms down, till dawn.

STANISLAV: Yes, so we heard from the commander...

Sonja gives him a nudge to keep quiet.

SURGEON: The devil only knows why. They are all shooting randomly anyway.

He wipes his hands. But then something strange happens: he starts to rub his hands with soap again as if he hasn't just washed them.

SURGEON: In general, this war is largely irrational. First of all you have the same people killing each other, they speak the same language, have the same mentality, the same feelings...

The surgeon rinses his hands and wipes them carefully again. But then, to the utter surprise of his guests he starts to rub them with soap again.

SURGEON: They don't have any differences. Even their uniforms are similar. When they bring them in, we operate first and then we try to identify them; not out of altruism, but because it is practically impossible to determine which side they are from!

As if spellbound, the actors are staring at his hands. The surgeon is wiping them again for the third time only to start rubbing them with soap again.

SURGEON: I was thinking how it would be one hell of a job to make a film about this war. First of all in terms of costumes, and then all the rest... In a proper war film you can tell the two sides apart not only by their appearance but also by their behaviour. And these here... They are all the same – the Serbs, and those Croats across the road and the Muslims. They are all completely identical people. The same people... It would be difficult to make a film about it...¹⁹⁶

Having wiped his hands for the fifth time, he gets hold of the soap-bar again, and Jadranka mechanically calls out:

JADRANKA: Doctor!

SURGEON: Yes?

JADRANKA: There is no need... You've washed your hands already.

[*End of scene.*]” (op.cit.: 44)

Despite a certain degree of over-elaboration, Marković consistently achieves a thought-provoking punctuation to the scene-structure. The obsessive-compulsive action of hand-

¹⁹⁶ This then becomes an instance of the author's self-reflexivity and a possible attempt at justification as to why he has had to resort to playwriting.

washing, though reminiscent of Lady Macbeth,¹⁹⁷ is actually a result of real blood on the surgeon's hands. Still he is an objective party, the blood on his hands is not a metaphor of responsibility for the killing but a metaphor of his inability to stop it, and thus he becomes the only symbol of humanity – in a pitifully distorted form – that the actors encounter. Significantly, they are much more intrigued by his action, the physical manifestation of his state of mind, rather than what he actually tells them.

After their performance of a 19th century romantic-heroic Serbian drama for the soldiers (who are only actually interested in the presence of women on the stage) – the actors are denied payment once again, even threatened with a potential charge of war-profiteering, and finally, left stranded on the battlefield. Jadranka returns to look for the doctor, only to learn from one of the wounded that the doctor is dead. 'He was blown away by a mine when he went for a piss' – states the patient dispassionately. Apart from the participant's obvious desensitisation towards the phenomenon of 'death', the poignancy of this moment is also contained in a direct – typically absurdist – challenge to the perception of reality. For a moment, the patient's resignation seems to suggest that the doctor may have died long ago, despite the fact that the actors talked to him a couple of hours earlier. If the play indeed unfolded as an absurdist play from now on, then this moment might have been a moment of realisation of the actors' own 'death' – and that they had actually met the doctor in the domain of the dead. A series of subsequent events where the actors always miraculously manage to escape dangerous situations, reduces the play's naturalism further – although the sequence of events always remains logically consistent. This breadth of the text and its metaphorical potential opens up a number of directorial possibilities – which is hardly surprising given that the playwright actually has a director's sensibility at his disposal.

¹⁹⁷ And even further, perhaps – Pontius Pilate's gesture of renouncing his guilt.

Unlike Simović's travelling actors, this ensemble has, therefore, played their pieces, even manifesting some resourcefulness in their attempt to meet the audiences' needs. Still their naivety and self-obsession will only begin to falter when, wandering through the night on their own, they encounter a Croatian military unit. Stanislav's stroke of genius in addressing the Croats in their own dialect is immediately taken as a cue by the senior actress Sonja who jumps into the role of Petrunjela, from the Croatian classic Marin Držić's play of the same title. The soldiers are visibly enamoured and the performance itself creates a more effective impact on them than the ensemble's previous performances on their respective audiences. However, the commander will soon trap Stanislav, catching him off his guard and letting him reveal his real national identity. In the first significant moment of danger, the actors will then be used to test out a minefield, being forced to walk across it by the Croatian soldiers:

“SONJA: They want us to clear the mine-field for them, shitheads...

MIŠKO: That's because we are their only chance of escaping from the siege?

SONJA: *Who is escaping from whose siege?*

MIŠKO: The Croats from the Serbian.¹⁹⁸ Our boys must have surrounded them.

LALE: Which *our* boys!? I haven't surrounded anybody!

ŽAKI: If you stay alive you can complain to the papers about it.

LALE: I do not want to have anything more to do with this shitty war of yours! I don't want to die! [...] I am not a Serb, I am an aaaaaactooooor!!!

SONJA: What are you shouting for, you dickhead! As if we are not actors!?!

Lale suddenly starts to trudge through the minefield freely, deliberately making noise and marching through. Everybody freezes looking at him horrified.

[...]

LALE: You are killing actors, trying to blow away the people who wouldn't even hurt a fly, you bloodthirsty shitheads!!!”

(op.cit.: 62)

¹⁹⁸ This moment of irony could also be a reflection of the media's fabrication of reality, whereby Serbian losses were continuously presented as advantages to the gullible public.

In an equally naïve turn of events, the actors are saved by the advance of the Serbs against the Croatian unit. In their further exploits they come across a Serbian novelist – a prototype of a writer who came to fame through his nationalistic, sentimentalist glorification of Serbian history in support of the war-mongering regime.¹⁹⁹ Although ambivalent towards him, the actors join him in the hope that, as a local celebrity, he will be able to help them return home. But on their way back, they are ambushed by Muslim fighters. Their leader's immediate sinister enchantment with the young actress Jadranka is distracted when he recognizes the writer Ljubić as an outspoken war-monger and asks him to step out of the vehicle. After a while, the leader will return with a bloodstained knife, order the actors' driver to go and dig a hole, and address the actors:

“LEADER: Do you know how much we loved you?

Silence. All the actors are looking at the ground. The leader turns around and looks at them deep in thought.

LEADER: And all your stupid Belgrade slang phrases... If you only knew how much the Sarajevo people loved you...

He approaches the actors, bends over in front of them, and starts playing with the big knife.

LEADER: What do you think, which team did I support? ‘Željezničar’? ‘Sarajevo’? No! I supported ‘Red Star’! Went to the matches in Belgrade. Went to Bari, for fuck’s sake, for the championship cup finals...

As if hypnotised, the actors are looking at the blade of the knife with which the Leader is playing.

LEADER: And then you, Belgrade actors... [...]

The Leader suddenly grabs Miško by the chin and sticks the knife under his throat.

LEADER: You used to be – my idol. You did, I fucking well swear to you... I used to think: ‘This one can do anything!’ Had you asked me for my sister Hatidža, I’d’ve given her to you. And my bike, and my dog and... Take everything – it’s all yours...

Silence. After several moments [the driver] Djuro returns and sits down among the actors. He keeps quiet for a bit. Stanislav whispers to him.

¹⁹⁹ Interestingly also the writer’s name is Ljubić. Pronounced with a different accent the word can also stand for a diminutive form of a Mills and Boon type of sentimentalist fiction – although this association is probably subconscious rather than deliberate. An example of his kind of rhetoric is recreated here:

“LJUBIĆ: [...] Above all *Sorabians* are not Slavs. [...] *Sora* in Sanskrit means the sky, heaven. Sorabians, which is an ancient name for today’s Serbs have probably come to this planet from some other place. It is not clear exactly where they came from, but it is clear that they had a special mission... [...] That fact was shrouded by a veil of mystery for a long time, because the CIA was immediately informed about the scientific discoveries in Mycenae which testify to...

LALE: Are you crazy, you cretin!? Or are all of you who are going on about Serbs as a ‘heavenly people’ such bastards that you are doing all of that for money...” (op.cit.: 80)

STANISLAV: Djuro... What happened out there?
Djuro looks like he doesn't want to talk to anyone.
 STANISLAV: Did they torture him?
Djuro nods.
 STANISLAV: What did they...
Djuro suddenly starts shouting.
 DJURO: Of course, they tortured him, what else!? He must have cursed his mother's milk before he died! Must have seen the devil himself!...
Silence. Everyone, including the Muslims, is looking at him in shock. Djuro is pointing at the Leader.
 DJURO: He...
 STANISLAV: What?
 DJURO: Cut...
 STANISLAV: What?
 DJURO: His – down there...
 STANISLAV: What?
 DJURO: His balls, for fuck's sake! He cut off his balls and stuffed them in his mouth, do you hear!!!" (op.cit.: 84-7)

At this point, the student-actress Jadranka – who has been preparing the part of Euripides' Iphigenia for one of her exams – decides to put an end to the uncomfortably tense situation and offer her own sacrifice in the words of her prematurely grasped character. As a result – the Leader orders his unit to retreat.

This scene in itself represents a mini-drama. Marković's earlier insistence that this war is absurd precisely because not only can the warring parties communicate in the same language, but also have a shared history and an identity, achieves a culmination here in the Leader's address to the actors. The fact that he is talking to famous actors – one of whom actually represented his own idol – makes this situation thoroughly unique in the expression of the underlying sentiment. In other words, had the actors been just any other Serbs from Belgrade, the impact of the encounter would have been significantly less poignant. In Freudian terms even, the Leader is actually confronted with his former superego²⁰⁰ which he has had to denounce amid the explosion of id-driven ethnic tensions. The significance of the method which the Leader chooses in order to execute

²⁰⁰ Taken further this situation could perhaps even represent an Oedipus-type confrontation with the superego, which is however resolved before it becomes tragic.

the nationalist Serbian writer could also be sought within the context of Freudian theory. This moment is also the first and the only instance of a direct murder in this war-ridden play. The author does not create a tragedy by sacrificing one of the protagonists, but chooses instead to kill a character who is deplorable to the protagonists too. In this way he firmly assigns responsibility for the war to Serbian nationalists, whom he also condemns. Therefore the tragic element does not reside in the execution itself, and not solely in the executioner's method, but in the juxtaposition of his conflicting sentiments. The peripeteia to both this scene and the play itself arrives in the form of Jadranka's assuming the role of Iphigenia. At first glance, Jadranka's confrontation with the Leader could be compared to Simović's Sofia in her confrontation with Clobber, consciously using her art to initiate a transformation within him. However, Jadranka acts out of despair rather than from the standpoint of personal power. Also, in comparison to Simović's Filip – who unnecessarily and instinctively assumes the role of Orestes and gets killed for it – Jadranka's action is a result of an inner transformation and a personal necessity to deal with the cruelty of the experience. Having been the most naïve participant in the entire proceedings, she finally faces the truth of the situation. Thus she acts both consciously and instinctively – on the conscious level she realises that she can divert the Leader's attention from the rest of the captives by conceding to what she perceives as his intention to rape her, while instinctively she resorts to her art in order to find the means of articulation of her own predicament. This in itself is also a reversal of the usual actors' process whereby they may borrow from personal experience in order to find the means of articulation for their character. On a larger level this reversal also reflects the way in which the reality of war has usurped the mechanisms and the language of theatre, discussed above. Her action eventually has an unanticipated transformative effect on the Leader in whom the human factor prevails, at least in this instance.

The epilogue of the play is intended to mirror its beginning. The actors are sitting in the bar of their theatre in Belgrade where they had played cards before their departure. One of them does not seem to remember what has happened to him during the last few days while they were on tour – which could be partly explained by the fact that he was drinking most of the time – but is probably largely intended as a depiction by the playwright of a particular model of behaviour on the national level. The psychological denial is, however, most evident in the behaviour of the second-rate actor Stanislav, who had in fact initiated the entire idea. He led the actors into the danger with a promise of financial reward, but was in fact mostly interested in finding a performance platform for himself. Having risked their lives and having not delivered what he had promised, he does not miss the opportunity to ask the actors to recommend him to play some role in their theatre some time. On a certain level he could be a sublimation of the inept, irresponsible and arrogant leadership that the country was subject to at the time, both in the government and in the opposition.

On his departure from the bar, his girlfriend Jadranka resolutely stays behind, the delayed effect of her trauma having just manifested itself through uncontrollable tremor and sobbing. As he leaves they only ask Stanislav to turn off the light. *'Before the curtain falls, the actors remain seated in the dark for several moments'* (op. cit.: 93).

Goran Marković's playwriting debut was highly acclaimed while Milan Karadžić's direction and many individual performances were also singled out for their accomplishment by the critics at the time. Most importantly, the play was welcomed as the first significant attempt at questioning the given political situation. Petar Volk, in this respect states:

“In such an atmosphere, it is not important whether or not something has already been seen in other domestic or foreign plays, because the essential thing is the potential of this timely theatrical tragi-comedy.” (Ilustrovana Politika, 16.11.1996)

And:

“The author is careful to avoid subjectivity or caricature even when certain images seem grotesque and the words which certain characters utter transform from general phrases into bitter realisations and subjective truths which lead into despair.” (ibid.)

Vladimir Stamenković, on the other hand, places an emphasis on Marković’s successful contribution of his cinematic sensibility to the domain of theatre, mainly in relation to the malleability of space and time, achieved through a series of picturesque vignettes:

“The dramatic transformation [in the play] is achieved when the troupe of actors comes through the trials and tribulations of war which have brought art itself into question as well as the lives of the individual members. After that, we have people transformed standing on the stage, facing the defeat of that which used to give meaning to their existence. This goes some way to explain why the war is often perceived in an emotionally detached manner, at a distance: the war is just a means for provoking an internal transformation within the people who do not participate in it, but who are fundamentally changed, destroyed. And whatever the playwright’s own view might be, this play is primarily a big metaphor of the humiliating change, which, in the last few years took place in the Serbian society.” (2000: 172-3)

Aleksandra Jovičević is more sceptical, reading the play mainly as a naïve epic which at least pinpoints the Serbian role in the civil war. Laudably, the play examines the ‘attitudes of artists’ during the war and the question of ‘moral responsibility’ in the context of silent conformism, but Jovičević complains that:

“Marković presented the actors as grown-up children who are over-sensitive and lacking reason. [...] In an anticlimactic ending, the actors [...] return to their home theatre. It seems they are untouched by their experiences, thus revealing the ineptitude of the theatre in a new society where all moral high ground has been destroyed.” (1997: 126)

Certainly Jovičević's scepticism is justified particularly in terms of the tradition of political theatre in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, and in the context of a comparatively flippant tackling of the more severe current political condition. Still, it should be emphasised here that following the complete aesthetic and cultural flux in Yugoslav theatre of the early 1990s, this (meta)play was a long-awaited and welcome input of new interrogative energy.

Dušan Kovačević: Lari Tompson – Tragedija jedne mladosti (Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man)

Before proceeding with the discussion of Dušan Kovačević's return to playwriting for the first time since 1991, it is worth considering a particular cultural phenomenon which emerged in the 1990s in the Balkans, as seen by the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić:

“In August 1997, Belgrade was visited by the star of the Venezuelan soap opera *Cassandra* (Croatian television broadcasts an equally mammoth, equally soapy *Marisol*). The arrival of the collective favourite Cassandra provoked real hysteria among her local admirers. [...] It was the inhabitants of the Serbian village of Kučevoi who went the furthest [in their euphoria]. When the heroine Cassandra ended up in prison in one of the TV episodes, the furious people of Kučevoi sent a petition (with around two hundred signatures!) to the president of Venezuela demanding the immediate release of the innocent Cassandra. They went further still by writing to the Vatican to ask that Cassandra be proclaimed a saint, and then to the Hague tribunal, asking that it be made possible for Cassandra to be given a fair trial in Serbia. The people of Kučevoi, who had remained deaf and dumb in face of the fascist policies of the state, the war, poverty, corruption and crime, the death of their own sons, the death of other people's sons, these ostrich-people, in other words, suddenly demonstrated unheard-of human solidarity, political maturity and a reasonable understanding of democratic procedures in the pursuit of their aims. [...] The inhabitants of the village of Kučevoi turned off the programme of their own reality and elected to live in a television world as though it were their own most intimate reality. Thus the inhabitants of Kučevoi are performing Baudrillard's thesis about the loss of the real which is today 'our reality' about the hallucinations which are the only way left us of feeling that we are alive.” (The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays, 1998: 263)

Ugrešić's underlying thesis in her commentary of the 1990s culture in the former Yugoslavia is based on an interesting notion – having entered a new phase in their political identity, people were asked to completely forget their history and to replace it by brand new memories. By implication the people of the former Yugoslavia were at the collective age of a five year old by 1996. By further implication, they needed fairytales. The state-run Belgrade media, at least, had certainly managed to construct an alternative reality – which was not far from a fairytale – for their viewers.

Although premiered several months before Goran Marković's play, Dušan Kovačević's Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man (subtitled "The show must go on!") is rooted firmly in the present moment. On paper it opens thus:

“ACT 1

Will not be performed due to the illness of the leading actor Stefan Nos.²⁰¹
The performance is being put off, with the great understanding of the audience, until the intermission. Then we will see what happens.

The audience has taken their seats a long time ago but the performance has not started. Certain members of the audience, the ones with weak nerves, have been fidgeting and shifting in their seats wondering why the play is not starting, but the curtain is motionless, like a heavy steel door.” (English Issue of Scena, 1996/7: 72, translation by Vladislava Felbabov)

Five years after the Roaring Tragedy in which the off-stage theatre was reported as experiencing a crisis, we are finally brought into the theatre in which nothing is as it should be anymore. Relying on the very ritual of theatre-going, Kovačević actually proceeds to dramatize the audience too. He is fully aware of the potential audience profile and their expectations. Used to the diet of escapist television and escapist theatre, disillusioned, resigned and in a state of a psychological denial of their socio-political condition, this audience is therefore referred to and treated as such – while they

²⁰¹ Nos in Serbo-Croat means nose.

are intermittently addressed as the 'beloved audience'.²⁰² The playwright then casts his audience into the role of an audience who have come to see a romantic-heroic classic – Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac.²⁰³ The audience only discovers this much later, once they have been brought into the play through gradual suspension of disbelief. At first, the playwright utilises one of the given conditions of theatre ritual – the audience has come to see a play. As they are waiting in their seats for longer than usual, they might suspect that the play is delayed – which is also one of the possibilities in theatre.²⁰⁴ Then they hear noise coming from behind the curtain, and eventually the muffled voices of the theatre manageress and one of the actors negotiating what to tell the audience as an excuse as to why the play is running late – given that the main actor refuses to turn up for the performance. In the hope that she would persuade him otherwise, the manageress insists that the show must go on, at all costs, even if she has to perform a striptease in order to keep the audience in their seats and avoid disappointing them by having to send them away. Meanwhile, we also learn that the noise coming from behind the curtain is a result of a personal fight between the stage-hands. Eventually the manageress and the actor appear on the stage to address the audience and apologize for the delay.²⁰⁵ When in the middle of their address, the fight backstage escalates – they begin to draw the audience's attention to the fact that these are hard times, people have lost patience and are suffering from a collective neurosis which leads them into all sorts of conflicts, often with catastrophic results.

If we remember that the process of suspension of disbelief generally involves:

²⁰² The terms such as *cenjena publika* and *dragi gledaoci* – 'respected audience' and 'dear viewers' respectively – are here translated as 'beloved audience' by Felbabov. Similar terms are part of the usual register and the convention of direct address which is used by the TV presenters in Yugoslavia.

²⁰³ It is worth noting that this play has had several popular productions in Yugoslavia in the post-war period, most notably in the early 1990s in the Yugoslav Drama Theatre.

²⁰⁴ In Yugoslavia performances customarily start approximately a quarter of an hour later than scheduled.

²⁰⁵ At this point, the Yugoslav audience is highly likely to realise that the play has started already as they will probably recognize the actress playing the manageress. At the Zvezdara Teatar premiere production of the play, directed by the playwright, this part was played by the very well known actress Milena Dravić.

- 1) 'lowering the threshold of evidence' on the audience's part, and
- 2) making a 'series of acceptances' regarding the world of the play,

it should be observed here that Kovačević:

- 1) deliberately removes the need for the first condition, and
- 2) appeals to the audience only to make acceptances in relation to the way that theatre is affected by everyday reality.

Gradually he builds on this, and having justified the possibility that the stagehands might indeed be having a real fight backstage in the light of the everyday tensions and hardships that the whole nation is experiencing, he lets the audience hear a shot coming from behind the curtain. This is where his irony then begins to reveal itself:

“THE MANAGERESS: Who fired the gun?

BELI: Engineer Mandić.

THE MANAGERESS: Why did he fire?

BELI: Some criminals tried to rob the box office.

THE MANAGERESS: The box-office?

BELI: Yes...

THE MANAGERESS: Are there criminals who have been reduced to robbing a theater box-office?

BELI: There are. That's probably the pits. They are not criminals, they are desperate men.”

(op.cit.: 76)

Within minutes, a policeman – come to make an investigation following the robbery-attempt – will stray onto the empty stage and explain his presence to the audience. This is followed by the actor Beli's return and with his profound gratitude to the patient audience who are still there, he proceeds to try to entertain them by reading a story about theatre by the author Danilo Kiš.²⁰⁶ When suddenly all the lights go off we are confronted once again with the harsh reality of the everyday – the theatre's electricity has been cut off because the bill has not been paid. This black-out then becomes a

²⁰⁶ Kiš's story is inspired by his observing the technicians at Atelje 212 at work, and thus Kovačević once again makes an indirect tribute to the theatre which propelled him in the early stages of his career.

convenient point of transition into the flat of the actor who refuses to come to the theatre. At first, sounds of shooting and tense music are heard, as in the flat two middle-aged couples are sitting in the dark, staring at the TV. The actor's uncle and aunt, Dragan and Dragana Nos, and their relatives Sava and Savka are watching the Australian TV series "Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man".²⁰⁷ Engrossed in the events on screen, they comment on the injustice brought on Larry Thompson, a handsome, educated young man who finds himself amid criminal accusations of which he is innocent, facing execution by electric chair. Most of the remarks they make, although directed at the series are in fact an unconscious projection of their own predicament: 'Screw the country which destroys its young people'; 'You give birth to a child and the damn country takes him and has him killed'. Moreover: 'What are our problems compared to Larry's' (ibid.: 81). Meanwhile the actor Stefan Nos is trying to commit suicide in his room, in response to which his uncle only warns him to avoid breaking the chandelier this time. When the electricity cut in the Nos household interrupts the series, Dragan Nos gets embroiled in a confrontation with an electrician working on a lamp-post outside their window. Simultaneously the Manageress arrives to find Stefan hanging. While she tries to get him down, Dragan Nos hits the electrician with a crowbar²⁰⁸ and the electrician retaliates by electrocuting him with a wire. His wife Dragana soon dies of grief and panic-stricken cousin Savka attempts to call the doctors Bojan and Bojana Nos, Dragan and Dragana's respective twins. Meanwhile, resuscitated Stefan explains his suicide attempt to his mistress, the Manageress:

"STEFAN: I no longer have the strength to look at this world. This misfortune and evil. I am too small an actor for all of this mass of evil, Katie. Everything that I play is ridiculous and sad compared to my life. I do not want to entertain people, and I don't know how to act out my

²⁰⁷ Interestingly, Kovačević's hero Radovan III, from his 1970s play of the same title, also has an obsession with an American TV series.

²⁰⁸ The crowbar is a prop repeatedly used by various characters in their numerous assaults on each other in this play.

unhappiness – I am not capable... Every day I experience greater drama than any of my roles... Theatre has become tragically comic to me... I play princes and kings and yet I live like a dog. Like a stray dog. [...] After each performance I have a fractured soul [...] I can't go on playing roles which make an audience laugh. An actor is not a clown..." (ibid.: 86)

This is one of the rare opportunities in the play for Stefan Nos²⁰⁹ to voice his despair. Surrounded by desensitised, absurd characters, he is denied a convincing voice with which to make a case for himself or win sympathy. The only choice he has is to become an absurd character himself, or to commit suicide without failure for once. Although apparently sympathetic, the Manageress insists that he must return to the theatre for the sake of the audience. She points out that they have made an effort to come to the theatre and see 'someone else's, nicer story', and that 'theatre exists as a kind of anaesthetic'.

"MANAGERESS: I'd prefer killing myself on the stage, but we are not paid to kill ourselves, to take our own lives, but to prolong somebody [else's] life, if we can, and we have to be able to, we have to!" (ibid.: 87).

Insisting that he changes into his costume, the Manageress draws the flat curtain, which is simultaneously the theatre curtain – 'The two houses are, as in life, one stage', elaborates the stage direction (ibid.: 87) – and we are transported back into the theatre, waiting in the dark.

Carrying a candle, the actor Beli informs us that the Manageress has just been on the phone and that we are asked to take a break in the bar where we will be entertained by the theatre orchestra. On our return, we are assured, the performance will take place.

²⁰⁹ It could be speculated that in continuation of the trend which started with The Professional, Kovačević is making yet another homage to dead colleagues in this play. Stefan Nos could have been modelled on the actor Zoran Radmilović who had played Radovan III and whose big nose is also referred to in The Professional. Also, it has already been asserted that the Manageress was modelled on Mira Trailović, a particularly enterprising and passionate former artistic director of Atelje 212.

“Several actor-musicians appear from between the curtains, dressed in the costumes of the performance they have been waiting to play. With song and music they ‘lead’ the audience out for the intermission. Beli, bowing, shows the audience out... When the audience heads for the lobby, he disappears behind the curtains, leaving the candle to shed some light at least. However it could seem to some cynical actor that the candle was placed there to honor [sic] the soul²¹⁰ of the performance in its death throes.” (ibid.: 88)

The playwright further proceeds to give stage directions as to what should happen during the intermission and how the audience should be brought back in. This demonstrates a mock intention to create very controlled conditions whereby the suspension of disbelief is maintained and the audience is prevented from ‘de-roling’ during the interval. Compared to Brechtian manipulation of ‘the fourth wall’, whereby the actors step out of role and address the audience so to maintain an intellectual response, Kovačević’s device quite clearly operates in exactly the opposite way – his seemingly ‘de-rolled’ characters keep asking the audience for empathy and patience. It is an instance of reversed psychology, whereby the playwright – ironically – insists that theatre should offer the audience pure escapism. The fact that they are continually reminded of their everyday life is meant to come across as incidental and unintentional – thus creating the crucial conflict in the play: the conflict between the real life and the theatre illusion. Utilising the principle of audience engagement through the process of recognition, the playwright insists only on collective recognition. Thus having cast the audience into the role of an audience who seek escapism, he simultaneously exploits the convention of suspension of disbelief in order for the audience to recognize themselves as such, and then proceeds to deny them the pleasure of escapism through voluntary suspension of disbelief on their part, all the while blaming real life for putting obstacles in their way. It is inevitable that the audience will get the point, even if the play utilises anti-Brechtian method in order to achieve Brechtian results. Kovačević’s metatheatrical

²¹⁰ It is a Serbian custom to honour the dead by lighting a candle for their soul.

approach here resides in between the aims of efficacy and entertainment²¹¹ – his farce is only a façade for some very serious themes, and his use of the device is a means of creating heightened reality rather than an illusion. Moreover he seems to insist on solidarity between the audience and the actors – which is also a parody of the audience’s own socio-political predicament: at one point Beli shouts to the audience: “I’ll be right back and we can wait for the beginning of the performance together. We’ll be together no matter what is happening to us” (op.cit.: 80).

Act two of Larry Thompson continues in a similar manner to the preceding one, with the curtain being used as a tool for transferring the action between the two settings. The audience are still waiting while the manageress is cajoling the actor to return to the theatre. The doctors Bojan and Bojana Nos will also die of grief at the sight of their dead siblings. Torn between the desire to please his mistress and the obligation to stay with his dying family, and being forced to suppress his own profound suffering, Stefan Nos cuts his nose off. This – Freudian – act is primarily an act of rebellion. He ‘cuts off his nose to spite his face’, for he has now rendered himself useless to his theatre company – by whom his nose had been regarded as his main theatrical asset and a source of endless typecasting – and has secured the condemnation of his own family. This act was however the only means of asserting his own free will. Following this, he might have found a way of re-inventing his life and finding happiness, had he not – in a consequent upsurge of bravado – provoked his own premature and accidental death.

When the policeman arrives at the flat to make an investigation, he mistakes the actor in his theatrical costume for a paramilitary. In an echo of Simović’s confrontation between a dumb policeman and a Thespian, the policeman insists that the actor disarm himself,

²¹¹ As proposed by Schechner in Performance Theory, 1994: 120-4.

to which the actor responds with Cyrano's verses. The policeman understands the actor's recitation of his lines as a direct assault; whereas the actor, proclaiming that he must stay as brave in real life as on the stage, insists on protecting his artistic integrity, refuses to yield his sword to the policeman, and even points it at him – all of which leads to the policeman firing a shot with which he kills both the actor and himself. The duel is then yet another metaphor of distorted and unreconciled perceptions of reality. Finally, Oliver and Olivera Nos – two of the respective triplets of Stefan's recently deceased uncles and aunts – arrive from Australia. Oliver Nos is a healer/magician and he proceeds to bring most of the dead back to life. Before setting off for Russia, the healer explains how this resurrection was made possible through the concept of 'apparent life'. Savka's husband Sava who also died in drunken stupor, and has been revived by Oliver, is here the subject of the explanation:

“SAVKA: ...Cousin, will Sava stay alive?

OLIVER NOS: He will.

SAVKA: And how long, cousin?

OLIVER NOS: Forever.

SAVKA: And he won't drink anymore? You know he took to drinking [because of] injustice, and that killed him.

OLIVER NOS: He won't. He won't drink or even eat. If he doesn't want to, he doesn't even have to breathe. Olivera has not breathed for 8 years. For 8 whole years.

SAVKA: He won't do any of that and he'll still be alive?

OLIVER NOS: It depends, Savka, what one means by being alive. I raise the dead but I'm no miracle worker. It is impossible to make a dead person come 'alive'. No one can do that, not even I.

SAVKA: So what is Sava now? Dead? Alive? Half dead or half alive?

OLIVER NOS: An Apparently Living Man.

SAVKA: An Apparently Living Man.

OLIVER NOS: Yes. Like my Olivera. Like the millions that I have made apparently alive. You can see them every day in the streets, in the buses, in the markets, in the parks... People walk, talk, speak to each other, they even laugh a bit, but when you take a hard look at them, if you are able to see it, you will see that they are not alive; they are all dead, they just have the Appearance of Living People. They don't eat, they don't drink, most of them don't even breathe and still they do work, though it is as dead as they are. A dead man, though he may look alive, has to have something to fill up his days, otherwise he would notice that he is dead, and it would be very hard on him.” (1996/97: 98)

Bringing the policeman to life at this point, he resumes his explanation:

“OLIVER NOS: There are many Apparently Living Men among the police and army. That is why they serve so faithfully, against their better nature...”
(ibid.: 99)

Finally, Oliver Nos leaves refusing to bring his nephew back to life. The long nose had been a traditional characteristic of the Nos family, all of whom have been very proud of it. Stefan Nos, the actor, had first made his nose an object of ridicule in the theatre and then cut it off, as a result of which he deserves to be punished.

Without placing any more emphasis on the notion than is necessary for the purposes of an absurd comedy, Kovačević simply points to the existence of a wide-spread phenomenon of mentally impoverished lives, which he seems to associate with socialism as a system – ‘The people of [Russia] committed suicide collectively at the beginning of the century’ and Russia is therefore a country with ‘the largest number of apparently living people’ explains Oliver Nos (ibid.: 99). In that way Oliver Nos, might also represent the forces in society which are struggling to keep the legacy of socialism alive, in its corrupt form. The condemnation and the conscious ostracism of the young man might also have been a reference to the regime’s unscrupulous ruin of the country’s youth – which then becomes the main theme of the play too – as reflected in the title.

Following the death of Stefan Nos, the Manageress, totally committed to her audience and their right ‘to leave the theatre in a better mood than the one they came in’, keeps her promise given at the beginning of the play and concludes the evening with her own striptease performance. Broken down emotionally, she is led off the stage by confused and alarmed Beli who calls for the curtain to fall, apologizing to the audience once again and offering them a chance to return their tickets at the box office. The theatre orchestra continues to play, ‘and that is the end of a play that didn’t go on’ (ibid.: 100).

Larry Thompson – the Tragedy of a Young Man is a perfect example of Hutcheon's notion of a metanarrative which opens itself up as a process and which also involves 'the reader' in a co-creation of meanings. It is a play which fully acknowledges the critical context within which it tries to position itself, rendering the playwright both to a position of power and powerlessness. His power stems from his craft which then makes it possible for him to articulate his powerlessness in meeting the expectations of his audience – whatever they might be. Instead, he involves them in the play – giving them a sense of pleasure through participation, but also making it inevitable for them to achieve a realisation of the all-pervading critical context itself. On the level of the subject matter the play is interwoven with its context which will make it difficult for a literal translation of the text to transcend the local level. Ultimately, the play's primary strength is on the level of its craft which exploits universal principles at its departure point – the rituals, functions and internal dynamics of theatre.²¹² Thus the play definitely represents an exceptional example of metatheatre both in Yugoslav and European dramaturgy. It is a metaplay dramaturgically as well as in the sense of play as *ludus*, whereby the audience engage in the play through an ascribed role, which in turn, hopefully raises awareness of their socio-political condition.

In the context of Kovačević's entire oeuvre, this play – at least as shown in its premiere production, directed by the author – unfortunately, seems to lag behind his other hits.

Vladimir Stamenković's review of the play is both affirmative and critical:

²¹² Although the play has not yet received significant productions abroad, I do believe that through adjustment of specific cultural references, it can be adapted to other contexts. The play, unlike many others at the time, avoids the subject of war but deals instead with relatively universal concepts of material and cultural loss of values. In terms of its metatheatrical effectiveness, the play can indeed work much better in a context where the actors will not be immediately recognized as playing a character by the audience, and the initial play with the suspension of disbelief can be maintained for a longer period.

“Both levels of the story are very illustrative of what is happening to us, they are easily recognizable, being extracted from our harsh reality, but they do not easily integrate into a metaphor with any deeper, significant meaning. Even when it is hinted that the story can grow into a metaphor about people who died long ago while still having some characteristics of living beings, about creatures who perform dead, unnecessary actions, it is thin and weak, because it is sublimated in a direct statement of one of the protagonists – who momentarily transforms into a voice of reason – and because it is reduced to a thesis imposed from the outside, which doesn’t organically co-exist with the explication of the dramatic action.” (2000: 42)

It is my opinion that this is largely a result of a lack of additional directorial intervention, rather than being a problem in itself. Stamenković’s other objection relates to the fact that the play ends up being comically inferior to the playwright’s other work because its characters are less exuberant than usual, and the general rhythm of the play is affected by the juxtaposition of farcical action in the flat and the one-man show of the actor Beli in the theatre. It is worth noting here that Yugoslav traditionalism – often dominated by the clarity of genre – has significantly slowed down the penetration of postmodernism into the culture. This is a particularly big obstacle for a play which deals with explicitly postmodern phenomena and their collision with a backward-looking, impoverished culture.

In an interview he gave me, Kovačević first of all emphasised his interest in our performative behaviour in everyday life:

“I am more and more interested in how we as ‘actors’ in our private lives can actually play someone else. [...] Because when someone is getting ready to go to some meeting – assuming that that meeting is very important in this person’s career and life – he does everything that an actor does. He gets ready at home, he puts make up on, he puts costume on, he dresses specially for that occasion, he prepares a speech in his head – meaning he prepares his part. [I]f he speaks [...] as a presidential candidate, [...in] some big hall or at a rally, then it is a monologue. But if he has co-speakers in his team then it is a classical [conventional] play and if he has a chorus behind him then it is an ancient [classical Greek] play. And all of that together is morphing and moving from one state to another state, and all of that together has a smell and taste of theatre.” (Interview, 04.04.2001)

Thus, it is completely clear how the playwright might resolve to treat his audience as 'actors' who arrive at the theatre to perform their part of an audience. Immediately Kovačević links this account with his interest in the media stating that due to the horrifying pressures of the media 'our life is increasingly a life of someone else'. As an example Kovačević quotes the local obsession with Mexican soap operas which seemed to make life more bearable for the Serbs at the time of crisis. In response to my question as to whether he thought this was a specifically Yugoslav phenomenon, he explained:

“Here it was all overemphasised and manipulated by the fact that all television channels were under the central management of one family which dictated all aspects of life – from banking and the economy to culture. Or the lack of it. And it is not accidental that over the last ten years those series proliferated like cockroaches. It is not accidental that the standard of good taste was increasingly lowered, because with the lowering of taste, follows the lowering of human need. The human need of any kind of aesthetics, because in your private life you can live in a cold room, not eating anything all day, and in the evening you will watch something called televisual cocaine. [...]he media have become in our lives something which replaces our life. It is not accidental that in the whole world – we are not talking now about Belgrade and Serbia – in the whole world, the majority of people know the biographies of the actors they like, they know what is happening to them in their private lives, and they haven't seen their mother for six months [...] That phenomenon of moving the human essence towards some peripheral, unimportant things, is actually a media manipulation of the Orwellian type. And the whole planet is beginning to resemble the Orwellian story and Big Brother who is observing us and manipulating us on different levels.” (ibid.)

In the context of parallel realities, the play Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man, therefore explores the reality of theatre on one level and the reality of real life, which in turn has been usurped by the reality of an Australian soap-opera. The play itself is further set in a reality which has become highly theatricalised. Both Kovačević and Jovičević are highly aware of the fact that this is not solely a postmodern phenomenon of the Baudrillard type, but that the Serbian fictionalised reality had the ultimate author in Slobodan Milošević, himself.

A BOMB IN THE PLAYGROUND

Metatheatre of 1997-1999

“Milošević existed in a different dimension, a twilight zone of lies and I was mucking about in the dimension of facts. He had spent his entire life in the world of communism, and he had become a master, an absolute master, at fabrication. Of course, my verbal punches went right through him. It was as though I pointed to a black wall and asked Milošević which colour it was. White, he says. No, I reply, look at it, that wall there, it is black, it is five feet away from us. He looks at it, then at me, and says, The wall is white, my friend, maybe you should have your eyes checked. He does not shout in anger. He sounds concerned for my eyesight.” (Maas, P.: Love Thy Neighbour: A Story of War, 1996: 213)

Following the end of the Bosnian war and the Dayton Peace Agreement, Milošević was evidently confident that with the international community on his side, he was able to present the war-induced losses as long-term gains. The reality of the situation was however, more serious than Milošević liked to believe. In August 1995, according to some estimates over 200 000 Serbs from Croatia were driven out of their homes and pouring into Serbia.²¹³ The regime ignored their plight, as well as the growing dissatisfaction of the Serbs in the country. The elections were scheduled for November 1996. His wife, Mirjana Marković, had meanwhile set up her own socialist party under the name of United Yugoslav Left (JUL). In the elections the two parties ran in coalition. The opposition parties formed their own ‘Zajedno’ (Together) coalition

²¹³ In his TV appeal made in response to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, Harold Pinter also claims that the ethnic cleansing of Serbs in 1995, was downplayed in the Western media by moving an emphasis onto the recently uncovered mass-graves in Srebrenica, for which Serbs were held responsible. (Counterblast, Channel 4, on 04. 05.1999).

consisting of Vuk Drašković's Serbian Renewal Movement, Zoran Djindjić's Democratic Party and Vesna Pešić's²¹⁴ Civil Alliance of Serbia.

“The federal elections progressed as normal. Milošević did no actual campaigning, relying on the compliant media to praise his virtues as a statesman and the sole architect of peace. [The] family coalition nicknamed the ‘cosa nostra’, won a firm majority, resoundingly beating Zajedno.” (2001: 104)

The local council polls, however, revealed a huge surprise – the Zajedno coalition had won a majority of seats in all major Serbian towns. The regime immediately proceeded to announce ‘irregularities’ and to annul the election results, thus causing one of the biggest and longest-lasting peaceful demonstrations in history. Between 29th November 1996 and 21st February 1997, peaceful walks and gatherings, with satirical placards and street performances took place every night, often in sub-zero temperatures, the numbers of the demonstrators gradually increasing to several hundred thousand. The core of the ‘Protest’ consisted of Belgrade University students who maintained a cautious distance from the opposition coalition and demanded democracy as well as dismissal of the University management infiltrated by regime appointees. Their Protest campaign also abounded in creative energy and high-spirited jokes and pranks as a means of resistance. Through a loophole in the telecommunications system, the students managed to set up their website which was mirrored all around the world and which encouraged people to throw pictures of eggs at the government email addresses, for example. The egg-throwing was one of the ‘street activities’ also organised against the TV building and other regime-institutions, which led to the demonstrations being dubbed ‘a yellow revolution’. When the street walks were banned by the government due to traffic obstruction, they devised a game called ‘Arrest the lights’ whereby a crowd would wait until the green light showed on a crossing, ‘then rush into the road en masse, screaming

²¹⁴ Vesna Pešić was a University professor, particularly renowned for her outspoken if lonely condemnation of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia.

“it’s green!” and bouncing up and down on the road like punks pogoing in a nightclub’ (2001: 126).

The demonstrations also had more sinister repercussions. A 21-year old student who had carried an effigy of Milošević in prison uniform on the back of a truck through the streets of Belgrade, was arrested and brutally tortured by the police. According to Collin (2001: 112), the police told him that they were only doing to him what he had done to the effigy and he was jailed for twenty five days on charges of ‘obstructing the traffic’.

The state media were typically dismissive of the demonstrations and continued to paint their own picture of the situation for viewers in the provinces:

“At first Radio Television Serbia all but ignored the demonstrations, damning them casually by remarking that only a ‘handful of provocateurs and hoodlums’ was on the streets. ‘The first reaction of the official state media to the student protest was [...] almost boringly stereotypical: we do not report, ergo it does not exist,’ noted artist Jovan Čekić. Instead there would be stories of ‘progress’ and ‘co-operation’, of visits of delegations of Russian businessmen, even reports of unrest elsewhere in Europe, but little about what was happening right below RTS’s office windows. RTS portrayed a cosy, amiable country where the president had generously and wisely won peace and ensured prosperity, while the international community smiled benignly from afar. One protester responded with a banner declaring: ‘I want to live in the land of RTS’.” (2001: 110)

Consequently one of the main demonstration activities that all protesters engaged in consisted of coming out on their windows and balconies at 7.30 PM – the time of the main evening news – and making noise by banging their saucepans or blowing their whistles. Thus the atmosphere of togetherness was maintained in a number of ways.

The independent Radio B-92 was also actively involved in the proceedings trying to counter not only the media misinformation on a small scale, but also to provide refuge

for a number of artists, writers, musicians and filmmakers who could not find their place in the dominant Serbian culture. An artist even referred to the offices of B92 at the time as 'a soul ambulance' (2001: 119). According to Collin, the Belgrade art world at the time, dominated by turbo-folk, was confronted with 'anti-modernism, anti-individualism, anti-intellectualism, wisps of national metaphysics and mythology, resistance to anything international, lack of irony and humour' (2001: 119). And crucially, Collin also notes that the regime-supported art was 'used as a political tool to promote the insular, backward looking state mentality' (ibid.). In those terms, it can further be noted that the use of culture as a political tool and the effectiveness it yielded in the context of the 1980s dissidence had now changed hands completely and was utilised equally effectively by the dominant political power as a means of control. This was certainly evident in the early 1990s when former dissidents²¹⁵ who also happened to be Serbian nationalists joined in in the project of cultural hegemony. The result was kitsch and sentimentalist fictions. Those 1980s dissidents who didn't jump on the bandwagon of national mythomania were rendered powerless or remained silent at the time.²¹⁶ This is certainly not to say that theatre remained immune to the cultural processes either way. As we have seen, it initially conformed to sentimentalism and the audience demands for nationalist fictions and chauvinist popular entertainment. On a smaller level, a certain degree of political autonomy was maintained due to the regime's lack of interest in theatre. I have already mentioned the example of the 1992 production of Mother Courage directed by Lenka Udovički which was adapted to include images of Brecht's life in exile and to emphasise the play's pacifism. Music for the songs was

²¹⁵ The most notable example of this was the novelist and the member of the Serbian Academy Dobrica Ćosić, whose novels centred mainly on the struggles of rural Serbs during the world wars and whose latent nationalism was extolled as a virtue in the early 1990s. He even became President of Yugoslavia on Milošević's invitation for a brief period at the time.

²¹⁶ As noted earlier, even though he might have had a personal nationalist sentiment, Dušan Kovačević stopped writing in the early 1990s altogether, while Ljubomir Simović never returned to playwriting after his poetic drama The Battle of Kosovo underwent sentimentalist cinematic commercialisation in 1989. Nenad Prokić's interview in Appendix 2 also testifies to a certain personal disempowerment as a writer in this nationalist atmosphere.

written by the rock-musicians Milan Mladenović with his band *Ekatarina Velika*, Bora Djordjević from *Riblja Čorba* – renowned for the non-conformist political content of their other work²¹⁷ – as well as the freelancer Djordje Petrović. Brecht was played by the exiled Croatian actor Rade Šerbedžija. As one of the most renowned Yugoslav actors, Šerbedžija had worked extensively with the famous director Ljubiša Ristić, the *enfant terrible* of the 1970s and 1980s Yugoslav avant-garde. Bafflingly, however, by 1996, Ljubiša Ristić was in the frontline of Mirjana Marković's JUL party.

Many theatre artists took part in the 1996-97 protests, either as speakers or performers. The most famous example of a street performance probably remains Sonja Vukićević's rendition of *Macbeth*. A Pina Bausch look-alike, Vukićević was a former ballerina who then developed her own dance-theatre, mainly housed by the Centre for Cultural Decontamination – a non-government cultural organisation, under the leadership of the outspoken dramaturg and artistic director Borka Pavićević. Collin gives an account of this performance:

“Actors performed in front of police barricades; the strangest being a post-midnight *Macbeth* which was intended as a parable for Serbia's descent into self-destruction. ‘It was 1 a.m., it was below zero, we had two naked actors and we were pouring water on them,’ says Borka Pavićević [...]. ‘One voice said “hell is dark” and thousands of voices responded: “Yes!” The actors felt that, for once in their stage careers their drama could capture the collective consciousness. ‘If any time the theatre really happened on the streets, this was it – this is what Brecht was talking about,’ Pavićević continues. ‘We wanted to say that you can't rehearse Molière during the morning then go on the demonstrations in the evening. We wanted to say that you should be on the streets all the time. There should be no separation between the theatre and the streets. I remember 1968 in Paris – I am from that generation – but I have never seen such literary and theatrical imagination on the streets. It was better than any theatre director could have invented. People wore their best shoes, their best suits; the women put on their hats. It was amazing – the best of Belgrade came out. At the time we thought it was over for the regime, and that nobody could stop us’.” (2001: 106-7)

²¹⁷ For more on these authors and Bora Djordjević's political problems in the 1980s see Ramet (1996) and Gordy (1999).

Eventually the regime yielded to the demonstrators and acknowledged the local election results, the rector of the University resigned and Zoran Djindjić became the mayor of Belgrade. However, the demonstrators were utterly defeated by the opposition leaders who allowed the coalition to disintegrate by June 1997 as a result of internal power struggles. At that time Milošević elevated himself to the position of President of Yugoslavia. His move was cunning and the thinking behind it only became apparent years later. As President of Serbia during the Croatian and Bosnian wars he hoped to shrug off the responsibility for what was officially a Yugoslav affair. As President of Yugoslavia, he could stay in power whilst at the same time using his tried and tested recipe of inciting conflict. The tensions in Kosovo had simmered for at least fifteen years. The Kosovo Albanians had boycotted all Serbian and Yugoslav elections and institutions ever since his rise to power. By the end of 1998, with the increasing activity of the guerrilla organisation the Kosovo Liberation Army and its clashes with the Serbian Police, tension approached boiling point. During that time, however, Milošević was the president of Yugoslavia; and Kosovo was – a Serbian affair.

Biljana Srbljanović: Porodične priče (Family Tales)

In his overview of the 1990s,²¹⁸ Ivan Medenica singles out two women as the most significant representatives of the entire Yugoslav theatre in this period – the dancer Sonja Vukićević and the playwright Biljana Srbljanović – both of whom have gained considerable international acclaim. Biljana Srbljanović was born in 1970 and graduated from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in 1996. Her first play Beogradska Trilogija (The Belgrade Trilogy) was premiered at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in 1997, and was

²¹⁸ “Die Stunde null – Ein Überblick zur Situation des Theaters in Serbien”; Theater Heute, 11/00

directed by Goran Marković. Two years later, Porodične priče (Family Tales), staged at Atelje 212 by Jagoš Marković, won the prestigious Sterija Prize. Both of these plays were shown at over forty theatres all over Germany and in 1999 she received the Ernest Toller Award for her plays and essays in German periodicals. In 2000, her third play Pad (The Fall) was premiered at the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF).

Often written in the style of 'fragmentary' dramaturgy,²¹⁹ Srbljanović's plays focus on the harsh reality of the given context, and the fate of a whole new generation of deprived, ruined and traumatised young people. In The Belgrade Trilogy,²²⁰ the author focuses on the latest wave of Yugoslav emigrants dispersed all over the world. Family Tales, on the other hand, is a non-naturalistic depiction of a ruined, self-destructive, infantilised society portrayed through a series of playground games. The protagonists of this play are four children, who according to the playwright 'grow older, or as the story requires, grow younger'. The playwright further instructs that 'the actors are not children but adults who impersonate children who, in turn, impersonate adults' and that this 'should not come as a surprise'. Finally: 'The heroes and heroines of the play [...] are the citizens of a ruined land' (Scena, English Issue 18, 2000: 38).

Stylistically, Srbljanović's work does not easily fit any of the traditions of Yugoslav dramaturgy, though it grows organically out of both the Yugoslav theatre aesthetic and the given socio-political context. While The Belgrade Trilogy could be seen as belonging to the current of contemporary urban drama which might be exemplified by the work of Goran Stefanovski in the 1980s, Family Tales could then be seen as a

²¹⁹ This style seems to be favoured in Macedonian dramaturgy and particularly in the plays of Goran Stefanovski, who distinguished himself in 1980s Yugoslavia, but subsequently settled in the UK in the 1990s. Another significant example of this style is Bure Baruta (The Powder Keg) by the Macedonian playwright Dejan Dukovski. This play was premiered at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade in March 1995 and became one of the most popular plays of the season. In 1998 a film version of the play (aka Cabaret Balkan), directed by Goran Paskaljević was released to great international acclaim.

²²⁰ Also published in Evans, S. and Robson, C. (eds.): Eastern Promise: Seven Plays from Central and Eastern Europe, Aurora Metro Press, UK, 1999

metatheatrical variation within that idiom. On the one hand, the play resonates with the surrealist energy of Roger Vitrac's Victor, ou les Enfants au Pouvoir,²²¹ which has had several significant productions in post-Second World War Yugoslavia. Simultaneously, the play utilises the Jean Genet type of metatheatre which consists of role-play within the play, rather than strictly speaking theatre within theatre.

The siblings, Vojin and Milena, aged 12 and 11 respectively – whose ‘appearance indicates the kind of likeness that can cause a shiver’ – usually play parents to the ten year old boy Andrija. The 11 year old Nadežda – ‘the child with a tic’ – at first attempts to shyly join their game, but due to her unwillingness to speak to the rest of the children, is adopted and treated as a ‘family dog’. Through the eleven scenes the children engage in role-play which occasionally acquires irrational, dreamlike characteristics. Repeatedly ‘the parents’ get killed or die in the course of the play, although their deaths progressively assume a sense of routine and ‘normalcy’. The time period within which the games are taking place is uncertain, although a historical line of political events of the 1990s is apparent. Thematically, Srbijanović highlights a number of post-socialist Yugoslav phenomena associated with chauvinism, xenophobia, war psychosis and general oppression. These issues presented in a number of social rituals, which are re-enacted in the children’s play through a mixture of naivety and cruelty, subsequently manifest a significant dose of irony. Scene Five, for example, has Vojin and Milena engaged in a ritual of domestic budgeting. When Andrija arrives in a temporary role of a ‘daughter’ (wearing a dress over his boyish clothes), and demands to know when s/he will be married and with what dowry, Vojin chokes on the nuts he has been eating and dies. Consequently:

²²¹ According to David Bradby, “the play satirizes middle class manners, patriotism, and the conventions of boulevard comedy by means of a grotesque child, Victor, who is nine years old but already six-foot tall and can see through all the social pretence that surrounds him.” (The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre, 1990: 1049)

“(Milena falls beside Vojin like an old woman mourner. She plays the role she has been rehearsing all her life.)

MILENA: My poor husband. You’ve clothed me in black. Heaven help me! What shall I, a miserable woman, do without you. That I should live to see you buried. Who will caress me? Whose hand will strike me? Whose socks shall I darn? Whose fence will fence me in? [...]

MILENA: Woe is me, a miserable widow. Now I’ve no-one’s shit to wash away.

(Milena is exhausted and lies down on her back next to her husband. Andrija carefully assesses her position, lifts the edge of his dress and suddenly kicks the mother on the throat. Milena instantly expires.)”

(Scena, English Issue 18, 2000: 49, translation by Vida Janković)

Significantly, Srbljanović here also raises the issue of the position of women in a traditionally patriarchal society, which has had its spell of female emancipation and equality during socialism, and has finally reverted to the traditional rituals with a new ironic slant: ‘Woe is me, a miserable widow. Now I’ve no-one’s shit to wash away’. While the behaviour of the playground ‘family’ may well resemble the behaviour of any family in this particular society, it gradually becomes apparent that this ‘family’ is actually a sublimation of the entire society in all of its extremes.

Structurally, the family scenes alternate with the scenes of bonding between Andrija and mysterious Nadežda. Thus the plot and the subplot of the playground games are established while simultaneously driving the story of the political events in chronological order. In the following scene, Andrija and Nadežda hum various traditional songs. As they arrive at nationalist songs Andrija gets sexually excited. He masturbates and Nadežda naively joins him in his bed. By the end of the scene Andrija will swap the lyrics of a nationalist song (which lyrics he doesn’t know, anyway) for the words ‘I fucked Nadežda a-a-a!’ Thus the entire nationalist euphoria of the early 1990s is depicted as a clearly id-driven phenomenon and a sinister, desensitised rite of passage.

Scene Seven coincides chronologically with the war in Croatia and has the family seated around a dinner table. Milena is dishing out ‘sedatives’ while they talk about their dreams in which their family unit is destroyed. Their dreams overlap and link up with each other – Andrija is lost at a sports competition in Croatia because he doesn’t know how to communicate with the locals, Vojin is fighting in a war and Milena simply dies when she receives their dead bodies and cannot afford to bury them. Vojin and Milena again die of shock when Andrija tells them that over-the counter sales of sedatives have been banned. His powerless repetition of the words ‘I was only joking!’ is in vain, but it also resounds with remorse on a larger scale – it was he who actually came up with the story of the sinister dream first. Milena and Vojin only joined in in elaborating on this dream to include themselves in it. On the level of the game and ‘make-believe’ one can argue that it was Andrija who initiated this improvisation for fun, which then acquired much more serious and tragic dimensions.

The play seems to reach its thematic and stylistic culmination in Scene Eight:

“MILENA: I’ve heard there are demonstrations in the city.

(Milena is winding the wool and speaking as if quoting from a cook-book. Vojin is essentially undisturbed and only watches the process of work at hand.)

VOJIN: Is that so? I hadn’t heard.

[...]

MILENA: They say, there’s lots of people.

VOJIN: I haven’t heard.

MILENA: They stole something.

VOJIN: They did? Who did they steal from?

MILENA: From us. The people.

VOJIN: They stole nothing from me.

MILENA: They stole money in sacks, papers, documents...

VOJIN: Did they. Mine they didn’t.

MILENA: How do you know?

VOJIN: I know, I have neither money, papers nor documents...”

(2000: 52)

Milena's dispassionate acknowledgement of the fact that something is happening out there and Vojin's denial and lack of interest in these events will come into conflict with Andrija's excitement on his return from the demonstrations with a flag of the Dominican Republic in his hands. The demonstrations in question are obviously the 1996/97 demonstrations against the rigging of the local election results. Vojin's disapproval of Andrija's involvement in the street demonstrations will gradually escalate into a full-blown row, with regular invocation of myths and conspiracy theories on Vojin and Milena's part. Significantly Vojin and Milena interpret Andrija's street activities as exposure to narcotics rather than commenting on any political implications:

“VOJIN: Show us your [arms], d' you hear? Roll [up] your sleeves!

ANDRIJA: Mama, I really never, no drugs, really.

(Milena sharpens her tone. She acts more insanely than her husband.)

MILENA: Shut up and roll up your sleeves!

ANDRIJA: Here, you can see, there's nothing. I'm not [taking drugs], honestly, what's wrong with you?

MILENA: There's nothing wrong. Take off your pants.

ANDRIJA: Mama...

VOJIN: They've invented some special drugs in the West that are inserted into the brain through hypnosis...

ANDRIJA: Oh, for heaven's sake, dad...

MILENA: Take off your pants!

(Andrija obeys. Milena grabs his legs and examines them.)

ANDRIJA: See there's nothing...

VOJIN: They're now injecting drugs into children's teeth.

(Milena grasps her son's head.)

MILENA: Into the teeth? Open your mouth.

(Andrija invokes reality.)

ANDRIJA: Gosh, Milena, into the teeth...?

(Milena no longer knows what reality is.)

MILENA: Don't you Milena me!”

(2000: 54)

The fact that 'Milena no longer knows what reality is' obviously functions on two levels. On the primary level, she refuses to acknowledge Andrija's attempt to 'invoke reality' and de-role from the game which is getting out of control. On the secondary

level, Milena in the role of the adult, is intended to depict the extent to which the notion of everyday reality has been distorted.

There may be nothing strange about the outrageous ideas that emerge from Vojin and Milena's heads, as they are entirely appropriate to infantile imagination and the playground context. These ideas, however, acquire additional ironic significance once they are recognized as coming from the everyday adult register. The drugs from the West which are 'inserted in the brain through hypnosis' once again recall the way in which Kovačević's characters analyse and perceive the Australian soap opera "Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man".²²² Within minutes Vojin and Milena will also sit down to watch the TV. Having established that Andrija has brought in the flag of the Dominican Republic, Vojin engages in the xenophobic and racist rhetoric, all the while accusing Andrija of treacherous behaviour, and finally beats him with the pole of the flag. Eventually:

“(Vojin calms down and throws the [flag-pole] away. He brings a TV set from the room and slams it down on the table. He glares at the screen that is not turned on.[...] Milena sits at the table and takes up the skein of wool and starts winding it into a ball. She glances from time to time at the TV screen. Both parents behave as though they're listening to the news. Occasionally they shake their heads or softly complain.)

VOJIN: Tsk, tsk. D'you hear that?

MILENA: I [did], it'd be better if I didn't.

VOJIN: Tsk, tsk!

(Vojin carefully watches the screen. Milena carefully listens to the non-existent sound.)”

(2000: 54-5)

By the end of the scene, Andrija again kills his 'parents' by choking them with a piece of rope, from behind their backs. This time, his act – accompanied with the words 'There's no other way' – is less playful and more dramatic than before. The following

²²² Kovačević's also refers to soap-operas as 'televisual cocaine' (see previous chapter).

scenes have Andrija deciding to leave his family and his country. Upon his departure at the end of Scene Ten, his parents once again lie down on the dinner table and die ‘with the traces of all the previous deaths on them’. It is at this point that Nadežda finally speaks out in a hesitant and disjointed manner. She is visibly shaken by Vojin and Milena’s death:

“(Nadežda again goes to Milena and Vojin and falls across their bodies. She shouts, very distinctly, though through tears.)

NADEŽDA: Mama, wake up, please, daddy forgive me, I really didn’t mean to! I’ll never again... sit at the table with dirty hands or leave dirty spots on books, mess up the newspapers, shout slogans, ask for money, cry when I am bruised, tear my stockings, fall in love, spit out my soup, steal money from a wallet, scrape the skin off my knees, ask for candied fruit, copy from someone in school, talk about politics, feel disgust when dad burps, ask for my inheritance, ask for help, for a flat, plan my future, wish to live my own life, have my own opinions, demand progress, want happiness and peace, grow up, marry and have children...!”

(2000: 57)

The final scene, therefore becomes, a playground enactment of Nadežda’s own family tale. Her tale is made all the more tragic and all the more serious as she ultimately relates to a make-believe situation out-of-role, with her own true feelings. In the following couple of lines it will become clear – though never overstated – that Nadežda has killed her own real-life parents:

“NADEŽDA: Father’s bomb was here...

[...]

(Milena, Vojin and Andrija look at Nadežda in amazement. She no longer reacts to miracles. She speaks softly.)

NADEŽDA: I only...

(With her hand she makes a motion of hurling a hand-granade which we seem to see rolling along.)

NADEŽDA: ...let it fall.

(The sound of a loud explosion is heard in the distance. Milena, Vojin, Andrija and Nadežda remain ‘Frozen’.)

Darkness.”

(2000: 57)

The only reality in this play is the make-believe reality of the children's games – we see absolutely nothing of their real lives. Thus Nadežda's own trauma surfaces at the moment when she confuses the make-believe for her own reality which she has tried to escape. On a metatheatrical level this means that the playground 'theatre' does not simply imitate life or provide escape, but it eventually creates an opportunity for one of the participants to confront the truth of her own predicament. It could be argued that this is one of the aims of theatre in general. Knowing that she is addressing an audience who persistently refuse to confront their own predicament, Srbljanović incorporates the desired transformative effect of theatre into the play itself through a juxtaposition of make-believe and reality. In the context of the Yugoslav metatheatre tradition, this play could also be viewed as taking a step beyond the established format. The metatheatre of the 1980s has examined theatre and reality in parallel, seeking to establish various levels of political efficacy of theatre in everyday life. The metatheatre of the early 1990s, on the other hand, has acknowledged the powerlessness of theatre in a highly theatricalised political context. Srbljanović selects the concept of children's play as a powerful and multi-functional device. The fictional level is already contained in the notion of children's play and does not need to be stated in binary opposition to reality. As an audience we again suspend our disbelief on two levels, first in relation to the play and then in relation to individual instances of the children's play in which they repeatedly die. Reality however, inevitably creeps up on this playground 'fiction' and is left to us to recognize and intuit before we are eventually asked to confront it. Rather skilfully, the playwright brings reality into the play through a heightened sublimated moment of coincidence between a make-believe situation and a child's personal trauma. The fact that the protagonists of the play are children also heightens the way in which they are forced to channel the brutality of the reality in which they find themselves through their equally brutal games. As children, they are assumed to be neither

responsible nor fully cognizant of that reality wherein is contained the first seemingly tragic level of this play. However, the unstated tragedy of Nadežda's predicament will only reach catharsis when she finally recognises her own responsibility for the death of her parents. Once these children's play is seen as a metaphor for Yugoslav society itself, the need for such catharsis and recognition of personal responsibility becomes all the more pressing.²²³

Nebojša Romčević²²⁴: Karolina Nojber (Caroline Neuber)

“In its first layer, the play by Nebojša Romčević *Caroline Neuber*, is a story of the misfortune of the dramatic artist, who thoroughly reformed German theatre in the second half of the eighteenth century. She was responsible for opening the door to the new, modern dramatic sensibility and actors' expression in Germany. In its second layer, the play is a story about the powerlessness of theatre and of art in general, skilfully composed as the eternal dispute between two different ideas of theatre. One of them presents theatre as blatantly flattering the taste and the worldviews of the commoners, while the other has the necessity and ambition to change reality and to improve it. Seen from this perspective, Romčević's play becomes a serious challenge to our times which appear to pose the need for a self-re-examination, even if the play involves a segment of life, at first sight detached from politics and social reality. Thus the play *Caroline Neuber* contains some of the answers to the questions which were posed in the civil protests when the theatre people questioned their actions and wondered how to determine their attitudes toward the events.” (Aleksandar Milosavljević, *Scena*, 2000: 77; translation by Mirna Radin, with my interventions)

At the core of this play, once again, we have a conflict between generations – Caroline's mission being to oust from the German stage the vulgarity and the championship of base instincts embodied in her father's popular entertainment creation – Hanswurst. Hence, this play could also be read as a variation of the Electra myth. Caroline Neuber also insists on truth and the poetic elevation of the German people and thus stands for the forces of Enlightenment, to which epoch she also belongs.

²²³ This notion also links with Dubravka Ugrešić's view of the inhabitants of post-socialist former Yugoslavia as being at the political and mental age of children.

²²⁴ Nebojša Romčević was born in Belgrade in 1962. This is his eighth play.

In terms of its use of the device of metatheatre, the play resorts both to narcissistic self-irony and the more general enquiry into the notion of 'reality'. In Scene Five for example, young Neuber is on the stage in between rehearsals, rejoicing at having been given a small part in a play. The principal actress Margareta then joins Neuber and her devoted husband Johann in conversation:

"MARGARETA: [...] You walk, my dear, as if you have stolen the legs of a Swiss horseman and are finding it difficult to get used to them. You have to walk the stage, you can shuffle along in life. Do you see?

CAROLINE: But, no one walks like that...

MARGARETA: Of course, just as they do not drink deadly nightshade for problems of the heart. You do not speak here as in reality, you do not feel here as in reality, since there is – no reality here. Only essence, while in reality we see nothing in its minutest details... my dear child.

CAROLINE: I think...

JOHANN: Yes, I agree with you... Madame Hoffman is right. In reality there is no essence, while in the theatre it comes in bundles and sheaves, to express myself awkwardly. Madame Hoffman has correctly determined the very sense and essence of a phenomenon which I consider...

MARGARETA: Are you making fun of me?

JOHANN: I wouldn't allow myself something like that, madam.

Margareta goes over to him.

MARGARETA: Look into my eyes, you slave, not at my breasts or my legs.

JOHANN: I wasn't looking at your...

MARGARETA: Although you are only worthy of hatred, perhaps pity, although you are a speechless worm, who thinks like a butterfly who, for his own satisfaction, is ready to suck on a dung heap...

CAROLINE: I forbid you!

MARGARETA: My heart cannot hide that it spreads before thee both reason and fear, which easily turns into dust all my disgust for thy person. It knows what I do not want to know, that I and thou will become three. Act Three, Scene Two. That is the difference between essence and reality: in reality, he felt uncomfortable; in essence: he enjoyed it.

He stands her gaze, frightened, and finally lowers his eyes. Margareta goes out.

MARGARETA: Please applaud. I can't leave the stage without applause.

Caroline and Johann applaud in surprise. Pause. Caroline goes over to Johann.

CAROLINE (*places her hand on his chest*): How your heart is beating..." (2000: 62)

In this instance Romčević, like Simović and Marković before him, bestows special power onto an actor – a power to leave a strong, potentially transforming or illuminating impression on another. Whereas Simović and Marković’s actors utilised their skills in real life instinctively or out of necessity to deal with dangerous situations, Margareta here acts in order to teach – which is also Caroline’s super-objective. She blurs the boundary between reality and theatre in order to illustrate the different effects of both, which creates an ambiguity in her audience – they are not sure whether she is being herself or acting, and therefore her impact is greater.²²⁵ Moreover she firstly articulates a notion she is teaching, then proceeds to demonstrate it and finally recapitulates on what she has taught. By comparison, Caroline’s forthcoming educational mission is significantly less effective, being aimed at society as a whole and being continually thwarted by that society. Ironically, the magnificent teacher Margareta will later be ousted from the stage by Caroline’s ascendance, and by the end of the play Margareta will have also sided with Hanswurst, out of pragmatic necessity.

Caroline’s own gradual demise will manifest itself in her own confusion between her ambitions and desires and the limitations of the reality of her given context:

“CAROLINE (*in a night dress*): Johann... This is terrible! Thank God it was only a dream. (*Embraces him*). I dreamed that they had forced me onto the stage and that I didn’t know what the play was, nor what I was playing, nor what I was supposed to say. The actors around me were playing something quite different... Truthfully, energetically; while I was slow, false, boring. And then, in the middle of the performance, an actress said to me, outloud: ‘Mrs Neuber, don’t you see you are a nuisance? Don’t you see that you are finished?’ And I jumped on her, and we began to fight in front of the audience, and I knew that she was right. Think of it, what a dream! (*Pause.*) What’s the matter?!

JOHANN: Caroline... that’s what happened last night. It wasn’t a dream.

Pause.

CAROLINE: It wasn’t a dream... What do you mean it wasn’t a dream?”
(2000: 71)

²²⁵ Exactly the same effect is created at the opening of Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man.

Scene Sixteen, which has been reproduced here in its entirety, could also be seen as representing a central point in the protagonist's journey. She has had a 'dream' of a new transformed theatre and society – based on 'truth' as its main aim, and she continues to believe in it even when everyone around her has given up. However, once her own 'reality' turns nasty she begins to treat it as a 'bad dream', and therefore as 'unreal'. Several scenes later, the playwright will stop indicating the boundaries between the character's reality and dreams which begin to resemble each other in a distorted form. A war will finally bring about some hope for Neuber once again. She will try to lure a heart-broken peasant, the father of a recently departed soldier, into the theatre, with the promise that 'the muses – on the wings of truth – will stop the war' and bring the soldiers back home. They begin to recite lines from the classics, but 'the cannons drown them out'. The very end of the play will find Caroline and Johann, in the rubble of her father's home, with Caroline recalling her father's much despised Hanswurst routine.

The play therefore charts the protagonist's martyrdom in her quest for truth, which results in a temporary rise to artistic distinction, and a subsequent fall into destitution and involuntary surrender. On one level, the underlying conflict of the play is that between idealism and pragmatism, which doesn't seem to be able to arrive at any feasible reconciliation. Culturally, this conflict can be traced throughout Serbian history – all the way to the Battle of Kosovo and the mythical notion of choice between a heavenly and an earthly kingdom. In the contemporary context, the corrupt ideology of Milošević's regime – which posed as socialist, but was in fact nationalist and highly criminalized – is here represented through the metaphor of Hanswurst, a fictional character and the ultimate cult of vulgarity. In 1990s Yugoslavia, Hanswurst could also have stood for the turbo-folk music, sentimentalist fictions and a general disintegration

of all moral values. Romčević's decision to treat historical subject-matter could be in line with the Yugoslav dramaturgical tradition of re-writing history. Moreover, his choice of a figure from the history of German theatre is affirmative of his desire to transcend the official xenophobia and reconnect with Western values and attitudes, despite the fact that it also seems to affirm the post-colonialist relationship of the origins of Serbian theatre to the German. Unfortunately, the play does not transcend the apparent Serbian-German connection and reach a more universal level, the way that Srbljanović's plays intrigued the German public without pandering to German culture. Indeed, from an anglo-cultural perspective the play's main theme may appear as impenetrable in terms of its apparent endorsement of elitism. Still, the play obviously managed to depict the zeitgeist within its own socio-political context, as noted by Milosavljević above, and it received the Sterija Prize for the best play in 1999 and its production, directed by Nikita Milivojević at Grad Teatar Budva in Montenegro, was hailed by the critics at the time as an example of excellence.

“The most precious aspect of this play is the fact that the most romantic of all romantic dreams – the dream that art will manage to transform reality – is treated here without any pathos, but as the struggle of a man, who embroiled in public duties, fails to notice the real misfortunes which creep up on him from behind his back – loneliness, old age, death.”
(Stamenković, 2000: 163)

Epilogue

An article in the 01.05.1999 issue of the Belgrade opposition weekly Vreme states:

“In Ancient Greece, the public square was a space where people demonstrated their freedom through dialogue. Also, in the Renaissance, the public square represented the centre of social life and an adaptable venue: a market place, a promenade, a catwalk, a forum, but also a theatrical stage. In

Belgrade such a venue is the Square of the Republic [...]. Set between two playhouses – the National Theatre and a theatre for children (the theatre audience of the future), just next to the National Museum, another symbol of serious cultural value, amid which there stands a monument to a historical ruler who, with a resolute gesture repels an invader from the homeland – the Square symbolises freedom as well as cultural rebirth, but has also functioned as a successful ‘theatrical stage’ for almost ten years now.” (Milosavljević: Vreme; 01.05.1999)

The author, Aleksandar Milosavljević, further notes that this place will certainly become a subject of study for many sociologists of culture and theatre theoreticians and embarks on tracing the evolution of the genres and styles as well as the connections between theatre and politics seen on the Square. It started in the tone of tragedy in 1991 when Vuk Drašković, an opposition leader, addressed the gathered demonstrators from the balcony of the National Theatre, calling for peace. Milosavljević gives this event the characteristics of the Greek model of tragedy. Later, in 1996/97 lasting for several months, there followed a sophisticated, brilliantly directed, well thought out form of carnival, imbued with wit and humour – the Protest. This event showed ‘that even the impossible was realistic’:

“On that occasion, a great number of people, or in theatrical terms a great ‘ensemble cast’, gave a performance that superseded primitive populism, ignored the tastes of the masses or the average viewer, but instead it consciously articulated an unexpected sensibility which we had considered long dead.” (ibid.)

The latest theatrical event on the Square was organised against the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Milosavljević sees this event as inferior in quality, clichéd, loosely structured, under-rehearsed and largely reliant on the improvisational skills of the protagonists – a form of bad rep, in other words, or a bad amateur copy of a masterpiece. It seems that the problem this time was the absence of a spontaneous response and the exercise of real free will of the people. The author acknowledges that the first moments of the current demonstrations did contain elements of the Protest, the

outcome of which was the 'Sorry we didn't know it was invisible' banner (in response to the Yugoslav forces shooting down the stealth bomber), and the target with a question mark in the middle, evoking the sophistication and wit from two years ago. However, those elements were being submerged by the kitsch, vulgarity and aggression, the current protests were infiltrated by some new protestors, 'those against whom the Protest had initially been staged', explains Milosavljević, seeing in this change the very essence of the theatricalisation of street activities. In other words, 'in history things happen first as a tragedy, so that later, the second time around they become a farce – which is the other side of tragedy' (ibid.).

The year 1999 saw another 78 days of highly theatricalised reality, which briefly made Ronald Harwood's play The Dresser – fondly remembered by Yugoslav audiences – come to life entirely. Milošević was eager to show his defiance to the world, and although he had repeatedly and brutally quashed street demonstrations before, this time he encouraged them with turbo-folk concerts on bridges. Meanwhile the original protesters withdrew after a short street campaign. Whereas theatre artists decided to close down their playhouses in sympathy with the 1996/97 Protest, during the bombing they opened them up as shelters, letting audiences in for free or for symbolic prices, the proceeds of which were donated for humanitarian causes. The theatre ritual therefore acquired added poignancy as both the audience and the actors were brought together in an act of solidarity against circumstances outside of their control.

In 1999 yet another metaplay saw the light of the stage at the Belgrade Drama Theatre – this was the twenty-nine year old Uglješa Šajtinac's graduation piece Rekviziter (The Propsmaster). It is a warm, nostalgic story of the succession of generations, changing times and changing attitudes towards life and art. In it an old propmaster returns into

his propsroom, having run away from the hospital, in order to pass on his trade secrets and his legacy to the coming generations before he picks up his coffin and leaves. He however finds his propsroom in disarray, and the young propsmaster in drunken slumber. A series of theatrical anecdotes ensues, masking the old propsmaster's careful and perceptive assessment of the state of affairs. Eventually he decides to help the young man sift out the valuables, advising him to sell them in order to get the money that he needs to get his illegitimate son out of an orphanage. The cross-generational differences contained in the two propsmasters' and a theatre cleaning lady's attitudes to their work are finally reconciled in recognition of personal responsibility and a renunciation of the legacy of socialist self-management. By the end of the play the future is bleak and uncertain, but at least the slate is clean. In introducing his play for an English audience, Šajtinac revealed his intention to counterbalance the demise of all values with nostalgia and described his heroes as the people from 'the off' at the time when 'the whole of Serbia is one bad off-theatre' (Šajtinac in Three Contemporary European Plays, 2000: 67). Most poignantly, while working on a translation of the play, I discovered that the main character, the old propsmaster Živa was entirely based on the playwright's grandfather. The young Yugoslav director Vladimir Popadić was invited to stage the English premiere of the play in Hull, and the play was going to print in English, as Živa lay on his deathbed. At least the story of his life had transcended geographical barriers, opening up new avenues of intercultural communication and cultural exchange in the aftermath of yet another Yugoslav tragedy.

In the words of Milosavljević, the 1999 Nato bombing of Yugoslavia might indeed have been a 'farce' – and a sinister one at that, but the final epilogue to the post-socialist 'Yugoslav drama' was yet to come some 18 months later, with the ousting of Milošević and at least a temporary happy ending.

WHEN NARCISSUS TURNS INTO A FLOWER

Conclusion

“‘This is me’, says the play, ‘and these are my distant origins’. They are now tamed and transformed into something which is socially acceptable and safe, because it is theatricalised and represented; that is how it remains amongst you and in it you can experience pity and fear, without any threat. It contains prophetic gift and a partaking of the truth, and although it is in its essence an illusion and a fiction, it gives you knowledge of human affairs which you must not neglect. Saying that, the Euripides’ play [The Bacchae], at the very end of the Athenian tragic cycle, actually states and affirms that truth which, in its nature, it should conceal: like ‘the girl from the fairytale who can turn her eyes on the inside and watch herself’. The tragic genre ends up in self-awareness.” (Milutinović, Z., 1994: 33)

Belgrade. Mid-1930s. Pavle Marić, a successful engineer, hardworking businessman and scientist, discovers one day that his wife has been having an affair with his business partner and best friend Milan Novaković. Having found proof in their correspondence, Marić considers his choices – when suddenly one of his workers, a Russian émigré, calls on him. The Russian intends to commit suicide as his beloved too has fled with a Polish opera singer. Marić comforts him and offers him his new coat, having decided himself to leave for Vienna temporarily. Just before his departure he entrusts his cherished manuscript on hydro-technology to his young devoted friend and protégée Protić.

Three years later, Milan Novaković, the sole owner of the business which he previously ran with Marić shares perfect marital bliss with the former Mrs Marić. Young Mr Protić is a valued academic and is engaged to be married to the daughter of a certain Spasoye.

Spasoye, on his part, has managed to prove that he is the closest relative of Mr Marić's and inherited his entire estate. Mr Marić was buried with all due honours after a disfigured body was found in the Danube and the clothes and documents in the coat pocket were identified as belonging to the unfortunate engineer – rather than the heartbroken Russian, whose body it actually was. The unfortunate engineer then suddenly appears in town – to the horror of all the formerly bereaved – and he is bent on getting back all of his property and dues.

This is the opening of Branislav Nušić's last completed play The Deceased. Largely written in the playwright's favoured style of the comedy of manners, the play is one of his most dramaturgically accomplished pieces, also conceived as a thesis-play. Its ironically named anti-hero, Spasoye – his name approximately translates as 'the saviour' – is a typical Balkan bully, unscrupulous and self-assured, well connected and thoroughly corrupted, slightly dim but the ultimate winner of a logically presented argument. In his bid to maintain his illegally attained position, he utilises all his personal powers of emotional blackmail and sophist-style persuasion to keep all of the affected under his manipulative hold. Having initially planned to refute Marić's existence as a living person, he fails to prove this absurd argument and eventually changes his plan with the aid of a crafty government official. By the end of the play, he holds the entire situation in his hand. He has invited Pavle Marić before all the concerned parties to offer him a final deal – he can either leave the country or he will be arrested on the charges of being 'an agent and an exponent' of an international anarchist organisation which 'has for its aim the destruction of society, social system and the state'. Pavle Marić is therefore also presented with all the evidence gathered against him:

“SPASOYE: The beginning of the investigation leads to a certain theft of letters in your house-

PAVLE: Love letters?

SPASOYE: That’s what you say but the investigation says otherwise... That was a theft of highly compromising letters which revealed your entire destructive purpose. As soon as those letters were intercepted, your close accomplice in action, a certain Russian immigrant Alyosha, committed suicide, and you ran away abroad and lived as an immigrant for three years.

PAVLE: This is the first time I’ve heard of it. So those were political letters?

SPASOYE: Not political but revolutionary, anarchist letters.

PAVLE: We could say that, if a woman’s infidelity were described as marital anarchy.”

(Nušić: The Deceased, see Appendix 1 for full translation of the play)

Pavle Marić’s former wife Rina is morally coerced by Spasoye into confirming that she would testify to the ‘revolutionary’ nature of the correspondence as she was ‘acquainted with the content’ before she reportedly destroyed the letters in an attempt to save her husband. Further, Spasoye claims that Marić’s former best friend and partner Novaković will confirm this statement as well as testifying to the fact that Marić was spreading ‘the anarchist propaganda’ at the building site, where he also employed ‘dubious characters and agents from various international organisations’ in order to give them an alibi.

“PAVLE: I presume the collection of such perfect witnesses can in no way exclude your respected son-in-law?

SPASOYE: Of course not, my dear sir. His statement will be one of the strongest against you. [...] Just before you emigrated you made sure that you removed all the evidence against yourself by giving this young man certain manuscripts of yours, which as you said, were very precious to you.

PAVLE: That’s right.

SPASOYE: There you see, you don’t deny the basic fact. Of course, no one can deny the truth. After your funeral, my son-in-law, not knowing what to do with your manuscripts, had a look, and to his great surprise found them to be a collection of most confidential revolutionary correspondence with various organizations abroad. The kind of correspondence which doesn’t lead only to prison but straight to the gallows. The young man found himself in great confusion, he certainly didn’t want to keep such documents, and didn’t find it suitable to take them to the police, for what would be the point in that given that you were already dead? My son-in-law [...] made the decision to burn all that correspondence, in the interest of your peace and the peace of your soul.” (ibid.)

Following the young man's tortured confession that he too would testify to this 'fact' – even though he had obtained his academic title by submitting Marić's thesis under his own name – Marić is profoundly hurt and temporarily loses control. Then:

“PAVLE (*recollects himself*): I shouldn't have allowed myself to lose my temper. These kinds of phenomena in this environment are not a sufficient reason for agitation. (*To Spasoye*) Let us, therefore continue our chat. Please tell me, my dear closest relative: Will you make a statement too?

SPASOYE: What kind of a question is that? Of course I will say everything I know. I can't be expected to be unscrupulous and hide what I know.

PAVLE: And what is it that you know and that your scruples prevent you from hiding?

SPASOYE: I know all about great amounts of money that arrived into your account in foreign currency from abroad-

PAVLE: And you will back this with documents similar to those that you used in court to prove our kinship.

SPASOYE: I know how I'll back that, that's my own affair.

PAVLE (*getting agitated again*): Dear God, is it possible that I'm hearing these things; did you really say all these things which I've just heard? It is unimaginable that so much immorality can be found amongst such a small number of people.” (ibid.)

In an attempt to prove the 'goodness of his heart' and his 'generosity', Spasoye proceeds with his proposition. He offers Marić a forged passport in the name of a German businessman. Seeing it as a good proof against Spasoye and his corrupted ways, Marić snatches the passport away from his hands. But Spasoye's plot had been worked out in detail. Just before Marić is able to leave the house, a police inspector who had been lying in wait – appointed through Spasoye's connections in the government – will appear in the house. He has a warrant to arrest Pavle Marić and asks everybody present to produce their IDs. Realising the situation he is in, dejected Marić produces the ID of the German businessman instead of his own and subsequently leaves on the first train to Vienna. Finally:

“SPASOYE: I believed in our victory all along, as I’ve always valued the great pearl of wisdom – ‘the good must win in the end’.

RINA: So where is he going now?

SPASOYE: He is returning to the dead.

NOVAKOVICH: You really think that he’s left the stage now?

SPASOYE: More permanently than ever before. Before he emigrated under his own name, and now under someone else’s. This way he has himself acknowledged his own death.” (ibid.)

When viewed from a contemporary perspective, Branislav Nušić’s play still represents a faithful depiction of the Balkans, today perhaps even more so than some fifteen years ago. Its socio-political context is that of primitive capitalism where personal connections and corruptible government institutions are made to serve personal interests of those with financial power. Pavle Marić is clearly conceived as a representative of the European influences and the European frame of reference and as such he at first forms a positive juxtaposition to the given context, only to be eventually defeated and ejected by it. His defeat and Spasoye’s final triumph is, however, only made possible once Spasoye recruits all of the other protagonists under a common interest and a single purpose. He imposes himself upon the group as a Freudian superego, and even if they do not believe that his method is entirely moral, they pass on all personal responsibility to the convincing leader and remain united behind him.

Unfortunately, the Balkan setting as a whole could be characterised as a socio-political context within which tribal power-mechanisms still survive. The institutions designed to look after personal rights of individuals are rarely immune to political pressure, and the ‘leader’ often has the ultimate undisputed power. Levels of conformism among group members are directly interrelated with these power-mechanisms. By comparison, the European democratic tradition bestows a much greater amount of personal power on an individual, whose rights are protected by established institutions. Being on the dividing

line between 'civilised' Europe and the 'primitive' Balkans, Yugoslavia has always experienced a vivid tension between the two socio-cultural modes. Goldsworthy (1998: 9) describes how Yugoslavia referred to itself as 'the heart of Europe', whilst the English called it a 'backyard' and the Americans located it 'behind the European door'. In his essay Zašto Balkan nije seksi? (Why Balkan isn't Sexy?), written in 1999, the Macedonian playwright living in Britain, Goran Stefanovski, attempted to address this tension between the East and the West:

“Allow me to refer to the East as Byzantium. It is a closed society, vertically based, patriarchal, macho, rural, in which only one person at the top knows what needs to be done – a society where you can never be alone, and never can be left alone. [...] There is no democracy, there is no tolerance, there is no logical space for homosexuals – or for women, for that matter. Individuation is possible only at a deadly cost. That's the world of ethnic fundamentalism. On one side, brothers in an eternal embrace, on the other – traitors and outsiders. This narrative structure is black and white and it is only interested in the collective tribal problems. It is interested in big National Theatres, casts of actors in their thousands, operatic, collective themes. [...] On the totally opposite end of this world, there stands Western Donald Duck. He lives in a comfortable, fast, global, consumerist, post-industrial society. He doesn't have a mother, he doesn't have a father, he doesn't have a wife, he doesn't have children. He is looking after two or three grandchildren [sic.] – dear God knows who they belong to. He has a girlfriend whom he sees from time to time, and after the meeting everybody goes to their own place in separate cars. Donald Duck does not belong to anyone bigger than himself. He is an individualist par excellence! A loner 'in pursuit of happiness'. [...]

What Eastern Europe has been witnessing for the last few years is the entry of Donald Duck into Byzantium. He enters full of himself bringing with him his own model of the world. [...] It is a cowboy-gun-wielding form of capitalism”. (Stefanovski, <http://www.mimagazin.com>, my translation)

Stefanovski, of course, exaggerates in order to make a point. His point is about stereotype-inspired misunderstandings. Following the end of the Cold War, Eastern Europe wanted to embrace the Western European democratic and capitalist traditions. What the Balkans ended up with was only an interjection of the caricature of the Western European 'superego' and a primitive form of capitalism.

When applied to the Balkans, the Freudian theory of group-formation manifests itself in two intermittent patterns: a group is first of all formed around a single powerful leader or an idea, only to then reach a crisis and fragment itself into at least two different groups which become intolerant of each other. The process of fragmentation is accompanied by significant levels of group narcissism and mutual hatred. In the process of liberation from foreign domination at the end of the 19th century, Southern Slavs grouped around the ideas of Illyrian Movement, emphasising their similarities. Once united into a single state, the constituent groups began to display ethnic narcissism and mutual hatred which then culminated in the Second World War. In the second half of the 20th century they were again re-united around the idea of socialism, symbolised by the powerful superego, Josip Broz. Fifty years later, mounting crisis reached fragmentation-point once again. In an analogy to the Greek myth, each instance of narcissism led to banishment into the underworld – the world of the dead, and a consequent strife for resurrection and reunification. This cycle of reaching from the underworld for the ‘Heavenly Kingdom’ and subsequently experiencing a crisis also characterises much of the Serbian national poetics.

The fact that theatre practice developed in the Balkans for the first time in the mid-19th century and in the atmosphere of Romanticism may also have something to do with the development of a taste for self-reflexive fictions. Zoran Milutinović in his thesis Metateatralnost: Imanentna poetika u drami XX veka (Metatheatricality: The Immanent Poetics in the 20th Century Drama) states that auto-reflexivity is essentially part of the Romanticist poetics:

“Karl Philip Moritz – who [...] has synthesised Romantic teachings in his works – says in his text Gotterlehre that the nature of a beautiful piece of art

consists in the fact that it explains itself – it describes itself through itself – and so it doesn't need an explanation or a description, apart from a finger which points to itself; as well as in the fact that its inner being rests on the other side of the power of thinking; in its emerging, in its becoming. If a piece interprets and explains its inner being on its own, then it also explains its emerging, its becoming. That interpretation does not occur in an explicit way, through statements which have the piece itself as a reference, but by interpreting one aspect through another, whereby the whole is interpreted through itself. The interpretation is immanent to the piece, and that as an interpretation of its becoming. That is, according to Moritz, a characteristic of a perfect piece of art, and it most probably corresponds with the essence of the image of a girl who can turn her eyes on the inside, as quoted in The Birth of Tragedy." (1994: 22)

Milutinović here evidently also evokes Abel's concern over the impossibility of Greek-style tragedy and its replacement by metatheatre – 'the tragic genre ends up in self-awareness' (ibid.).

Returning to Nušić's play, and further still, the cultural tradition that it belongs to, one is inevitably reminded of the character from the Serbian oral literary tradition – Ero. Possibly related to the Arabic folk tale trickster Mulla Nesrudin, Ero is a generic character, whose name was probably derived as a nick-name for the inhabitants of Herzegovina. He is often portrayed as a poor peasant or a wanderer, who always outwits his opponents – mainly the (Turkish) authority figures. In the story Ero and Kadija, for example – Kadija is a Turkish authority figure, often acting as a judge in local disputes – Ero is looking after Kadija's herd of cows as well as one cow of his own. When Ero's cow kills one of Kadija's, Ero goes to Kadija with the words: "My lord, one of your cows killed mine," to which Kadija responds: "Nothing can be done if the animals killed one another." Ero, implying that Kadija hasn't heard him properly, repeats: "My lord, I say, my cow killed one of yours," to which Kadija declares that, in that case, he must look in his law-book. Then Ero says: "No, my lord, if you haven't looked in the law-book for mine, then you won't look in the law-book for yours either."

It is significant that in this story Ero doesn't only trick Kadija in order to save his head, but he also makes his trickery obvious – self-reflexive, and subsequently gains power over him. In other words, knowing that Kadija is likely to hold different beliefs regarding justice when personal interest is at stake, Ero firstly makes a proposition which is false. Having accepted this proposition on one set of beliefs, Kadija declares a verdict which wouldn't suit Ero if his proposition was true. Ero then proceeds with stating the opposite proposition, which is actually true, but justifies himself by implying that Kadija had misheard him. This triggers off a different set of beliefs in Kadija, who would then like to alter his terms of acceptance. Ero then exposes his plot in order to maintain the original verdict, which now suits him.²²⁶

Similarly, in Nušić's dark 'comedy of mentality' Spasoye refuses to accept the reality because of the consequences it would have on his position. He prefers 'the deceased' to remain dead, as was the generally accepted case before his return but soon realises that even if he refuses to believe that his opponent is alive, it would be difficult for others to accept his (dis)belief in the face of hard evidence. Eventually, Spasoye decides to change his tactic and accept all the evidence, but interprets it from an alternative system of beliefs, in the interest of maintaining his position of a beneficiary. He therefore accepts that 'the deceased' is indeed alive but sets out to manufacture a situation in which Marić would have no other choice but to consent to his status of 'the deceased' and assume a new identity. In order to achieve this, Spasoye relies on the – corrupted – legal system and pursues a logical and plausible argument subjecting the facts to an alternative belief system and replacing one reality with another – fabricated one – which is more suitable to his interests.

²²⁶ The folk-tales featuring Ero have also found their way to the Yugoslav stage. Most notably, the Croatian composer Jakov Gotovac has composed an opera to Milan Begović's libretto based on the folk-tale Ero s' onoga svijeta (Ero from the other world). The opera was premiered on 2.11.1935 in Zagreb and received several revivals all over Yugoslavia in the post-war period.

Although Kovačević has attempted to deny the levels of affinity with Nušić which have been ascribed to him, by claiming that he was more influenced by Sterija,²²⁷ similarities between the two dramatists' work are more than obvious even at the first glance.²²⁸ Both playwrights are interested in the comic genre, the mentality of their people, the mechanism of power in the particular socio-political context and both of them employ a certain amount of self-reflexivity in their work, both in the literal sense of the word²²⁹ and in terms of 'narcissistic' fictions. It is known that Nušić was experimenting with a number of genres, even though most of these experiments remain obscured by the popularity of his comedies. In the above extract, a character comments in relation to another departed character 'Has he really left the stage now?'. This momentary instance of metatheatre is intended as a metaphor within the play, although it inevitably reminds the audience that the play is also drawing to an end. Nušić's play Knjiga druga (Volume Two), which was presumed lost until a copy recently emerged in the Croatian National Theatre, was written in the 1920s and it was a direct response to Pirandello's work and his popularity in the then Yugoslavia. Set in a theatre, the play revolves around a young man who believes that a French novel he has read is in fact a script of his life and is determined to find volume two of the book in order to find what will happen to him next. When he obtains an unfinished manuscript of the sequel from the family of the deceased author, his life becomes a version of the Oedipus story, in which the young man is trying to avoid killing his beloved as this is actually what happens in the book. The play was not very successful when premiered in Sarajevo in 1927, however, the playwright continued exploring an expressionist/symbolist and occasionally

²²⁷ See the interview in Appendix 2.

²²⁸ Vesna Jezerkić has suggested to me that Kovačević's play The Gathering Centre is a reply to The Deceased, in addition to The Balkan Spy being a reply to Nušić's The Suspicious Character.

²²⁹ Though neither of the two engage in any disclosure of the personal life in their dramatic work – Nušić did write a humorous autobiography, elements of which resonate in his plays, while Kovačević's The Professional features the author's own memories.

metatheatrical mode in his following three plays Opasna igra (A Dangerous Game), Žena bez srca (A Heartless Woman) and Predgovor (Prologue). According to Raško V. Jovanović (1998), all four plays are in fact thesis-plays, which dramaturgical form he revisited in writing The Deceased in 1937. Unfortunately none of Nušić's metaplays have generated much interest or acclaim, possibly implying that although he had reached a certain level of accomplishment and maturity as a playwright, he was not able to transcend certain barriers which might well have been culturally imposed. It took another half a century before Yugoslav playwrights suddenly perfected the style that Nušić at least attempted.

It is worth noting that Nušić was a law graduate, which might explain the juxtaposition between the presented evidence and logically constructed counter-arguments in his work.²³⁰ In terms of the audience reception of such sophist arguments, it is inevitable that the audience are led to make a series of acceptances within the play, having already suspended their disbelief and entered the world of the play. Even if those hypotheses within the play are only verbal rather than actually constituting a play within the play, their juxtaposition with the obviously contrasting evidence is often a source of pleasure as it actually involves the audience in an act of imagination and deliberation within the process of watching the play. In the above quoted example Nušić presents the anti-hero as the ultimate winner of the argument in the spirit of comedy. The fact that this comedy does not have a typical happy ending leaves its content open to deliberation rather than defending a morally acceptable standpoint.

I already argued that theatre – as a specific chosen example of fiction with the highest degree of empirical reality – could be perceived as a ‘reality’ subject to its own (man-

²³⁰ This device, which often has comic results, is employed in most of Nušić's comedies including, for example, the scheming cabinet minister's wife in the play of the same title, the paranoid civil servants in The Suspicious Character, electoral candidates in The People's Representative etc.

made) conventions. It could be seen as a 'sublimated', 'heightened' or even 'a hypothetical reality' which is complete in duration, which we experience ritualistically and which we accept through temporary and voluntary 'suspension of disbelief' whilst at the same time retaining and applying our own moral values and cognitive skills. In order for us to begin accepting the hypotheses within the play (either verbal or in the form of a play within the play) it is necessary for us to make a series of acceptances in relation to the play itself first. I am aware that my proposition of theatre as 'reality' entails a whole number of epistemological and moral issues. Possible objections are only a question of terminology rather than logical plausibility. By advocating a status of reality for theatre, I am certainly not suggesting that the two realities should be confused or mistaken for each other. The 1990s Yugoslav example clearly warns of the danger of such a mistake.

Kovačević, whose plays constitute more than a third of the corpus of plays studied in this thesis, bases a number of his plays on the notion of conflicting hypotheses, or in his own words – the notion of 'parallel worlds'. He was also influenced directly by Pirandello, and his stylistic experiments, which can be charted throughout the presented plays, were geared mainly towards involving the reader/audience more closely in his work.²³¹ In Hutcheon's terms he opened his texts up to the audience, and this notion is particularly evident in his play Larry Thompson – The Tragedy of a Young Man where he actually casts his audience into the role of an audience which seeks escapism, and proceeds to actively engage the audience in the play.

Significantly, Kovačević was neither the first nor the only Yugoslav playwright to utilise the metatheatrical device in his work. In contemporary dramaturgy, we can trace

²³¹ Note Barnett's discovery in relation to the playwright's wish to communicate with the readers who could not actually see his plays.

this trend back to at least the Croatian playwright Ivo Brešan's The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater, written in 1965 and revised in 1971. Here too we have a Spasoye type character – Jughead – and the theme of an individual against the group and authority. In the context of socialism, this theme is particularly politicised, which in this case resulted in the banning of the play. A similar fate befell the Slovenian play Act A Brain Tumour or Air Pollution by Dušan Jovanović published in 1972 and performed four years later. Although at the first glance the emphasis in this play is on conflicting aesthetics and an artistic revolution, it is clear that this only constitutes a metaphor of a particular socio-political context in which group formation revolves around a manipulative and charismatic superego, even to the detriment of the group itself, as well as those that the group or the leader ejects. In Dobrivoje Ilić's 1976 play Joakim once again the theme of an individual – in this case an artist – against political authority finds an analogy in historical material, thus continuing the favoured trend in Yugoslav dramaturgy of rewriting history. Here the father of the Serbian theatre Joakim Vujić is confronted with the all-powerful, volatile and philistine ruler Prince Miloš Obrenović.

The early 1980s represent a politically interesting context of a vacuum following the death of the national superego of nearly forty years, Josip Broz Tito. In this climate of re-grouping, re-examination and re-invention, theatre was mainly utilised as a means of taboo breaking and in the words of Dragan Klaić as a 'public forum' where ideas were debated before they even reached the parliamentary domain. The Second World War and the subsequent events occupied playwrights at this time, the actor's fate being one of the leitmotifs in both drama and film of the period. Slobodan Šnajder's examination of the actor Vjekoslav Afrić's resistance to the authority in The Croatian Faust was a particularly acute study of the mechanisms of political power and culture, while

Ljubomir Simović's play The Travelling Theatre Šopalović represents a more lyrical variation on the theme of an actor's fate at the time of war. Significantly for us, Simović here insists on bestowing equal credibility to the physical as well as metaphysical domain, even suggesting through one of his characters that 'theatre is more real than the real world'. The outcome of this plot at least shows the transformative power of theatre at its best, which can occur even without its agents being aware of it. Finally, Nenad Prokić's play The Metastable Grail, which was also a study of Yugoslav socialism through the metaphor of early Italian Fascism, singles out the way in which metafiction can pre-empt criticism and draw attention to the importance of the thematic content over the means of execution. Most importantly, not only did all of these plays, including those from Kovačević's oeuvre, receive most prestigious awards in the country, but they were also the plays which found audiences and readers abroad. It can therefore be concluded that Yugoslav theatre found external exposure mainly in the form of metatheatre. In the absence of an internationally recognizable format attached to Yugoslav theatre – Czechoslovakian theatre is viewed through Havel's dissidence, Romanian tradition is seen as continuing Ionesco's absurdism, Polish theatre is perceived through the physical theatre tradition initiated by Grotowski – I would propose metatheatre as a possible definitive feature of contemporary Yugoslav theatre.

In an interesting twist at the turn of the 1990s, Yugoslav political reality became highly theatricalised, thus usurping the kind of attention and the discourse which traditionally belonged to the histrionic domain. Another Spasoye/Jughead-type superego was at the centre of this drama – Slobodan Milošević. His arguments, equally dislocated from the actual reality, equally persuasive, being fabricated with perfect adherence to the laws of logic, though not necessarily in a truth-seeking manner, led to a construction of an alternative reality – a sentimentalist fiction – which was being broadcast over the public

media, under his own control. Freud recognizes that in group psychology there is a certain level of 'hypnotised' behaviour in relation to the superego or the leader. This is certainly evident among the people of the former Yugoslavia who were hypnotised by their leaders into ethnic hatred and the waging of wars against each other. As Šnajder had shown in The Croatian Faust, even the purest of classics can sometimes be recruited for the most repressive ends. It goes without saying that all artistic domains were permeated with a certain degree of sentimentalism and even theatre participated in the stirring of nationalist sentiment in the early 1990s in Yugoslavia. This phenomenon could have been viewed within the tradition of the breaking of taboos and rewriting of history which had started in the 1980s – only this time the socialist taboos of interethnic hatreds during the Second World War were being broken with disastrous effects. Alternatively, in line with the diet of escapist fictions and TV soap-operas, theatre proceeded to offer entertainment and escapism. Despite the fact that Milošević had a much tighter hold on the media and the dissemination of information than was ever the case during socialism, he did not seem to have much interest in the theatre. Criticism of his policies therefore gradually gathered momentum particularly in this domain. Inevitably any depiction of a highly theatricalised reality in theatre could end up being metatheatrical. However, by comparison to the 1980s the output of Yugoslav dramatists remained scarce, resulting in re-readings of the relevant classics or importation of other texts. Starting with The Dresser – which being set in a theatre during the war had powerful resonances for Yugoslav audiences – the entire oeuvre of Ronald Harwood soon received productions in Yugoslavia. It was only in 1996, in the aftermath of the Bosnian war, and with a growing discontent towards Milošević's policies that the process of sobering up began. Kovačević returned to playwriting after five years, having in the meantime collaborated with Emir Kusturica on the (meta-cinematic) film Underground. As mentioned above, Larry Thompson was largely a direct address to the

audience, conducted in a playful manner but also imbued with brutal honesty. The film director Goran Marković, who had dealt with the notion of the actor's fate and with theatre in his films, eventually took up playwriting in order to treat the subject of actors' or artists' responsibility at the time of the Croatian and Bosnian wars. Even if reminiscent of Simović's play, A Tour states clearly the debutant-playwright's justification – 'It would be one hell of a job to make a film about this war', stressing the lack of ethnic distinctions between the warring parties. Significantly therefore, metaplays of this period deal with the group dynamics instead of the previous subject matter of an individual against group or authority. Here the authority figures are invisible, although their presence manifests itself in subliminal ways – the plays explore the behaviour of groups which are politically oppressed, the former example focusing on the audience and the later on the artists. At this point Slobodan Šnajder himself appears in Belgrade and articulates the events of the previous six years as an instance of 'narcissism of small differences', thus articulating that the post-socialist Yugoslav problematics was contained within the process of disintegration of a group into smaller groups which were insufficiently different from each other. They all sought new superegos, but the emphasis was no longer on their respective relationships with their leaders but precisely on themselves. The younger generation of Yugoslav playwrights continued to explore their sociological predicament polarising themselves from older generations, but continuing the tradition of metatheatre. Typically, Nebojša Romčević took a historical figure, the German actress of the Enlightenment period Caroline Neuber, and – self-reflexively? – explored her plight in trying to escape culturally degrading traditions and to promote the ennobling value of theatre. Uglješa Šajtinac offered a much more tender examination of the generation gap, combining authentic theatrical anecdotes with the tragedy of a young man, and producing his own authentic version of The Dresser – The Propmaster as an homage to those who could afford to

love their work despite existential pressures. Biljana Srbljanović, however, found inspiration in the Theatre of the Absurd which had exerted a strong influence on Yugoslav theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. In a kind of joint homage to Vitrac and Anouilh, she deftly translated the contemporary events into a metaphor of horrifying children's games, thus also offering a new variation of the metatheatrical genre within Yugoslav dramaturgy.

In summation Yugoslav metatheatre could be seen as occurring as a result of identity crises – in the 1980s following Tito's death, and in the 1990s following the wars. The identity crisis is handled either:

1. through an exploration of the relationship between the individual and the authority figure or the oppressive system;²³² and/or
2. as a means of re-grouping in relation to other groups or older generations.²³³

Metatheatre in Yugoslavia is also often political even if at the first glance it seems to be paying tributes or concerning itself with aesthetics. This inherent ability of metatheatre to tackle simultaneously political and aesthetic concerns was a useful taboo-breaking tool in socialist Yugoslavia when aesthetisation constituted a defensive veneer for political query. More importantly its inherent nature meets the traditional audience demands by being both cerebral and sentimental, without being cold and didactic (as in Brecht) or exclusively sentimentalist (as in melodramatic fictions). Thus metatheatre as a political tool in Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s consistently aims to address and establish a challenging relationship with the audience and their beliefs, perceptions and mindsets. In the 1980s, it challenged those beliefs, perceptions and barriers imposed by the socialist authorities over the previous 40 years, while in the 1990s it confronted a brainwashed, infantilised and an audience in a state of a psychological denial.

²³² Brešan, Ilić, Šnajder, Prokić, Romčević and partly Kovačević in Larry Thompson.

²³³ Jovanović, Simović, Kovačević (especially in Roaring Tragedy), Srbljanović and Šajtinac.

In more specific terms, Yugoslav (meta)theatre was shaped by a number of European influences as well as arising organically from the national heritage in line with the audience demands. It is therefore contextualised at the beginning of this thesis both within its own historical, geographical and socio-political setting as well as in relation to the rest of the world.

An analysis of European trends which are mirrored in the Yugoslav context reveals the pattern of metafiction often proliferating at particular points of history and at the time of crisis. Pirandello's work occurs within a critical socio-political context:

“In hindsight, the peace that had been hailed in 1919 was an illusion, and the way it was imposed sowed the seeds of later hostilities. [...] The twenty years of unstable coexistence between the armistice of 1918 and the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 can be seen as merely a strategic retreat for regrouping and resupply between one extended battle and the next. And such events shaped the theatre and were directly reflected on the stage.” (Innes, C. in Brown, J.R. (ed.), 1995/7: 382)

Innes proceeds to describe how theatre began to be seen as a ‘weapon’ between the wars, there being ‘an equation between the degree of war damage the country had suffered, and theatrical experiment’ (ibid.: 383). Therefore, theatrical experiment flourished in Germany, whilst

“France and Italy, where much of the fighting had taken place, though they were counted among the victors, stood between these extremes [of convention and experiment]. Only recently united as a nation, Italy was the more destabilized, and this was reflected in the aggressive iconoclasm of the futurists, as well as the conceptual experiments of Pirandello. [...] But in both countries these challenges to traditional or naturalistic theatre lacked the ideological element that characterized Russian and German innovations.” (ibid.: 383)

In other words, Pirandello was developing his metatheatre within an ideological flux, in a country which was experiencing an identity crisis and in between wars. It should be

added that this was already Mussolini's Italy, and that Pirandello was directly linked with the regime, which funded his theatre company. Despite the fact that Pirandello's ideological and financial allegiance to his government is mirrored by none of the Yugoslav playwrights, similarities between destabilized Italy described above and Yugoslavia of the 1980s²³⁴ and 1990s are unmistakable. More importantly, Frederick May in a preface to his translation of Six Characters in Search of an Author sums the play up as 'an ironic tragedy, the tragedy of man tormented by enigma of personality, perplexed by the impossibility of arriving at truth, and forever questioning the nature and the purpose of existence' (1954: viii). This truth-seeking nature of the play could in fact be extended to apply to the contemporary Yugoslav metatheatre as a whole.

I have already outlined that metatheatre can assume a purely entertaining format (as in Ostrovski's Artistes and Admirers) or a highly efficacious one (as in Brecht's theatre). This thesis has treated non-Brechtian metatheatre which is both illusionist and efficacious and can even be primarily entertaining (Kovačević's plays). In the context of examining efficacy and entertainment in the history of European Theatre, Richard Schechner identified a trend of efficacious metatheatre in the 1960s and 1970s which, it should be noted, was also a period of political crisis in the post-Vietnam war USA:

"Theater directors and choreographers discovered reflexivity even as they were discarding (temporarily) narrativity. The story of 'how performance is being made' replaced the story performance more ordinarily would tell. This self-referencing, reflexive mode of performing is an example of what Gregory Bateson called 'metacommunication' [...]. As such theater's reflexive phase signalled loudly that the spectators were now to be included as 'speakers' in the theatrical event. Thus it was natural that reflexivity in theatre went hand in hand with audience participation. Furthermore, all this attention paid to the procedures of making theatre was, I think, an attempt to ritualise performance, to make theatre yield efficacious acts. [...]. In a period when authenticity was, and is, increasingly difficult to define, when

²³⁴ Nenad Prokić indeed recognized these similarities in the 1980s but he seemed to overlook the fact that Mussolini's Italy was going to war, hoping instead that Yugoslavia would make a swift transition to the economic progress of post-Second World War Italy.

public life is theatricalised, the performer was asked to take off her traditional masks – to be an agent not of ‘playing’ or ‘fooling’, or ‘lying’ (kinds of public masquerade), but to ‘tell the truth’ in some absolute sense. If not this, than at least to show how the masks are put on and taken off – perhaps in the way to educate the public to the theatricalized deceptions daily practised on them by political leaders and media bosses. Instead of mirroring the age, performers were asked to remedy it.” (1994: 121-2)

In terms of the ultimate purpose of Yugoslav metatheatre as a political tool in its socio-political context, I would suggest that its main function was, precisely – communication. The deconstruction of the relationship between theatre and ideology (as in Šnajder’s play), the demystification of the theatre processes and rituals (as in Prokić’s play), the revelation of actors’ naivety and vulnerability (as in Simović and Marković) and the apparent removal of the fourth wall (as in Larry Thompson) are all intended to heighten the immediacy of this ‘metacommunication’ between the text and its audience with a view of truth-seeking and the shedding of dangerous preconceptions. At the time when it was impossible to voice the issues of pressing importance metatheatre proceeded to show them, to discuss them and to then hopefully open up the discussion among audience-members themselves. Conversely, when the audience came back to the theatre brainwashed and accustomed to the diet of escapist fictions, metatheatre proceeded to drive them to truth-seeking through role-play. For the Balkan people who are inclined to behave politically as a ‘herd’, this interaction with fictions on their own individual terms, rather than the collectively imposed ones is paramount. Metafictions encourage individual response. Metaplays do not state, they interrogate, sometimes even tapping into the metaphysical as in the case of Simović, the sentimental as in Claustrophobic Comedy, or the grotesque as with Srbljanović. But most importantly, these plays also established communication between Yugoslav theatre and the rest of the world. Even at the time when Yugoslavia was completely shut off, under economic sanctions, Dušan Kovačević’s plays were shown in the USA and in London. Hopefully it was just a springing of the flower from the underworld that is yet to flourish.

Areas for Further Research

This study has inevitably only scratched the surface of a vast number of perspectives on Yugoslav theatre. The contemporary political perspective is a result of a general increase of interest in the Yugoslav 'tragedy', whereby the term is only borrowed to apply to real life. The disintegration of Yugoslavia has already been analysed in historical and economic terms. Culturally, in the recent years Yugoslavia has found its place in the post-colonialist studies of the Balkans. Yugoslav popular music and the role of the media in the country have been subjected to individual independent studies. Yugoslav theatre has surprisingly attracted insignificant attention.

In the absence of any significant literature on the subject of Yugoslav theatre in the English language, I have had to resort to translation of both plays and critical texts. This has inevitably raised issues of cultural translation, both in technical and philosophical terms which I hope to tackle in more depth in the future.

In this thesis I have acknowledged the historical and post-colonialist angles, seeking also to connect the notion of Freudian 'narcissism of small differences' which manifested itself among the Southern Slavs throughout their history, with the notion of Linda Hutcheon's 'narcissitic fictions'. Additionally, both the Yugoslav reality and the Yugoslav drama have featured the notion of the 'cult of the leader' in very Freudian terms, focussing on the disastrous consequences of such cultural behaviour to date. I hope to have highlighted issues for further research within all of these strands.

The historical study of the Southern Slavs' culture, in particular, opens up areas of research in terms of the theatrical features of the oral epic, which was enthroned as a

cultural symbol by the likes of Goethe and the brothers Grimm. Lionel Abel's notion of the impossibility of tragedy after the ancient Greeks and their belief system, is directly challenged by the Serbian epic. The epic cultural heritage, which was shared by other Southern Slavs too has shaped the development of theatre in the Balkans, although more exact patterns are yet to be established.

This early theatre, however, often relied on the sentimental value of the heroic stories. Metafictions could be seen as originating from the trend of rewriting history and the rewriting of older fictions. The key characteristic of metafictions, according to Hutcheon, is that they are empowering for the reader, who is invited to co-create meanings. This process is evident in Yugoslav metatheatre which was born out of a necessity to relate challenging ideas in a politically safe way. There is no space for sentiment alone here, metafictions are therefore cerebral too, without being prescriptive or didactic. This is certainly a notion to be tested on other significant examples of metatheatre in European and world dramaturgy.

My enquiry into epistemological and cognitive processes involved in the act of consuming theatre fictions was intended to determine more closely the way in which metatheatre is consumed, especially within the context of a highly theatricalised reality. The distinction between sentimental and emotional responses has been a particularly useful discovery, although much more can be written on the subject in this context. Additionally, the boundary between theatre and reality has been a recurrent theme in much of contemporary Yugoslav (meta)drama and this notion could certainly be explored in more depth.

Although scepticism was repeatedly expressed by Yugoslav critics in relation to the power of theatre to foster political changes – in relation to the 1980s Yugoslav metatheatre in particular, the model remains a favoured, effective and internationally renowned means of expression among Yugoslav playwrights. Finally, the question remains whether this was the result of particular political circumstances or whether it is indeed a defining feature of contemporary Yugoslav dramaturgy. This question can only be answered in the years to come.

A Note on Consequent Developments

Whether or not Yugoslav metatheatre eventually played a part in remedying the perils of its own socio-political context, the people of Yugoslavia, led by its youngest generation and their NGO Otpor (Resistance), finally ousted the war-mongering regime of Slobodan Milošević in the so-called 'Bulldozer Revolution' on 6th October 2000. Yet another attempt of the regime to ignore the election results was therefore thwarted, and the newly elected president Vojislav Koštunica took up his post, opening an active international policy and starting a process of economic transition. The former president was subsequently imprisoned on 1st April 2001, and two months later delivered to the Hague International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that Croatia's own superego of the early 1990s, Franjo Tudjman died in December 1999. Stipe Mesić – who had briefly held the post of president of the presidency in the final stages of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1990-1991) – was subsequently elected as President of Croatia in early 2000. Cultural exchange is slowly opening again between Yugoslavia and Croatia and other constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia.²³⁵ Whether or not the Southern Slavs – surrounded mainly by non-Slav countries – will ever again pursue an idea of living together – any further trading, exchange or development of business relations will certainly be greatly facilitated by their ability, in most cases, to communicate to each other without a translator.

²³⁵ Srdjan Dragojević's 1998 film *Rane (Wounds)* was the first Yugoslav film to be released in independent Croatia. Its subtitling into Croatian caused an uproar and some acerbic mockery in the opposition paper *Feral Tribune*, due to the fact that the subtitling actually ended up being a transcription rather than a translation.

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In addition to the general absence of the English language sources on Yugoslav theatre, this research has encountered further problems. Yugoslav literature on contemporary drama and theatre is limited. At best, theatre critics and academics have tended to edit collections of contemporary plays and provide an accompanying essay or commentary, or to collect and publish their reviews and essays in book volumes, some of which have greatly facilitated analyses of certain plays in this thesis. The quarterly periodical Scena which has an annual edition in the English language, has been a particularly useful source of plays in translation as well as essays, reviews, overviews and commentaries. The break-up of Yugoslavia has had significant effect on publishing in general and particularly on theatre-related titles. On the one hand, the war and the economic crisis had an effect on what was being published and in what quantities. On the other, the market was significantly reduced. Whereas theatre-related literature might have been printed in several thousand copies before the war thus catering for the theatre students and academics all around the country, following the break-up, this kind of literature is rarely printed in more than five hundred copies. The number of authors is also significantly diminished.

While trying to trace a copy of the 1994 title Metateatralnost – a published thesis by Zoran Milutinović – I managed to find that the publisher's name was SIC, but that a publisher under that name did not officially exist anymore. Photocopying is the easiest and the most popular way of obtaining copies of relevant literature and the photocopying business is certainly thriving around the Belgrade University. This however is still very innocent in comparison to a very widely spread cultural piracy in Yugoslavia which took off at the time of the 1990s economic sanctions in an attempt to meet the market demands for music, satellite TV and computer software.

The archive of Belgrade's Theatre Museum has been of great help in the process of my field research. However, the effects of the country's break-up were noticeable here too. The bulky, neatly archived files of the 1980s press-clippings – which also often came in equal quantities from Zagreb and Sarajevo as well as Belgrade – were replaced in the 1990s by the thinning, incomplete volumes, often of insignificant value. Still I am very grateful to a kind young woman at the Museum who patiently stood by the photocopier for several hours creating my own archive of relevant reviews – naturally, at a set fee.

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- Kovačević, Dušan: Doktor šuster, Stubovi Kulture, Beograd, 2001
(Kovačević sees this play as the fifth part of his exploration of metatheatre; however the only evidence of metatheatre here is the presence of an opera singer as an invisible character in the play)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Šta je to u ljudskom biću što ga vodi prema piću in Odabrane drame 3, Stubovi Kulture, Beograd, 1998, pp 39-90; (Kovačević's first metaplay, written in 1976)
- Pavić, Milorad: A Theatre Menu for Ever and a Day; Dereta, Beograd, 1997
(As yet unperformed play by the internationally acclaimed Yugoslav magical realism novelist, featuring metatheatrical elements)
- Plavneš, Jordan: R (Macedonian metaplay from the 1980s, publication details not known)
- Šajtinac, Uglješa (tr. Radosavljević Heaney, Duska): The Propsmaster in Three Contemporary European Plays, Alumnus, Leeds, 2000
(1999 play about changing times focusing on a provincial theatre's propmaster)
- Šnajder, Slobodan: Držićev san, premiered in Zagreb in 1980, publication details not known (Play about the Renaissance Croatian playwright Marin Držić)
- Šnajder, Slobodan: Gamlett, premiered in Sarajevo in 1987, publication details not known (Play about a war time production of Hamlet)
- Zečević, Božidar: Pivara in Ka Novoj Drami 4, Tribina, Beograd, 1983
(War time play about entertainers)

Relevant "Parallel Worlds" Plays:

- Kovačević, Dušan: Balkanski špijun; Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, Beograd, 1996 (1984 play about a former inmate of a political prison who constructs an alternative reality on the basis of his paranoia)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Sabirni centar in Odabrane drame 1; Stubovi kulture, Beograd, 1998
- also: (tr. Barnett Dennis) The Gathering Place, Samuel French, New York, 1997
- Simović, Ljubomir: Čudo u Šarganu in Selenić, Slobodan: Antologija savremene srpske drame, Srpska književna zadruga, Beograd, 1977, pp 493-645

Politically Controversial Plays:

(In addition to the ones discussed in the thesis the following plays provoked controversy at the time of their premieres or were temporarily banned):

- Kovačević, Siniša: Sveti Sava; publication details not known (The 1990 premiere of the play provoked street riots, lead by a political party which saw the play as sacrilege)
- Mihajlović, Dragoslav: Kad su cvetale tikve in Uvodjenje u posao: drame; Narodna knjiga, Beograd, no date (The play was premiered in 1969 to critical and popular acclaim but withdrawn for political reasons after the fifth performance)
- Radulović, Jovan: Golubnjača; BIGZ, Beograd, Second Edition, no date
(The play was premiered in 1982 but subsequently withdrawn for political reasons)

Relevant Films (by screenplay author):

- Marković, Goran: Već Vidjeno; (dir. Marković, Goran), 1987 (featuring the 1980s taboo-breaking concerns about the treatment of actors in the aftermath of the Second World War)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Balkanski špijun; (dir. Nikolić, Božidar and Kovačević, Dušan), 1984 (The screen version of the play received an award at Montreal)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Maratonci trče počasni krug; (dir. Šijan, Slobodan), 1982 (Adaptation of Kovačević's very first play which was also a box office hit; featuring metacinematic elements)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Poseban tretman; (dir. Paskaljević, Goran), 1980 (Based on the metaplay *Šta je to u ljudskom biću što ga vodi prema piću*)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Sabirni centar; (dir. Marković, Goran), 1989
- Kovačević, Dušan: Underground; (dir. Kusturica, Emir), 1995 (Metacinematic Cannes-award winner, based on an early unsuccessful play)
- Kovačević, Dušan: Urnebesna tragedija (dir. Marković, Goran), 1995 (Metacinematic version of the metaplay)
- Simović, Ljubomir: Boj na Kosovu (dir. Šotra, Zdravko), 1989 (Although a huge commercial hit at the time, the film features a degree of "parallel worlds" fantasy as envisaged by the author)

NB: The above lists are not exhaustive in terms of any one author's complete oeuvre; e.g. not all of Kovačević's plays and screenplays are included above. Equally, not all of the Yugoslav metaplays or politically controversial plays are included above. Cited references are those which have informed this thesis.

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Slobodan Šnajder: Hrvatski Faust; directed by Roberto Ciulli,
Theater ad Ruhr
(Photo courtesy of Aleksandar Milosavljević)



Slobodan Šnajder: Hrvatski Faust; directed by Roberto Ciulli



Slobodan Šnajder: Hrvatski Faust; directed by Roberto Ciulli



Dejan Mijač
(Photo courtesy of Aleksandar Milosavljević)



Branislav Nušić: Sumnjivo Lice; directed by Dejan Mijač (no date)
(Photo courtesy of Aleksandar Milosavljević)



Ljubomir Simović



Ljubomir Simović: Čudo u Šarganu; directed by Mira Trailović, Atelje 212, 1975 (Photo courtesy of Aleksandar Milosavljević, Editor of Ludus)



Ljubomir Simović: Putujuće pozorište Šopalović; directed by Kokan Mladenović, Narodno Pozorište Beograd, 2001 (photo on www.bg-pozoriste.co.yu)



Dušan Kovačević
(Photo courtesy of Aleksandar Milosavljević, Editor of Ludus)



Dušan Kovačević: Balkanski špijun; directed by Dušan Jovanović; JDP, 1983

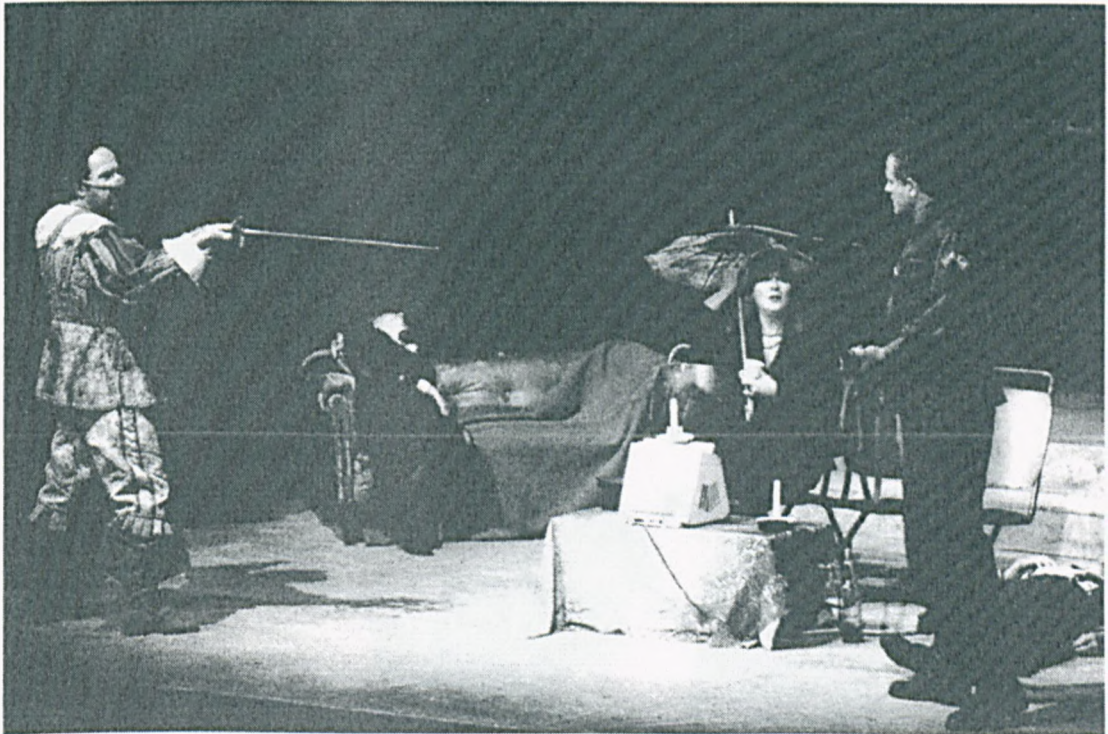
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Dušan Kovačević: Klaustrofobična komedija; Zvezdara Teatar, 1987
(Photo published on www.zvezdarateatar.co.yu)



Dušan Kovačević: Urnebesna tragedija; Zvezdara Teatar, 1991
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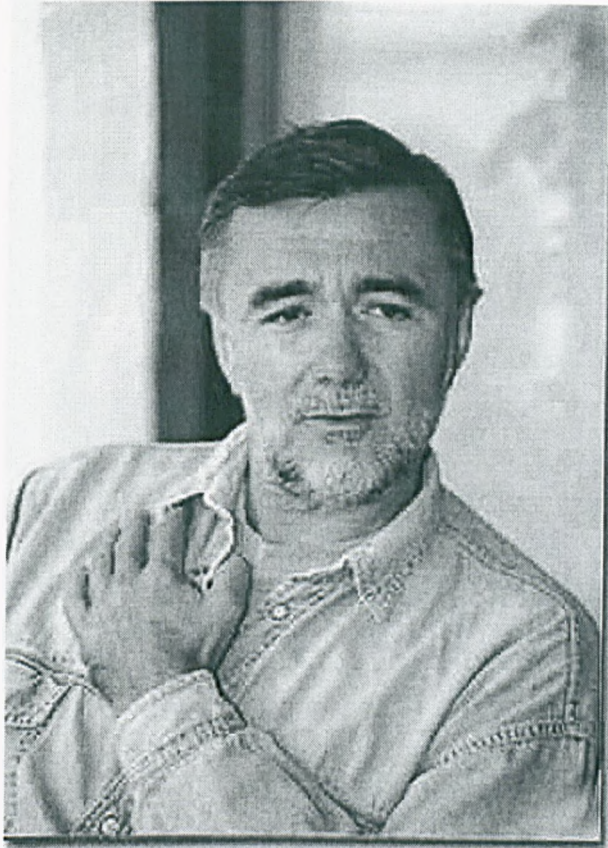
Dušan Kovačević: Lari Tompson; Zvezdara Teatar, 1996
(Photo courtesy of Aleksandar Milosavljević, Editor of Ludus)



Dušan Kovačević: Doktor Šuster; Zvezdara Teatar, 2001
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Dušan Kovačević: Doktor Šuster; Zvezdara Teatar, 2001
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Dušan Kovačević

(Photo published on www.zvezdarateatar.co.yu)



Nebojša Romčević: Karolina Nojber; Grad Teatar Budva, 1998

APPENDIX ONE

PLAYS

The Deceased

By Branislav Nušić

Translation by Duška Radosavljević Heaney

CHARACTERS:

Pavle Marich
Milan Novakovich
Spasoye Blagoyevich
Mr Dyurich
Lyubomir Protich
Anta
Mladen Dyakovich
Mile
Alyosha
Adolph Schwartz
Rina
Agnia
Vukitsa
First Police Agent
Second Police Agent
Maria – a maid
Anna – a maid
Sofia – a maid

Three years pass between the prelude and the first act.

(Written and set in the 1930s Belgrade.)

THE PRELUDE

A tastefully arranged room in Marich's house.

1. PAVLE, MARIA

MARIA (*an elderly maid, enters*): Sir, a gentleman is here – he says he's been called.

PAVLE (*sitting at a small table, engrossed in a book*): Oh, yes, let him in!

MARIA (*goes to the door and lets the Agent in*).

PAVLE (*to Maria*): Please go and inform the lady.

MARIA (*goes left*).

2. PAVLE, AGENT

PAVLE: If I'm right, you are from the Police.

AGENT: Yes, sir.

PAVLE (*nonchalantly*): The matter is not that tragic at all you see. However, my wife was very upset and called the police immediately. (*He notices Rina at the door*). Anyway, she is here now, so she can explain.

3. RINA, PAVLE, AGENT

RINA (*wearing an elegant morning coat*): The gentleman is from the Police?

AGENT: Yes, madam.

RINA: There isn't much to explain: we had a robbery last night.

AGENT: Can you be a bit more precise?

PAVLE: I'll explain. My wife and I went to the theatre last night. When we came back at about 11 o'clock, we came through this room – our bedroom is just over here – and, as far as I remember, everything was in perfect order. This morning, however, I found this desk – which is normally locked – broken into and everything in it turned upside down, as you can see.

AGENT (*approaches a female writing desk with one open drawer and all contents in disarray*): Anything else apart from this?

RINA: Just that.

AGENT: Could you tell me who was the first to notice, please?

PAVLE: I always get up first, my work is such that I have to leave early – so, I came through here and this is what I found. I woke my wife straightaway and she phoned for the police.

AGENT (*inspecting the desk*): The drawer has obviously been opened by force. Can you tell me what is missing?

PAVLE: That's my wife's desk, she'll know.

RINA: I keep small pieces of jewellery and some trifles in here – just insignificant toiletry. I always have two or three hundred dinars of my spending money in here, and none of that is missing – even the money is still here. Only this cassette has been broken – it is normally locked and I keep my letters in here. Some letters have been stolen.

AGENT: It means that the theft was not motivated by material gain. Consequently, I do not think that the thief came from the outside. Have you got anyone else in the house?

RINA: We have a maid, but I don't think it was her. She is an honest and honourable old lady who has served us faithfully for many years.

AGENT (*thinking*): Could you tell me whether any particular letters have been stolen – or is it–

RINA (*confused*): Oh dear... I don't know... they are all equally important to me: some of them are intimate, from my youth...

AGENT (*after a bit of thought observing both of them*): If you wish, I can start an official enquiry, however, with your permission, I'd rather not give the matter more significance than it really has.

PAVLE and RINA (*keep quiet*).

AGENT: All I can conclude is that the theft was not motivated by self-interest, the thief did not come from the outside; he is in the house. I do not think there is any need to go any further than this. I ask for your permission to leave. Madam, Sir! (*He leaves*).

4. PAVLE, RINA

PAVLE (*again engrossed in the book*).

RINA (*having glanced scornfully at him, goes to her room. Stops at the door, turns around and with an emphasis*): The police agent concluded that the thief is in the house.

PAVLE: Yes, I heard.

RINA (*goes to her room*).

5. PAVLE, MARIA

PAVLE (*lifts his head and glances at Rina leaving; after she closes the door, he goes to the telephone, takes the telephone book and looks for a particular number*).

MARIA (*enters*): The supervisor of the building site.

PAVLE: Alyosha? Let him in.

MARIA (*lets Alyosha in, exits*).

6. ALYOSHA, PAVLE

PAVLE: What is it, Alyosha? Is everything all right over there?

ALYOSHA (*speaks with a Russian accent*): Yes, mister engineer!

PAVLE: Have you increased the numbers on the site?

ALYOSHA: Yes, mister engineer.

PAVLE: Any problems with the transport of materials?

ALYOSHA: No, mister engineer.

PAVLE: Why have you left work?

ALYOSHA: I was waiting for you there, I think you will come, as usual, like every morning, so you didn't come—

PAVLE: Do you need me?

ALYOSHA (*confused*): I think you will come, so you didn't come—

PAVLE: Tell me then, what is it; why were you waiting for me?

ALYOSHA: Mister engineer! I am grateful to you, very grateful. You were my father; good, generous father. Three years ago you gave me job...

PAVLE: But why all this gratitude! You are a good worker, I am very pleased with you, and that's all.

ALYOSHA: That's why I am sad, I am very sad, and I am afraid to hurt you. I wouldn't like to, I wouldn't like to hurt you.

PAVLE: You look very strange, Alyosha. You look as though you'd like to tell me something and you don't know how? Maybe you are not happy with your salary?

ALYOSHA: Oh, no, sir!

PAVLE: Is your work getting too hard?

ALYOSHA: No, no, no!

PAVLE: So what is it?

ALYOSHA: I came to thank you for everything you did for me, and to ask you to take my resignation.

PAVLE: Resignation? You've found a better job?

ALYOSHA: No. I never leave you for another job, for another salary, but, but...

PAVLE: Are you ill?

ALYOSHA (*shakes his head looking down*): Nyet.

PAVLE: Well, what is it then, tell me?

ALYOSHA: I have to, I have to tell you, I cannot hide from you. (*Pause, he fights himself, and finally raises his head*) You know my Lidochka?

PAVLE: Your wife?

ALYOSHA: Yes!

PAVLE: I think I saw her once when she came to see you at work. A kind and pretty lady, if I remember well.

ALYOSHA: She leaves me.

PAVLE: She left you?

ALYOSHA: Yes. There was singer, opera singer here, Pierkovski.

PAVLE: A Russian?

ALYOSHA: Not Russian, Polish. He was on tour here...

PAVLE: Your wife left with him?

ALYOSHA: She tells me she loves him very much, she cannot live without him. She said goodbye to me, I cried, she left.

PAVLE: Did it happen recently?

ALYOSHA: Three months ago!

PAVLE: Three months ago! That's a lot of time, you must've got used to it by now?

ALYOSHA: No, mister engineer, I love Lidochka, I love her very much.

PAVLE: But she doesn't love you?

ALYOSHA (*sighs*).

PAVLE: I don't understand why you'd want to leave your job because of that; do you want to go after her?

ALYOSHA: Not that. I do not want to spoil her happiness; she is happy there with him. Why should I spoil her happiness?

PAVLE: You think she is happy?

ALYOSHA: Yes, she writes to me, she writes she is happy, but still I have to help.

PAVLE: Financially?

ALYOSHA: Oh, no, she has, she has money. But will you allow me to read you a letter I received yesterday?

PAVLE: Where is she writing from?

ALYOSHA: From Berlin. He is there engaged.

PAVLE: So what does she say?

ALYOSHA (*unfolds the letter*): She writes in Russian.

PAVLE: I think I might understand that much.

ALYOSHA (*reads*): "Milyenki moy" (*He's embarrassed*) "My dearest". Sorry, that's just tenderness...

PAVLE: Just you continue.

ALYOSHA (*Reads*) "Mnye zdyes ocheny harasho, ya sosvyem schastlyiva."
 (*Speaks*) She says she is very happy there.
 (*Reads*) "Dorogoy moy Andryusha kazhdim dnyem balyshey menya lyubit"
 (*Speaks*) He loves her more and more every day.
 (*Reads*) "On ocheny laskoviy ko mnye; smotrit na menya kak na obraz."
 (*Speaks*) He looks after her like a relic.
 (*Reads*) "Ya schastlyiva, ya schastlyiveyshaya zhenshchina na svyetye."
 (*Speaks*) She the happiest women in the world.
 (*Reads*) "Maya schastiye adno obsoyatelystvo trevozhit."

PAVLE: I don't understand that one at all.

ALYOSHA: She says only one thing spoils her happiness.
 (*Reads*) "Ya znayu chto ti svyo vremya dumayesh oba mnye."
 (*Speaks*) She knows that I think about her all the time.
 (*Reads*) "Yesli by i ty nye dumal oba mnye, maya schastiye bylo by v dvoynye balyshey."

PAVLE: If you didn't think of her, she would be twice as happy.

ALYOSHA: Da! (*Reads*) "Zdelay odalzheniye, perestany dumat oba mnye, tym zdelayesh menya schastivlyeyshey zhenshchinoy na svyetye".

PAVLE: If you stopped thinking about her, you would make her the happiest women in the world.

ALYOSHA (*reads*): "Do groba lyubyashchaya tebya, Lidochka"

PAVLE: So this woman that loves you to death – what does she actually want?

ALYOSHA: She wants that I don't think about her.

PAVLE: Well, you can do that for her. Write to her that you won't think about her anymore.

ALYOSHA: I cannot. I cannot! I cannot not think about her; I want to make her the happiest woman in the world. Why can't she be happy? If we can't both be happy, let her be happy at least, let her be happy.

PAVLE: How do you mean to make her happy?

ALYOSHA: I must think about her. I love her. I cannot not think about her... If I am dead I won't think about her.

PAVLE: What do you mean dead?

ALYOSHA: I wrote to her.

PAVLE: What did you write?

ALYOSHA: I wrote: When you get this letter, the water of the Danube will cover me and I will not think about you anymore.

PAVLE: What are you talking about; what water, what Danube?

ALYOSHA: I wrote like that.

PAVLE: You wrote such a letter to her?

ALYOSHA: Yes, and I come to apologize to you, to say goodbye and thank you.

PAVLE: What are you talking about Alyosha?

ALYOSHA (*taking some papers out of his pocket*): These are receipts for materials; this is a copy of a contract with the brick maker, it is signed; these are tax returns; this is your ID that you gave me when I went to the auction on your behalf...

PAVLE (*interrupting*): Please, Alyosha, you keep all those papers with you; you can't die like that, how do you imagine you can just die like that. Does an unfaithful woman deserve that you die because of her? On the contrary, that's precisely why you should continue to live, continue to exist. If you give her the peace of mind, she will ridicule your death; no, my dear Alyosha, one doesn't die for the love of an unfaithful woman.

ALYOSHA: I cannot!

PAVLE: You mustn't be so weak.

ALYOSHA (*wants to protest*).

PAVLE (*interrupts him*): It can't be just that, just the letter. Alyosha, you are embroiled in a lot of negative feelings, and the four months of hard work have weakened you mentally. You must be a bit homesick as well. Whilst Lidochka was around, your heart was full of feelings towards her; and now you are lonely, your heart is empty and the nostalgia has taken over. All of that is only natural, and believe me, you can get over it.

ALYOSHA (*shakes his head*): Nyet!

PAVLE: Listen to me, Alyosha, a man is susceptible to women's charms; it's always been that way. We all have our weaknesses towards them, but not to the extent that we should sacrifice our life for them. We mustn't be despondent. Would a shipwrecked person simply give in to the sea? No, they'd look for a way to save themselves and reach the shore! Believe me, it is only mental tiredness, as I said before, you are disappointed and nostalgic. Listen to me Alyosha, I'm giving you a day off today and tomorrow; please rest!

ALYOSHA (*refusing*): Ah!

PAVLE: Just you listen to me, go out, have a bit of fun, and you'll feel better. I know, you might not be able to afford it. (*He takes some money from his wallet*) Here is 500 dinars.

ALYOSHA (*protesting*): But mister engineer...

PAVLE: You may consider it as a bonus for overtime work; you must accept it! (*He pushes the money into Alyosha's pocket*). Go out, go to "The Russian Lyre" or to "Casbeck" or... I don't know the names of your bars. Go there, and you'll find your friends, you'll listen to the balalaikas, you'll hear the songs from your homeland and, maybe you'll cry a little, but those are healing tears, please believe me. Just do that, and you'll feel much better.

ALYOSHA: Nyet, sir.

PAVLE: You northern people, although you don't get much heat from the sun, you are a bit softer, your heart is more vulnerable, you are dreamers. We are not, we are a bit more rational and more resilient. So please accept my advice and you'll see the difference.

ALYOSHA (*fighting himself*): I cannot, I cannot!

PAVLE: Please, Alyosha!

ALYOSHA: I wrote to her.

PAVLE: Just accept my advice today, and if tomorrow you feel the same, if you are still determined, then that's your destiny, I can't stop you. Will you try to do as I ask you, just for today? (*He stretches out his hand*).

ALYOSHA (*looks him in the eye and stretches out his hand without enthusiasm*).

PAVLE: That's it! Go out and meet people, cheer up! (*Looks at him*). Wait, you can't go like that. Have you got a better coat? This one is too worn out and dirty, you can't go like that. (*He starts to go to his room*).

ALYOSHA: No, mister engineer, no, no, no! I'm too embarrassed; all of this is from you anyway, the coat, the shirt, the shoes, I can't take anymore, no!

PAVLE: Please, don't mention it! (*He goes to his room and comes back carrying a nice coat*). That's it, take that off!

ALYOSHA: Please, sir, in God's good name.

PAVLE: Please take it off, please!

ALYOSHA (*takes off his coat*).

PAVLE (*helping him to put the new coat on*): That's it! Transfer all those papers here, that's it! And the old coat? Well, you can still wear it at the building site. Now, you look very decent, ready to go out. Now, just do as I ask you. Tomorrow when we meet, you'll see, everything will be different.

ALYOSHA (*folding his old coat, after he has transferred all the papers*): Only, you know I wrote to her... (*Exits*).

7. PAVLE, RINA

PAVLE (*first he goes to Rina's door listening in, and having heard something he returns quickly to the table where he was reading, sits down and pretends to be engrossed in the book again*).

RINA (*comes out of her room, dressed to go out, and goes to the main door, without looking at Pavle*).

PAVLE (*after she's gone, raises his head, and after a pause, gets up and rings the bell*).

8. MARIA, PAVLE

PAVLE: The lady has left?

MARIA: Yes!

PAVLE: Listen, whoever asks for me, I am not at home. Do you understand?

MARIA: I understand!

9. LYUBOMIR, THE FORMER

LYUBOMIR (*at that moment he appears at the door carrying a big book*): May I come in?

PAVLE (*a little confused, unconvincingly*): Yes, yes... please! Come in!

LYUBOMIR (*feeling a bit uncomfortable*): I don't want to impose; I just wanted to return this book to a girl, but I didn't find her. I do apologize, it seems I came by at the wrong time. (*He puts the book down on the table*).

PAVLE: It's not the most suitable moment, but it doesn't matter; I always have enough time for my young friend. (*To Maria*) You may go!

MARIA (*exits*).

10. LYUBOMIR, PAVLE

LYUBOMIR: I am so sorry. (*He wants to go*) May I?

PAVLE: Please stay, I insist. I am a bit perturbed... In fact, maybe it's good that you came, I... I need a friend at the moment; I need to talk to someone. Please, sit down.

LYUBOMIR: I'd be very glad if I could be of any help to you.

PAVLE: For the one who suffers, genuine understanding is sufficient.

LYUBOMIR (*surprised*): What... You're suffering?

PAVLE (*startled*): No, no I'm not suffering... Although, why deny it, it's a kind of suffering! (*Upset*) Dear young man, my wife is unfaithful to me! (*He is startled again, it seems too rash to him to have confided in a young man, keeps quiet, walks around in an agitated manner*).

LYUBOMIR (*surprised, follows him with his eyes*).

PAVLE (*finally feels the need to justify himself and stands in front of Lyubomir*): I do not know why I have just confided in you, but... there you are, you came by, you were the first to come by, and I had the need to say it outloud ever since this morning.

LYUBOMIR: Have no regrets that you've confided in me, you've confided in a friend. I am very much indebted to you, Mr Marich; you know how much respect and admiration I have for you. I would be very happy if I could in any way offer some consolation.

PAVLE: In this case any consolation would be illusionary; it would seem like a statement of commiserations offered to the bereaved.

LYUBOMIR: Well... who knows. Maybe it's not that bad, maybe it's just the petty chit-chat of malcontents!

PAVLE: Yes, chit-chat, it's true, and I tried to ignore the chit-chat, but... (*He takes a pack of letters from his pocket*). These are the letters from her lover; I committed a robbery and got hold of them. The chit-chat was only a speculation, a portent, which didn't give me the name, and the name is here now, in my hands, his name is here! (*He crumples the letters in his hand with excitement*). Here it is!

LYUBOMIR (*feeling embarrassed, shrugs*).

PAVLE (*still excited*): Here it is, but I can't, I don't have the courage to look! I'm afraid that my suspicions will be confirmed, and that would be terrible. That would be a defeat. I'm afraid of the truth; wouldn't it be easier to run away from it? It is bad enough that I know of her infidelity! (*He fights himself*). However, it vexes me, it will vex me, it would vex me all my life. I've made my bed, now I must lay in it. (*He opens one of the letters and looks at the signature. Another upsurge of emotion*). It is him! I thought so, I thought so...

LYUBOMIR (*approaching him*): Please, calm down! Please! Those things always look worse at the first glance.

PAVLE: My childhood friend, my school friend, my business partner, my best friend...

LYUBOMIR: Mr Novakovich!?

PAVLE: Yes, he, he! Ah, that's so mean, so vile!

LYUBOMIR (*pause, still uncertain*): So what are you going to do?

PAVLE: What? That's what I'm wondering. I'm wondering, and I can't decide.

LYUBOMIR: Surely, you don't mean to...?

PAVLE: Leave her, take a revenge on him? Oh, no! But what? In order to make a decision I need to get over it, for I loved that woman, I need to get over the pain!

LYUBOMIR: I fully understand, but I am not able, nor is it right for me to give you advice.

PAVLE: I am afraid that in this moment of agitation I might make a wrong decision. If I could only be on my own for a while, so I can think it over.

LYUBOMIR: Maybe you can go somewhere for a couple of days.

PAVLE: Yes, that would be best. (*Short thinking pause*). That's what I'll do, I'll go somewhere.

LYUBOMIR: For a couple of days.

PAVLE: I don't know for how long, I don't know where; unknown destination for an undetermined period. I do not have any plans, but I have a need to isolate myself for awhile so I can get over it and think it over in peace. To prevent a rash decision, the best thing to do is run away from myself. Thank you, my friend, you gave me good advice.

LYUBOMIR: Can I do anything for you?

PAVLE (*remembers*): Yes, thank you for your offer, you could do me a little favour.

LYUBOMIR: With pleasure!

PAVLE (*takes his passport out*): If you can get me a visa as soon as possible. (*Leafing through the passport*). Oh, look, what a lucky coincidence! I got a visa six weeks ago when I was planning to go to an international fair. It is still valid. That's good, that's very good! (He puts the passport away).

LYUBOMIR (*starting to go*): I shall be on my way then.

PAVLE (*stretching his hand out*): I rely on your discretion. (*He remembers something and withdraws his hand*). Just a moment, I've just thought of a great favour you could do for me.

LYUBOMIR: Certainly.

PAVLE (*goes to another room and comes back with a big file of manuscripts*): This, my young friend, is my most precious possession. I have worked for seven years on this thesis in hydrography, and I have worked on it with great conviction that it will make an impressive contribution to the pool of knowledge.

LYUBOMIR: You work in this area as well?

PAVLE: Yes, I am an architect and a civil engineer, but hydrography is my great passion, and I've spent all my free time on it. The hydrographical problem is a general problem; three quarters of the globe's most fertile land is covered with swamps, marshes and aquatic sediments, and overpopulation causes great crises and problems in the world! I have even tried to establish new hydrographic methods. I am telling you all this to point out to you the significance of this work and what it means to me. I normally keep this manuscript locked in the drawer of my desk, however, I have just had a terrible thought that in my absence my wife might resort to the same action that I used against her and break into my desk. She would not find anything interesting, but she might just out of spite, knowing how important this manuscript is to me, she might decide to take her revenge on me and pull out a few pages.

LYUBOMIR: Ah!

PAVLE: Oh, when they are angry women are capable of committing horrible things. I would like to entrust this manuscript to you for safekeeping.

LYUBOMIR (*surprised at this demonstration of trust*): Oh, Mr Marich!

PAVLE (*handing out the manuscript*): Here I entrust you with it; you know its value and I'm sure you'll know how to look after it.

LYUBOMIR: Rest assured, Mr Marich, I'll look after it with great care.

PAVLE: Thank you, and now goodbye!

LYUBOMIR: Goodbye! (*exits*).

11. PAVLE (*alone*)

PAVLE (*on the telephone*): Hallo... hallo! Radich and Todorovich? Who is speaking, please? That's you, Peter? This is engineer Marich. I wanted to inform you that I am going to be away for a while; however, your deadline is in two days time. Please, could you deal with my partner Mr Novakovich instead; he is fully authorised to deal with you on my behalf, and our bank account is in the name of the company.... yes, yes, please, contact him.

12. MARIA, PAVLE

MARIA (*enters*): Mr Novakovich.

PAVLE (*startled with agitation*): He?

MARIA: I said you were-

PAVLE: No, no, let him in!

MARIA (*withdraws*).

13. NOVAKOVICH, PAVLE

NOVAKOVICH (*approaches with a pleasant expression*): Good afternoon, I've been at the site, and as you never turned up, I thought I'd come around to see whether you are all right...

PAVLE (*controlling his feelings with difficulty*): You have not been at the site, nor have you come around to see whether I'm all right, my wife has sent you here. She visited you not long ago with great alarm, she told you that I broke into her desk and that your secret is out. She has obviously sent you to probe me.

NOVAKOVICH: What secrets are you talking about!? I don't understand you.

PAVLE (*approaches him and talks into his face*): You scamp!
NOVAKOVICH (*insulted*): What does this mean?
PAVLE: It means that you are a vile scamp!
NOVAKOVICH: I do not approve of your talking to me like that!
PAVLE: You are right, I can see that one should talk to you in a different way too, but... I am controlling myself for the moment, we shall talk later! I promise you, we shall talk!
NOVAKOVICH: All right, Pavle, we'll talk openly about the matter.
PAVLE: If you think that your confession constitutes an open conversation – you are mistaken. I do not need your confession.
NOVAKOVICH: Not a confession, but maybe a justification.
PAVLE: Can immorality be justified!?
NOVAKOVICH: You are undoubtedly right, you feel offended, your pride is hurt.
PAVLE: My honour!
NOVAKOVICH: Pride!
PAVLE: Even if it is pride, who gives you the right over it.
NOVAKOVICH: For God's sake, Pavle, are you not able to see life for what it is? That's life, that's how it is. It's always been like that. You are busy all the time, you go to the site at the break of dawn, you have a quick lunch, in the evening you come back tired, and even then you spend all your time with books, and some scientific theses. You never exchange a few nice words with your wife. She, however, is a young woman, she loves life, needs attention and affection.
PAVLE: And she will achieve that by ruining her marriage, she will achieve it with the shameful aid of my friend and my business partner.
NOVAKOVICH: Me or anyone else, it doesn't make any difference. I happened to have enough time, and maybe I even had the ability to give her attention...
PAVLE: And enough baseness to lose all consideration.
NOVAKOVICH: I don't see why you are so upset? There are some things in life that one has to just accept. Any opposition in this case is true barbarity...
PAVLE (*gets angry at this cynicism, opens the door, gets hold of a chair and swinging it at Novakovich*): Out! Out!
NOVAKOVICH (*getting up*): Real barbarity, is it not?
PAVLE: Out!
NOVAKOVICH (*exits*).

14. PAVLE, MARIA

PAVLE (*having calmed down a little, rings the bell*).
MARIA (*arrives*).
PAVLE: Maria, can you please, pack my luggage, prepare the blue suit and everything else.
MARIA: You are going on a journey, sir?
PAVLE: Yes!
MARIA: A long journey?
PAVLE (*irritated*): How do I know!
MARIA: I ask because of the suitcase, shall I use the bigger one, or—
PAVLE: Don't use any, I don't need any luggage! I won't take a single handkerchief out of this house... I don't need anything!
MARIA: As you wish, sir.
PAVLE: I don't need anything. You may go now, I'll call you later!
MARIA (*exits*).

15. PAVLE, RINA

PAVLE (*thinks for a moment, then takes all the stolen letters out of his pocket, crumples them up and throws them on the floor with disgust*).
RINA (*coming in she goes straight to him; stands in front of him, without the courage and pride she'd had before*): I would like to explain some things to you, Pavle.
PAVLE: Sorry, I have no time for that at the moment, I am going on a journey this moment.
RINA: Where?
PAVLE: Unknown destination.
RINA: For how long?
PAVLE: I don't know, but it is likely to be for long, for a very long time.

RINA: Does it mean—

PAVLE (*leaving*): That means that I am going on a journey. (*He leaves suddenly, slamming the door after himself and without turning back*).

RINA (*realising the truth of the situation, scared*): Pavle! (*Falls into a chair next to the door and starts sobbing*).

CURTAIN

ACT 1

Tastefully arranged room at Milan Novakovich's.

1. NOVAKOVICH, RINA

NOVAKOVICH (*after the morning tea, he is sitting at the table somewhat ruffled, holding a silver teaspoon in his hand and looking at it*).

RINA (*sitting opposite him in a luxuriant morning dress*): Tired again, what? Under a little cloud? (*She gets up, goes behind him and embraces him*). No clouds, please, I want everything to be bright and cheerful.

NOVAKOVICH: A happy marriage is always bright and cheerful.

RINA: Well, isn't our marriage happy!? Have you got anything to tell me?

NOVAKOVICH (*decisively*): Oh, no!

RINA (*kissing him*): Then cheer up.

NOVAKOVICH: Oh, it's nothing, just a trifle, nothing worth mentioning.

RINA: So there is something?

NOVAKOVICH: It's insignificant, really.

RINA: Let me hear – what is it?

NOVAKOVICH (*pointing at the teaspoon*): You see this monograph. Your old name. It's two and a half years since we got married, and these things are still around.

RINA: For God's sake, Milan!

NOVAKOVICH: Well, yes, it's totally insignificant, but I'm not comfortable having to be reminded of your ex-husband every morning.

RINA (*embracing him, she is laughing*): For God's sake, Milan! It never occurred to me, and it's so easy... (*She rings a bell*). Honestly, it never occurred to me.

2. ANNA, THE FORMER

ANNA (*young pretty girl, enters*).

RINA (*pointing at the table*): You can clear up. In future, Anna, you will not lay these silver teaspoons. You can bring the other ones from the small cupboard.

ANNA: Yes, I understand!

RINA (*picking up one of the spoons*): And afterwards, after the gentleman's gone to work, you will take these teaspoons... you know the little jeweller's shop opposite the Kasina? That jeweller used to work for me. You will go there and ask him if he can re-melt these 12 spoons and make me another set.

ANNA: Certainly. (*By then she has collected everything onto a tray, exits*).

3. THE FORMER, without ANNA

RINA: There you are!

NOVAKOVICH (*kissing her*): You are so attentive and so decisive!

RINA: Well, should I allow some trifles to spoil my happiness?

NOVAKOVICH (*getting up, embraces her*): Thank you, you almost smother me with your love.

RINA: I don't just do it to please you, I really feel that way.

NOVAKOVICH (*kissing her hand*): Good bye for now, my treasure!

RINA: Oh, I might be silly, but wouldn't it be nice if you hadn't gone into the civil service, so you can stay at home the whole day, and be with me all the time. (*She is laughing*). Silly isn't it?

NOVAKOVICH: Still, I like it. Bye, my love!

RINA (*embracing him, follows him to the door*): One more thing. You can go to the office from here whichever way you want, take hours to get there if you like, but at noon, promise me that you will get here at noon as soon as possible.

NOVAKOVICH: But of course! Of course! (*At the door they kiss, and he goes*).
RINA (*at the door*): Anna, please see the gentleman off!

4. RINA, ANNA

RINA (*standing at the door, waves for a while, then comes back in*).

ANNA (*enters*).

RINA: The gentleman's gone?

ANNA: Yes, he has.

RINA: Anna, I am going to get dressed and you get ready to go out. Oh, yes! When you go to the jeweller's, please call by at Mrs Sloutski at Poincaré's Street, ask her – how much longer do I have to wait for my negligee. She's been promising to get it done for a week now, tell her – I'm cross!

ANNA: Certainly.

RINA (*goes to the room on the left*).

5. ANTA, ANNA

ANTA (*a middle-aged man, slim, balding. He comes in panicking, looking behind him as if somebody is running after him. Sits down uninvited*): Anna, a glass of water, please!

ANNA: Yes! (*Goes out and comes back straight away with a glass of water*).

ANTA (*drinks it all up*): Thank you! Where is the lady?

ANNA: She is getting dressed.

ANTA: Getting dressed? She's getting dressed at such a moment!?

ANNA: She'll be ready in a minute!

ANTA: In a minute!? Women never get dressed in a minute. (*Remembers*). Please, tell me, is the lady a bit unsettled this morning?

ANNA: How do you mean unsettled?

ANTA: Well, you know what an unsettled woman looks like, you must've been unsettled at some point?

ANNA: The lady is in the same mood as usual.

ANTA: She hasn't sort of heard anything that could have disturbed her?

ANNA: Not as far as I know.

ANTA: Please go and call her, tell her it's very urgent, she doesn't have to button up to the last button. Please go!

ANNA (*goes*).

6. ANTA, then RINA and ANNA

ANTA (*fidgiting nervously in the chair and wiping his forehead and neck with a large handkerchief*).

RINA (*dressed up, surprised and alarmed*): What is it for God's sake, what happened?

ANTA (*to Anna, who follows behind*): Anna, one more glass of water please.

ANNA (*exits*).

ANTA: Oh, it's nothing!

RINA: But you are so agitated?

ANTA: Of course I am agitated, you will be agitated as well when you hear.

RINA: So something has happened. Speak for God's sake!

ANNA (*brings in a glass of water*).

RINA (*to Anna*): You may go!

ANNA (*exits*).

RINA: Speak, speak for God's sake, is anyone ill?

ANTA: But, please, who would think of being ill in these circumstances?

RINA (*horrified*): Or... maybe, dead?

ANTA: Dead? Yes, dead! That would be very good, but that's the point, he is not dead.

RINA: Who, for God's sake, who are you talking about? Please don't torture me like this.

ANTA: Do you have heart problems?

RINA: Yes.

ANTA: That's it you see, that's why I have to tell you about it with great caution and from a distance.

RINA: All right! But please get on with it.

ANTA: I will, but I tell you, it's got to be with great caution. Please sit down.

RINA (*sits down*).

ANTA (*after she's sat down*): Here is a glass of water.

RINA (*impatient, disturbed*): Please speak!

ANTA: Tell me, please, do you remember your youth?

RINA: What kind of a question is that?

ANTA: I told you, we have to approach this from a distance: so, do you remember your youth?

RINA: But of course!

ANTA: You were of course a girl, before you became a woman?

RINA: Really, sir!

ANTA: I know, you want to say that that's clear in itself, but I just have to state all the facts. So, once you got married, you were not a girl anymore?

RINA (*offended*): Please, sir, if this is a joke, it is very distasteful, and I-

ANTA: Be patient, we are almost there. You got married, and what happened then?

RINA: Then I became a widow.

ANTA: That's what I mean. You see, this fact is incorrect.

RINA: What do you mean incorrect?

ANTA: Listen, but please we have to treat this with great caution.

RINA: What's got into you this morning, sir: what are these riddles, what kind of a conversation is this?

ANTA: Please be patient. We shall bring the whole matter to the light of day presently. Let us see, on what basis do you claim that you are a widow? Your husband got cross with you one day, left home and said he didn't know where he was going and when he was coming back. This is the statement you gave at the investigation.

RINA: Precisely!

ANTA: And he left, or rather – disappeared. The day after, his suit was found by the Danube, and all his papers were in it, even his identification card – and the whole matter was clear. The body was found six weeks later in the Danube, completely deformed, of course, but it was established that it had been in the water for six weeks, exactly the amount of time since the disappearance of your husband, also his initials were found on the shirt, and we proceeded with a ceremonial funeral. You were behind the coffin in the procession, and I was there too.

RINA: But please, why are you telling me all these things that have been repeated hundreds of times? I've had it all up to here, and I don't want to think about it anymore.

ANTA: OK, let's skip that for now. But there is one thing we cannot skip and that is: what did you do when you became a widow?

RINA: I got married again.

ANTA: That's where you went wrong you see, you shouldn't have got married.

RINA: That is a personal thing, sir, and I do not permit such comments–

ANTA: Still you made a mistake. I can give you an example of a certain Saveta Tomich. She is an honourable, but poor woman. She cleans people's houses to support herself.

RINA: Please, sir, leave Saveta Tomich alone, what does some Saveta have to do with all this? You storm into my house like that, totally perturbed, start speaking in riddles, annoying me and frightening me and now – you tell me about some Saveta.

ANTA: That's not 'some Saveta', dear lady, but an authentic Saveta, and after you've heard me out, you will understand.

RINA (*sits down, resigned*): OK, speak!

ANTA: That Saveta Tomich lost her husband in the war. He was killed and they buried him at the front. She received an official report about his death, on the basis of which she became a widow. As such, as an authentic widow, she married some tram driver. She'd suffered a lot on her own, so she needed some support to see her through. And she lived happily with her husband, and she would have lived happily ever after, but one day, after three years – her first husband turns up alive, released as a war prisoner.

RINA (*is shocked, gets up and looks him in the eye*).

ANTA: And of course, the second marriage immediately fell through because Saveta wasn't a widow when she got married the second time. And she had to go back to the first husband.

RINA (*disturbed, pale*): Sir, do I understand you correctly?

ANTA: Take some water please, please!

RINA (*unaware of her actions, complies*).

ANTA: Sit down.

RINA (*sinks into an armchair, fidgeting with her hands*): Speak, in God's good name, please speak!

ANTA: I saw him!

RINA (*terrified, shrieks*): Whom?

ANTA: Him!

RINA (*desperate*): Whom, for God's sake?

ANTA: Your first husband.

RINA: This is terrible, this is a torture! Why did you come to torture me like this, who sent you? What is this you are talking about, who told you this rubbish; what do you want from me, speak, what do you want?

ANTA: I saw him.

RINA: Do you know him at all?

ANTA: How can I not know him, I owe him 10 000, God rest his soul!

RINA (*very disturbed*): That's... that's impossible... you are ill... that's... Oh, my God, I'm losing my mind!

ANTA: Please, don't! You mustn't do that now.

RINA: That can't be true. Say it's not true, please, please say it! Or if it's true, I don't know, I can't think.

ANTA: There you are, what would have happened if I hadn't told you like this, with caution and from a distance?

RINA (*gets hold of the phone*): Hallo, hallo! Mr Novakovich, please. He hasn't arrived yet! Look, please, this is not possible. No! (She puts the phone down). Oh, God!

ANTA: Why are you bothering him?

RINA: Well, who shall I talk to if not my husband?

ANTA: True, that's very true.

RINA (*going to the phone again, but before dialling*): Listen, don't allow me to raise the alarm if it was just a joke or if you didn't see well—

ANTA: Well who would make such a joke! You think I'm happy that I saw him? And I saw him, I saw him very clearly. Ristich, the shopkeeper, was standing in front of his shop and he was terribly surprised when he saw him. He simply went white. The deceased approached him, they shook hands and talked for a long while in front of the shop. When they parted, I went to Mr Ristich and asked him: Excuse me please, who was this gentleman you were just talking to? "That's the man" says Mr Ristich "whose funeral you went to; that's Mr Marich and he was just telling me how it all happened". There, that's what Mr Ristich told me, and he personally spoke to him.

RINA: Hallo! Hallo! Mr Novakovich please? How come he hasn't arrived to the office yet? (She puts the phone down agitated). That's terrible! That's impossible! May I ask you a favour, can you please go personally to the Ministry of Building and Environment, it's not very far, can you please go, you know, he must be there by now, maybe he stopped at some other office on the way, but he must be there. Find him at all costs and tell him to leave everything, everything, and come home immediately.

ANTA: He will get to the office, he will, any time now, please be patient.

RINA: No, no, no I can't be patient, I can't bear this, I can't bear it, please go, go, please!

ANTA (*getting up*): OK! I'll go now!

RINA: You can come back with him.

ANTA: Oh, yes, of course I will. (*Exits*).

7. ANNA, RINA

RINA (*rings the bell*).

ANNA: Yes?

RINA (*confused*): Actually... what did I want, oh I don't know... I've forgotten... I'll call you again.

ANNA: Certainly! (*Exits*).

8. MILE, RINA

MILE (*a dandy, powdered and well dressed, approaches her, embraces and starts kissing her*): How is my little darling?

RINA (*rests her head on his shoulder*): Oh, Mile, I am so unhappy, so unhappy.

MILE: But why, my sweetheart?

RINA: You will not believe it when I tell you... I don't believe it, I don't want to believe it, I can't believe it. It is too terrible!

MILE: What on earth is the matter? You are so upset.

RINA: The matter is very unusual, unimaginable, and I can't deal with it, I can't recollect myself, I can't think.

MILE (*strokes her hand*): Tell me, what happened?

RINA: Imagine, my first husband, the one that committed suicide by drowning, he's re-appeared, he is alive.

MILE (*surprised*): What do you mean? Alive? That's nonsense, that's impossible, you have a bit of a fever; there you are, you've got high temperature, you are just hallucinating a bit, must be fever.

RINA: I knew you wouldn't believe me. Well, no, it's not believable, still... you can imagine how distressed I was when I heard.

MILE: Calm down, darling; it can't be true.

RINA: It is true, oh, it is true; something tells me that it is true, I don't know why, but I'm sure of it.

MILE: But for goodness' sake, his body was found and identified...

RINA: There were some who doubted even then and who claimed that all the evidence was inconclusive, but he hasn't been in touch for three years, and that was the best proof.

MILE: You would be in a very difficult situation if it was all true.

RINA: I'd have to go back to him; imagine, I'd have to go back. I've only just found true marital happiness and now I have to return to marital slavery? I would lose you as well, Mile! *(She falls into his arms and starts sobbing)*.

MILE: You must be strong, darling. We will find a way out of it, we have to seek some advice!

RINA: Seek advice? Who the devil can I seek advice from when I've been trying to contact my husband for the last half hour and he is not in the office; he left God knows how long ago, and he still hasn't got there.

MILE *(looks at his watch)*: He will not get there before ten.

RINA: You say it as though you know it for certain?

MILE: I know just as well as you know. At this time of day, just before going to the office, he always goes to Lidochka's for a coffee. That's been going on like that every day ever since Lidochka came back from Berlin.

RINA *(indifferent)*: Does he stay there long?

MILE: Till he finishes his coffee, until about ten o'clock.

RINA: Who can wait till then, I have to talk to him as soon as possible.

MILE: Madam Salev, Lidochka's neighbour, is on the same floor, and she has the telephone as well. If you wish—?

RINA: Oh, no, no. I don't want to disturb him like that. He mustn't know that I know either. That's where our marital bliss resides – we never disturb each other like that.

MILE: Then you must be patient.

RINA: Patient! As if it were so easy!

MILE: The best thing is – don't think about it. I can divert your thoughts to other things. My dearest darling, I have totally run out of money, and look I'm so thin like a winter mosquito. In a couple of days I'm getting some money in, but in the meantime, do you think you could lend me 200?

RINA *(takes some money out of her purse)*: You always have financial problems.

MILE: What can I do, I'm trying my best, but life is so complicated!

9. ANTA, THE FORMER

ANTA *(entering)*: He's not there, I told you, he's not there!

RINA *(to Mile)*: So, as I said, sir, my husband wouldn't be able to receive you even if he came back now; he has certain problems at the moment. In fact, it would be best if you made an appointment to see him in his office regarding your business, he seldom receives at home.

MILE *(kissing her hand)*: That's what I'll do, madam. I do apologize! Good bye! *(Exits)*.

10. RINA, ANTA

RINA *(having sent Mile a kiss stealthily, to Anta)*: I do not know why they've got offices when everybody always looks for them at home. So, he is not there?

ANTA: No.

RINA: But he must be there!

ANTA: I've just been there.

RINA *(picks up the phone)*: Hallo, hallo! Is that you Milan? Yes. *(To Anta)* There you are!

Have you heard anything? You haven't? Please, come home at once! Please! You haven't sat down yet? Don't. Come home at once, the matter is very serious and very urgent; I'll go mad waiting for you... Hurry up, please! *(Puts the phone down)*. He's coming!

11. SPASOYE, THE FORMER

SPASOYE *(a nouveau riche)*: Good morning! *(Kisses Rina's hand)*. I'm sorry, I've knocked twice. I don't want to impose, I've just called by to ask you a favour. My daughter would like to look at some materials for her wedding dress, for as you know, her wedding day is near. And she would very much like you to come with her, she trusts your taste immensely and she won't do it without you.

RINA *(impatiently)*: Yes, but not now, not today; I have some more important matters to attend to, which actually concern you as well.

SPASOYE: Me?

RINA: You haven't heard anything?

SPASOYE: I don't know, what was I supposed to hear?
RINA (*to Anta*): How come, sir, nobody has heard anything apart from you.
ANTA: I haven't heard, I've seen.
SPASOYE: What the hell have you seen?
ANTA: I'll tell you. Do you have heart problems?
SPASOYE: Yes, a bit.
ANTA (*rings the bell*): Of course, it's typical for a man of your age.

12. ANNA, ANTA

ANNA (*enters*): You've called!
ANTA: Anna, can you please bring a glass of water.
ANNA: Certainly! (*Exits*).

13. RINA, SPASOYE, ANTA

ANTA (*to Spasoye*): Please, sit down, I've got to tell you this with great caution and from a distance.
RINA: Please, let go of your great caution, sir. (*To Spasoye*) The gentleman takes forever. I'll tell you – the man whom we all know to be dead, deceased, the man whom we buried, is alive.
SPASOYE (*startled shouts*): Who are you talking about, for God's sake?
ANTA: The one whose house in Terazije and whose entire estate you inherited.
SPASOYE: Come on, please; nonsense, childish nonsense... how can that be?
RINA: I can't believe it either.
SPASOYE: Who would believe anything like that, and who could invent such a thing, please?
RINA: I've heard it from our relative here – Anta.
SPASOYE: You?
ANTA: Me.
SPASOYE: What do you drink so early in the day.
ANTA: I don't drink anything, but even if I had a gallon of petrol now, it wouldn't make any difference.
SPASOYE: Please tell me, how can something stupid like that occur to you?
ANTA: I saw him, I saw him with my own eyes.
SPASOYE: Who?
ANTA: The deceased – Pavle Marich.
SPASOYE: Which Pavle Marich.
ANTA: The one whose estate you've inherited.
SPASOYE: You leave the inheritance alone, and you tell me... In fact, there's nothing you can tell me. You'll only tell me the most stupid, impossible nonsense. I would understand if you said "I've heard", although then I'd punish you for spreading misinformation, but if you say "I've seen", when you say "I've seen" – that's simply a crime.
ANTA (*insists*): I've seen him!
SPASOYE (*irritated*): There he goes again!
RINA: Can you imagine how I felt when I heard it.
SPASOYE: OK, if you said – the Sun blacked out, OK, I accept it; every light must go out some time. I accept! If you said, for example: the priest of such and such a church, swallowed the church spire; OK, I can accept that too. There are some priests who can swallow church profits, and when their stomach expands, they may of course, be able to swallow the spire and all five bells. Very well, I can accept that. I accept that the Danube changed its course and started running in the opposite direction; I accept that the government decided to have free elections; all of the world's wonders I can accept, do you understand, all wonders, but that you've seen the man whom we buried three years ago – I can't accept that! And why on earth did you have to run here and terrorise this poor lady like that!? (*To Rina*) I can imagine how you felt when you heard.
ANTA: Can you imagine how I felt when I saw him?
SPASOYE: Listen to him, always one and the same thing!
ANTA: Honestly, when I saw him, my knees went weak and I couldn't even walk. And all of a sudden I began sweating, and then as if someone slid a piece of ice down my shirt, I started shivering with cold.
SPASOYE: I don't know what you have to shiver about?
ANTA: What do you mean 'what' – and what about the 10 000?
SPASOYE: Well, you declared under oath in the court that you'd returned that money to him.
ANTA: Well, yes, I declared it, of course I declared it, but he was dead then, and now he is alive.
SPASOYE: So, that's what it is?
ANTA: Well, yes of course.

SPASOYE: Wait a moment, I'll tell you now. *(He takes a booklet out of his pocket and leafs through it)*. This is the criminal law book, I always carry it around. It's very useful, one can learn an awful lot from it. This is, so to speak, a guide through life. *(He finds the page)*. Ah, there we go: paragraph 144, perjury. *(Reads for himself)*. So, a year in prison and loss of national honour for a year. It can be more than that, but you can certainly book a year in.

ANTA: Who?

SPASOYE: You!

ANTA: Why me?

SPASOYE: For perjury, what else.

ANTA: What do you mean a year in prison? How can you just say it like that, as if you are weighing a bag of onions. Prison, that's all I need!

SPASOYE: And loss of national honour.

ANTA: I don't mind that. One can live very happily without national honour. But prison, my dear sir, that's a different cattle of fish. And what I don't understand is why you – what gives you the right to charge me like this.

SPASOYE: I should actually be the one to sue you, because you have damaged me for 10 000.

ANTA: Well, really!?

SPASOYE: Of course! When your creditor committed suicide, they created a financial mass, and you owed to that mass, and then I inherited that mass as the closest relative.

ANTA: Ah, now I understand why you were so happy earlier on to hear that Pavle Marich is alive. Of course, who else would be happy if not you, his closest relative?

RINA *(irritated by their conversation)*: Oh, for God's sake, you are talking about everything, but the most important thing.

ANTA: Well, the gentleman cannot just tell me like that: a year in prison. Just like that – prison, as if there is nothing else in life but prison. And why does the gentleman not look into this life-guide of his, and see how many years are his due.

SPASOYE: I damaged no one for 10 000.

ANTA: No, of course not. That's trifles for you, you don't want to dirty your hands with such things. But a three storey house in Teraziye, a plot near the Railway Station and two shops in King Peter's Street, that's something!

SPASOYE: What do you mean to say?

ANTA: Well, perjury, seven false certificates, four solicitors and an inheritance. Look it up in that guide of yours.

SPASOYE *(extremely angry goes towards him clenching his fists threateningly, but controlling himself at the last minute)*: You said it now, and never again!

14. NOVAKOVICH, THE FORMER

NOVAKOVICH *(enters agitated)*: Oh, dear God, dear God!

RINA *(hurries to meet him)*: You know?

NOVAKOVICH: Just now on my way back I bumped into Mr Tadich and he told me that he had seen him and talked to him. Otherwise I'd've had no idea why you'd called me.

ANTA: I saw him too!

NOVAKOVICH: Really saw him?

ANTA: Just as I see you now.

SPASOYE: That means, gentlemen, we can no longer believe in death? Death has turned deceitful too. *(He pulls a piece of paper from his pocket)*. Please, is this a death certificate or is it not?

ANTA *(looking)*: You were one of the signatories as well?

SPASOYE: No, you were! Is this a death certificate, I ask you; have we buried him–

ANTA: Allotment 17, grave 39.

SPASOYE: Has he stayed there nicely and peacefully for three years, has he? So how can he all of a sudden be alive now? And can it be that way? Can people just do what they like like that? All the progressive Western countries, I'm sure, must have a law regarding this, and according to that law – who is dead, is dead. In our country however–

ANTA: No country can force anyone to be dead.

SPASOYE: That means, I can't be sure that one day my deceased wife, who died eleven years ago, may not reappear one day. And so she reappears, comes home "Good afternoon" "Oh, good afternoon, please come in!"

NOVAKOVICH: The question is not what might happen and what might not happen; the fact is – he is here!

SPASOYE: But how? Where from? Has he got up from his grave? Was he resurrected? Did he run away, did he fall down from a tree, from the Moon or from Mars?

NOVAKOVICH: They say he returned from a journey.

SPASOYE: What journey – from the graveyard here, and how did he travel, pray? Oh my God, I can't think anymore, and this is the first time in my life that I can't think. *(Sits down)*.

RINA *(to Milan)*: Have you found out any details?

NOVAKOVICH: Yes, I've found out that he wasn't dead.

SPASOYE: Of course, he will now keep denying everything.

NOVAKOVICH: He was staying at "The Excelsior".

SPASOYE: Which allotment is that?

NOVAKOVICH: The hotel "Excelsior". That's all I know. *(Remembers)* Oh, yes, one more thing. He was asking around for my address, he wants to visit me.

ANTA: You?

NOVAKOVICH: Me, or... maybe my wife.

RINA *(terrified)*: Me? Why me?

ANTA: Well, you are closest to him.

RINA: Me?

ANTA: Yes, because you are actually his wife.

RINA *(runs to her husband)*: Milan, is it true what this gentleman is saying?

NOVAKOVICH *(confused)*: I don't know. *(To Anta)* On what basis are you saying this?

ANTA: On the basis of Saveta Tomich.

SPASOYE: There he goes again, what Saveta Tomich?

ANTA: The one who married thinking that she was a widow, and when her first husband re-appeared, the Court moved her, in the name of law and order and without travelling expenses, from the second back into the first marriage.

RINA *(distressed, to Milan)*: Is that possible?

ANTA: That's according to the Law.

NOVAKOVICH *(wanting to console Rina)*: I don't believe that the Law can serve barbarity, for that would certainly be barbarous.

RINA *(embracing Milan)*: I don't want us to part!

NOVAKOVICH: Calm down, Rina. There is no law that can destroy happy marriages.

SPASOYE *(having been thinking and listening to them)*: All that you say is completely secondary. Completely secondary. The most important question here is – how can a man whom we buried with all due rites three years ago, how can he and with what right–

15. LYUBOMIR PROTICH, THE FORMER

LYUBOMIR *(carrying various newspapers, he is pale and very confused)*: What is this, what is this, for goodness' sakes!?! *(Remembers)* I beg your pardon, madam! *(He goes to Rina and kisses her hand; addressing everybody)* What is this?

RINA: Are you well?

ANTA *(rings the bell)*: Do you have heart problems?

ANNA *(enters)*.

ANTA *(to Anna)*: A glass of water please!

ANNA *(exits)*.

LYUBOMIR *(he sinks in an armchair)*: Oh, no, no, I'm better, no, no. But what is this?

NOVAKOVICH: Who told you?

LYUBOMIR: Who? *(Hands out the papers)* All the papers are full of it!

ALL *(surprised)*: The papers? *(They all pick a copy each)*.

ANTA: Oh, the titles are so big!

SPASOYE *(reads a title)*: Just listen to this, please: "The Dead on the Rise".

ANTA *(reads)*: "And when the Day of Reckoning comes, the dead will rise from their graves".

NOVAKOVICH *(reads)*: "Allotment 17, grave 39 opened up and the deceased has risen".

LYUBOMIR *(reads)*: "The dead rise, the dead speak".

ANNA *(brings in a glass of water)*.

LYUBOMIR *(drinks up)*.

SPASOYE: I do not think that the matter is so interesting that all the papers should give it so much attention.

LYUBOMIR: Can you imagine how I felt when I found it out in the middle of the street. I had no idea, and waiting for the tram I was leafing through the papers and this title "The dead rise, the dead speak" caught my attention. As soon as I read the first few lines I felt ill!

RINA: Me too.

LYUBOMIR: I started sweating, my hands went cold, everything clouded up in front of my eyes and I had to lean against the wall.

SPASOYE (*takes him by the arm and to the side, confidentially*): I don't understand my son, why are you so perturbed about it? I can understand everyone else, but you...? What did you have to do with the deceased Marich?

LYUBOMIR (*still disturbed*): We can't talk about it at the moment.

SPASOYE: It must be a big amount?

LYUBOMIR: Something like that.

NOVAKOVICH (*still engrossed in the papers*): Ah, there we have a whole description of how it happened. The whole interview.

ALL (*huddling around Novakovich*): Please, read it out, please!...

LYUBOMIR (*on the side, slightly worried, but listening*).

NOVAKOVICH (*reads*): "In response to the question whether everything was carefully premeditated, Mr Marich strongly denied that there was any deliberation in the matter. This is how he describes the event: 'It was a fateful decision, my wife was very unfair to me, which hurt me very much. For even then, even when I suffered because of her, I always—

RINA: Please, skip those banalities.

NOVAKOVICH (*reads*): 'I was very distressed and I didn't know what to do'.

ANTA (*to Rina*): Does he have heart problems too?

SPASOYE: Please, don't interrupt! Continue reading, please.

NOVAKOVICH (*reads*): 'Since I had to make a decision, I got frightened of myself. I realised that I could make a rash decision which I could then regret all my life. Then it occurred to me to go away, to leave this place where everything seemed to me then to be working against me; I decided to be on my own for a while so I can think and make a decision. I went away not telling anyone where. In fact, even I didn't know where I was going. When the ticket inspector asked me for the ticket and I didn't have one, he asked me where I was going and I finally decided Vienna. I know Vienna very well, so I thought I'd be quite comfortable over there'.

ANTA: Exactly. And if he'd returned after a couple of days, everything would have been fine.

SPASOYE: But, please, don't interrupt! (*To Novakovich*) Please, continue!

NOVAKOVICH (*reads*): 'In Vienna I stayed in a hotel near the University, and spent a couple of days there immersed in my problems. On the fourth day I went to town, hoping that I might bump into someone I knew in those bars frequented by our people. I didn't meet anyone, but I found some Belgrade dailies. I took one of the papers, opened it up and got really surprised when I found my own picture in it. Reading the titles I immediately learnt that I'd committed suicide by drowning in the Danube, and I proceeded to read the details about my suicide. At first I was really amused, it made me laugh, and then it occurred to me – this could actually be the best solution to the situation. Being officially dead, but being alive at the same time'.

SPASOYE: He considers that the best solution. Well, thank you very much!

ANTA: Well, that's from his point of view.

SPASOYE: Of course, from his point of view! But we have our point of view as well. (*To Novakovich*) Please, continue!

NOVAKOVICH (*reads*): 'I decided to go along with it, and as Vienna is a bit inconvenient – you can bump into someone you know any time – I took the first train to Germany. Happily I found a nice job straightaway in a place near Hamburg, and I stayed there for three years, unnoticed, hardly ever going anywhere.'

SPASOYE: And what I don't understand is why did he have to leave such a nice job, he could have stayed there happily and everything would have been fine.

ANTA: Maybe he wanted to come back and check on his estate?

SPASOYE: Maybe! And maybe he wanted to claim his money back from his debtors.

RINA (*anxious*): I can't, I cannot at all recollect myself and calm down.

SPASOYE: So, who did we bury?

NOVAKOVICH: He gives an answer to that question as well.

SPASOYE: And what does he say, pray?

NOVAKOVICH (*reads*): "In response to the question about the possible identity of the body found in possession of his clothes and documents, Mr Marich says: 'I think that must have been my building supervisor, a Russian immigrant, Alyosha'."

SPASOYE: Alyosha?

NOVAKOVICH (*continues reading*): 'That day, just before I left, Alyosha told me that he had suicidal thoughts, he even told me he was going to throw himself into the Danube. He was wearing an old suit of mine that I gave him and he also had some of my documents on him. It could have been only him'.

SPASOYE: Alyosha?

ANTA: And you put the wreath on Alyosha's grave.

LYUBOMIR (*desperate*): Now we know everything. As you can see the situation is very bad.

SPASOYE: Of course, it's bad!

LYUBOMIR: At this moment of general shock, we are not even able to consider all the potential consequences.

ANTA: No, we are not! (*To Novakovich*) For example, you could lose your wife.

RINA (*embraces Milan*): Oh, no! Not that!

ANTA (*to Spasoye*): And then you'd lose your estate.

SPASOYE: And then you'd go to prison for a year

ANTA: There he goes again! I told you I was sensitive to that word.

SPASOYE: I only wanted to highlight all the potential consequences, you see. But there is one that is worse than all – that's Mr Dyrich. What will Mr Dyrich say about it all?

ANTA: Who?

SPASOYE: The man who invested all of his experience, his reputation and his connections into our enterprise, into which we had invested our capital and knowledge, what will he say? For if we accept this state of affairs, if Mr Marich is found alive, our whole enterprise would come tumbling down.

ANTA: Oh, that's the least that could happen.

SPASOYE: The least? What do you mean the least? Have you ever heard about the great techno-financial conglomerate Illyria Ltd?

ANTA: Of course I have.

SPASOYE: This company, sir, has applied to the Government for a concession to drain all the marshes, swamps, lakes and in fact all the aquatic sediments in this kingdom. That's one big job that will take twelve years to complete and will include some big construction work – at least ten iron bridges, around a hundred concrete bridges and a lot of tunnels. That's something very big, do you understand?

ANTA: I don't see what that's got to do with anything?

SPASOYE: What that's got to do! We have all invested all we had into this project. Mr Novakovich has invested around half a million in cash at the planning stage. Mr Protich, my future son-in-law and the fiancé of my daughter, has been elected technical director of the company. Yes, sir, and not because he is my son-in-law, but because he is an expert. Two years ago my son-in-law published a great scientific thesis "Amelioration and Terrisation". That publication caused a great sensation. And on the basis of it, my son-in-law became a visiting University Professor, because, sir this is not just any scientific thesis, but a great scientific revolution in the field of hydro-technology.

ANTA (*amazed*): How come you speak with such knowledge about it?

SPASOYE: I learnt it all, my dear sir, I learnt it all off by heart so I can talk about the matter.

LYUBOMIR (*to Spasoye*): I do implore you, father, do not speak about it anymore, speak about something else.

SPASOYE: I wanted to explain it to him.

ANTA: And what does this have to do with you?

SPASOYE: First of all, that big techno-financial consortium doesn't have the basic capital of its own. The consortium's only capital is the fact that its general director, Mr Dyrich happens to have a minister for a brother.

ANTA: And Schwartz and Rosendolph?

SPASOYE: Schwartz and Rosendolph are mere mercantile agents: one is the agent of some automobile tyre factory, and the other an agent of a factory of combs and celluloid products. You'll ask me now why did we involve them in the consortium when they are just mere agents? Because, my dear sir, our country, our banks and our city do not like enterprises without at least one Schwartz or Rosendolph. And at the end of the day, we don't consider them as mere agents. We've promoted them into representatives of big foreign capital. Schwartz is the official representative of Belgian capital and Rosendolph – of Anglosaxon capital. However, we do not require the capital anyway, for when we get the concession, we'll sell it, but what we need is a recovery of the deposit and all our expenses. Mr Novakovich paid for most of the expenses and I mortgaged my three-storey house in Teraziye for the deposit.

ANTA: I thought you were giving that house to your daughter as a wedding present.

SPASOYE: Yes, but in the meantime I mortgaged it for the deposit. There, do you understand? And in the middle of all that there appears one dead man and swallows the deposit and the whole of the Illyria enterprise. Can we allow that, please, can we?

NOVAKOVICH (*irritable*): That's why we should be speaking about that, instead of Illyria.

SPASOYE: About what?

RINA: About him, the deceased. He could be here any minute now. Every time I hear the door my heart misses a beat.

SPASOYE (*confused but recollecting himself*): Well... let him come...

NOVAKOVICH: Yes, but how are we going to behave with him?

SPASOYE: How? It's easy. We simply mustn't acknowledge that he is alive; it would be against our interests if we behaved as though he was alive. We will behave, therefore, as though he is deceased.

ANTA: What do you mean – should we cross ourselves when we see him?

SPASOYE: You can cross yourself if you like, but as far as I'm concerned, he doesn't exist for me. If he comes, he's not here for me, if he greets me, I won't greet him back, I can't be shaking hands with dead people. No, thank you very much!

ANTA: And if he speaks?

SPASOYE: I won't talk to him.

RINA: I'll turn my back on him – I don't even want to see him.

SPASOYE: And do you think I want to see him.

NOVAKOVICH: You think therefore, that it's best to ignore him, totally ignore him.

SPASOYE: As though he doesn't exist.

ALL (*agreeing*).

16. ANNA, THE FORMER

ANNA (*bringing a visiting card, hands it over to Novakovich*).

ALL (*terrified*): Is it him?

NOVAKOVICH: It's him!

ALL (*nervous, looking at each other*).

NOVAKOVICH (*turning the card over in his hand and thinking; finally decides*): Let him in.

ANNA (*exits*).

SPASOYE (*with bravado*): For me, he doesn't exit.

ALL: For us neither. (*They take up various positions. Spasoye folds his hands on his stomach and looks up at the ceiling; Rina hides behind Novakovich; Lyubomir sits in a deep armchair and covers his eyes; Anta pulls a handkerchief to wipe his nose and freezes like that*).

17. PAVLE, THE FORMER

PAVLE (*enters, looking at everyone*): Good afternoon!

ALL (*frozen*).

PAVLE (*he observes them for a while, and after a long pause*): Good afternoon, I say.

SPASOYE (*still frozen, in the same position, overpowered by his short temper*): We heard!

PAVLE: I thought... I expected–

SPASOYE (*forgetting himself*): What the hell did you expect; you didn't think we'd all faint when we see you?

PAVLE: Oh no, my dear heir, I thought I would be welcomed by my family as it normally happens in such situations. I've returned from the dead, for God's sake, haven't I?

SPASOYE: That's your problem!

PAVLE: Not only mine, but of my family, too. Wouldn't a wife cheer up at the sight of her husband whom she thought dead?

RINA (*protesting and hiding behind Novakovich's back*).

PAVLE (*to Spasoye*): Or yourself, for example, as the closest relative? I understand that you proved in the Court that you were my closest relative; and I see (*he pulls out a death certificate*) you also signed my death certificate as a bereaved member of the family. Such a close relative as yourself must surely be happy in such a case.

SPASOYE (*confused*): Of course, I don't deny that, but I can't allow you to play with my feelings like that. One moment you decide to die and I have to cry, and the next you decide to come back to life and I have to be happy. You could be changing your mind like that all your life, and then I wouldn't have anything else to do in my life but cry one moment and laugh the next!

PAVLE (*looking around*): And then these other gentlemen. My best friend and business partner, for example?

NOVAKOVICH: You and I, sir, parted whilst you were still alive!

PAVLE: Oh, yes, but Mr Anta, the relative of my wife's! However, let us skip him for the moment.

ANTA: Precisely, let us skip me.

PAVLE: But my dear young friend, Mr Protich, for whom I had so much affection and trust and to whom—

LYUBOMIR (*broken up, approaches him*): I implore you, sir, let us talk about it face to face.

PAVLE: Certainly! Would you prefer us, Mr Anta, to talk face to face as well.

ANTA: We said, we would skip me.

PAVLE: And my wife, perhaps?

RINA (*turns as if stung, then experiencing a difficult moment, finally with a lump in her throat*): You may address my husband, please.

NOVAKOVICH: Sir, your former wife is now legally married to me and we now have a very happy life together. I don't see how you can take the liberty to pester my wife like this, and what gives you the right to address her in such a manner?

PAVLE: The fact that I am alive.

SPASOYE: You will have to prove that, sir! One can't just turn up like that and declare: I am alive! The investigation established that you had committed suicide and according to that you are dead; you are dead in the eyes of the legal system, and you are dead in the eyes of all of us here. We buried you, and ceremoniously at that. The lady and I were behind the coffin in the procession, my son-in-law gave a speech, my daughter was in mourning for six weeks and I laid a wreath on your grave, now what else do you want; what more could you expect?

PAVLE: I am very grateful to you for such consideration!

SPASOYE: We gave you two memorial services as well.

PAVLE: I really do appreciate it.

SPASOYE: Then what else do you expect from us? We did everything that was in our power. What else do you want?

PAVLE: I do not want anything, I came to say thank you for everything you've done.

SPASOYE: Oh, no, you needn't have bothered.

PAVLE: So you reckon there is nothing else to discuss?

SPASOYE: I don't see that there is anything else we could discuss.

PAVLE: Don't you see that my return changes everything? That in fact the current state of affairs changes fundamentally? Surely there is a lot to discuss here.

SPASOYE: I don't see that anything can change, and if by any chance you find that the state of affairs is different, I shall give you a friendly piece of advice as to how to pull out of it.

PAVLE: Please, it would be my pleasure to hear it.

SPASOYE: If your arrival is meant to be a threat to us all, I have to warn you not delude yourself. You think it's easy to destroy everything that has been built after your death? You are wrong! The only solution for you would be to return wherever you came from and accept the fact that you are dead.

PAVLE: Yes that would be one solution, but there is another one and I've opted for the latter.

SPASOYE: And that is?

PAVLE: To stay here amongst you!

(*General commotion*).

NOVAKOVICH: That means not amongst us but against us!

PAVLE: If you wish so.

SPASOYE: That means, sir... think again, please think again!

PAVLE: I've been thinking for three years.

SPASOYE: For such matters even thirty years of thinking may not be enough.

PAVLE: I do apologise, gentlemen, if I have disturbed you. I needed this meeting before we proceed. I was going to make a visit to everyone separately—

ANTA: Please, you may skip me.

PAVLE: But it's even better that I found you all in one place. I wish you all a good afternoon. (*He starts to go*).

SPASOYE: Please, just a minute, is this your last?

PAVLE (*stops*): My last? I am alive and I want to live! (*Exits*).

ALL (*shocked looking at each other*).

SPASOYE (*the first to recollect himself, shouts after Pavle although he has already left*): But we want to live too! Anta, please run after him and tell him: we want to live, we want to live too!

CURTAIN

ACT 2

A nice room in Spasoye's house.

1. VUKITSA, SPASOYE

VUKITSA (*wearing a nice dress, rich lipstick, bright nail-varnish, thinly shaped eyebrows. She is sitting languidly on a sofa, legs crossed and smoking a cigarette*): I do not understand why everybody is hiding the reason from me?

SPASOYE: Nobody is hiding the reason from you, it's just that the reason is of such nature—

VUKITSA: It must be a very strange reason indeed. To arrange the wedding day, to announce it to the whole world, print the invitations and then suddenly call it all off... Well, that's nothing short of a scandal! And why, why?

SPASOYE: Some great unexpected worries have befallen us.

VUKITSA: Worries, worries, you always have them.

SPASOYE: Yes, that's right, but these are, how shall I put it, exceptional worries. To do with this consortium. We came across a big unexpected obstacle, and we are all very worried, including your fiancé.

VUKITSA: Yes, my great fiancé. Until a few days ago he used to come here several times a day, looking into my eyes like a kitten, telling me sweet words and painting our future together in the best of colours. And since a few days ago he hardly ever calls by, and when he does he is always somehow perplexed and absent-minded, he can hardly speak.

SPASOYE: I tell you, we've got big worries, that's why we can't think about the wedding now. I want the wedding day of my only daughter to be the happiest day in my life... (*He strokes her hair*). Be a little patient and you'll see everything will be fine.

VUKITSA: And on top of all that you bring me auntie-Agna.

SPASOYE: But it wasn't me who brought her! She met me yesterday exclaiming: I have to come and see Vukitsa tomorrow! I couldn't tell her: Don't come, Vukitsa can't stand you.

VUKITSA: Well, I can't stand her and that's it!

SPASOYE: But, darling we have to be able to stand her. First of all, she is my cousin, a second cousin, that's true, but she is my cousin, and then she is a wealthy spinster.

VUKITSA: So? Is it my fault she never got married?

SPASOYE: I don't know, but she is wealthy. However, she is thinking of leaving all her money to a charity; all of those old spinsters, you know, they are all diseased with humanism, but I think she will think about leaving something to you as well.

VUKITSA (*determined and capricious*): I can't stand her!

SPASOYE: I don't understand why you can't stand her? What has she done to you?

VUKITSA: She is just unbearable. Can you imagine that she never speaks of anything else but the wedding night. Always about that and only about that, and she is so affected and she just keeps sighing.

SPASOYE: Well you should try to understand her, everybody sighs after their ideals.

VUKITSA: What kind of an ideal is the wedding night?

SPASOYE: An ideal, my dear girl, is everything that one can't achieve.

VUKITSA: So now I have to suffer because she hasn't achieved her ideal!

2. ANTA, THE FORMER

ANTA: Good day! Good day, miss!

VUKITSA: Good day!

SPASOYE: Please, darling, give us a moment, we have to talk regarding those worries of ours.

VUKITSA: Of course! (*Exits*)

3. ANTA, SPASOYE

SPASOYE: Have you found him?

ANTA: Finally! He is not just a journalist for a particular newspaper, you know, or an owner, so you can't find him so easily.

SPASOYE: What is he then?

ANTA: He is something like a flying journalist; he says he is a publicist. He writes, you know, like that, in an underhanded way.

SPASOYE: That's just what we need! Have you got his name?

ANTA: Yes, I have! Mladen Dyakovich. They say, nobody can write like him – he is so sharp and so dangerous that he can ruin anyone he takes under his pen. He can turn white into black, and black into white like nobody else.

SPASOYE: Will he come?

ANTA: Yes as soon as today.

SPASOYE: You haven't told him why I called him?

ANTA: No way. I've as much as found him, but, to tell you the truth, I'd rather not get involved in anything. You know very well that I've been skipped, so what do I want getting involved.

SPASOYE: Don't you rely too much on being skipped; if we go down, we'll all go down together, and don't you worry you'll get your year too.

ANTA (*startled*): There you go again! Can't you bloody well leave that year alone for once!

SPASOYE: Well I just mention it like that, in passing.

ANTA: Not even in passing, please!

4. AGNIA, THE FORMER

AGNIA (*dressed in a youthful attire and made up; she carries a beautiful bouquet of flowers*): Good morning, gentlemen! (*She holds out her hand to Anta and then to Spasoye*). How come you are the only one at home?

SPASOYE: Oh, no, Vukitsa is at home as well. (*Goes to Vukitsa's door*). Come on, darling, hurry up, hurry up, auntie-Agnia is here!

ANTA (*having already got up*): I should go really.

SPASOYE: He'll be here today, won't he?

ANTA: Any time now.

SPASOYE: All right, come again some time.

ANTA: I will; goodbye Miss Agnia!

AGNIA: Goodbye!

ANTA (*exits*).

5. SPASOYE, AGNIA

SPASOYE: I wonder what she is doing? Darling?

AGNIA: Don't call her, I'd like to talk to you.

SPASOYE: What on earth do you have to talk to me about, there's Vukitsa you can talk to her.

AGNIA: I wanted to ask you about this cancellation of the wedding, you know. Do you know that it is very badly perceived out there?

SPASOYE: I don't care how it is perceived! Please, leave that alone, we'll talk about it some other time. Vukitsa, darling!

6. VUKITSA, THE FORMER

SPASOYE (*when Vukitsa enters*): Where have you been all this time?

VUKITSA: Good morning, auntie-Agnia!

AGNIA: Good morning, sweetie! (*She kisses her*). This is for you. (*She gives her the flowers*).

VUKITSA: Thank you.

AGNIA: Tell me, how are you, are you getting tired of all the excitement yet?

VUKITSA: Oh, yes! (*Looking at the flowers*). These are very nice flowers!

AGNIA: I chose them myself at the florist's. I wanted it to look like a particular bouquet I remember.

VUKITSA: From your youth, certainly?

AGNIA: Yes... yes... from some years ago. I received a bouquet just like this one, and it had a visiting card attached to it on which it said: To a flower - flowers.

VUKITSA: That's very nice! And what was written on the other side of the card?

AGNIA: Nothing! Just a name: Sima Teshich, an artillery captain.

VUKITSA: Oh, I can imagine, it must be a sweet memory.

AGNIA: But of course! I still have the stems from that bouquet-

VUKITSA: And what did you do, dear auntie, to reward this gift-bearer for his attention?

AGNIA (*confused, affected*): What? What could I have done?

VUKITSA: Oh, please tell me, please admit it, you must have done something to reward him.

AGNIA (*confused*): Well, really... I rewarded him with a nice smile. What else can a girl give to her admirer? But let us leave the pleasant memories aside, let's talk about you, about the future. Have you chosen your wedding dress yet?

VUKITSA: No, I haven't but I'm not thinking about it now, as the wedding has been postponed.

AGNIA: Well, it's only temporarily postponed, but it will take place, won't it, Spasoye?

SPASOYE (*until then engrossed in some kind of a letter, startled*): Yes, of course!

AGNIA: And you should think about the wedding dress well in advance. There are so many fashion magazines around these days, it's very difficult to make your mind up. And then all the materials! Come around, I told you so many times, come to my place, I've got more than three hundred samples of various materials for wedding dresses. Come and see.

SPASOYE: And what do you need all those samples for?

AGNIA: Well I just liked choosing the samples, I wanted to have a collection. Why not? Some people collect stamps, some collect old coins, or pipes, or clocks or hunting trophies, why shouldn't I have my own hobby? I collect wedding dress samples, and that's my pastime.

VUKITSA: Yes, why do you reproach auntie-Agna, father? At least she is not collecting cats like auntie-Yovanka.

SPASOYE: I don't reproach her I just don't understand how she doesn't get bored going to all the shops and asking for pieces of cloths?

AGNIA: Don't speak like that, Spasoye, there are nice things about it. I go into a shop and I address the oldest shop assistant: Sir, I would like to see some materials for a wedding dress! And the shop assistant's face immediately lights up, and he really enjoys serving me, thinking that I'm the happy bride-to-be. And that goes on like that for half an hour. Real pleasure!

SPASOYE: Indeed.

AGNIA (*to Vukitsa*): Come on, sweetie, I'd really like to see the underwear and the going away clothes you've prepared.

VUKITSA: But I have shown them to you already.

AGNIA: Never mind, I'd like to see them again. (*Whispering to her*) To tell you the truth I don't think it's a good idea to wear white pyjamas on the first night; I much prefer the pale blue nightie.

VUKITSA (*desperate, to her father*): You see!

SPASOYE: What?

VUKITSA (*confused*): You see, my fiancé is not here yet. (*She looks at the watch on her wrist*) Look at the time, and he is not here yet.

SPASOYE: He'll come. Don't be impatient.

AGNIA (*embracing Vukitsa and taking her to the room*): Oh, sweet impatience! Let's go!

VUKITSA (*going past her father*): You see!

AGNIA and VUKITSA (*exit*).

7. DYAKOVICH, SPASOYE

DYAKOVICH (*a robust man, slightly scruffy*): Good day, sir! I hope I've got the right address?

SPASOYE: And the gentleman is?

DYAKOVICH: I am Mladen Dyakovich—

SPASOYE: Oh, yes, you are the journalist!?

DYAKOVICH: No, not a journalist, a publicist, sir!

SPASOYE (*gesturing to him to sit down*): I thought it was all the same.

DYAKOVICH: No, sir. A journalist is tied to a paper, to an editor, to a publisher, I am a freelance writer, I write when I like and what I like: brochures, leaflets, pamphlets, and things like that in general.

SPASOYE: Yes, that's just what we need and that's why I wanted to talk to you.

DYAKOVICH: Please!

SPASOYE: They say that you are able to prove in any debate that black is white and white is black.

DYAKOVICH: It is possible to affirm or contest everything, my dear sir, thanks to the power of logic. What else is the philosophy of the old Greeks Protagoras, Isocrates and Aeschylus about? Its essence is in the premise that every 'yes' contains in itself its 'no', and every 'no' carries in itself its 'yes'. Everything depends on the power of logic.

SPASOYE: And they say you've got that.

DYAKOVICH: Yes, logic is my skill! You see, God gives something to everyone; for example, he gave you money, and he gave me logic. He doesn't give everything to one person and nothing to another. He can't give you both money and logic, can he, because those two things don't go together. He gave me one and you another and he said – there you are, now you barter with what you've got. You put your logic at Mr Spasoye's disposal, and he'll put his money at your disposal.

SPASOYE: What do you mean put his money at your disposal?

DYAKOVICH: I mean I'll nicely write up what you need and you'll nicely pay me for it, won't you?

SPASOYE (*holding back*): Well, yes!

DYAKOVICH: So, having in principle agreed on the practicalities, will you please proceed with your requirements and give me all the details. (*He pulls out a pen and paper and gets ready to take notes*).

SPASOYE: The matter is this: one man died three years ago and we buried him. I was personally at the funeral.

DYAKOVICH: God rest his soul.

SPASOYE: Yes, but now we have to prove that he is dead.

DYAKOVICH: Easy! If you could only tell me what style do you want it in?

SPASOYE: What do you mean what style?

DYAKOVICH: Do you want it in high style such as: "The departure of an individuum from a living environment is a result of an inevitable process which all natural phenomena are subjected to" or do you just want me to tell him straight: "You've snuffed it, mate".

SPASOYE: Well, this is much clearer.

DYAKOVICH: So I shall tell him: You've snuffed it, mate, and these are the proofs: first, you're not alive—

SPASOYE (*interrupting*): But he is alive.

DYAKOVICH: Who is alive?

SPASOYE: Well, the one that died.

DYAKOVICH: I don't understand?

SPASOYE: So, he actually died as I told you, and we buried him three years ago, but now suddenly he reappeared alive.

DYAKOVICH (*shaking his head*): Hm! Hm! Hm! That is a bit of an unusual case! I've been in a situation where I had to prove that a man who had been dead for a year was alive. It was necessary for the dead to vote in the local elections, but that's an altogether different matter. It's one thing to have to prove that a dead man is alive, but it's a different thing to have to prove that a living man is dead.

SPASOYE: I know, but what about all the proofs, the death certificate, the funeral, the grave.

DYAKOVICH: The grave? A grave is not a proof when the man exists. Does he exist?

SPASOYE: Well, he says he exists.

DYAKOVICH: Well, that's it, you see, and we must believe him in this case.

SPASOYE: Well, can't this power of logic of yours prove somehow that he doesn't exist?

DYAKOVICH (*thinking*): Hm, it's a really difficult problem, unless we resort to Einstein's theory.

SPASOYE: What theory is that?

DYAKOVICH: According to Einstein, everything is relative. Therefore, we could argue that this man is only relatively alive.

SPASOYE: Wouldn't it be possible to use some other theory?

DYAKOVICH: OK, let's get onto another theory. You tell me honestly, sir: you don't want this man around? He spoils your plans too much, no?

SPASOYE (*embarrassed*): Well, how shall I put it?

DYAKOVICH: You've said it already; I understand. Well, yes, it's difficult to give back what one has inherited already.

SPASOYE (*sighing*): It is!

DYAKOVICH: Fair enough! Now we are out in the open and I understand the whole situation. And if we carefully think about it all, it will be too early to write anything yet. I beg your pardon, that's just my opinion, but if you wish so, I shall write; only you know, if I write now, that will provoke a response, and if we totally expose the whole thing, you might very quickly end up in the court; and it seems to me that you have every reason to avoid the court in this case?

SPASOYE: Well, yes, what do I need the court for.

DYAKOVICH: So, you see, it's better that you do this thing away from the public eye. As far as I'm concerned, it really is not in my favour to give you such advice, for if I wrote something now I could charge you more; as it is, I can only charge you for this piece of advice at the moment and that'll be 1000.

SPASOYE (*shocked*): What!?! 1000 for not writing!?

DYAKOVICH: Yes, and that does not include the royalties for my discretion.

SPASOYE: What discretion?

DYAKOVICH: Well, dear sir, now that I've got into the secret, please tell me, what prevents me now from publishing a little leaflet saying "The dead have risen, the living are getting ready to bury them again!"

SPASOYE (*petrified*): You won't do that!?

DYAKOVICH: So, you see how valuable my discretion is, and I ask for no more than a thousand altogether.

SPASOYE: All right, all right, agreed!

DYAKOVICH: Very well, we've struck a deal. I have warned you not to mess about with this and not to publicise it yet. OK?... Now, on the other hand, you can't just sit around doing nothing, you can do other things—

SPASOYE: Of course!

DYAKOVICH: And in that respect I shall give you another piece of advice.

SPASOYE: Another thousand!?

DYAKOVICH: It could be another two, or three or four... but, dear sir, I won't blackmail you, I will be happy with a thousand, which in addition to the other thousand, makes two thousand.

SPASOYE (*sighing*): Two thousand!

DYAKOVICH: Two, indeed, but listen to me first, and then you'll see that it's worth it. You, the family... I presume you are related to the living dead man?

SPASOYE: Yes.

DYAKOVICH: You and the rest of the family should get together and announce this man for a lunatic who uses his physical resemblance... does he look like him?

SPASOYE: A spitting image.

DYAKOVICH: Therefore you announce him mad and send him for a psychiatric investigation. Then you can arrange everything – I don't have to tell you how to do these things – and he will be certified as mentally ill. Believe me, in this country it is easier to announce someone mad than sane. And the proof of that, my dear sir, is the fact that I spent three months in the lunatic asylum too.

SPASOYE: You?

DYAKOVICH: Yes, just before the local elections I was found mad, and then just after the elections I was found sane again.

SPASOYE (*worried*): Yes, it is worth considering this suggestion of yours.

DYAKOVICH: Of course it is, and I hope you realise now that I haven't charged you too much?

SPASOYE (*remembers*): Oh, yes! (*With great remorse he takes two thousand out of his wallet and gives the money to him*).

DYAKOVICH (*getting up*): Thank you very much, sir, and whenever you need me I am at your disposal, whether you need some writing doing or some good advice.

SPASOYE: Thank you!

DYAKOVICH: I won't take anymore of your time. Goodbye, sir!

SPASOYE: Goodbye.

DYAKOVICH (*exits*).

8. AGNIA, VUKITSA, SPASOYE

AGNIA (*coming out of Vukitsa's room*): Such taste, such style! Every little detail has been chosen with remarkable taste, I have to say.

VUKITSA: Now, you can't say I haven't shown you everything?

AGNIA: Oh, yes, everything, everything, everything! I say, sweetie, you will be such an exceptional bride, so well prepared. And you've prepared it all on your own, you wouldn't even ask me to help you.

VUKITSA: I didn't want to bother you.

AGNIA: But why, why, when you know that wedding preparations are my favourite pastime.

SPASOYE: Well, we'll call you, there are a lot more preparations to make, and a lot of time left.

AGNIA: Of course there is a lot of time left, when the wedding has been postponed.

SPASOYE: Well, why do you insist so much on this postponement!

VUKITSA: Please, auntie, don't even mention this to me. (*She goes to a table and finds something to do there*).

SPASOYE: Yes, it's best not to mention it.

AGNIA (*goes to Spasoye, confidentially*): You know Spasoye, I can't tell you in front of her, but people are saying some strange things out there.

SPASOYE: And do you know what kind of things they are saying about you?

AGNIA (*shocked*): Oooh!

SPASOYE: If you don't, I do, but I never came to tell you what they are saying about you, so you don't need to tell me what they are saying about me either.

AGNIA: I meant it with the best of intentions.

SPASOYE: Not even with the best of intentions.

AGNIA: Very well, very well, never again! (*Goes to Vukitsa*) Don't forget to call me, darling, when that cream dress is finished, I'm dying to see what it looks like.

VUKITSA: Certainly!

AGNIA (*kisses her, then stretches her hand to Spasoye*): Well, do forgive me, Spasoye! Goodbye! (*Exits*).

9. VUKITSA, SPASOYE

VUKITSA (*having seen Agnia off, drops into an armchair exhausted*): Ah!

SPASOYE: You are right: ah!

VUKITSA: I absolutely can't bear it.

SPASOYE: It's not easy for me either, but what else can I do—

VUKITSA: If you only knew what kind of things she asks me, it's terrible.

SPASOYE: Darling, I'm expecting the minister's brother. We have some serious matters to discuss so I'd like to ask you to leave us on our own when he comes

VUKITSA: Of course, you know that I never bother you in such situations. And anyway I've got a lot of writing to do. (*She gets up to go, but at that moment the door opens and Lyubomir enters. She stops.*)

10. LYUBOMIR, THE FORMER

VUKITSA: Oh, what a surprise! What a surprise!

SPASOYE: It's very good that you came otherwise I've already run out of excuses for you in front of your fiancée.

LYUBOMIR (*having kissed Vukitsa's hand and shook Spasoye's hand*): Have I made a big faux pas.

VUKITSA (*to Spasoye*): Do you hear him, daddy, he calls it a faux pas!? (*To Lyubomir*) That's not a faux pas, it's a crime. To neglect your fiancée as you do, to get your fiancée used to two or three visits a day and suddenly stop coming, to get your fiancée used to tender words and love promises and suddenly slip into academic absent-mindedness, you will agree that that's nothing short of a big crime!

LYUBOMIR: For God's sake, father, why do you complain that you can't excuse me any longer when you very well know why that is the case?

SPASOYE: I tell her, I tell her we've got big worries at the moment, worries that concern all of us, but they will pass, I tell her they will pass. I never tell her anything in detail. And what for?

LYUBOMIR: I wouldn't like to stay in my fiancée's bad books.

SPASOYE: You know what, you go over there into her room and defend yourself; fiancés can always defend themselves better in private.

LYUBOMIR: You are right. (*Takes Vukitsa's hand and they go to her room.*)

11. SPASOYE, SOFIA

SPASOYE (*rings a bell*).

SOFIA (*enters*): Yes, sir?

SPASOYE: Sofia, I'm expecting a certain gentleman. When he comes, can you please make sure that no one interrupts us. Whoever comes, tell them I'm not in.

SOFIA: Of course. (*She goes but comes back straight away*) Mr and Mrs Novakovich.

SPASOYE: Oh, they? You can let them in.

SOFIA (*lets them in and exits*).

12. NOVAKOVICH, RINA, SPASOYE

NOVAKOVICH: Good afternoon.

SPASOYE: Good afternoon! (*They shake hands*) What a surprise!

RINA: Not a surprise at all. I promised Vukitsa to come around these days so we can go shopping together.

SPASOYE: Oh, yes, she very much trusts your taste, only—

NOVAKOVICH: And just imagine, dear sir, now I have to go shopping too.

SPASOYE: Why you?

NOVAKOVICH: My wife wouldn't cross the threshold on her own.

RINA: Imagine if I bump into him, I wouldn't know what to do.

SPASOYE: Well, you will both be spared the hassle. I have postponed the wedding and all the preparations... There's always enough time for that. But you are always welcome, Vukitsa will be very happy to see you.

RINA: Let's go to her, then. (*She wants to go*).

SPASOYE: Just a moment. I wanted to ask you. You said you would go to your solicitor for a consultation?

NOVAKOVICH: I went.

SPASOYE: And?

NOVAKOVICH: He says that our marriage is indeed annulled with the re-appearance of the first husband, and that my wife has to return to him.

RINA: That would be terrible, that would be a most cruel punishment!

NOVAKOVICH: The solicitor says the only solution would be if the first husband sought divorce, got divorced and if I then remarried my wife. And to tell you the truth, I intend to make such a proposal to him.

SPASOYE: To who?

NOVAKOVICH: To the deceased.

SPASOYE: To ask him to seek divorce!?

NOVAKOVICH: Well, yes, what does he need the wife who doesn't love him for?

RINA: I couldn't survive it if I had to go back to him.

SPASOYE: Wait a minute! It's not so simple as it seems. In order to seek divorce he has to be alive.

RINA: Well, he is alive!

SPASOYE: He is alive, I know he is, but we mustn't admit it. Do you know what it would mean if we recognised him as legally alive? That would mean that we would all end up in court, all of us God-fearing and innocent people would have to suffer the humiliation of standing in the dock.

RINA: You know how it is, Mr Blagoyevich, when the ship is sinking, everyone fights for their own survival.

SPASOYE: Ah, that's how you see it? Each for themselves? All right then, let everyone fight for themselves. But don't be sorry if I find my rescue first.

NOVAKOVICH: You seem to be threatening something, Mr Spasoye?

SPASOYE: I am not threatening anything, but you say 'when the ship is sinking', and you are forgetting that that ship will pull half a million of your own cash with it.

NOVAKOVICH (*startled*): You don't mean...?

SPASOYE: I do mean, yes I do. You're forgetting that in this whole affair your marriage is not the most important thing.

NOVAKOVICH: I'm not forgetting, but—

SPASOYE: Well, when you are not forgetting, than you must be patient. I, for example, have an important meeting today with one very prominent gentleman. I very much hope that he will be of great assistance to us.

NOVAKOVICH: Well, of course, we will be patient.

SPASOYE: You go now to Vukitsa's room, her fiancé is there, and you have a good time, I'll take care of your worries. Please. (*To Rina, following her*) I implore you, madam, please exercise your influence over Vukitsa and calm her down, she is very upset that the wedding has been postponed.

RINA: Oh, yes, yes, of course!

RINA and NOVAKOVICH (*exit to Vukitsa's room*).

13. SOFIA, SPASOYE

SOFIA (*enters*): One gentleman, sir.

SPASOYE: Did he say who he was?

SOFIA: I think it's the gentleman you are awaiting.

SPASOYE: Oh, yes! Please, let him in immediately!

SOFIA (*exits*).

14. PAVLE MARICH, SPASOYE

SPASOYE (*when he sees Marich at the door, unpleasantly surprised*): Oh, it's you?

PAVLE: Does my appearance still take you by surprise?

SPASOYE (*slightly confused*): I didn't expect you.

PAVLE: I felt the need to talk to you in person once again, before I proceed with particular action.

SPASOYE: I don't see what we would have to talk about.

PAVLE: If you don't see what we could talk about, I see much less point in talking myself. I only wanted to avoid scandal.

SPASOYE: If you wanted to avoid scandal, why did you come back at all, why didn't you stay where you were?

PAVLE: I did intend to stay there anyway. I only came back to arrange the management of my estate and sort out certain relationships.

SPASOYE: As regards the management of your estate, that has been arranged.

PAVLE: Oh, yes, I see, you have arranged it for yourself, but it was necessary that I arrange it from my end as well.

SPASOYE: You tell me, since we are already talking like this face to face, would you be prepared to discuss the situation honestly and openly?

PAVLE: Why not?

SPASOYE: Then, please sit down. (*He offers him a cigarette*).

PAVLE (*sits in an armchair looking at it*): That's the armchair from my study.

SPASOYE: Oh, yes, will you say that these cigarettes are yours as well? (*Having lit a cigarette himself, sitting down*) Would you like to reveal your intentions to me, but honestly? I mean could you tell me what you intend to do and which action you intend to take?

PAVLE: I will tell you, why not? There is nothing in my intentions that I should hide. For example, as regards Mr Milan Novakovich who dispossessed me of my wife, and as regards my wife, who profoundly offended me—

SPASOYE: You will seek divorce, I know that already.

PAVLE: No, I won't seek divorce, I'll leave it open like that; I'll let them to live in a marriage without a legal basis.

SPASOYE: You'll leave them to fret about their marital happiness?

PAVLE: And are they happy really?

SPASOYE: That's what they say.

PAVLE: Well, why should I spoil that?

SPASOYE: And regarding that one with ten thousand?

PAVLE: That's least important, I'll think about it later.

SPASOYE: Well, you are right, he hasn't really robbed you but me.

PAVLE: How do you mean you?

SPASOYE: Well, after your death, the court made the financial mass and invited all the debtors to come up with what they owe. If he had come up with his debt, that amount would have gone to me as an inheritor of the mass.

PAVLE: All right, I'll leave him to you and you can pursue him if you like. It really is not fair that he should damage you like that.

SPASOYE: Fine, and... (*he can't find the right words*) ...I mean... How shall I put it? And what position do you take towards me?

PAVLE: That matter is most simple and clear. You've inherited my estate because the court was led to believe that I was dead. As I am actually alive, the inheritance will be reverted and you will vacate this house as well as hand back the ownership of everything else.

SPASOYE: Well, really!

PAVLE: That is, of course, if I encounter your good will and collaboration; if not than I'll pursue it another way. I shall accuse you of being a false successor, my solicitor is already gathering information on all the false documents and false witnesses you brought to the court to prove that you are my close relative, although we are only related, and you know this very well, because your mother married some distant relative of my mother's. Then, of course, the case will acquire a completely different standing.

SPASOYE (*worried, thinking*): Hm! So that's what you intend to do?

PAVLE: Yes, it is!

SPASOYE: But, sir, to say the least, that would be a crime, what you intend to do. Do you know that I am a respectable and important member of the society, do you know that—

PAVLE (*interrupting*): I beg your pardon, I don't mean to take away your respectability, only your estate, I leave your respectability to you.

SPASOYE: Please tell me sir, are all dead people so naive as you are, or are you a special case! What else is respectability if not estate? If you take away the estate, you've taken away my respectability.

PAVLE: Yes, actually, I remember, before you appropriated this estate you were a nobody.

SPASOYE: Of course I was a nobody.

PAVLE: Oh, yes, yes, I remember.

SPASOYE: And now you understand why I dislike your intentions and why I can't recognize you as a living man.

PAVLE: Yes, I understand, I do, but what can we do, it is difficult to find any kind of solution which would be suitable for you.

SPASOYE: Oh, but there is something, and if by any chance you'd come straight to me, the matter would have been resolved well before now.

PAVLE: Oh, I'm very curious?

SPASOYE: We said we would talk openly. So I'll tell you. I've got a very good plan where neither you nor I would suffer any losses.

PAVLE: Let's hear it?

SPASOYE: First of all you should seek divorce from your wife. We'll all help you, I can give you enough material for three divorce petitions.

PAVLE: And then?

SPASOYE: Then, when you get divorced, you will ask my daughter's hand in marriage, and I shall give it to you. What are you looking at me like that for? You'll ask for my daughter's hand in marriage, I shall give it to you and I'll give you the estate that used to belong to you in dowry.

PAVLE: A very interesting proposition, in that way I would become my own son-in-law.

SPASOYE: In that way both you and I can keep both the estate and respectability.

PAVLE: And in that case you would recognize me as a living man?

SPASOYE: Yes, in such an exceptional case.

PAVLE: I don't understand only one thing, you offer me your daughter who is already engaged?

SPASOYE: Yes, so you can see how big my sacrifice is! Imagine, I could have a son-in-law who is a university professor, a celebrated scientist, and a great scientific writer, and I am prepared to sacrifice him for you, you must agree that it's quite generous of me.

PAVLE: I think that the sacrifice is so much bigger given that these two young people are obviously in love, and you are prepared to ruin it for them.

SPASOYE: Well, yes, that too!

PAVLE: For if you lost the estate that you promised to your son-in-law in dowry, he would certainly stay engaged to your daughter anyway?

SPASOYE (*a little confused*): Well, yes... certainly, for he is such an honourable man, believe me, he is such a rare man of quality.

PAVLE: I believe you! And if that 'rare man of quality' lost his professorship and the name of a great scientist, your daughter would certainly stay engaged to him?

SPASOYE: Well, I'm not so sure about that.

PAVLE: Then you are in a really difficult predicament for that can very easily happen to you.

SPASOYE: What can happen to me?

PAVLE: Well that – that you lose your son-in-law, not because he would leave you but because your daughter would leave him.

SPASOYE: I don't understand you.

PAVLE: Hasn't your son-in-law ever told you anything about the crime he committed against me?

SPASOYE: Not a word! What crime, what crime are you talking about?

PAVLE: I can't find another word for his behaviour.

SPASOYE: Does he owe you a lot?

PAVLE: Much more than you can imagine.

SPASOYE: For God's sake what did he do with all that money?

PAVLE: It's not money, it's something else that cannot be estimated in monetary terms.

SPASOYE: I don't understand.

PAVLE: Your son-in-law should have acquainted you with this because you should know the entire complexity of your predicament at the moment.

SPASOYE: My predicament? Why my predicament?

PAVLE: You'll see why. Your son-in-law was once a young friend of mine; I helped him along from school days into adulthood; he acquired my affection and my trust. Just before I left on my journey I entrusted the young gentleman with looking after a manuscript of my scientific thesis, which I had been working on with great effort for seven years. And he, as soon as he's seen me off to the cemetery, and made sure that I'm dead, he came home pleased after the funeral and printed my thesis under his name.

SPASOYE (*losing his balance with shock*): What... that publication!?!?

PAVLE: Yes, that publication on the basis of which he has obtained professorship and the status of a scientist, on the basis of which he has become a director of that Illyria of yours, on the basis of which he became your son-in-law and on the basis of which you have promised him all the dowry.

SPASOYE (*sighs with despair sinks in an armchair and covers his face in his hands; after a pause he lifts his head and without confidence, quietly*): Can you prove that?

PAVLE: Yes, of course!

SPASOYE (*recollecting himself*): That means you are resolved?

PAVLE: Yes, I am resolved to go the right way about it.

SPASOYE (*thinking for a moment, then with bravado, gets up*): Do you know that you can come across obstacles even if you go the right way.

PAVLE: We will deal with those obstacles in the court.

SPASOYE: You reckon? (*Walking back and forth, agitated, wants to say something but can't think of anything*) I just don't know what to tell you.

PAVLE: I don't think anything else can be said on the matter, both you and I are sufficiently informed!

SPASOYE: Well, yes, I'm informed, of course I am—

PAVLE: Then there is no need for any further discussion. I've kept you too long as it is anyway; goodbye cousin!
SPASOYE (*hardly audible*): Goodbye!
PAVLE (*exits*).

15. LYUBOMIR, SPASOYE

SPASOYE (*looking after him in utter confusion and frustration; then goes to the door of Vukitsa's room*): Lyubomir, Lyubomir!

LYUBOMIR (*enters*).

SPASOYE: Marich was here, he's just left.

LYUBOMIR: What did he want?

SPASOYE: He told me some very strange things, very strange.

LYUBOMIR: Probably something interesting from the other world.

SPASOYE: No, from this world. Your scientific name and status, he claims that you stole it.

LYUBOMIR: I don't understand how one can steal one's name or status, one's status is not a cigarette case or an umbrella.

SPASOYE: It's not. But he claims that he has a proof that he gave you his manuscript to look after and that you, having returned from the cemetery, printed it in your own name.

LYUBOMIR (*cynically*): What else should I have done, put it in the grave with him?

SPASOYE: So, you don't deny it, you actually admit it.

LYUBOMIR: And you find that it is a crime? Believe me, it's not, for everybody takes everything they can from a dead man. Somebody takes his wife, somebody takes his work and somebody his house and the whole estate. Catch what you can.

SPASOYE (*bites his lip*): Well, yes... but this is different. On the basis of your catch you became a university professor; and on the basis of your professorship I gave you my daughter and a big dowry—

LYUBOMIR: It's all the same, there is no difference at all. On the basis of your catch you became a wealthy man, and on the basis of your wealth you looked for and found a son-in-law with a status.

SPASOYE: You are so rude, you totally forget about the dutiful respect you should give the father of your fiancée.

LYUBOMIR: Oh, no, father, I never forget about that respect; but I think this is strictly a business conversation.

SPASOYE: Well yes, business conversation, of course. (*Remembers*) And Illyria?

LYUBOMIR: What about Illyria?

SPASOYE: Well you are the director... The company has an international standing... If they take away your professorship, if you lose your reputation?

LYUBOMIR: That would be a much smaller loss than if you lose the house you mortgaged to the government.

SPASOYE (*dejected*): Well yes, that's true! (*Sighs*) That's true! (*He keeps quiet, his head down*).

LYUBOMIR (*after a pause*): Do you have anything else to discuss with me?

SPASOYE: Nothing else.

LYUBOMIR: If you need me I shall be with my fiancée. (*Exits*).

16. SPASOYE, SOFIA

SPASOYE (*sitting in an armchair, deep in thought*).

SOFIA (*entering*): A gentleman, sir.

SPASOYE (*perks up with hope*): Ah, that's him. (*With great hurry*) Let him in immediately, let him in.

SOFIA (*exits letting Mr Dyurich in*).

17. DYURICH, SPASOYE

DYURICH: Good afternoon, sir!

SPASOYE (*all blissful*): Good afternoon, Mr Dyurich! You've come just at the right time, at the right time! Please, please, sit down!

DYURICH: So? I'm curious whether you've achieved anything?

SPASOYE: Nothing. With that man you can't get anywhere the nice way.

DYURICH: And you've talked?

SPASOYE: Yes he was here earlier, he came as if God-sent; we talked in great depth and quite openly.

DYURICH: What does he say?

SPASOYE: Not only does he not accept any proposition of a compromise, but he even intensifies his attacks.

DYURICH: He's threatening?

SPASOYE: That he's threatening to take my estate, that's nothing new, but now he is threatening my son-in-law.

DYURICH: How does he threaten him?

SPASOYE: You won't believe it; he says: I'll topple him, I'll take away his professorship. He wants to portray him as a false scientist. Please! That man claims that he wrote the thesis which my son-in-law then printed under his own name.

DYURICH: Oh, that's a big accusation, and at the worst time possible. The matter of Illyria is this moment being discussed at the cabinet; any moment now we could get the concession, and that means millions, millions!

SPASOYE (*entranced*): Millions!

DYURICH: And at such a moment when we can already see all those millions-

SPASOYE (*continues*): -one bully comes along wanting to take away my estate and my house which is mortgaged to the cause, and wanting to topple one son-in-law, I mean not son-in-law, one company director.

DYURICH: We should think it through carefully.

SPASOYE: I ask you, please, think on my behalf, I am not able to think any longer.

DYURICH: You see, one shouldn't just approach this thing from one's own narrow point of view, as you do. The matter demands to be approached from a much wider, shall we say, from the perspective of the state. Can't you see that in this whole phenomenon there is a system, a system with destructive intentions? That man has been living in a secretive corner of Europe, working in some company as he says, but I would say he was working for some international destructive unit. Who knows what he has learnt over there, who knows what kind of ideas have entered his head and affected his powers of reason? Can't you see what he is onto? He attacks everything that is holy. Can't you see that he intends to destroy everything that makes up the basis of a society? Start from the beginning, please, and look at what he is doing. He wants to destroy a marriage-

SPASOYE: And a happy marriage, at that!

DYURICH: And marriage, my dear sir, is one of the first pillars of society. What else, he wants to rob someone of their estate, a private estate!

SPASOYE: That is, my estate!

DYURICH: And finally, he wants to demean, dethrone and trample down an authority. In his destructive rage he wants to take down one scientist.

SPASOYE: Oh, my God, I'm only just realising now, only now can I really see the real intentions of this man!

DYURICH: Oh, yes, yes, sir, that's how we should look at this matter. And when we look at it this way, we can see that this phenomenon contains a danger of broader significance.

SPASOYE: A danger, of course, it's a danger!

DYURICH: And this worry of yours, sir, cannot and must not stay only yours; this should be the worry of an entire society, the worry of the state, if you want.

SPASOYE: Well, yes, of course I want! Let the state deal with this worry!

DYURICH (*a thinking pause*): Now, you tell me, should we in such a case give permission to the legal system to deal with it? Is the legal system able to see through the apparent legal exterior of those destructive forces.

SPASOYE: No!

DYURICH: For what will the legal system do? This is what: This is my rafter and I ask that I can have it back. The legal system such as it is has no alternative but to say; it is your rafter, have it back! But what if this rafter supports the whole house, so now in order for you to have your rafter the whole house has to fall apart? What is bigger, what is more important, I ask you, the rafter or the house?

SPASOYE: The house!

DYURICH: Exactly! And now imagine Illyria as a house, for it is one big organization of great importance, and then suddenly somebody comes along and says: give me your rafter. Yes, your rafter, but if we pull your rafter out, the whole of Illyria falls on its head!

SPASOYE: Terrible!

DYURICH: And in addition, if... have you got the telephone by any chance?

SPASOYE: There it is at your hand.

DYURICH (*picks up the phone and looks for a number*): Hallo, hallo... Is that the cabinet? Is it you Mr Markovich? This is Dyurich. So? (*Having heard something, his face lights up with joy*). Thank you! Thank you, very much! (*He puts the phone down and goes to Spasoye with his arms open*) Illyria! Illyria! (*Embraces him tightly*).

SPASOYE: Yes?

DYURICH: Yes!

SPASOYE: Agreed?

DYURICH: Yes!

SPASOYE (*falls into his embrace*): Illyria! Millions! (*Suddenly he remembers*) And the rafter?

DYURICH: What rafter?

SPASOYE: The one that can be pulled out and destroy the house?

DYURICH: Don't you worry; we are safe now. We'll sort that out, come to me today! I'm off to the Ministry; I want to see the ministerial signatures with my own eyes. You come to me later on today, and I'll figure something out till then, or should I say, I already have a plan; don't worry! Goodbye! (*Exits*).

SPASOYE: Goodbye (*Follows him to the door*).

18. SPASOYE, RINA, NOVAKOVICH, LYUBOMIR, VUKITSA

SPASOYE (*returning from the door, rubs his hands with pleasure, whispering*): Illyria! Illyria! (*Goes to Vukitsa's door*). Children, ladies and gentlemen, over here, please!

ALL (*entering*): What is it?

SPASOYE (*joyful*): Illyria! Illyria! Illyria!

19. ANTA, THE FORMER

ANTA (*runs in out of breath*): Good afternoon! Ladies, gentlemen, an important announcement! Does anyone here have heart problems? (*Goes to the door, to Sofia*) Five glasses of water, please! The news is, ladies and gentlemen, very, very good, but I have to start from a great distance, just in case—

SPASOYE: You want to tell us that we've got the concession for Illyria?

ANTA (*disappointed*): So you know? (*Goes to the door*) Sofia, no need for the water!

SPASOYE: Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we've got the millions, that is, we've got the concession. Come on, come on, everybody, let me embrace you.

ANTA (*runs to his embrace*).

SPASOYE (*pushes Anta*): Not you; shareholders only — let me embrace you, brothers and sisters, shareholders. (*He embraces as many as he can, shouting*) Illyria! Illyria!

CURTAIN

ACT 3

Spasoye's study.

1. SPASOYE, SOFIA

SPASOYE (*standing next to a desk, opening his mail*).

SOFIA (*brings a letter in*).

SPASOYE (*taking it*): Who from?

SOFIA: I don't know, a boy brought it.

SPASOYE (*opening the letter, reading it and frowning; reads it again, muttering*): Of course! I knew it! Of course I knew it! (*To Sofia*) Is the boy still here?

SOFIA: Yes, he is waiting for a reply.

SPASOYE: Well, of course he is waiting for a reply, of course he is, and that means I have to reply, doesn't it?

SOFIA: I don't know, sir.

SPASOYE: Well, of course, who else can reply but me? I have to reply, I may not like it, but I have to reply. (*He takes 500 out of his wallet, puts the money in an envelope and seals it*). There, give him the reply since I have to reply.

SOFIA (*takes the letter and leaves, stops at the door*): One gentleman, sir.

SPASOYE: Who?

SOFIA: I don't know, I've never seen him before.

SPASOYE: Let him in!

SOFIA (*withdraws letting Mile in*).

2. SPASOYE, MILE

MILE (*carrying a leather bag under his arm, bows and hands out a letter*).

SPASOYE (*opening the letter*): Another letter. For God's sake, can't breathe for the letters this morning!
(*Reading the signature*) Oh, this is from Mrs Rina Novakovich!

MILE: Yes, the lady has sent me to you.

SPASOYE (*having read the letter*): Ah, I see? Well, glad to meet you, please, please sit down, young man.

MILE (*sits down*).

SPASOYE: And you are, the lady writes, a clerk at Petrovich solicitor's.

MILE: Yes!

SPASOYE: And certain Pavle Marich has approached Mr Petrovich to represent him.

MILE: Yes, to start court proceedings against you.

SPASOYE (*startled*): Against me!? How do you mean against me!? Why against me!? And you seem to be closely acquainted with the matter?

MILE: Yes I'm working on the case.

SPASOYE (*unsettled*): What are you doing? How are you working on it? Please, tell me, what is going on? He is suing me, you say? OK, let him sue, but why me? Please tell me that, why me?

MILE: Not only you, he has lodged four charges.

SPASOYE (*offering him a cigarette*): What four charges?

MILE: He is suing you for using false evidence before the court in appropriation of his property. He demands return of his property and charges you on criminal grounds.

SPASOYE: Oh, really! Criminal? And the other three?

MILE: One against Milan Novakovich for adultery and an intrusion upon marriage.

SPASOYE: Yes, I thought so; the third?

MILE: The third against the university professor Lyubomir Protich for the theft of a manuscript and publication of the same under his name!

SPASOYE: Well, does he ever have enough of it! And the fourth?

MILE: Against some Anta Milosavlyevich for perjury.

SPASOYE: So he hasn't skipped him either? And you, I mean, what did I want to say, so are these charges really serious?

MILE: Actually, I have to say, when my boss looked at the material he exclaimed: "Oh I'll sort them all out like a bag of worms!"

SPASOYE: Sort who out, what worms?

MILE: Well, you!

SPASOYE: What does he have to sort me out for, and why sort me out, please! Like worms...

MILE: He means, metaphorically, like that.

SPASOYE: I don't like it even metaphorically. And anyway, you tell me, please, has he submitted these cases?

MILE: No, he hasn't, he is just working on them at the moment, and then I'll type them up.

SPASOYE: Very good! Very good! You will be typing them up, then! And you could kind of procrastinate with this typing, couldn't you? We could do with a bit of procrastination in this.

MILE: Oh, yes, yes of course, I have already given my word to Mrs Novakovich that I shall procrastinate.

SPASOYE: Very good! Very good! Believe me, dear young man, we shall be very grateful and we shall make sure that we show you our gratitude somehow.

MILE: I was saying to Mrs Novakovich, I would be very happy with, say, a position in your company Illyria. You will, I presume, need some clerical staff?

SPASOYE: Of course! And your qualifications are?

MILE: Yes... well, I've got... I've got an incomplete baccalaureate; I've got an incomplete mercantile apprenticeship; I've got an incomplete technical training, I've got an incomplete law degree-

SPASOYE: Generally – incomplete? Well, anyway, what do you need it for, your best qualification is your acquaintance with Mrs Novakovich.

MILE: That is, you understand, quite an accidental acquaintance.

SPASOYE: Well, of course it's accidental, that's what I thought anyway. So, I can very gladly promise you a position in the company; only of course after we actually open. That won't be very soon, but as soon as we open...

MILE: And in the meantime?

SPASOYE: In the meantime? In the meantime – patience!

MILE: Yes, certainly; only you know, I have a very modest salary at the solicitor's, and life is very expensive.

SPASOYE: Oh, yes!... Now I understand. You would obviously like a reward for your favour?

MILE: Oh, God, no; not at all! I only do it out of respect towards Mrs Novakovich. It would be different if you offered me a small loan, that would be quite acceptable, but a reward would be an insult.

SPASOYE: And what would be the amount constituting this insult?

MILE: You mean the loan?

SPASOYE: Yes, that's what I mean.

MILE: I never ask for more than what I really need. At the moment I would need about five hundred.

SPASOYE (*taking the money reluctantly out of his pocket*): That's just as much as I can give you at the moment. (*Gives him the money*).

MILE (*taking the money*): But, please, Mrs Novakovich mustn't know anything about this.

SPASOYE: Of course. I mustn't know what you and Mrs Novakovich know, Mrs Novakovich mustn't know what you and I know. In mathematics, I think, this is called the rule of the three.

MILE (*laughing*): Yes, yes! So, I shall keep you informed about the state of affairs at the solicitor's. (*Goes*).

SPASOYE (*following him*): And please, procrastinate, procrastinate as much as possible.

MILE: I am at your disposal, sir! (*Exits*).

3. ANTA, SPASOYE

SPASOYE (*reading Rina's letter again and smiling*).

ANTA (*at the door*): Here I am!

SPASOYE: Have you found it?

ANTA: Yes, I have, of course!

SPASOYE: Is it the way I wanted it?

ANTA (*hands over a small envelope*): There!

SPASOYE (*taking a photograph out of the envelope*): Yes, very good! How on earth did you find it!

ANTA: Don't ask, it wasn't easy. I went to all the photo-shops, the ones that do passport photographs, and I spent ages roaming through all those boxes of photographs, and finally, somehow, I found it.

SPASOYE: Very good!

ANTA (*sitting down*): But I was thinking... such a big house and you couldn't find a single photo of his anywhere around.

SPASOYE: There were some, but I need this passport format.

ANTA: Also, on the way I was looking around for commercial premises and office-space for Illyria. I've found a couple of premises but with only two rooms each.

SPASOYE: That's too small, we'll need three or four rooms only for the clerical staff.

ANTA: And you will have a lot of clerics?

SPASOYE: Oh, yes, there'll be a lot of work to do.

ANTA: Well, won't there be some work for me to do there, then?

SPASOYE: You don't have the money, you see, and that's very important. There you are, had you not swallowed those ten thousand, you could've bought shares for that money--

ANTA: Well, I don't have to be a share-holder.

SPASOYE: What else?

ANTA: Well, some kind of a position. I am the only unemployed pensioner in this country, and you can't say I'm not capable.

SPASOYE: You are capable, I can't say you aren't, and you are always ready to run around when necessary, but to tell you the truth, you would be a bit unsuitable for employment at such a company.

ANTA: Why?

SPASOYE: Well... because of that thing.

ANTA: Which thing?

SPASOYE: Because of your perjury.

ANTA: Oh, yes, that's right, you are right there, you and I are not the most suitable ones for such a company.

SPASOYE: You, you are unsuitable, not I.

ANTA: Well, I mean, you know, given those forged certificates and false witnesses.

SPASOYE (*angrily*): I told you once and for all, not to mention that anymore.

ANTA: Well, why do you mention it to me?

SPASOYE: I am one thing, and you are quite another. You lied under oath, and so what? Who and what are you now!? A nobody; you've got just as much money as you need for your tram ticket, and that's your capital. It would've been different if you'd made those ten thousand that you swallowed into a hundred thousand, and those hundred into two hundred, and four hundred and so on! That's different; had you done that, I'd've taken my hat off to you and never mentioned any perjury. What is a perjury when you're at a capital of eight hundred thousand? The whole world would've taken their hat off, and forgotten the perjury.

ANTA: That's true, you can see that the whole world is taking their hat off to you.

SPASOYE: They are, of course they are, and that's the difference between you and me.

ANTA: All right, that's all right; but I thought, you see, you might also need some people like me in the company.

SPASOYE: We might need people like you, but let me tell you, you are not lucky enough, there you are, you are just not a lucky man.

ANTA: And why not?

SPASOYE: Well, for example, you found me that publicist!

ANTA: And?

SPASOYE: And he robbed me of two thousand the day before yesterday, and look at what he says today. *(He pulls a letter out of his pocket)* This is what he writes this morning. *(Reads)* "Dear Sir, I've found out from reliable sources that in the next few days all papers will be writing in great detail and at great length about the matter. They have got the material from the very person who in your opinion is not alive. If the papers published this they would rob me of the money in my hand, or should I say, they'd take the bread from my mouth. In order to avoid that, I can't do anything else but write up a pamphlet as soon as tonight to be released tomorrow afternoon. Either that or to keep quiet, but keeping quiet would mean a great sacrifice on my part, and sacrifice nowadays is a very expensive affair. I would, in all modesty, be very happy with a thousand dinars." There!

ANTA: And what did you do?

SPASOYE: I cheated on him. I sent him five hundred.

ANTA: Would that be enough for the sacrifice?

SPASOYE: Of course it would be enough, what else? You would sacrifice yourself for two hundred, so why wouldn't he for five.

ANTA: Well, what he says about the papers is true, I've heard it as well.

SPASOYE: What have you heard?

ANTA: I've heard that Marich called all the journalists and-

SPASOYE: And you haven't heard that he called the solicitors?

ANTA: Why solicitors?

SPASOYE: He lodged a case, he sued you.

ANTA: Why me?

SPASOYE: For perjury.

ANTA: Why only me, hasn't he sued anyone else?

SPASOYE: He sued all of us as well, but not on criminal grounds. He sued one for taking his wife, he sued another for taking his money, but those are not criminal charges. He sued you for perjury, and that's at least a year in prison.

ANTA *(annoyed)*: I know, you told me, how many times have you told me already. *(Worried)*.

SPASOYE: As you can see he hasn't skipped you.

ANTA: No, and he could have, really.

SPASOYE: He could've, of course he could've; he could've skipped me too, but there you are, he didn't want to!

ANTA *(scratching his head)*: To hell with it, I really don't feel like going to prison.

SPASOYE: I don't feel like going either, my friend! You think it's easy, this year I'm off to Carlsbad, this year I'm off to Bled, and this year – off to prison. I don't feel like it, either!

ANTA: So what shall we do now?

SPASOYE: We'll have to work hard. I'll deal with the court, and you deal with the papers. This moment you go to all the papers, see everybody from the editor to the printer, tell them to be patient, tell them to wait just for another 24 hours and tomorrow they'll get some truly sensational material. You tell them that, and as soon as you achieve anything, come to inform me about it.

ANTA *(getting up to go)*: And you know... this thing with the court?... I really wouldn't like to have anything to do with them.

SPASOYE: I told you, I'm going to deal with that, I've put it in motion already.

4. AGNIA, THE FORMER

AGNIA: Good afternoon, everyone. Oh, it's you dear Mr Anta, I'm so glad to see you. I was going to try and find you anyway, I've got to tell you – I've heard a completely different version of what you told me the other day.

ANTA: It might be, it might be, but that doesn't change anything.

AGNIA: Basically, it is not true that the late Mr Marich had a birthmark above his left lip.

ANTA: OK, I accept it, he didn't; only please excuse me this time, I really haven't got the time to talk, I've got some very important business to attend to. Isn't that so Spasoye... I've got some very important business, haven't I?

SPASOYE: Yes, yes! You must go this moment!

ANTA (to Agnia): Please, excuse me! (Exits).

5. AGNIA, SPASOYE

AGNIA: And I have to talk to you too, Spasoye.

SPASOYE: What about?

AGNIA: About what they are saying outside. I have to tell you, we are family and I'm worried.

SPASOYE: What do you have to worry about, and why on my behalf, please!?

AGNIA: But how can I not worry? For instance, I met Mrs Draga Mitrovich yesterday and she asked me straight away: "Please, tell me, why did Mr Spasoye call his daughter's wedding off so suddenly, when absolutely all the invitations had been printed already? There must be something there!"

SPASOYE: My daughter will get married when I want it, not when Mrs Draga Mitrovich wants it, and the invitations can very easily be printed again.

AGNIA: And it's not only Mrs Draga Mitrovich. Ah, if you only knew what is being said regarding the wedding but also regarding many other things.

SPASOYE: I told you already, once and for all, I don't care what they are saying.

AGNIA: I've also been to Nasta's, and she looked at my cup.

SPASOYE: What cup, for God's sake, woman!?

AGNIA: A coffee cup! Listen to me, that Nasta fortunetold from the coffee cups of many ministers, and she always told them, they say, precisely when they were going to become former ministers. I tell her: it's a big problem, big worry. And do you know what she tells me?

SPASOYE: I don't know, I don't want to know, do you understand; I only need to start believing in some coffee cups now.

AGNIA: What? You don't believe in fortunetelling from a cup?

SPASOYE: I don't.

AGNIA: Then you don't believe in God either.

SPASOYE: What does God have to do with coffee cups?

AGNIA: Well it's all about destiny; God decides on your destiny and the coffee cup only tells you about it in advance.

SPASOYE: Please stop with this claptrap, but since you are here you can do me a favour which I'll be grateful to you for. I need to get Vukitsa out of the house for at least an hour. I will have some meetings here today which could be pleasant, but they could also be unpleasant, and I wouldn't want her to be around.

AGNIA: Well, that's not difficult; I'll take her to look for the wedding dress material. Only you should've let me know so I could bring my collection of samples, but never mind, I already know very well what can be found in which shop.

SPASOYE: That could be a bit tricky. You know that we've just postponed the wedding and I've asked Vukitsa not to look for the wedding dress yet, I can't go back on my word now. Can you think of something else you could look for.

AGNIA: How about this, I could ask her to come with me and choose a silver dining set. I've seen several 24 piece sets in some shops; I'd like to give it to her as a wedding present, and it would be good for her to make her own choice.

SPASOYE: Yes, that's a good idea. She'll like that. (Goes to the door on the left). Vukitsa? Vukitsa, darling, come along, auntie-Agnia is here. (Coming back) Please, keep her as long as possible.

6. VUKITSA, THE FORMER

VUKITSA: Oh, hello, auntie, what do we owe this surprise to?

AGNIA (kissing her): Business, darling, very important business. I came to pick you up, and we'll go together.

VUKITSA: Go? Where?

AGNIA: So you can help me, darling, to choose your wedding gift.

SPASOYE (to Vukitsa): Yes you should help auntie-Agnia, darling.

AGNIA: I'll tell you what it is. You see, I wanted to buy you a bedroom suite, but Spasoye was very much against it. He said he had ordered all the furniture already.

SPASOYE: Of course!

AGNIA: And I wanted to buy you a bedroom suite according to my taste.

VUKITSA: That would certainly be something really extraordinary.

AGNIA: I've always imagined my own wedding suite in a pale blue colour. All the walls would be painted in that colour, especially the ceiling. Now imagine a pale blue double bed spread, pale blue pillows and a sky blue chandelier. Oh God, that would be exquisite, the newly weds would feel as though they are in heaven. That's how I always imagined my bedroom.

VUKITSA: Oh, it's a real pity you haven't had a chance to get it.

AGNIA (*sighing with real feeling*): Of course it's a pity! Anyway, as Spasoye was so much against it, I decided to get you a 24-piece silver set. Pure silver set.

SPASOYE: It sounds a really nice gift.

VUKITSA: And why do you need me?

AGNIA: I've found three sets at three different jeweller's shops, and I can't choose between them. I would love you to choose yourself.

SPASOYE: Really, Vukitsa, since it's for you, it's best that you make the choice.

AGNIA: I don't mind how much it costs; the most important thing is that you like it.

SPASOYE: Yes, go along, Vukitsa.

AGNIA: You must. I really wouldn't like to get it without you.

VUKITSA: Could we do it some other day, I have a really bad headache today.

SPASOYE: And who can guarantee that you won't have a headache next time?

AGNIA: Yes, and believe me, as soon as you get out and get some fresh air, it'll stop.

VUKITSA (*deciding with great difficulty*): OK, then. Let me just get ready. (*Goes to her room*).

AGNIA: I'll help you. (*Goes with Vukitsa*).

7. SPASOYE (*alone*)

SPASOYE (*goes to the phone and dials a number*): Hallo! It's you Mr Dyurich. I'm sorry to bother you, but the situation is very serious. You've heard, have you? They say, his solicitor is preparing a lawsuit. I've heard that from a reliable source, and he is also preparing a press campaign. That's what you've heard, isn't it? So tell me, can't we stop this somehow; can't we get someone to censor this, to prevent the papers from writing about it, for what is censorship for after all if it won't protect the interests of honourable and respectable citizens? After all, if it won't protect us as individuals, let it protect Illyria as an enterprise; that enterprise represents the pride of the state, and ruining us means ruining the enterprise. How? Sorry? Yes, I've done everything as you instructed, the police have been contacted, the witnesses have been named, everything, everything has been arranged. And more than that, I've asked the police agent, who you recommended, to be here at 10.30, which is when Marich will be here too. He will come because I said it was regarding a final agreement. With Schwartz? Yes, I've prepared everything and I've invited Schwartz.

7. SCHWARTZ, THE FORMER

SCHWARTZ (*enters, elegantly dressed*).

SPASOYE (*having noticed him, waves to him to wait a minute and continues talking on the phone*): Here he is, Mr Schwartz has just arrived. Yes, yes, of course, Mr Dyurich, that's what I'll do, I'll sort it out with Mr Schwartz this moment. Yes, we mustn't take any more time over it, either-or, and as soon as today we'll see what happens! I'll keep you informed, oh, yes, I will! (*Putting the phone down*). Where have you been, Mr Schwartz, for God's sake, I've sent for you three times today?

SCHWARTZ: I'm sorry, I didn't know it was that urgent.

SPASOYE: It's extremely urgent. Please, sit down.

SCHWARTZ: Thank you. (*He sits down*).

SPASOYE: Have you got a visa in your passport?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, you asked me to have it ready for travelling as soon as the concession is through.

SPASOYE: Have you got it on you?

SCHWARTZ (*taking it out of his pocket*): I never part from my passport.

SPASOYE (*taking the passport*): You will leave it with me for awhile.

SCHWARTZ: What do you mean?

SPASOYE: You will leave it with me, and tomorrow you will go to the police and inform them that you have lost it or maybe had it stolen.

SCHWARTZ (*protesting*): But, sir!

SPASOYE: It is to do with a very important matter, and it is completely in your interest to have this matter resolved the best way possible.

SCHWARTZ: But how can I stay without a passport?

SPASOYE: I told you already, tomorrow you will apply for another one.

SCHWARTZ: Will I get another one?

SPASOYE: You have just heard me talking to the minister's brother on the phone? You can see that I am doing everything according to his instructions, so what are you worrying about when there is somebody else taking care about everything.

SCHWARTZ (*uncomfortable*): Yes, however... How shall I put it, it's not very pleasant. I don't know how my passport and my name will be used.

SPASOYE: Nothing unlawful. You don't have to worry about it. On the contrary, your passport will facilitate one good deed, do you understand, a good deed.

SCHWARTZ: I believe you, sir, but it is still a bit awkward.

SPASOYE: Shall I get you Mr Dyrich on the phone, so he can explain it to you in person?

SCHWARTZ: Thank you, I believe you... only... will I certainly get a new passport tomorrow?

SPASOYE: Tomorrow, or maybe the day after tomorrow.

SCHWARTZ: And you say I have nothing to worry about?

SPASOYE: Exactly.

SCHWARTZ: And I can go now?

SPASOYE: Wait! (*Opens the passport, unsticks the photograph with a letter opener and gives it to him*) You may need it.

SCHWARTZ (*even more disturbed*): But, sir, this is-

SPASOYE: This is something I've explained already, therefore you may rest assured!

9. VUKITSA, AGNIA, THE FORMER

AGNIA (*coming out of Vukitsa's room*): We are ready.

SPASOYE: What took you so long?

AGNIA: Well, you know, girls' talk!

SPASOYE (*introduces them*): Mr Schwartz, a member of the managerial board of Illyria, my daughter, my cousin.

SCHWARTZ (*bowing*).

VUKITSA: Daddy, is it all right if we stay out a bit longer?

SPASOYE: It's all right, I've got a lot of work to do anyway! (*To Schwartz who is growing impatient*): So, Mr Schwartz, we've agreed.

SCHWARTZ: Thank you. Goodbye, sir. (*Bowing to the ladies again, exits*).

10. SPASOYE, AGNIA, VUKITSA

AGNIA (*following Schwartz with her eyes*): A very noble gentleman!

SPASOYE: He is not noble, he is married!

AGNIA: Ah, I see.

SPASOYE: What did I want to say? (*To Vukitsa*) Yes, don't you hurry because of me. Take a good look at those sets, for you know those are the things you buy once in a lifetime.

AGNIA: That's what I say, as well! Let's go, Vukitsa.

VUKITSA (*kisses her father on the cheek and exits with Agnia*).

11. SPASOYE (*alone*)

SPASOYE (*turning around to see whether anyone is looking, takes out of the envelope the photograph that Anta had brought, then takes a bottle of glue out of the drawer and applies some on the back of the photo, sticks it on in the passport and presses hard with his hand*).

12. SOFIA, SPASOYE

SOFIA (*enters*): A gentleman from the police.

SPASOYE: Let him in, let him in, straight away.

SOFIA (*withdraws, letting the agent in*).

13. AGENT II, SPASOYE

SPASOYE: And you come for the reasons of?

AGENT: To put myself at your disposal.

SPASOYE: You are acquainted with the matter?

AGENT: Yes.

SPASOYE: Have you got the instructions?

AGENT: They said I would get them from you.

SPASOYE: Good, very good. Are you being accompanied by anyone?

AGENT: I've got two policemen outside on the street.

SPASOYE: Don't leave them outside, it could look suspicious. Let them into my courtyard, and you will go into the adjacent room until I call you. The ones that I guarantee for are all right. Otherwise... you know.

AGENT: I understand, sir.

SPASOYE: You may go into the room on the right. (*He follows him to the door*). Sofia, please take the gentleman into my small room. (*He returns*).

14. LYUBOMIR PROTICH, ANTA, THE FORMER

ANTA: I met Mr Son-in-law; he had already been visiting the papers.

SPASOYE: You had?

LYUBOMIR: Yes, but it's very difficult to persuade them. It's a first class sensation, and they won't let it go.

SPASOYE: They'll write?

LYUBOMIR: I managed to postpone it for a couple of days; I've promised them an even bigger sensation by then.

SPASOYE: Very good, very good, that's just as much as we need, a couple of days.

LYUBOMIR: And Mr Anta says He's already been to the solicitor's.

SPASOYE: Yes, he is suing Mr Anta.

ANTA: He is suing all of us.

LYUBOMIR: On criminal grounds?

SPASOYE: I don't know, I think he is suing us on administrative grounds, and Mr Anta on criminal grounds.

ANTA: He is suing all of us on the same grounds, there's no difference.

LYUBOMIR: And what for?

SPASOYE: He is suing Mr Novakovich for taking his wife, me for allegedly taking his estate, you for—

LYUBOMIR (*interrupts with a gesture not to talk in front of Anta*).

SPASOYE (*remembers*): Ah, yes... he is suing you for you know what.

LYUBOMIR: And Mr Anta?

ANTA: Me too for 'you know what'.

LYUBOMIR: That means we should employ a solicitor as well?

SPASOYE: My best solicitor is my clear conscience.

ANTA: Mine as well!

LYUBOMIR: Still... clear conscience doesn't know the paragraphs, and paragraphs can be very dangerous things.

ANTA (*more to himself*): Very dangerous!

SPASOYE: The only question is, should we take the same solicitor for all of us, or should we take one each! In any case we shouldn't be too rash. I will seek Mr Dyurich's advice on this, too.

LYUBOMIR (*wants to go to an other room*): Is Vukitsa around?

SPASOYE: No, she went out with auntie-Agnia, she will be awhile.

15. NOVAKOVICH, RINA, THE FORMER

SPASOYE (*having noticed them at the door*): Well, thank God you've arrived!

RINA: I've had such a bad headache—

SPASOYE: My dear lady, we all have a headache today, but what can we do, the situation is very serious, we have to get through it together, for it's burning under all of our feet. That's why I've had to ask you to come over today at all costs. Marich has submitted his case to the solicitor's, and in a couple of days time, we shall all be charged.

NOVAKOVICH: Well so what, we'll find a solicitor as well, and try to defend ourselves.

SPASOYE: Defend ourselves? It's easy for you to say we'll defend ourselves, for after all, what have you got to lose — nothing.

NOVAKOVICH: What do you mean nothing?

SPASOYE: Well, he is only suing you for taking his wife. Even if you lose the case, what have you lost — a wife and nothing else. That at least is not a big loss.

RINA (*offended*): How do you mean this, sir?

SPASOYE (*realising*): That is, I beg your pardon, I mean the loss of a wife is not a material loss, and we are talking about material losses here. Then, taking somebody's wife is not a criminal act, nowadays that's just a sport and nothing else. Therefore, his charges against you are not at all dangerous, but take for example, this poor Anta.

ANTA (*protesting*): Why me again?

RINA: Take yourself as an example, why don't you.

SPASOYE: Myself and all of us, for you are deluding yourself, Mr Novakovich, if you think that you've got a cheap deal here in losing only your wife to him. You'll also have to face a material loss. You've taken Mrs Rina Marich thinking that Mr Marich was not alive; if however, the court now returns his wife to him, that means that he is alive, and if he is alive, the whole of Illyria will go to hell. Everything will go, everything, including of course half a million of your cash which you have so far invested in the enterprise.

NOVAKOVICH (*frightened*): Half a million!? Can it really be lost? If that happens, believe me, I have no choice but to commit suicide.

SPASOYE: There you see! Should we allow that to happen? You commit suicide, my son-in-law commits suicide, Anta commits suicide – and even if Anta doesn't commit suicide, what use is he to me. I can't defend myself on my own, we all have to do it together.

ANTA: Of course!

ALL (*agreeing*).

SPASOYE: We have to fight, and it is a fight for life or death. We cannot afford to choose our means, for our very survival is at stake. You have to be prepared for everything, do you understand, everything!

NOVAKOVICH: How do you imagine this 'everything'.

SPASOYE: I'll tell you the whole plan. I've been thinking it out all day and all night. I'm not saying I thought it out entirely on my own; it's essentially Mr Dyurich's plan, I just developed it. Mr Dyurich has really tried hard to make sure that this plan is realised and he took certain necessary measures with the authorities. The authorities will be completely at our disposal.

NOVAKOVICH: Legal authorities?

SPASOYE: No, the point is that this should never get to the legal authorities. Marich has been reported to the police as a dangerous element, as a representative of a destructive organisation from abroad, which I will testify to, as well as you Mr and Mrs Novakovich, my son-in-law and Anta. You will all have to be ready to make such a statement if necessary.

NOVAKOVICH: What statement?

SPASOYE: Any, any statement that will portray him as a destructive element, as a foreign agent, an anarchist, anything that can work against him, do you understand?

ANTA: Even if we've never heard or seen anything like that.

SPASOYE: Not 'even if we've never heard or seen it', but precisely what you've never heard or seen – that is what you will testify to.

NOVAKOVICH (*uncomfortable*): That would actually be, how shall I put it-

SPASOYE: Please, say it!

RINA: That would perhaps be immoral.

SPASOYE: Immoral, of course, what else do you expect! You think morals will help you? I learnt about morals in religious education at school, but religious education is one thing and life is another. Please, tell me, Mrs Novakovich what would you prefer, morals or Mr Novakovich's suicide? Or you Mr Novakovich, tell me, do you like morals better than your five hundred thousand, or maybe you, my son, do you prefer morals or... (*He stops himself*). Or you, Anta, would you rather have morals or a year in prison? Come on, say it?

LYUBOMIR: Really, it is a very difficult position we are in.

SPASOYE: Of course it's difficult. Immorality is power, power, my dear sir, and a power that is more powerful than the law itself. The whole world worships immorality nowadays, only Anta pretends to-

ANTA (*defending himself*): What about me?

SPASOYE: You are frowning for some reason, maybe you'd like to represent a virtue in our society?

16. SOFIA, THE FORMER

SOFIA (*bringing a card in*): A gentleman.

SPASOYE (*reading the card*): Mr Marich. Let him in!

SOFIA (*exits*).

SPASOYE: Gentlemen, I warn you, be ready for anything!

17. PAVLE, THE FORMER

PAVLE (*enters, bowing; nobody returns his greeting; to Spasoye*): I have come in response to your special invitation.

SPASOYE: Yes I invited you to come.

PAVLE: You said it was going to be the final conversation between us.

SPASOYE: Yes, final.

PAVLE: Since I have made the final decision regarding the situation, I really don't find that there is a necessity for any more conversations, however, I've come to hear what you have to say.

SPASOYE: You've done very well to come, it is in your greatest interest to have done so.

PAVLE: You reckon?

SPASOYE: I don't reckon, I know. As we don't have much time for conversations, we'll proceed with the matter immediately.

PAVLE: And we'll talk like this, in public?

SPASOYE: Yes, in front of everyone. I invited them especially, for what I have to tell you is both in my own and in their name.

PAVLE: Fine.

SPASOYE: Do you know that you are being followed by the police?

PAVLE (*surprised*): The police?

SPASOYE: Yes, I wouldn't be surprised if there are some police agents in front of my house at the moment, or in my courtyard or, indeed, behind this door.

PAVLE: That's how dangerous I am?

SPASOYE: Much more dangerous than you think, all your movements, all your actions and all your intentions have been revealed.

PAVLE: That's very interesting.

SPASOYE: It's very interesting for the police, too.

PAVLE: Are you going to tell me anything more about these actions and intentions of mine?

SPASOYE: I'll acquaint you with all the material that has been gathered against you, so that you can assess your predicament for yourself.

PAVLE: I shall be grateful to you, sir.

SPASOYE: You, sir, are an agent and an exponent of an anarchist organisation which has for its aim the destruction of society, social system and the state.

PAVLE (*laughing*): And that's all?

SPASOYE: That's not all; you will be assured that that's not all as soon as I present you with the evidence. The beginning of the investigation leads to a certain theft of letters in your house—

PAVLE: Love letters?

SPASOYE: That's what you say but the investigation says otherwise... That was a theft of highly compromising letters which revealed your entire destructive purpose. As soon as those letters were intercepted, your close accomplice in action, a certain Russian immigrant Alyosha, committed suicide, and you ran away abroad and lived as an immigrant for three years.

PAVLE: This is the first time I've heard of it. So those were political letters?

SPASOYE: Not political but revolutionary, anarchist letters.

PAVLE: We could say that if a woman's infidelity is described as marital anarchy.

SPASOYE: The police are acquainted with the content of those letters.

PAVLE: I see, so they've read them, have they?

SPASOYE: No, they haven't read them since the lady has destroyed all the letters wishing to save you.

PAVLE: I am very grateful for that! But how do the police know that those letters were revolutionary? Unless the lady claims so?

SPASOYE: Of course she claims so.

PAVLE: Really!/? That means that she would even give such a statement if necessary.

SPASOYE: Of course she will give such a statement.

PAVLE (*addressing Rina*): I would very much like to hear the lady confirm this to me.

RINA (*confused, disturbed, almost sobbing*): I... I...

PAVLE: Yes, yes, the lady would give such a statement, it is entirely in keeping with her understanding of morals.

NOVAKOVICH: Sir, I do not permit you to insult my wife like this.

PAVLE: I am insulting my own wife, the lady is only your mistress.

NOVAKOVICH: As long as she carries my name—

PAVLE: Your name? I don't know whether that means anything to you, but obviously to her it means nothing! She carried my name too and she still had her own views of morals; she now carries your name and still has the same views.

RINA (*overcome with feeling and momentary anger*): Enough! (*Spitefully*) I will give a statement, I will! (*She sinks in an armchair*).

PAVLE (*calm and indifferent*): I believe you! (*To Novakovich*) You will of course confirm this statement for you are also acquainted with the content of those letters?

SPASOYE: Yes, the gentleman will confirm. Not only that, the gentleman will also give a statement about the anarchist propaganda you were spreading at the building site, about the suspicious characters and the agents from various international organizations whom you had brought in from abroad and employed at the site in order to give them an alibi.

PAVLE: The gentleman will claim that?

SPASOYE: And much more.

PAVLE (*looks Novakovich in the eye and when he lowers his eyes, Pavle turns his back on him with profound contempt, addressing Spasoye*): I presume the collection of such perfect witnesses can in no way exclude your respected son-in-law?

SPASOYE: Of course not, my dear sir. His statement will be one of the strongest against you.

PAVLE: Will it?

SPASOYE: Just before you emigrated you made sure that you removed all the evidence against yourself by giving this young man certain manuscripts of yours, which as you said, were very precious to you.

PAVLE: That's right.

SPASOYE: There you see, you don't deny the basic fact. Of course, no one can deny the truth. After your funeral, my son-in-law, not knowing what to do with your manuscripts, had a look, and to his great surprise found them to be a collection of most confidential revolutionary correspondence with various organizations abroad. The kind of correspondence which doesn't lead only to prison but straight to the gallows. The young man found himself in great confusion, he certainly didn't want to keep such documents, and didn't find it suitable to take them to the police, for what would be the point in that given that you were already dead? My son-in-law had a chat with Mr Anta, since he is a man of great experience, and they made the decision to burn all that correspondence, in the interest of your peace and the peace of your soul.

PAVLE (*with great disgust*): Your son-in-law will give such a statement?

SPASOYE: Yes!

PAVLE: And Mr Anta will confirm that?

SPASOYE: Mr Anta? He will confirm it under oath if necessary.

PAVLE: A spineless worm!

ANTA (*underbreath to Novakovich*): Now I'm a worm.

PAVLE: Mr Protich, I would very much appreciate it if you could confirm that you are prepared to make such a statement?

LYUBOMIR (*keeps quiet*).

SPASOYE: Tell him, tell him, feel free to tell him!

LYUBOMIR (*tortured, whispering*): Yes... I will!

PAVLE (*angry*): A crook!

(*General commotion*).

PAVLE: I thought you were a mere thief, but you are more than that, you are a criminal!

ANTA: Oh-o!

SPASOYE: Please remain calm, gentlemen, the gentleman has nothing else to defend himself with but insults.

PAVLE (*still agitated*): You expect me to want to defend myself? What from? Who from? From you, immoral vermin!

ANTA (*to Novakovich*): There we go again, now we are all vermin!

PAVLE (*recollects himself*): I shouldn't have allowed myself to lose my temper. These kinds of phenomena in this environment are not a sufficient reason for agitation. (*To Spasoye*) Let us, therefore continue our chat? Please tell me, then, my dear closest relative: Will you make a statement too?

SPASOYE: What kind of a question is that? Of course I will say everything I know. I can't be expected to be unscrupulous and hide what I know.

PAVLE: And what is it that you know and that your scruples prevent you from hiding?

SPASOYE: I know all about great amounts of money that arrived into your account in foreign currency from abroad-

PAVLE: And you will back this with documents similar to those that you used in court to prove our kinship.

SPASOYE: I know how I'll back that, that's my own affair.

PAVLE (*getting agitated again*): Dear God, is it possible that I'm hearing these things; did you really say all these things which I've just heard? It is unimaginable that so much immorality can be found amongst such a small number of people. People, yes, for after all, you are all human, after all you must have at least a seed of humanity in you.

SPASOYE: Of course we do, I'll prove it to you; I'll prove how humane we are and what a great care I took to fulfil my family duties towards you, sir. (*He pulls out the passport belonging to Adolph Schwartz*). I have

prepared a passport with a visa for you, sir. According to this passport, your name is Adolph Schwartz, because you wouldn't be able to cross the border under your own name. Your picture is in the passport. *(He gives it to him).*

PAVLE *(dumbstruck)*: Passport?... What for?...

SPASOYE: So that you can leave the country without problems and in good time.

PAVLE: Leave? *(He grabs the passport)*. Give it to me, give me this invaluable document. *(He puts it in his pocket with great urgency)*. This is the biggest proof of your immorality. I won't give you back this document, I won't give it to you for anything on earth!

SPASOYE: I don't want it back, keep it, you'll need it. When you have to decide whether you are going to spend ten or fifteen years alone, unseen and unheard of, under somebody else's name in some German, Dutch or even Swedish town, or whether you are going to spend ten or fifteen years alone, unseen and unheard of in some prison cell, you will realise then the value of this passport.

PAVLE: Prison cell? What would I do in a prison cell, and why? Because I ask for robbers to return my honour, hard work and property? And that's why I am an agent of an anarchist organization, because I want to reveal you as the robbers and crooks that you are? Is that the destruction of society and the social system for you? Are one polygamous woman, one false friend, one bandit in a professor's chair, one robber and one perjurer, are those the pillars of that social system of yours? And I, the one who asks for his moral and material possessions to be returned to me, am I supposed to be a destructive element? Oh, you vermin, you don't even deserve to be spat on by an honourable man!

SPASOYE: We have allowed you to say everything you wanted, and you have heard what you needed to hear; now you only need to see that all of this has not been empty claptrap. *(He rings a bell. Pause. Silence.)*

18 SOFIA, THE FORMER

SOFIA *(enters)*.

SPASOYE: Sofia, is there anyone waiting outside?

SOFIA: Yes, there is a gentleman from the police waiting here and there are two policemen in the courtyard.

SPASOYE: Please, tell the gentleman to come in.

SOFIA *(exits)*.

19. THE FORMER

PAVLE *(looking at everyone individually)*: It is true, isn't it? It is true?

ALL *(keep quiet)*.

PAVLE: Speak, for God's sake, is this true? Mr Spasoye, Mr Protich, Mr Novakovich, Mr Anta, speak, is this true?

ALL *(keep quiet)*.

PAVLE: I have to go to prison, have I? To prison or to exile, so that you can live on my account? Is that it... is that it? *(He looks at them, nobody raises their head; then with pain and bitterness)* Oh how much immorality, oh how little courage; can't anyone speak up, does no one dare?

20. AGENT II, THE FORMER

POLICE AGENT *(to Spasoye)*: I'm sorry, I'm coming on business.

SPASOYE: You've come to see me?

AGENT: We've been informed that in your house at the moment, there is a person who is being sought all over the capital. Apart from you and the gentleman *(pointing at Novakovich)*, whom I know personally, can I ask all the gentlemen present to show their IDs, please. *(To Anta)* Your ID, sir?

ANTA *(confused, looks through his pockets)*: I'm... I'm sorry, I haven't got one on me...

SPASOYE: He is my relative, I can guarantee for him.

AGENT *(to Lyubomir)*: You, sir?

LYUBOMIR *(has already prepared his ID, hands it out)*.

AGENT *(returning the ID to Lyubomir)*: Thank you very much! *(Addresses Pavle Marich)* Yourself, sir? *(General silence with certain tension)*.

PAVLE *(after a moment of fight within himself, controlled)*: Who are you actually looking for?

AGENT: I am looking for the former engineer Pavle Marich.

PAVLE *(perturbed)*: You are looking for Pavle Marich?

AGENT: Can I have your ID, please?

PAVLE *(defeated, dejected and resigned takes out Schwartz's passport and hands it over)*: I am Adolph Schwartz!

(General exchange of discreet glances).

SPASOYE (*quickly takes over*): Mr Schwartz is a member of the managerial board of the Illyria enterprise; he is travelling today on business on behalf of Illyria and he... (*he looks at his watch*) he has to catch the first train at 11.10 for Germany and beyond, maybe. As you can see he has a visa.

PAVLE (*taking the passport back*): Yes, I'm leaving on the 11.10 train.

SPASOYE (*to Marich*): You have got the main instructions, you will have to hurry up if you wish to catch this train.

PAVLE (*with contempt*): I will hurry up, don't you worry, I won't miss the train. (*He looks at all of them one by one once again*). Yes, I will hurry up, I will go.

21. THE FORMER (*without Marich*)

AGENT: Have I finished my job?

SPASOYE: No, not yet. I'd ask you one more favour, please. My car is downstairs, take it and go straight to the station, the train should leave in five or six minutes. Can you, please, make sure that the gentleman has really left.

AGENT: Certainly. (*Exits*).

SPASOYE (*following him out*): And, please, inform me.

22. THE FORMER (*without the Agent*)

SPASOYE (*coming back from the door*): Gentlemen, you may relax.

ANTA (*takes a deep breath*).

NOVAKOVICH: I can't, believe me, I cannot relax anymore.

LYUBOMIR: Really, one could've expected anything else, but this.

SPASOYE: I believed in our victory all along, as I've always valued the great pearl of wisdom – 'the good must win in the end'.

RINA: So where is he going now?

SPASOYE: He is returning to the dead.

NOVAKOVICH: You really think that he's left the stage now?

SPASOYE: More permanently than ever before. Before he emigrated under his own name, and now under someone else's. This way he has himself acknowledged his own death.

ANTA: Yes, but what if... I mean... what if he reappears again in three years time?

SPASOYE: In that case your year in prison is guaranteed. As far as we are concerned, we will have developed the business till then, we'll have secured ourselves with millions and nobody will be able to do anything to us.

NOVAKOVICH: Only... are you sure, he will leave?

SPASOYE (*looking at his watch*): This moment he is already on the train. (*A long pause*).

ALL (*keep quiet*).

SPASOYE (*still looking at his watch*): This moment the train has pulled out. (*Telephone, he goes to get it*) Hallo? Yes, this is Spasoye Blagoyevich... yes, yes so he has boarded the train and left? Thank you... thank you very much for letting me know! (*Puts the phone down; victoriously*) You have heard the agent's report. And now, may God give the deceased eternal peace, and may we continue with our normal life!

23. VUKITSA, AGNIA, THE FORMER

VUKITSA (*to her father*): Have I stayed too long?

SPASOYE: No, you've arrived just in time. I have told you, gentlemen, we may continue with our normal life. And we will start with joyful celebrations. The wedding will take place as soon as possible, tomorrow, the day after, not later than Sunday. (*He embraces Vukitsa*) Yes, we will continue our life, we will continue our life!

(*General celebration*).

(*The director may leave out this last appearance if they wish*).

CURTAIN

The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater

By Ivo Brešan

Synopsis:

Setting: Village of Lower Jerkwater, somewhere in Dalmatia. 1960s.

Scene 1: The villagers discuss their cultural programme, at the time encouraged by the authorities as a means of empowering the working classes. Big Simon tells of his visit to the city theatre where he saw Hamlet (with some party officials). He thus offers the plot through a mixture of banalisation and simplification, the popular (often eroticised) discourse and the official socialist one. The enraged Joe Schmoe breaks in on the meeting and threatens to expose whoever is responsible for his father's demise.

Scene 2: Jughead bullies the teacher Skull-Drag, who is initially disinclined to adapting Shakespeare's text to the needs of the villagers. Finally, the teacher succumbs – having been threatened with charges of political reactionism. Thus, he is asked not only to rewrite the translation into the traditional folkloric decasyllabic, but also to adapt the story to the given context and turn the Prince into a socialist official. By agreeing to the rules of their game, the teacher's only option remains to at least derive some pleasure from his own irony and reserve Hamlet's authentic speeches of despair for himself.

Scene 3: Jughead (Claudius) and Meatball (Polonius) blackmail Angie into spying on Joe Schmoe. Skull-Drag and Schmoe arrive to rehearse the scene of Ophelia's spying on the Prince – in Skull-Drag's own popularised adaptation. Following the rehearsal, in a correspondent scene of spying, Schmoe reveals a letter to Angie, where his father explains that Jughead demanded a certain amount of money which he released and promptly entered into the book of outgoings. However, the book disappeared and he was unable to account for the missing money, thus being implicated and charged for embezzlement.

Scene 4 is a mass-rehearsal of The Mousetrap. Shakespeare's play-within-the-play is here replaced by a demonstration against the oppressors of the people. Thus the villagers are given a script for this participatory performance, whereby they overthrow the rulers and commence a celebration through singing and ring-dancing. Schmoe's growing discontent and subsequent public accusations of Jughead yield no support. Moreover, Jughead actually manages to maintain his innocence and use Schmoe's rage against him as a sign of madness.

Scene 5: Big Simon is brought back onto the stage as a commentator of the play, written in by Skull-Drag on Simon's request. A wrestling match is announced between Hamlet and Leartes (here played by Hotshot, another local civil servant). Schmoe uses this opportunity to push the role-play a step further. Having wrestled him down, Schmoe pulls out a knife and demands that Hotshot account for the missing book of outgoings. Hotshot admits that Jughead bribed him to burn it. Calling on all the villagers present as his witnesses, Schmoe then demands that they should all go to court and testify in his father's favour. Simultaneously, the news arrives that Schmoe's father has committed suicide in prison. Jughead immediately denies Hotshot's statement, claiming that he had made it under coercion and puts forward old Schmoe's suicide as an obvious act of guilty conscience. Joe Schmoe proceeds once again to enlist the support of the villagers by asking them, one by one, to confirm what they had heard. All of them refuse to be involved (probably for fear of political reprisals). Disillusioned, Schmoe declares his utter disillusionment in humankind and leaves, while Jughead urges the villagers to recommence the celebration, stating that, if necessary, they can even play Hamlet without the Prince.

Translation: Slobodan Drenovac

Act 1, Scene 1

SECOND PEASANT: And what was th' play called?

BIG SIMON: What, god darn it... Yep... As I ponder it was called 'Omlette'.

SKULL-DRAG: Not 'Omlette', but 'Hamlet'.

BIG SIMON: Tie your tongue, teach, yer interruptin' me! Omlette or Amhlet, it's one an' the same mess to me. And thar you have it, comrades and lady-comrades, dat play somehow stuck in mah mind and so I want t' sorta propose we play it here too.

SKULL-DRAG: What! To play Hamlet... You must be crazy? You don't know what you are talking about.

MEATBALL: Comrade teacher, don't you be carryin' on like that! Don't care if you was educated in school, you're settin' th' problem upside down, ye understand? Comrade Simon here is jest suggestin', and the rest of us is all here, git... to put up th' suggestion fer discussion.

HOTSHOT: Comrades, I reckon comrade Big Simon could, like, tell us in a nutshell what he saw in that there play so's we kin see if dat, what's his name, Amlet, is in our field or he ain't.

BIG SIMON: Yup, I shore will! On that account to tell ya th' truth, I mahself dunno what all was goin' on up thar. By golly, a tremendous lot of folks came out onto th' stage and all of 'em was in some kinda costumes of the like not worn by peasant folk nor by gentry. Ya can't tell if they got their pants on or off. And then they started hoppin' aroun' an' yellin' and finally they got into a fight with one another, and all of 'em, men an' wimmin alike. And when I got up t' go home, the stage was full of corpses. I'm tellin' ya, I never seen such a miracle in all my life.

JUGHEAD:...Look here, comrade, don't ya go on like dat, keepin' us in a maze. Instead, go on an' tell us, matter-of-fact, sorta, how things ran in orderly fashion, first dis, then dat...

BIG SIMON: Awright, comrade Mat, when you say so! So then, comrades, since ya asked for it, th' play ran like this: First of all thar was a king. A good king, progressive, soft on socialism. He'd give his whole life for th' workin' people and th' poor. So this here king, comrades, has this good-fer-nuthin' brother who's an enemy of th' people, a bitter reactionary. So one day when he was sleepin' in th' field, this brother of his comes up and without hum an' how, pours somethin' into his ear, melts his brain and kills him on th' spot. And then havin' done dat deed, he starts aflirtin' with his widowed wife. And she, devil eat her heart out, in th' beginnin' sorta held herself tight and put on as if she ain't willin' to be laid. And in the course of all this shilly-shally and willy-nilly of her's he sweeps her off her feet and takes 'er to bed and th' next day she gits married t' him without battin' an eyelash.

THIRD PEASANT: A wench, devil take her! Woman, youse is all the same goddamn ya!

MUMSIE: And what d'you expect! Think your wife'll kill herself when you go t' hell!

HOTSHOT: Dat's how it is, ole chum! Jest can't trust wimmin. She'll bamboozle ya with reactionaries if she gits the itch.

BIG SIMON: So this here progressive king who was killed without a blame t' his name, comrades, has this son who is called Amlet. Now Amlet was a robust youngster and he has this girlfriend Omelia, th' daughter of one o' the kings deputees who did some kinda work there, like say our book keeper Jerkimer does in the collective farm. You shouldda seen that Omelia! Tits, comrades and lady-comrades, those weren't tits but bombshells that woulda made Jesus Christ drool. And her rear end stood up as sturdy as th' back of the collective farm's tractor. Hot-diggity-dog, comrades and lady-comrades, if I was t' hit the hey with her, I'd like it more than if you was t' elect me for county president.

ANGIE: Ah, devil take ya, I'll tell yer wife watcha been talkin' about!

MUMSIE: Aw, forgit it, you could never hit th' hey with a peach like that next to th' kings son!

BIG SIMON: So then, comrades and lady comrades, when Amlet sees his old man is killed and his Ma is bein' banged, he turns woebegone and sick at the heart. And so one night he's so down in th' dumps he can't sleep and jist wonders up 'n' down, when all at once a giant presence pops up in front of him, a kinda spook of who knows what. And Amlet, poor fella, gits frightened outa his wits, and wants to run away but this monster sez to him: 'Don't be scared, Amlet, my boy! It's me, your Paw, who was driven to death by th' trickery of that skunk, that filthy hound of an uncle.' And then and thar, he tells 'im th' whole story and winds up by sayin': 'Thar ya are, Amlet, now that ya know everythin' don't let that son of a dog enjoy th' fruits of

th' people's sweat! Stab th' rascal with a knife, slash th' stinker's liver so's it falls right out to th' ground! And as fer that whore of a mother who's cottoned onto him, jes' punch her twice across th' mouth and tell 'er to go to hell.'

THIRD PEASANT: Only two whams! She'd see all the stars in heaven if she did dat to me!

MUMSIE: Ah, shut up ya jerk! How was the poor woman to know who she was dealing with!

FOURTH PEASANT: Oh yah! As if she wouldn't have if she knew! I kin just imagine how finicky she was when she was tickled pink under her skirt.

BIG SIMON: And all at once this cooltural and artistic group drops in on Amlet and they give these plays. And on top o' this they're whole-blooded representatives of th' workers and peasants. So Amlet, without kickin' up a fuss holds somethin' like a blitz meetin' with 'em and he has his say: 'Comrades, th' situation is so 'n' so, and comrades, matters are such 'n' such! You gotta organize this demonstration in fronta th' king and tell him straight t' his face, sorta, point out all his mistakes t' him.' And, oh man, without second thoughts they come out in front of the king. And what a commotion they make: Down with the king and his bunch, we don't wanna monarchy, an' this an' dat, and when they started to bleat and make faces at him, he jest didn't know where t' go. He got scared and ran off t' hide hisself someplace whar th' black devil hisself wouldn't find him.

HOTSHOT: He kin thank his lucky stars I wasn't there! He wouldn't have got away so easily from me!

BIG SIMON: And then Amlet barges into his Ma's room. She was jist preparin' t' go t' bed and was wearin' this thin nightgown so ya could see through it... Comrades and lady comrades, to tell ya th' truth, she was an ole hen, but again, thar was still plenty of flesh on 'er! Even a stiff would smack his lips! Omelia's Pa, was also in th' room and when Amlet came in he hid hisself behind kinda rag.

FIRST PEASANT: What th' hell was he doin' thar?

BIG SIMON: Whataya think, dumby! What'd he be doin' thar with her naked in bed! Reckon he wasn't prayin' to th' lord... So when Amlet came in, comrades and lady-comrades, this rag moved and he pulls out this big sword and slashes it into Omelia's Pa as if into a bladder and spills out his guts all over th' floor. Then he turns to his Ma and sez: 'Ma, you had a husband who was a decent fella. And now that he's dead, you've been awhorin' around with every louse that sticks to ya. Well fuck yer sweet honeypot dry if ya ain't become the biggest slut that God kin ever remember!'

THIRD PEASANT: Yup, that was quite a mouthful thar! Pity he didn't land her several blows and knock her head off!

MUMSIE: Oh, dear God, ya don't know what to expect from yer own children! And then somebody goes about wonderin' why I ain't got none of me own!

BIG SIMON: So, then comrades and lady-comrades, when Omelia sees Amlet has killed her Pa, she no longer lets him, how should I say... sorta play wid her. And after some time she gets this itch between her legs and she changes her mind. But now he wasn't willin and he sez to her: 'Listen here, Omelia! You go to the monks, an' do yer ass-fuckin' thar, not with me!' And she, bein' a progressive lass, comrades and lady-comrades, didn't wanna go to any monastery but instead she threw herself into a kinda big puddle and drowned.

MUMSIE: Ain't nobody's blame but her own, when she's so stupid! In her place I wouldn't have spilled a tear for a guy like dat, be he the king's son a hundred times!

ANGIE: Devil take his soul! First he uses her and then he ditches th' poor girl!

SKULL-DRAG: Comrades, please, where is this whole comedy leading to? I sincerely hope you are not entertaining the idea that we ought to play *Hamlet*. Have any of you the slightest idea of what is being discussed here? The play was written by Shakespeare, the greatest English playwright...

JUGHEAD: Don't you try to pull somethin' over on us, comrade, teacher. We ain't born yesterday. Ya think if he is from some kinda England that he is god! We brought th' Germans to a stand, let alone this Englishman.

SKULL-DRAG: But comrade secretary, be reasonable! Do you realize how complicated those roles are? Even professionals break down on them. And look, please take a look around yourself and tell me who would be capable of appearing on stage?

JUGHEAD: Hold yer horses! Whatcha takin' us for, teacher? Ya ask who's capable to appear? Here, fer th' love of Jesus, I'll volunteer to appear if nobody else will. When we was able to carry the whole struggle on our backs durin' th' war, well, we'll carry that play too.

(Scena, English issue, 1985: 6-7)

Act 1, Scene 2

SKULL-DRAG (*distributing the scripts*): Now, let me see! We'll try it out like this at random. Let us take, for instance the scene between the king and Hamlet in the first act. Page 20, please! Comrade secretary, you may begin. You are the king. Start reading from this point (*Shows him.*)

JUGHEAD: Read? From here, right? Move over Mary, go over there, gimme some space... (*Reads monotonously and clumsily.*) 'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet - - - To give these mourning duties to your father...'

Holy cow, he's so complicated! Coulda said th' same with much fewer words, like man t' man: Nice of ya fer bein' heartbroken 'cause of yer Pa... (*Reads*) 'But you must know, your father lost a father; that father lost, lost his...' Ya don't say! What hairsplittin'! What else kin you es'pect than to lose 'em. Imagine if my Pa, old and disabled as he was, still sat aroun' the fireplace at home, and was in the company of his Pa, and the Pa of his Pa's. Not a ghost of a chance fer th' likes o' that, or my name ain't Jughead... (*Reads*)

'tis a fault to heaven,

A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fa-fa-fathers, and he still hath cried,
From the first course till he that died today,
'This must be so'...

Well, here I can't tell heads or tails. Just lissen to that load of prattle: th' heaven, th' dead, then nature then reason, then the absurd, then death, and finally he winds up by sayin' 'This must be so'. Teacher, d'you say this guy was great? I rather reckon some screws are loose in his head.

SKULL-DRAG: Just you continue without interruptions, comrade secretary! For the time being these are but... minor difficulties.

JUGHEAD (*Reads*): '...but to per-per-perseveer in obstinate condolment...' Damn his ass, him and whoever gave him a pen to write! This ain't for anybody, teacher, he's some kinda nut. Ya jist can't git to the bottom of what he's talkin' about.

SKULL-DRAG (*With a triumphant grin*): And what can I do about it comrades! I told you right off that this text is simply too hard for us to master.

JUGHEAD: Nope, nope, teacher, you're mistaken. Nuthin' here is too hard for us. But, dammit, when a guy's literate I read him with no trouble, but if he is illiterate then I jist can't do it. That's the problem! It's as sure as a gun that my late gran Stannie had a gift fer th' pen which was three times more arousin' than this fella... So, no buts about it, you're gonna have to change this. It can't stay like this!

SKULL-DRAG: Change it? What's got into you? You want me to rewrite Shakespeare, the greatest English writer of all times! Forgive me but I would not dare do such a thing.

JUGHEAD: Don't you be beatin' yer brains over that, pal. So, big thrill, if he's a bigshot writer in some shady capitalistic England! What's that when you match it to my bein' the party secretary of an activists group in a socialistic country. You jest go on and change it, and Shakesbeer can blow his horn up your ass.

SKULL-DRAG: But what should I change? How can I change it?

JUGHEAD: Jest change it good 'n' proper like so's all th' folks in th' village kin grasp th' meanin'. Don't you ponder it's nicer and, sorta, more 'telligent when ya phrase it in the manner of the song: 'Oh, village maiden ya look so fine...' Mike, c'mere, let's sing it!

JUGHEAD & MEATBALL: Oh, village maiden you look so fine,

Why do you then whimper and whine! OOOOOOHH

JUGHEAD: Thar, you oughta change it to somethin' like that!

SKULL-DRAG: Why, you must be mad! What you are asking of me is an ordinary criminal act! It's punishable by law.

JUGHEAD: Criminal, shit! Punishable by law, my eye! Whose law, fer Christ sake? Is th' English runin' this country, or th' workin' people? You're gonna change it jist like I tole you, and no buts about it!

SKULL-DRAG: Englishmen? Working people? Stuff and nonsense! I cannot do that and I will not.

JUGHEAD: Awright, comrade, teacher, don't if ya won't. Ya don't have to, brother. We'll find someone else. But come hell or high water, ya ain't gonna be warmin' yer ass here fer long. We gonna inform them superiors o' yours on how you've been goin' about educatin' th' workin' people of the village here. Nope, comrade, ya ain't gonna be the entrustee fer culture and education in a socialistic society, no doggone it!

SKULL-DRAG: I beg your pardon, I never said I wouldn't educate the people. Don't change the tune to politics, please! It is only that I consider your intentions as something that has nothing in common with education but is more like making fools of people... But, why should I beat my head against the wall... In

fact, why not! You'll get what you want. However, I wish it to be clearly understood, I will not bear any responsibility for it!

(Pause)

HOTSHOT: Comrades, I'd add a thing or two to comrade secretary's discussion... I think this Amlet fella should be a positive comrade and a leader fightin' fer the rights of the workin' people. He can't be any kinda prince, or an heir to th' throne or whatever, like fer instance, comrade... uh... King Peter. That sorta wouldn't fit into our party's line. That oughta be changed.

SKULL-DRAG: Oh, great! Now that I've agreed to simplify the text, you're asking me to change it, to change the plot. That's just too much!

JUGHEAD: Naw, naw, naw, it ain't too much! Makes sense what comrade Hotshot said. King Peter wasn't on the side of the workin' people, he was against 'em. Comrade Amlet's attitude was unsuited to the occasion.

SKULL-DRAG: For heaven's sake! King Peter is one thing, and Hamlet is entirely something else! What gives you the right to change the plot of *Hamlet* because of King Peter?

JUGHEAD: Hear me comrade, if that thar Amlet is spreadin' reactionary propaganda, than we not only gotta right but it's our duty... Amlet gotta be a representative of the workers and peasants. That's what you gotta change!

HOTSHOT: I gotta hunch, comrades, that this writer of Amlet was a Chetnik collaborator durin' th' war!

SKULL-DRAG: I've had my say. To abridge the play and to simplify the text – that I can do. But to meddle with the contents, that I cannot, and you may just as well hang me by the feet.

JUGHEAD: Aha! Means you go along with what those English capitalists wrote. From your standpoint, King Peter was on th' people's side and oughta be brought back to rule again, right? If that's how you feel, we ain't in no need of yer help. Git th' hell outta here, man, go! There ain't no room for reactionaries in our ranks.

SKULL-DRAG: Please don't you twist my words! I never said that. I just want to say that I am not capable of writing another *Hamlet*, because I lack the talent, I'm no Shakespeare!

JUGHEAD: Hell's bells. Just ya wait and see! We'll unmask ya in front of the workin' people. We'll show th' people your real face. Don't think you kin pull one over on us. We kin smell th' likes o' you, You, comrade, are a satellite of some capitalistic power...

(ibid.: 11-12)

The Croatian Faust

By Slobodan Šnajder

Translation by Ellen Elias-Bursac

Act 2; Scene 7

Faust's Gothic room, etc.

FAUST: What happens there?

VOICE: News from the battlefield, Mr Head of Camp.

FAUST: Out with it. How stand our army?

SOLDIER: Heroically, Mr Head-of-Camp. Just as the flower of German youth thirteen years of age each, is defying the central fort in Berlin today, the best sons of Croatia are entrenched in – Zagreb.

Panic in the ranks of Ustashi. Many climb out of the loges on ladders, and those in the front row try to clamber up on the stage. They drag in sacks with sand, heavy machine guns.

DEPUTY-HEAD-OF-STATE BUDAK (*Standing up in the loge*): Silence! Retreat! Go on with the show! Let each do his duty!

Mephistopheles comes out in the hat with a rooster plume, in a crimson cloak. He takes a skeleton and kisses it.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Death shall be our creed; we can have faith in its redeeming peace. Here where you stand may an Ustashi grave gape. You are going nowhere my heroes, may all my witches of the West be at your service that you serve your bit of eternity as soon as possible. Oh, Faust, I have served you faithfully in our wager with the Lord; now when the earth gapes open under you, remember: in this world I served you, and in that one you shall serve me until judgement day! Ergo: be mine! Now! Sing, tiny lads, of the example of how the glory of the world is passing!

SOLDIER (*Runs in out of breath*): They are moving in on Zagreb!

LEGIONNAIRE (*Watching through an opera glass*): Continue! Weiter! Weiter!

MEPHISTOPHELES (*Bowing*): The dead eyes of the unborn now observe your dark victories! Faust, there is no salvation for you!

FAUST: You traitorous dog, slave to Moscow!

Many from the first row get up, pulling out large daggers.

Oh heavens! Oh lord who says that you are with us. Brothers and sisters! Are these red dogs, Moscow's agents, to insult us here under our roof, in our temple, where the holy fire of our fathers is burning?

MARGARET: Heinrich, I told you that I never liked his look, and this devil keeps speaking with forked tongue. Do let me scratch out his eyes with these fingernails of mine, oh do let me flog him to death, let me have that Satanic degenerate.

VOICE: Our defenders are coming.

The Siegfried funeral march. An odd procession of wounded Ustashi and Germans enter, carrying their dead.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Gods, see this! The nations of Europe, fall face down in the dust! Here gods are entering Valhalla on the rainbow's arch. *Women tear off their blouses and tend to the wounded in the audience.* And the furious German Walküres are becoming folk fairies. Onward, my comrades, the gates of Hell are wide open! Black God, my father, now embrace German Wotan to your heroic breast and stay with us forever!

FAUST: Do you know what this is?

He shows him a Chetnik pamphlet.

Here is what will be left of Croatia when the Serbs arrive.

He shows him the pamphlet.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Oh, yes, beyond all measure. The entire world ought to pay for Kosovo, and especially us Turks.

FAUST: Do you hear the bloody drums from across the Drina: Serbs are gathering, and these here; Croats to their own! What are you?

MEPHISTOPHELES: Faust, you mortal: you're asking a drop of water in the sea whether it came from this or that river.

FAUST: Only God can help you now, Satan.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Oh, fine, then it will be fine if it is up to your God. God, father of mine, who loved me more than all your angels because I shouted NO when all shouted YES: Father, deliver me from Serbian heroism and Croatian culture.

DEPUTY-HEAD-OF-STATE BUDAK (*Screams from the loge*): Now that's enough!

FAUST: Mr Budak, we have cleansed this institution three times from top to bottom in our great racial house-cleaning, and this actor has deceived us all. It took quite a while to come up with flawless evidence.

He slips a noose over his head.

We would love, Satan, to help you get to know all the secret joys that your body conceals, just as this kid, your sister in crime, has discovered by now. (*He smashes his foot into the sack.*) Straighten up to receive your just punishment from the hand of the people!

Margaret tries to straighten up, but she cannot. Two Ustashi rush over and knock her down. A large paper moon comes out and the whole scene is given a ghostly contoured lighting.

FAUST: Lights, lights!

Dogs bark. Shots in the distance.

FAUST: What do you have to say?

MEPHISTOPHELES: Hurry or you will not succeed! Good job, you up there working the lights! Give here a little of that glowing moonlight and illuminate every corner of this dark building. That's right!

The spots sweep the loges and first row. The legionnaires stiffen. Some place their Hitler's iron cross on their chest. Silence.

FAUST: Who are you Janko Rakuša?

MEPHISTOPHELES: I am a part of the dark forces who say NO to all sides.

FAUST: We thought it was some low-level devil, and then it turns out to be some big-shot beast!

MEPHISTOPHELES (*Very calm*): That force says: NO. It says: No. It says: No. That NO has never had its throat slit.

He lifts aloft his left fist.

I maintain that this moon will be well suited to a hammer!

VOICE: Pull out the chair!

The Deputy-Head-of-State gives the sign and they hang Mephistopheles.

HEAD DIRECTOR (*Leaping out of the audience*): I most fervently protest! Why, this is a cultural institution. In these thousand years of ours we have never slaughtered in theatres! I shall write to the ministry.

DEPUTY-HEAD-OF-STATE: Complaint lodged!

USTASHI: That dog did know how to make us laugh!

CRITICUS: He was a born comic talent, a kind that is rarely born, since we Croats, are more suited to tragic roles. The place of Janko Rakuša will remain unfilled in the history of recent popular acting. This true loss must be grieved today by all those...

VOICE: Now we have no Mephistopheles.

OTHER VOICE: That was one powerful actor.

VOICE: He was a Communist.

OTHER VOICE: For the hell of it.

VOICES: Amen.

Margaret watches them from her sack. She moans. Darkness.

(English Issue of Scena, 1985: 216-7)

The Metastable Grail

By Nenad Prokić

Translation by Duška Radosavljević Heaney

The Second Interlude

(All actors are sitting on chairs arranged in a row, in front of a black curtain. They're holding lit cigarettes in their hands, but nobody is smoking, nobody is moving. Ivan is sitting in the middle).

IVAN: I operate with illusion as a tool. As at the present time there is no single healthy substance, as the wine that we drink and the freedom that is claimed are lopsided and only fit for ridicule, as we finally need a great degree of good will in order to believe that the ruling classes merit respect and the ruled classes deserve to be rid of their burdens, I can only conclude that it shouldn't seem any more ridiculous or crazy that I should ask my fellows for a certain amount of illusion, which in any case is much less illusion than anyone invests in stupid causes everyday.

That is the kind of illusion I asked of you. As I obviously haven't got it, and as even more obviously I won't get it – I am already convinced of the futility of any stories I might tell. However, you called on me to talk – and I decided to try one more and definitely the last time, to explain and defend my work before the collective paranoia, which has forced me into retreat.

When I look back, my whole work in theatre only seems to me like an exercise of sweaty ballerinas in a smelly rehearsal room. I do not start from the beginning but I start from the Stalinist-style decapitatory question that has been posed to me: In whose name and for whose interest do I write? I will not give an answer to this barbaric question, but I will give an answer to all the others:

The first objection you have made revolves around the ambiguity of the title. The Metastable Grail. The term 'metastable' I borrowed from physics. Metastable is that which shows a tendency to transcend into a state of stability.

Next, the ambiguity number two: the grail. According to a medieval story, grail is a miraculous bowl which Jesus ate from at the Last Supper, and in which somebody is said to have received his blood at the crucifixion. T.S. Eliot said that the soul of a poet is actually some kind of a bowl in which are collected and mixed all kinds of feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until the moment when all the necessary ingredients are there to create a new complex form. I took the liberty to call that kind of a bowl – a grail, a metastable grail.

The third objection: the intelligentsia gives dubious speeches. I know that you would like the intelligentsia to chew over its formulas and ideas in some obscure reservation camp and refrain from causing unrest. In the Balkan wilderness, the 'pragmatic', the one who finds a way has always been particularly admired. As long as that is the case, the 'ratio' will be in the opposition.

The fourth objection relates to the contradiction between the form and content. I agree with that criticism, and this objection is fully justified. It is true that some statements contradict each other; there is a term for that: anagogic mechanisms. They are used by many religions. By being contradictory, they encourage the reason to think and act on another, different level.

The fifth objection: what kind of moral principles do I think I hold? My moral principles celebrate individual freedom, the freedom of creation and the freedom of thinking. And I will tell you what yours are like, as they are in opposition to mine. Yours – a dogmatic conception of morals – considers itself a messiah of the Absolute, of the only truth, of fulfilment of the Final goal and that is why it is closed to the opposite opinion that truth is not a priori given, and that it can also be attained through free creation and analysis. Every moral that begins from the general as a realisation, even if it is the idea of Good, and draws from it what individuals

have to be and do, is inevitably a dogmatic and oppressive moral, because it is an eschatological constant, an absolutum of every ideology. You have, above everything, even made your moral principles pragmatic. You bended them along the way to make them suit various changing trends, and in that way, you have in fact, made them so relative that they have been used as a proof, as a disproof, as a prohibition and as an encouragement. Between you and your principles there has arisen an intricate relationship of corruption. According to the need, you call on them and then you forget them. In that way, you have lost yourselves in a maze where you no longer distinguish lies from truth, an honest act from a speculation, because it all depends on who deals the cards in a game of poker. And so you've put your morals onto a hobby-horse, which is rocking to-and-fro without ever kicking anyone out of the saddle.

Here I have already addressed the last ambiguity: my orientation, inclination towards mysticism and autobiographical elements. You know what? – After our death, you are free to examine both what we were and what we wrote, but whilst we are alive you can only do the latter. However, I will tell you, for if one can't reach the stars with one's hands, maybe one can reach them with one's words. Once I escaped from my mother's embrace of religious dogmatism, I first emigrated into the light of vitalistic feeling and then straight into the Party. In that world, I glimpsed previously unimaginable possibilities of a new, non-dogmatic and just world, where under the flag of an idea there grew a higher spiritual vegetation of the ethics, morals and authentic human and social relationships. I believed that I left the hierarchy of archangels and saints for the avant-garde of free, tolerant people who can win over the last remnants of egotism, hatred and strife for power. Although I myself became a flame of ideological fire, I saw that the reality was very much different from my illusions; but I still believed that at least some of those visions would come true. In the moments of doubt I was looking for salvation in literature – there, everything was clear, obvious, understandable and definite. As soon as I went back to life – the differences would seem even bigger. That is why I left the present for a brighter future. In spite of everything, I couldn't help noticing that I was losing my identity. Today I look at the bright future through dark spectacles. Today I think that even a revolution can be depleted. Today I am convinced that every revolution, sooner or later, arrives at a phase when there is an overriding impression that a battle is being fought against the historical necessity itself and that it inevitably leads to a standstill. Then I was still a party member. I was, I am no longer, and I will never be. And I don't want to be anymore. I am not an opportunist who wants to make a career out of the Party. I've told you several times already, you are the party-members, you have to do whatever the Party requires of you. I don't. I could never agree with the kind of Marxism which is infiltrated with a kind of messianism in the sense of Bloch's claim: Jerusalem is wherever Lenin is. And we will never establish whether my writing and my directing represent ideological diversions. We couldn't do that even when as an adolescent I used to write poetry about romantic losers – because the debate was governed by double standards: we are not asking you whether or not you are sleeping with the girl, we only say that that kind of writing is an ideological diversion. Or: Don't you do as I do, do as I say. Do you understand? I didn't. And they started to convince me otherwise. That pressure sobered me up. I understood that that had nothing to do with literary tastes, or ideological views, even finally with romantic lyricism – but it had to do, and it again has to do, with my being required to subject myself, cover myself in ashes, kiss the altar, lift my arms and sacrifice my soul to some abstract ideals. The realisation that I left one 'mother's' dogmatic church for yet another one – was a defeat. After that I took the path of a being which searches around for the truth whilst always doubting – and first and foremost doubting himself. I remained a rover.

(Everybody's cigarettes have burnt out. All get up and exit. Only Ivan is still sitting down. Brana stands above him and sings into his ear Brecht's Über den Selbstmord.)

The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich

By Ljubomir Simović

Translation by Duška Radosavljević Heaney

Characters:

The Occupiers:

MEITZEN – *Volksdeutscher*, an officer of Sicherheitpolizei-SIPO, a coordinator in the Police

Collaborators with the Occupiers:

MILUN – an officer of the Civil Guard

CLOBBER – a torturer, leaving blood traces behind himself

The Citizens of Uzhitse:

BLAGOYE BABITCH, with a bottle

GINA – his wife, with a washing tub

SIMKA – young widow of the artillery major Adzhich, in mourning

DARA – a weaver

TOMANIYA – her shadow

FEMALE CITIZENS

The Actors of 'The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich':

VASILIYE SHOPALOVICH – the leader

YELISAVETA PROTICH – an actress in gold

SOFIA SUBOTICH – an actress in purple

FILIP TRNAVATS – an actor with two masks, underneath which there may be a third

Set in Uzhitse during the German occupation. Hot summer.

ACT ONE

Scene One

The Arrest of the Actors at the Brandy Market in Uzhitse

A brandy market, surrounded by shops such as: A PUB 'AT THE COCKEREL'S', THE SODA-WATER SHOP, THE WATCH-MAKER 'PETROVICH', THE BAKERY, THE BRANDY CELLAR. In front of the brandy cellar there stand several barrels and one or two crates with bottles. Two or three weights are hanging on the wall. The walls are covered in German announcements, orders, proclamations and statements: BEFEHL! WARNUNG! BEKANNTMACHUNG! VIKTORIA!

In some of the windows black flags can be seen. On one of the walls – a striking swastika. Amid the market, in front of the gathered passers-by, the travelling actors are performing a 'stylised' scene from Schiller's play "THE ROBBERS", as a means of advertisement for their performance tonight.

SOFIA: "Never! I'd rather fall dead into my grave than lie in your incestuous bed!"

VASILYIYE: "Is that so? The princess won't have it the nice way? You are disgusted by my ugliness? I am not as beautiful and handsome as Karl, my ugliness repels even the peasant women workers on our estate, but despite your love for Karl, and despite your disgust for me, I shall have you!"

SOFIA: "Never!"

VASILYIYE: "If need be, I'll take you by force into my bed, deflower you most brutally, and throw your beauty into mud!"

SOFIA (*slaps him*): "In that case, you can take this in dowry!"

VASILYIYE: "Is that so? I will throw you down the pit of humiliation; I'll clean my boots with your blond hair, and whip you into loving me! And when I've had enough of your body, I'll throw you to a bunch of drunken soldiers, let the bloodstained soldiers feast on the remains of your virginity! You could have been a queen, but you will be a whore!"

SOFIA (*embracing him*): "Ah, Franz, do forgive me, Franz, it was only in jest!" (*Having embraced him, she pulls out his sword, and pointing it at him, backs off quickly.*) "Now see, you evil-monger, what I'll make of you now! I am a powerless woman, weak and vulnerable, but my despair gives me colossal strength! Come on, you evil man, just you dare touch my body, which has been bestowed to your honourable and defamed brother, with your decadent hands! Just you dare! This iron will split your lewd chest!"

(The scene is interrupted by Yelisaveta, who steps in front of them, or climbs on a barrel, and addresses the crowd.)

YELISAVETA: Will chaste and unhappy Amalia manage to defend her virginity and her honour? Or will cruel Franz, who has cheated his father and defamed his brother, prevail with his evil intentions? Or will defamed and betrayed Karl appear at the last minute to avenge his father, to defend his beloved Amalia, and to cruelly punish his evil brother?

FILIP: You will find it all out tonight, if you come to the premiere of "The Robbers", a tragedy by glorious Friedrich Schiller, performed by—

VASILYIYE: The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich

YELISAVETA: The unhappy and chaste Amalia is played by a beautiful young actress, the hope of the Serbian theatre – Miss Sofia Subotich.

(Sofia steps forward and takes a bow.)

YELISAVETA: The honourable and cruelly betrayed Karl will be played by the famous Romeo, Hamlet, Pera Segedinats – the actor of great repute for his many unforgettable leading roles – Mr Filip Trnavats.

(Filip steps forward and takes a bow.)

YELISAVETA: The part of Karl's evil brother – Franz will be played by the leader of our troupe, celebrated Vasiliye Shopalovich!

(Vasiliye steps forward and takes a bow.)

FILIP: The part of the old duke, the unhappy father to Karl and Franz, will be played this time exclusively by our great tragedian actress Yelisaveta Protich!

(Yelisaveta takes a bow.)

VASILYIYE: Because of the curfew the performance starts earlier than usual! At 6 o'clock tonight, at the Todorovich Brothers' inn, you can see an exceptional and unforgettable theatre spectacle, full of intrigue, blood and romance! You will see murders!—

DARA: We can see them out here, every day!

VASILYIYE: Dear friends! Do not miss the opportunity to see the flower of Serbian theatre in one of the greatest plays ever!

FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: A flower! More like the worst scum!

SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: You've found a good time for theatre!

THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: Shame on you!

FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: The city is black with the flags of mourning!

DARA: No day goes past without arrests, raids, shooting and you are playing the theatre!

TOMANIYA: Serbia is teeming with refugees from Bosnia! Do you want to play for them?

DARA: Have you seen the gallows at the market?

SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: Do you know there's a war going on?

YELISAVETA: Should we abandon art as well because there's a war going on? Never! Not at the cost of our lives!

THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: You have a cheek!

TOMANIYA: If the eggs were not as expensive as ten thousand a piece, I would've given you a nice seeing off!

YELISAVETA: Who are you to threaten me?

FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Just you dare act!

YELISAVETA: Who are you to prevent me?

VASILYIYE: We also need to earn our living somehow!

DARA: If you want a living then dig the graves! At least there's a great demand for that job!

YELISAVETA: I don't need you to give me lectures!

SOFIA: Yelisaveta!

YELISAVETA: I haven't been cultivating my looks so to carry a spade around!

FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: You need a beating!

YELISAVETA: I am so sick of the provincial primitivism! I am sick of the peasants!

SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: I'll show you the peasants!

DARA: Go and act somewhere else, not here!

THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: We are wading through blood as if it were rainwater!

FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: They shoot a hundred Serbs for one dead German!

DARA: Half of Serbia is wrapped in mourning and they are acting!

FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: You immoral whore!

YELISAVETA: I have never yet seen such primitivism!

SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: I'll show you primitivism!

DARA: Have you heard her?

TOMANIYA: She climbed up onto that barrel to spit all over us!

FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: German hirelings!

YELISAVETA: Scum!

FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Can't you see us all in mourning, may you mourn for your soul?

DARA: Should we let whores insult us like this?

TOMANIYA: I'll get you down off that barrel!

(Commotion and shouting escalates. MILUN rushes in.)

MILUN: Who's causing unrest 'ere?

THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: Ask them!

SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: The scum of the earth!

MILUN: Step back!

VASILYIYE: We are The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich! I am Vasiliye Shopalovich the leader of the troupe!

MILUN *(to the citizens)*: Disperse now!

YELISAVETA: It was high time someone came to our rescue!

MILUN: Show me your official IDs!

SOFIA *(still holding the wooden sword)*: But, please, sir, we are actors!

MILUN: Down with the weapon!

SOFIA: What weapon?

MILUN: Down with the weapon, I said, or I'll shoot!

SOFIA: But please, sir, don't be so ridiculous!

YELISAVETA: That's not a weapon, that's a prop!

MILUN: I said, down with it! Watch out, I'm releasing the barrel! Hands up! Up, I say!

VASILYIYE: We are The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich.

MILUN: I said down with the weapon!
 YELISAVETA: Throw it away, he is serious, the madman!
 MILUN: Everyone step aside! Line up against the wall! Who told you to put your 'ands down? Line up, do you hear, and no shifting! Do you have the official IDs or not?
 YELISAVETA: I do not see what we, actors, can have to do with such things!
 MILUN: I'll show you what you have to do with it! Move on!
 SOFIA: Where are you taking us?
 MILUN: It's not for you to ask questions! Move, I say!
 YELISAVETA: Vasiliye, for God's sake, do something!
 VASILIYE: Dear sir, it is a misunderstanding, please let me explain. I think...
 FILIP: Aaah! You call those wandering thoughts thinking? Thinking? With such a head as yours? You believe that whatever goes on through your head is some kind of thinking? You must have a very high opinion of yourself, if you think so! What did he say, "I think"! Really! Is it possible for such a head - to think? Do you know what it means at all, that process, that verb, that act of thinking? Aristotle was thinking, Stefan, Plato and Descartes were thinking, but not you Stefan!
 MILUN: You told me your name is Vasiliye?
 VASILIYE: Vasiliye, sir! It is Vasiliye Shopalovich!
 MILUN: How can it be Vasiliye if he calls you Stefan?
 VASILIYE: You don't understand!
 MILUN: I understand well enough! You've no IDs! You're carrying weapons! You've false names!
 YELISAVETA: Vasiliye, for God's sake, explain it to him!
 MILUN: You can explain everything in the Police HQ! Come on! Stefan, should I be explaining it to you with the gun?
 VASILIYE: But, sir, I am not Stefan!
 MILUN: Are you going or am I shooting?
 YELISAVETA: But Filip was speaking the lines from a play! (*To FILIP*) You immerse yourself in your parts so much it's beyond belief!
 SOFIA: It's not all Filip's fault! Vasiliye gave him the cue!
 VASILIYE: When did I give him the cue?
 SOFIA: You said to the officer "let me explain, I think..." Remember where that's from!
 VASILIYE: It slipped! I can't always mind what I say in front of him! Sir, those were the lines from a play! I play Stefan in that play and when I say "let me explain, I think", that's when Filip, who plays Urosh in that play, cuts in with the lines you've just heard! Perfectly simple! (*To YELISAVETA*) It seems he doesn't understand...
 YELISAVETA: He needs only one gesture, only one word, one detail to set him off, and wherever he is, he suddenly thinks he is on the stage! (*To SOFIA*) You try to explain...
 SOFIA: What Filip said, he didn't say it to Vasiliye but to Stefan, and he didn't say it as Filip but as Urosh, do you understand?
 MILUN (*after a short thinking pause*): On you go, Stefan!
 YELISAVETA: His stupidity is beyond all of my expectations! (*MILUN is taking the actors off stage pointing the gun at them. The citizens are dispersing. Only DARA and TOMANIYA remain on stage.*)
 TOMANIYA: I don't remember when was the last time I saw you so angry!
 DARA: What do you mean?
 TOMANIYA: This now when you got angry with the actors!
 DARA: How can I not get angry! To give plays at this day and age – that's nothing less than an open collaboration with the enemy!
 TOMANIYA: Do you think the party should do something about it?
 DARA: Of course I do. And they will!
 TOMANIYA: What do you think they'll do?
 DARA: Nothing for the moment! Nothing until the comrades carry out the planned action!
 TOMANIYA: Why won't you tell me what action?
 DARA: The less you ask, the less you know, and the less you know, the better you live!

Blackout

Scene Two

The Interrogation of the Actors in the Police HQ

A dark empty office. An office desk, chairs, a stove. The walls are covered in announcements and declarations. Also world maps. A map of Europe. A map of Serbia and of the region of Uzhitse.

MEITZEN: So you say you are the leader of the troupe.

VASILYIYE: Yes, sir, and please let me explain...

MEITZEN: You will when we come to it. First, your personal details. The rest of you, sit down. We must have some order here. Name?

VASILYIYE: Vasiliye, sir!

MILUN: He is lying, this one calls him Stefan!

MEITZEN: I'm talking to him now. You say – Vasiliye?

VASILYIYE: Yes, sir, Vasiliye. Vasiliye Shopalovich.

MEITZEN: Stop with this 'sir'! Your father's name?

VASILYIYE: Milosh, sir! Milosh Shopalovich, a shopkeeper from Velika Plana.

MEITZEN: Sex?

VASILYIYE: What?

MEITZEN: Male. There are four of you?

VASILYIYE: Four.

MEITZEN: Are you by any chance married couples?

FILIP: The three of them are, I am a free man!

MEITZEN: What do you mean the three of them?

YELISAVETA: How annoying he can be with his stupidity, it's beyond despair...

VASILYIYE: It's all been a terrible misunderstanding, sir, from the very beginning!

MEITZEN: It's all misunderstandings with you! There's a pile of charges against you here! You don't have IDs! You are using false names! You are gathering people in a public place! You are wearing weapons! What kind of weapons, officer?

MILUN: Cold weapons, Mr Meitzen!

SOFIA: What your officer calls cold weapons is a mere theatrical prop, sir.

YELISAVETA: Do you not know what actors are armed with? With wooden swords like this one, cannons made of stove shuttles, artificial guns!

SOFIA: We wear armours and crowns made of cardboard, beards made of wool, charcoal moustache and eyebrows, we play violins without strings, we limp with perfectly healthy legs, we wear a pillow in the place of a pregnant stomach, we weep for dead mothers with the aid of onions!

YELISAVETA: We use false coins!

VASILYIYE: We live in drawn houses!

FILIP: So what?

SOFIA: Filip, please, you just stay out of it!

FILIP: Do you want to say that a wooden sword is not a serious weapon?

VASILYIYE: Please, do not pay any attention to him!

FILIP: And that a wooden sword cannot be used to kill a dragon, or spear a tyrant? And that a wooden sword cannot meet the attack of an iron one?

YELISAVETA: Yes, and after the fight you can use the remains as firewood!

FILIP: And do you want to say that the false money cannot be used to bribe a witness or a judge or a minister? And are golden coins more valuable? Or that stone houses last longer than the drawn ones? Or that they are safer? Or that a drawn house is not a real house?

YELISAVETA: Please, don't listen to his fantasies!

FILIP: And you call yourselves actors!

SOFIA: And are you trying to say that we are not?

VASILYIYE: Please, sir, do not take Filip too seriously! He is solely responsible for the tragic incident that led to our arrest!

MEITZEN: Why do you think he was responsible?

VASILYIYE: Why? Because he lives in the clouds, in illusions, in dreams! He has mixed up life and theatre, and even he himself doesn't know when he is in life and when he is in a play! Nor when he is himself, Filip Trnavats, and when he is a character in a play!

YELISAVETA: You give him a skull and he becomes Hamlet! You give him a sceptre, he becomes a king!
 You give him a bag of coins, he becomes the Miser! And then you make head and tail out of it!

VASILIIYE: Filip, my dear sir, is totally unaware of reality!

FILIP: And you are?

VASILIIYE: Look who's talking!

MEITZEN: Stop this!

FILIP: What does he say; unaware of reality! What reality?

VASILIIYE: This! This here! This you are in right now! This that you brought us into with your stupidity!
 This room, this desk, this stove! This shiny floor! This gentleman, this officer, Yelisaveta, Sofia, me!

FILIP: You are trying to say that you are - reality!

VASILIIYE: And are you trying to say that we are not?

FILIP: You are just a bad dream of mine and nothing else!

VASILIIYE: Have you heard him?

FILIP: And I only need to wake up for you to disappear!

VASILIIYE: You will wake up one day but it won't look the way you are dreaming about it and imagining it!
 Reality is not theatre, not clouds!

YELISAVETA: This war would exist for him only if it was happening on the stage!

VASILIIYE: That wooden sword will finish you off!

MEITZEN: Please keep your disputes to yourselves!

VASILIIYE: I am sorry I cannot bear it!

YELISAVETA: We're only trying to explain things!

MEITZEN: To explain what?

VASILIIYE: Well, this – what you asked about, this – concerning the weapons! Can't you see that it is a
 wooden sword?

MEITZEN (*having examined the sword*): What idiots I'm working with!

YELISAVETA: I really admire you for being able to bear it!

SOFIA: If you are arresting people because of wooden swords which are only good enough for frying an egg
 on or making tea – of course given that you have an egg or tea – what on earth are you doing with those who
 carry guns and make bombs?

MEITZEN: Who is asking the questions here, you or me?

SOFIA: Is it even forbidden to think aloud around here?

MEITZEN: The report says that you also use false names!

SOFIA: False names!

YELISAVETA: This officer of yours has mixed up our real names with the names of the characters we are
 playing!

MEITZEN: Can you try to explain?

MILUN: This one says he is called Vasiliye. That one calls him Stefan!

VASILIIYE: I am Stefan in one play, but in real life I am Vasiliye! Please! Every sensible person can
 distinguish between the two!

YELISAVETA: For the potential arrest of actors you should at least have a policeman with minimum theatre
 education!

SOFIA: Then, such tragic misunderstandings would never occur.

MEITZEN: It says here that you are also gathering people in a public place!

MILUN: They gave a speech at the Brandy market. This one spoke from a barrel!

VASILIIYE: We didn't give any speeches, we just played an extract from a play, as an advertisement!

MEITZEN: What were you advertising?

VASILIIYE: The play!

MEITZEN: And have you got a licence for that play?

YELISAVETA: Now just say that you don't have the licence and you can accept my resignation!

VASILIIYE: I think our good standing should suffice!

YELISAVETA: That's what I feared!

MEITZEN: So you don't have the licence either?

VASILIIYE: If you think that some administrative and bureaucratic piece of paper with purple stamps bears
 more value than our artistic reputation, then I do not know what we are discussing here any longer!

MEITZEN: I am not discussing anything with you here! This is an interrogation not an idle chat!

VASILIIYE: When we cannot find a lingua franca...

MEITZEN: I am not looking for a lingua franca with you, I am interrogating you! I am asking you questions
 and it is your obligation to give answers!

YELISAVETA: Not to argue!

MEITZEN: Are you at all aware of the situation you are in? This is not a lunatic asylum, this is police! Or do you perhaps want me to demonstrate to you where you are by some more tangible means?

MILUN: They need Clobber, that's what they need!

MEITZEN: You keep quiet! And you sit down!

VASILYIYE: If you insist...

MEITZEN: If you don't have the permit, it means you are operating illegally! This is war, man! Your country is occupied! The occupation laws are in place! The war laws!

VASILYIYE: If you think that it is so indispensably necessary...

MEITZEN: If I think it is necessary? And you don't think it is? It is not a matter of thinking! It is the regulation established by the German military official responsible for Serbia! And you, as actors, if you are at all actors, must know that!

YELISAVETA: Especially the actor who leads a troupe!

MEITZEN: Stop interrupting! As well as that you must know that any performance not licensed by the German military official personally, is punishable by at least a sentence to the concentration camp! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, if you didn't know! That's the first point!

YELISAVETA: Now say that you didn't know that! *(She sits on Meitzen's desk and lights a cigarette.)*

MEITZEN: Second, I won't ask you how you went about without the licence through the rest of Serbia, that's the problem of the local officials elsewhere, not mine! However, within my constituency, every illegal performance will be treated in accordance with the given laws! And get off my desk! That's the second point!

YELISAVETA: Don't say afterwards you haven't been warned!

MEITZEN: And put that cigarette out when you are in my office! Third and the last, all of this is enough reasons for me to put you in prison before the next transportation to the concentration camp! Which is what I will do straightaway!

MILUN: I'd just pass it all on to Clobber to sort out!

MEITZEN: Go and see whether there are free places in the prison!

VASILYIYE: Is this the document you require?

MEITZEN *(takes the document from Vasiliye and reads)*: "The Office of the Head Military Officer for Serbia..." *(He sits down.)* "...The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich... no Jews or Gypsies in the troupe... nor persons married to Jews... The permission is hereby granted... the play "The Robbers" by Friedrich Schiller..."

SOFIA: That, if you didn't know is a German writer!

YELISAVETA: Do you think the gentleman is not aware of that?

MEITZEN *(continues reading)*: "...in the town of Central Serbia, including Banat... anti-fire regulations... On behalf of the Military Officer for Serbia, the general..."

VASILYIYE: "...the general of anti-aircraft artillery, von Schreder!"

MEITZEN: "Officer..." Why didn't you show me this straightaway?

VASILYIYE: You asked about the wooden sword first!

MEITZEN: You can go!

YELISAVETA: Please excuse us for dropping in on you like this, without an appointment!

MEITZEN: Wait a minute, one more question!

VASILYIYE: Yes, please!

MEITZEN: Have you seen the gallows at the Corn Market?

VASILYIYE: Yes. Why?

MEITZEN: And you don't mind?

VASILYIYE: What?

MEITZEN: The shadow of the gallows across your stage?

Blackout

Scene Three

A Quarrel in the Adzhich Courtyard

Facing the auditorium is the inner facade of a two storey house belonging to the late Major Adzhich. All along the second storey there is a long veranda. Down to the right there stands the bungalow of Blagoye Babich's, in front of which Gina is doing the washing in a tub propped up by two stools. There is a water tap

in the courtyard. There might be some – still empty – washing lines stretched across the courtyard. To the left, on a slope leading to the river, there is a big lime-tree and a huge oak table surrounded by benches underneath it. The path to the right leads onto the main road.

VASILYIYE: And now that we managed to get ourselves out of the police station, and when we should be rehearsing before the tonight's performance, they are not here! Sofia, as if it were the most important thing on earth, has had to go for a swim!

GINA: What else should she do in this heat. At least she is not tied to this tub like me!

VASILYIYE: As for Filip, I do not know whether he is in Elsinore or in Venice... But I wanted to ask you something. We would like to have several rehearsals here in the courtyard, if that's all right with you... So, you know, we don't have to pay for the space hire for rehearsals as well. Not only was the hire of that pub very expensive, but we also had to pay in advance! In a word, we are left penniless! We really won't be too much of a hassle here...

GINA: You should discuss that with Simka, she is letting you the rooms, not I!

VASILYIYE: She said she's got nothing against it if you don't mind...

(Silently, CLOBBER enters. In spite of the great heat, he is wearing a woollen peasant pair of trousers, leather waistcoat and peasant leather shoes. He is waving a whip made of a bull's sinew. Goes to the water tap, rests the whip against it, pumps the water and drinks from his hand, he wets his face and then dries it with his cap. Sighs.)

CLOBBER: Just been 'anging them corpses at the Corn Market. By the Scales.

GINA: So I've heard.

CLOBBER: Shoulda seen it.

GINA: If I haven't seen enough of it so far...

CLOBBER: Much 'arder 'anging the dead than the livin'.

VASILYIYE: Who are those people who have been hung.

CLOBBER: Bandits.

VASILYIYE: Did you have to hang them like that?

CLOBBER: Whad'ya mean 'like that'?

VASILYIYE: Naked like that, without trousers and bare-foot.

CLOBBER: If anyone'd asked me, I'd've taken their pants off too! What ya lookin' at me like that for? That's 'ow you get rid of 'em fastest, you get it? You don't get it. Say you was a bandit... Say, you go to shoot at the Germans... and say you know you'd 'ave to 'ang bare-arsed at the market for it... would ya shoot, eh?

VASILYIYE: That's nothing to do with me. I am an actor.

CLOBBER: When ya wanna go somewhere, and you know you might 'ang for it, you'll think twice before you go! And when you think it thru', you either go or you don't! But when you know you might 'ang bare-arsed, ya wouldn't think twice but nine times! And you wouldn't go! They're more afraid of shame than death!

VASILYIYE: You know not what you do!

CLOBBER: Wha' did ya say you was?

VASILYIYE: An actor.

CLOBBER: You ride on a barrel?

VASILYIYE: I am in the theatre not in a circus!

CLOBBER: Yer not a vagrant by any chance? Or a gambler?

VASILYIYE: Do I look like a gambler to you?

CLOBBER: Just askin'. Coz of the Regulations on corporal punishment. Accordin' to article three, corporal punishment applies to vagrants, the unemployed, gamblers, drunkards and the persons who spread false information. The fact that you're an actor don't mean you ain't a drunkard or a vagrant. And according to the article five, the corporal punishment by beating can be issued from 5 to 25 hits on the backside. Thass why I ask.

VASILYIYE: I am a decent citizen!

CLOBBER: And if yer decent... d' you respect me?

VASILYIYE: I beg your pardon?

GINA: Of course he respects you!

CLOBBER: I'm askin' 'im!

VASILYIYE: I respect you, of course!

CLOBBER: When I enter the hotel "Paris", they all go schtum! Whichever table I sit at, they all get up and leave straightaway! Out a respect! When I go down the street, they all cross over to th' other side! Coz they respect me! Old women cross themselves at the sight a me, as if I was an icon! Understand?

VASILYIYE: I understand, yes.

CLOBBER: Liar, you don't understand nothing! *(To GINA)* 'e won't know my name!

GINA: Clobber!

CLOBBER: Thass right, Clobber. 'e won't know what I'm askin' 'im either! *(To VASILYIYE)* D' you know why I'm Clobber? *(To GINA)* 'e don't. *(To VASILYIYE)* Coz I clobber people's bones to dust! That's why I'm Clobber! And don't let it escape you, that, for the next time! *(He exits to the right, having forgotten the whip next to the water tap.)*

GINA: Always like that, no good morning, no good bye, nothing! Comes like an animal, leaves like an animal! You don't even hear him walk in. *(She is rinsing a cloth.)*

VASILYIYE: Who is he?

GINA: A torturer, what else!

VASILYIYE: A torturer?

GINA: You see this?

VASILYIYE: What is it?

GINA: Wherever he goes he lives a blood trace behind himself! *(She is washing the cobbles with the cloth.)*

VASILYIYE: Unbelievable!... Look he's forgotten his whip!

GINA: So, he's coming back! I'll have to wash after him again!

VASILYIYE: He beats them with this?

GINA: He beats them with whatever he can! With poles, with feet! But mostly with this whip! It causes utmost pain and it cuts in down to the bone!

VASILYIYE: If I'd met him on the street I'd've thought he was an ordinary peasant.

GINA: Before the war, he was – please, excuse me – raping goats up there in his village!

VASILYIYE: And that is the authority now!

GINA: He won't take pity on anyone. Not the young, not the old, not the ill! He won't take pity even for money. Some used to offer him golden watches to stop beating - but the monster wouldn't take them!

VASILYIYE: Can a man be such an animal?

GINA: He is not an animal, he is much worse than that - an inhuman being!

(Enters BLAGOYE with a bottle in his pocket.)

BLAGOYE: What did Clobber want?

GINA: Well, Blagoye, for God's sake, what took you so long?

BLAGOYE: I went to hear the news from the front.

GINA: I can see, your bottle is full of news.

BLAGOYE: Shall we have a swig, what do you say, Thespian?

VASILYIYE: No thanks, it's too hot! And I must stay fully sober until the end of the performance. Some other time. *(He goes in.)*

BLAGOYE: He can't because it's too hot! No, he can't because his stomach's empty, that's why. Those actors never have any money for food.

GINA: The man's had to run away from the stink of your brandy.

BLAGOYE: This is the smell of ambrosia!

GINA: Ambrosia! More like salamander's winter nest! Will I ever live to see you sober up for at least five minutes?

BLAGOYE: I'm not drinking on a whim, but out of despair!

GINA: As if you'd find it difficult to find a reason for drinking!

BLAGOYE: The Germans have got to the Volga, woman!

GINA: You don't have to drink a river of brandy for that!

BLAGOYE: Have I told you to stop nagging me!?

GINA: If I nag, I nag for your own good!... Who says they got to the Volga?

BLAGOYE: Who says, the newspapers say, read for yourself! To the Volga, for God's sake, that's half of Russia!

GINA: You were drowning your sorrows for the Dnyepar a whole week! As if you had a mill on it!

BLAGOYE: I had enough of your nagging long ago! And I'm not a child – I don't need lectures!

GINA: When you soak yourself in that brandy you are not a man either!

BLAGOYE: You'll be making me out of mud one day!

GINA: If I wanted to make you as you are, I wouldn't need any other material!

BLAGOYE: Clever! Even Adam was made the same way!

GINA: Oh, you might be quick, but you are drinking so much you don't even see what your Sekula is getting himself in for!

BLAGOYE: What?

GINA: Is it possible that you never see anything?

BLAGOYE: Well, I've always been blind, but I was most blind when I was taking you for a wife!

GINA: And you regained your sight when you squandered the dowry.

(SIMKA, YELISAVETA and VASILIIYE come out onto the veranda. Yelisaveta hangs some theatrical costumes over the veranda to let them air.)

SIMKA: You have access to the veranda from both rooms!

YELISAVETA: Yes, I've noticed.

SIMKA: Please use anything you wish. And here you have a view of the river! *(To VASILIIYE)* Have I shown you the oak table under the lime tree? You can dine there during the summer!

VASILIIYE: Dine on what? Beef soup with noodles and steak with horseradish sauce? Or roast lamb with green salad? Or poached salmon? Or maybe even stuffed geese or ducks?

SIMKA: Oh, now that you mention geese and ducks, I remember before the war, the river was white with geese and ducks! One couldn't have an afternoon's nap for all the clucking and quaking. And now not a single feather in sight! *(To YELISAVETA)* Have you seen how near the river is? When my late major was alive, we would sit here after lunch, eating apricots, and he would throw the stones right into the river!

YELISAVETA: Your husband was a major?

SIMKA: An artillery major, yes!

VASILIIYE: Did he die in this war?

SIMKA: No, he died of pneumonia. It's an advantage that your room is up here. You don't have to close your windows at night. You can hear the crickets in the summer, all night. The major didn't even close the windows in winter, and he always slept without pyjamas. But that's why he had an iron constitution and perfect health!

GINA: God bless his soul!

SIMKA: Where did you play before you came here?

YELISAVETA: I played in Belgrade! We did Piget's "Happy Days". They were indeed happy days! I had a wonderful female part...

(She is interrupted by some shooting – an automatic gun is heard firing several loads.)

GINA: What on Earth is that?

BLAGOYE: A machine-gun!

GINA: If only Sekula was at home, I wouldn't need to worry.

BLAGOYE: You just tempt fate!

YELISAVETA: Do you know where Filip is?

VASILIIYE: Maybe he is killing Polonius or counting his coins... God knows!

YELISAVETA: I just hope that fool doesn't get himself into more problems.

GINA: I'd only like to know why they were shooting!

VASILIIYE: You are not at all afraid?

SIMKA: I myself, sir, come from a military family!... And now, you can get on without me, I think I've shown you everything. You just unpack and relax - just feel at home! I leave everything at your disposal with unlimited trust! *(She goes into the house.)*

YELISAVETA: Sofia could at least do something to help. But, no, the young lady has to go to the beach! I haven't even had a chance to do my nails, nor my hair, let alone my massage or my make up – nothing! *(SHE and VASILIIYE also go into the house.)*

GINA: As if they weren't in a war but on a holiday.

BLAGOYE: Actors are bohemians, artists – the people of the world! It's not their fault you don't know that!

GINA: I don't need great knowledge to recognize who is a whore and who is a thief!

BLAGOYE: You haven't seen anywhere further than your village, and now you'd like to pass judgement on the whole world!

GINA: As if I could see anything with you around. Home – market, washing – ironing, cooking – sowing! That's my life with you! And you used to promise me the whole world!

SIMKA *(coming into the courtyard with a covered tray)*: Gina, could I please leave my silver dining set with you for a while?

GINA: You are afraid it might go walkies with the travelling actors.

SIMKA: I'd rather leave it with you than fret. There are 12 silver forks, 12 knives, 12 spoons and 12 teaspoons. *(GINA dries her hands on her apron, takes the tray from SIMKA and takes it into her house.)* That was our wedding present from the officers' core. *(To BLAGOYE)* What could that shooting have been about?

BLAGOYE: I only know it was a machine gun.
 SIMKA: It sounded like it was coming from the city centre.
 BLAGOYE: It could have been somewhere between the photo shop and the bookshop.
 SIMKA: Until now you could only ever hear the shooting at night... And Gina is worried about Sekula?
 BLAGOYE: She's just whining all the time!
 SIMKA: Who knows what they could get him into!
 BLAGOYE: Who?
 SIMKA: I'm afraid, Gina has every reason to worry...
 BLAGOYE: What about?
 GINA (*coming back*): You let anyone into your house, for God's sake!
 SIMKA: Who never sees an angel for seven days, on the eighth, they'd welcome the devil himself!
 GINA: You'll welcome the devil when they get some disease into your house. God knows where they've been!
 (*SOFIA is walking in from the direction of the river, wearing a purple bathing suit and drying her hair.*)
 SOFIA: Can you see that building behind the bridge?
 BLAGOYE: Behind the railway bridge? That's the first power station in Serbia!
 SOFIA: I swam as far as that!
 BLAGOYE: It means you are very fit!
 GINA: How could she not be!
 SOFIA: You must be really happy to be living in such a lovely place – the house next to the river!
 GINA: That's why we rarely ever go swimming, because we are so near the river.
 SOFIA: I thought I heard some shooting!
 BLAGOYE: Take no notice of it as long as I'm around.
 GINA: That's a great assurance.
 BLAGOYE: I went to war under the command of Earl Steppa! On the Tser we used to cover ourselves with one and the same coat.
 GINA: You used to cover yourself with horse's blanket.
 SOFIA: If you could only imagine how lovely the water is. I couldn't resist getting my hair wet. Now I'll need two hours to get it dry. But unless I go under water fully, I can never feel as though I've been swimming.
 BLAGOYE: Swimming without diving can't be counted as swimming at all!
 SOFIA: And the river smells of watermelon, have you noticed? And what lovely rocky beaches, and beautiful trees! The fields are full of dandelions and camomile! You must feel as though you are always on holiday!
 GINA: Not always!
 SOFIA: I wouldn't come out of the water the whole summer. Please could you wipe my back, I cannot reach. I'd swim all the time. I'd swim up to the sky, if I could.
 BLAGOYE: Swimming is the healthiest of all sports. And it is particularly good for the figure. I'm always ready for swimming, any time, just you tell me when you want to go!
 GINA: Don't forget your flappers, otherwise you might drown!
 BLAGOYE: I can swim all styles: breast-stroke, crawl, butterfly, 4x100 meters, mixed style, diving from various heights!
 GINA: You forgot to mention dog-style.
 SOFIA: Thank you, now I can do it myself. I must run to change my swimming costume, it's still wet. (*She goes into the house.*)
 GINA: Mind, you might get a cold!... Lovely water, lovely beaches, everything's lovely to her! She sees the camomile, but she doesn't see the war going on around her!
 SIMKA: The actors have always lived against the whole world.
 GINA: She's not even ashamed to walk around like that, half naked.
 SIMKA: If I told you, you'd never believe me!
 GINA: And I don't take my hands out of the tub all day!
 SIMKA: She even puts the rouge on her nipples.
 GINA: She wouldn't even hesitate to put her pussy on the market, and then – get as much as you can, everyone!
 BLAGOYE: Why, should she hang it on a distaff like you do, and sit next to the window all day, weaving?
 GINA: When whores need defence you are the first to offer it!
 (*SOFIA comes out on the veranda wearing a purple gown. She hangs the wet swimming costume on to dry. She is looking across at the river.*)
 SOFIA: Yelisaveta!

YELISAVETA (*from inside*): What is it?
 SOFIA: You didn't tell me what a lovely view we've got from here!
 YELISAVETA (*coming out onto the veranda*): When could I have told you? I've had to unpack everything myself!
 SOFIA: And have you seen the wheat fields, full of poppies?
 YELISAVETA: When could I have seen them? I've been airing the costumes all morning!
 SOFIA: As if the gold itself was waving in the wind!
 YELISAVETA: Everything's waving in front of my eyes with tiredness!
 SOFIA: I adore the summer! The days are full of bees and the nights – of fireflies! And how wonderful the silence is here. Listen!...
 YELISAVETA: What?
 SOFIA: You can hear a bee buzzing in the flowers!
 YELISAVETA: My head is buzzing.
 SOFIA: You've made a mistake, Yelisaveta, by not going out for a swim!
 YELISAVETA: When could I have gone?
 SOFIA: I don't remember the last time I felt so wonderful as today! (*She goes in.*)
 YELISAVETA (*following her*): Now that you've had a swim and a spell of sunbathing, and now that you feel so wonderful, you could get changed and help me a little... (*She goes in following SOFIA.*)
 GINA: I didn't even know it was so wonderful here at our place! When one looks at it from behind this tub, one wouldn't think so!
 SIMKA: It's a different world, my Gina!
 GINA: I can see myself that it is!
 SIMKA: How many waters do you rinse in.
 GINA: Five.
 SIMKA: They spend the whole life as if on a boat. One minute here and the next somewhere else.
 GINA: All my boats have sunk in this tub.
 (*SOFIA comes out of the house and goes to the river.*)
 YELISAVETA (*from the veranda*): Sofia, where are you going again?
 SOFIA: To catch a bit more sun.
 YELISAVETA: Do I have to do everything on my own?
 SOFIA: It's a pity to spend such a day inside.
 (*SHE runs down towards the river, YELISAVETA goes inside angrily.*)
 GINA (*to BLAGOYE*): Since you're standing there idle, you could get me some water for rinsing... Blagoye, do you hear me?
 SIMKA: As if thunderstruck!
 GINA: Blagoye!
 BLAGOYE: When I look at her I feel like a room...
 GINA: Like what?
 BLAGOYE: Like a room that somebody's just brought some violets into.
 GINA: You shouldn't even drink lemonade, let alone brandy!
 SIMKA: Men have no criteria!
 GINA: As long as she's new and somebody else's!
 BLAGOYE: I wonder what all that beauty can be for – it can't be only for embracing...
 SIMKA: The only good thing about her is her hair!
 GINA: If I put on her dresses and she mine, she wouldn't even be seen next to me!
 BLAGOYE: Yes, I can imagine!
 GINA: But I am wearing male shoes, male coat, I'm slaving away and wearing a rope around my waist. I should've put it on around my neck for once, rather than living like a decent woman!
 BLAGOYE: It's easy to be a decent woman with such beauty!
 SIMKA: You could at least have some respect!
 GINA: He has respect when he needs something! Gina make a meal, Gina wash away, Gina pass it on, Gina get up, Sekula's wee'd himself, Gina make some tea, Gina I've got a sciatica attack, Gina rent, Gina bills, Gina heating – may Gina see your funeral some time soon!
 (*YELISAVETA comes out onto the veranda and shakes some clothes over it.*)
 GINA: Stop shaking that crap over my laundry!
 YELISAVETA: You are talking to me?
 GINA: Am I washing here all day so you can soil it all again?
 YELISAVETA: I'm only shaking my nightdress, madam, how can it be dirty?

GINA: It's precisely what's full of your whoring dirt!
 YELISAVETA: You could mind your language a bit!
 GINA: This has been an honest house for twenty years, and you've made a brothel out of it in one hour!
 YELISAVETA: I've never heard such insults before!
 GINA: If your father'd made you with a bitch, you wouldn't have turned out this way!
 YELISAVETA: If you, sir, have no way of shutting this woman up...
 GINA: Who will shut me up?
 BLAGOYE: Gina, shut up!
 GINA: Shut up for what? For a whore? Who are you I should shut up for you? If it was somebody who gives orders, somebody who is useful, somebody who works the fields, somebody who gives something, I might shut up! But should I shut up for you, you old bitch?
 YELISAVETA: What did you say?
 GINA: What you've just heard! That you are an old bitch!
 YELISAVETA: Me old?
 GINA: Find a mirror and look at yourself.
 BLAGOYE: Gina, shut it, or you'll see this whip at work!
 GINA: Come on, get hold of it, it would suit you! Take Clobber's whip into your hands, you, Clobber's best copy! Come on, hit the mother of your son, come on! Defend the scum!
 YELISAVETA: Don't make me come down there!
 GINA: Don't you make me come up there!
 BLAGOYE: Gina, have you gone crazy?
 GINA: Yes, I have. Give me something to kill the bitch!
 SIMKA: Gina, don't be silly.
 GINA: Give me something heavy so I don't have to hit twice!
(From the left, from the street, enter DARA and TOMANIYA.)
 DARA: Calm down, Gina, we know how you feel!
 GINA: How do you know how I feel?
 DARA: That's why we ran up here, because we know that it must be hell for you now.
 GINA: Hell for me?
 TOMANIYA: Don't you know yet?
 GINA: What?
 DARA: Did you hear the shooting earlier on?
 BLAGOYE: Why do you ask?
 SIMKA: Who was it that fired?
 TOMANIYA: They killed them on the spot, with a machine gun.
 SIMKA: Whom?
 BLAGOYE: Who?
 GINA: I don't even dare ask.
 DARA: Have you got a glass of water?
 SIMKA: Who shot whom?
 TOMANIYA: They killed the regional councillor.
 BLAGOYE: Domazet?
 SIMKA: That creep?
 GINA: Who killed him?
 DARA: Whoever did, may his hands be blessed!
 TOMANIYA: Andja was killed with him...
 SIMKA: Andja Karamarkovich?
 DARA: The action was carried out perfectly.
 BLAGOYE: What action?
 SIMKA: Why did they have to kill Andja?
 DARA: Why, do you pity her, the German whore?
 SIMKA: How can anybody shoot at a woman?
 TOMANIYA: She wasn't a woman but a witch!
 BLAGOYE: Do they know who shot them?
 TOMANIYA: The city is like a beehive now.
 GINA: Oh God, where on earth is Sekula?
 TOMANIYA: You don't know! Shall I tell her?
 DARA: Sekula's been arrested.

GINA: What did you say?
DARA: I thought you've heard already. They suspect he might have fired.
BLAGOYE: Sekula!?
DARA: They are keeping him at the police station.
TOMANIYA: He must have got into Clobber's hands by now.
GINA: I'd rather you told me he was killed.
SIMKA: Are you crazy?
GINA: If they'd killed him I could've thanked God for it.
BLAGOYE: Do you know what you are saying?
DARA: Come on, it's important that he is still alive. As long as he's still alive, he might yet come out.
GINA: He'd sooner come out of hell. I've seen what they look like when they know nothing on earth. What will my Sekula look like tomorrow, when he does know, and they know that he does!?

BLAGOYE: What do you know that he knows?
GINA: A mother doesn't have to see it to know it.
SIMKA: Come on, have a drink!
GINA: It'd be easier for me if I knew what they are doing to him, the monsters, in those blood-stained cellars of theirs. Like this, I don't know, so I have to keep guessing, and I'm guessing it far worse than they themselves can make it.
DARA: For the moment, it is certain that they are not beating him.
SIMKA: How do you know?
DARA: I didn't say I knew, but I know who does.
GINA: If they are not beating him, it means that it's even worse.
BLAGOYE: How can it be worse if they are not beating him, you idiot?
GINA: That means he started to give it all away.
BLAGOYE: What does he have to give away.
TOMANIYA: Well, you should know Sekula better, you are his mother.
GINA: How can I know him, when I don't know the torture that they are putting him through.
DARA: Nobody's been putting him through any torture, they need him well and alive.
TOMANIYA: They think he can tell them a lot.
GINA: That's what I'm afraid of.
BLAGOYE: What can he tell them when he knows nothing?
DARA: Inspect Sekula's room and burn all the papers you find.
BLAGOYE: What papers?
TOMANIYA: For God's sake, man, you are totally flabbergasted.
DARA: Don't stand there like that! Every second is valuable.
(Everybody goes quiet suddenly. CLOBBER enters.)
CLOBBER: Forgot me whip. I left it somewhere 'ere. Where is it? Meitzen calls me on duty, no trace of me whip! Without it I'm as if without an 'and. Looking 'ere, looking there, 'till I remembered, must be 'ere. Without it, I'm lost.
SIMKA: You won't be interrogating him, will you?
CLOBBER: I don't interrogate. I only 'elp.
GINA: How do you help? By beating? With this whip?
CLOBBER: Leave that whip alone, I say.
SIMKA: Sekula is innocent.
GINA: Will you be soaking your hands in the blood of an innocent child?
BLAGOYE: He knows nothing. Nothing!
CLOBBER: None of them know nothin'. In th' beginnin'. But what he didn't know in th' beginnin', in the end 'e knows it all!
BLAGOYE: I can lay my head that he knows nothing.
CLOBBER: For some he does, for some he don't. It depends!
GINA: What do you mean it depends?
(YELISAVETA is standing on the veranda all the time and observing what's going on. Since the arrival of DARA and TOMANIYA, VASILYIYE has come onto the veranda too. In the course of the following monologue by CLOBBER, FILIP will arrive from the street too. He will walk to the oak table and stay there till the end of the scene. The actors are watching the whole scene silently.)
CLOBBER: I'm not like them agents that beat 'em, just beat 'em, beat 'em, and then come out throwing up. They beat 'em, five, six, seven hours, three of them in shifts – and nothin'! They beat 'im. And 'e keeps shtum. All 'e tells 'em is – I don't know. But give you 'im to me for a quarter of an hour and he'll need more

than one mouth! 'e don't know to the chief, 'e don't know to the agents, 'e don't know to the SS! But you should see 'ow 'e knows to me. I've 'ad plenty of them come to me. They come in like wanked up stallions, and come out like hollow arses. 'e knows what 'e didn't know 'e knew!

GINA: Mother of Christ...

CLOBBER: Thass why ye 'ave to know where to 'it 'im, and to know 'ow, and to know where 'is nerves are, and where 'is kidneys are! Ya understand? Ya don't! If ya 'it 'im and 'is skin don't burst, it's as if ya never 'it 'im! If you 'it 'im, and you get no blood dripping down ya from head to toe, it's as if ya never 'it 'im, understand? Ya don't. You can't make a chair with just two legs!

SIMKA: Gina! Water, quickly! Unbutton her!

TOMANIYA: Sprinkle her cheeks!

SIMKA: Gina! Gina!

TOMANIA: No good shouting. She's lost it.

DARA: Slap her on the cheeks a bit, come on! Harder! (*To BLAGOYE*) What are you standing there like that for, you muddle-head? Have you got some sugar in your house?

BLAGOYE: Sugar?

SIMKA: She's coming 'round!

CLOBBER: And when I was goin' t' arrest Yevrem! And when 'e 'eard 'oo was coming to 'im! I come to 'is 'ouse, and 'e's 'ung 'imself. Off a big pear tree. Fruit to fill up a wagon. While they were takin' 'im down, I picked six pounds a fruit.

(Coming off the stage CLOBBER almost collides with SOFIA, who is coming back from the river. Both of them are surprised and confused by the collision. CLOBBER, momentarily looks at SOFIA aghast. His exit from the stage in the end resembles running away. The consequences of this collision will be made apparent later.)

SIMKA: Is there anything that could tame this animal into anything humanlike?

TOMANIYA: He's left his blood traces everywhere!

DARA: What is it, Thespians, you are watching our bloody theatre?

Blackout

Scene Four

A Baked Pumpkin on the Oak Table Under the Lime-Tree

or

The Rehearsal of Schiller's "The Robbers"

The courtyard from the previous scene, some time after the noon. It is very bright and hot. At the table under the lime-tree, SOFIA, YELISAVETA and VASILYIYE are rehearsing a scene from Schiller's "The Robbers". YELISAVETA, in the part of the old earl, sleeps at the table. SOFIA, as Amalia, approaches her. VASILYIYE is the director.

YELISAVETA: "My son!"

VASILYIYE: You should say that three times!

YELISAVETA: "My son! My son! My Son!"

VASILYIYE: You are running up to him and taking him by the hand!

SOFIA: "Listen, listen, he is dreaming of his son!"

YELISAVETA: "You are here?" ...What do I say now?

VASILYIYE: You are asking: "You are here? You are really here?"

YELISAVETA: "You are here? You are really here? Oh, poor thing!..."

VASILYIYE (*prompting*): "Don't look at me..."

YELISAVETA: "Don't look at me with those eyes full of sorrow, I'm such a ... so sad, even without it!"

VASILYIYE: "Such a sad man"! For God's sake, Yelisaveta, speak as a man!

YELISAVETA: "I am such a sad MAN, even without it!"

VASILYIYE: You don't have to emphasise it so much!

YELISAVETA: "I am such a sad man, even without it!"

VASILYIYE: That's it. Now, you are waking him up...

SOFIA: "Open your eyes, dear old man, you were only dreaming! Calm down."

YELISAVETA: "Was he not here? Have I not just held his hand in my... fair hand?"

VASILYIYE: The same again. "In my old man's hand"! Can you not get into it? You are not playing a countess but an earl. Yelisaveta, you are not a woman but a man!

YELISAVETA: I am trying my best, but it's simply not working.

SOFIA: If only you could concentrate a little.

YELISAVETA: If you know how to play an earl, why don't you take his part?

SOFIA: And who would then play Amalia? Vasiliye?

YELISAVETA: There are other women in the ensemble?

SOFIA: Don't be ridiculous!

YELISAVETA: And you don't be rude!

SOFIA: It is impossible to continue working like this!

YELISAVETA: And I don't know what kind of a repertoire this is!

VASILYIYE: What's wrong with the repertoire all of a sudden?

YELISAVETA: An ensemble of four actors cannot play a piece with fifteen or twenty parts!

VASILYIYE: We must try our best!

YELISAVETA: We are trying very nicely, indeed! You cut out half of the characters! And out of those that you keep, you give only two or three characters to everyone! Women play men, men play women! Instead of getting concentrated, we are going crazy! And the playwrights are turning in their graves!

VASILYIYE: It would be best to have a break and relax a little. The first night nerves have set in – it's normal.

YELISAVETA: And it doesn't suit my temperament to play a man at all!

VASILYIYE: And you tell me that now, before the premiere!... A real actor should be able to play a bench and a mop if necessary!

YELISAVETA: And I don't know why we have to play these "Robbers"!

VASILYIYE: Because Schiller is a German writer! Which other writer would they allow us to play? And because our audience, our people – with their rebellious and freedom-fighting traditions, our defiant, incorruptible, proud and passionate people – love to watch rebels like Karl Moore! The descendants of the great hero Obilich don't come to the theatre for art, but for heroism! And they don't go to church to see Christ and the Virgin Mary, but to see their holy kings and holy warriors!

(SIMKA interrupts him, coming out of her house).

SIMKA: Can somebody help me?

VASILYIYE: Of course, how can we help you?

SIMKA: I baked a pumpkin, I cannot bring it out on my own.

VASILYIYE: I'll do it for you! Where did you find such a big pumpkin?

SIMKA: And if somebody could lay a tablecloth.

VASILYIYE: Yelisaveta!

(YELISAVETA is laying the tablecloth on the table under the lime-tree. VASILYIYE is bringing in a big baked pumpkin. Puts it on the table.)

SIMKA: We could even call this a lunch, for our fortune.

YELISAVETA: For some this is a breakfast and a lunch and a supper!

SOFIA: And for several days as well!

SIMKA: I beg your pardon?

YELISAVETA: I said, smells lovely!

SIMKA: A war-time feast!... Would you like to take on the role of the host and cut it?

VASILYIYE: With pleasure!

SIMKA: Please, sit down, help yourself. And where is Mr Filip?

YELISAVETA: Perhaps at Gloucester's castle.

SIMKA: Where?

VASILYIYE: It's not the time for joking. He is down there, by the river, probably rehearsing his part.

SIMKA: Why don't you give him a shout?

VASILYIYE: Yelisaveta will.

YELISAVETA: Well, of course, Yelisaveta, who else. *(She goes down to the river.)*

SOFIA: How do you get by in these times?

SIMKA: In summer I manage somehow, but in winter – no way! In summer you can cook a pear, bake a pepper... Dip an onion into some salt... But as soon as the dark winter comes... you go to the market and the stalls are covered in snow.

SOFIA: Summer is everything.

SIMKA: I prefer autumn.

SOFIA: Autumn?

SIMKA: Autumn brings peace into the house.
(YELISAVETA and FILIP are approaching from the river.)
SIMKA: Please, sit down, Mr Filip, I've baked a pumpkin... Some like it with sugar...
YELISAVETA: And where do we find sugar nowadays?
SIMKA: I see you've had a rehearsal.
VASILIYE: We had to go through the scene between the earl and Amalia once again. Yelisaveta has some technical problems with her part...
YELISAVETA: Nicely put, 'technical'...
SIMKA: Please, don't get me wrong... but I'm afraid it's not suitable for you to rehearse here any more...
VASILIYE: You said yourself we could!
SIMKA: I know, I did... But you saw it yourselves, Gina's son got arrested in the meantime, and I don't think it's right to... in front of her door, so to speak... It would appear as though we were mocking her.
YELISAVETA: That Gina can't stand anything, especially art!
SIMKA: Please don't get offended by her, it's not easy for her.
YELISAVETA: I can't remember when was the last time I heard such language.
SIMKA: She drowned her life in that tub.
YELISAVETA: And her husband consequently drowned his life in a bottle!... What else can children from such families do but go out onto the street and shoot people!?
SIMKA: Sekula, however, is a very nice young man! And I am sure he is not capable of killing anyone! Especially not a woman! If anyone is an example of a tender man, that's him!
VASILIYE: Are you crying?
SIMKA: For God's sake, no, why should I?... But since you came, you know, I've been thinking a lot...
VASILIYE: What about?
SIMKA: Well, that... The war's going on, you see. And you... put on various costumes, put on make up, you are acting, playing...
VASILIYE: And you consider it inappropriate?
SIMKA: I don't know, myself.
VASILIYE: Tell me, where is your baker now?
SIMKA: Stanimirovich or Slovich?
VASILIYE: I ask in general... Where do you think your baker should be now?
SIMKA: Where else but in the bakery?
VASILIYE: And the chemist?
SIMKA: In his shop. I don't understand, why do you ask?
VASILIYE: And the teacher?
SIMKA: At school!
VASILIYE: And the blacksmith? And the miller?
SIMKA: The blacksmith in his workshop. The miller in the mill. Funny questions!
VASILIYE: And where, according to that logic, should an actor be?
SIMKA: I know what you want me to say: in the theatre! But is it now the right time for theatre? And you can't compare an actor to a baker! The baker is at least helping us to survive, to stay alive, and an actor...
SOFIA: Maybe an actor is showing you why you should survive and stay alive!
YELISAVETA: You cannot weigh the theatre like a loaf!
SIMKA: I didn't say...
VASILIYE: Do you know, madam, what theatre is? You are sitting in Uzhitse, and ten meters away from you – there starts England! Only ten seconds walk away from you – there starts the ninth century!
SIMKA: That England of yours, to tell the truth, is lying in the shadow of a gallows! And on the stage, in that ninth century of yours, you can very well hear the shooting from the twentieth!
YELISAVETA: You should take off the mourning, madam!
SIMKA: What on God's good earth are you talking about, I'm grieving!
YELISAVETA: That's why, because you are grieving! Put on something white! The earlier the better! And emphasise the white by something red! And put a daisy in your hair!
SIMKA: Why?
YELISAVETA: Because you are grieving, because it's war, because they are arresting people, because they are killing, because they are burning! Put on a white hat, some white gloves, open a white parasol!
SIMKA: You want to see the whole of Uzhitse stone me?
SOFIA: Somebody might think I'm joking, but I've really enjoyed this, a most wonderful feast!
FILIP: The rabbit was not spicy enough!
SIMKA: The rabbit?

FILIP: But the venison was too spicy, indeed!

SIMKA: I don't understand this irony...

VASILYIYE: The same story again!

FILIP: And why do you serve fish with red wine?

SIMKA: What fish are you talking about?

FILIP: I am talking about this sturgeon! As if you fried it in scrapings! You haven't aired your rooms for months, the dust has covered your whole house, everything is white with dust, the whole house is covered in cobwebs! The autumn's coming and you are still wearing the spring's mud on your shoes! Your windows are full of dead flies! The buttons are falling off your dresses, you are wearing pins instead of buttons, you are throwing your hair and hairpins all over the house, your coffee cups are full of cigarette ends!

SIMKA: My house may be a bit neglected, maybe you can find some dust and cobwebs in it, but it is not like that because I am lazy, but because I am in deep mourning! And because maybe I don't even care to be alive! And maybe I couldn't cook for my major the way he would've liked it – I know what they are whispering in the neighbourhood! – but if anyone could criticize me, it is certainly not someone from the big wide world!

YELISAVETA: What he is saying is not directed at you!

SIMKA: You heard what he said to me! What right has he?

SOFIA: He didn't say it to you but to Simona!

SIMKA: I am not Simona, but Simka!

YELISAVETA: And Filip was talking to Simona, the widow from the comedy "The Last Summer".

SIMKA: He was talking to me all the time.

VASILYIYE: He didn't see you in you.

SIMKA: And he was referring to my house! If there are some dead flies in some rooms, that's because I live on my own, I cannot manage it all!

SOFIA: That was referring to some house in Bourgogne, in France.

SIMKA: Where?

YELISAVETA: Filip suffers from some kind of a theatrical lunacy. You give him a spade and he'll think he is a grave-digger. And if you take the spade away from him and give him a sceptre, you will in a second turn the grave-digger into a king.

SIMKA: I don't need either a king or a grave-digger.

YELISAVETA: You don't understand... Filip, for example... when you see him eat... he is not eating, he is acting that he is eating! And he is never reading, but acting that he is reading!

VASILYIYE: In a word, he is not all together normal.

SOFIA: He gets us into terrible misunderstandings.

VASILYIYE (to FILIP): This with you is becoming unbearable! We are going from trouble to trouble, all because of you! We get arrested because of you, and now we have to get thrown out onto the street because of you! And just before the performance! How can I act when I don't know where I'm going to sleep? If you have to play-act, play-act what you are supposed to! Karl – which you are playing tonight! I do not know any more what and who you are from moment to moment! Are you capable, I ask you, to be Hamlet in "Hamlet", Karl in "The Robbers", Treplyev or Trigorin or whatever you get in "The Seagull" - but during the day, outside of the play, in your normal life, to be like all the normal people, what you are, Filip Trnavats!?

YELISAVETA: You are wasting your words, he simply doesn't have the sense of reality!

FILIP: Somebody is always nagging me with that reality!

YELISAVETA: I get the impression that you are persistently running away from it!

FILIP: I cannot enter that reality and participate in it, on my own! I can only enter it with all my art which I belong to!

VASILYIYE: With the whole play, with the scenery, wigs, lights, ropes!

YELISAVETA: I'd really like to see what that would look like!

SOFIA: I don't see why you have to mock him!

VASILYIYE: An actor is one thing in real life, and another thing on the stage, and a sane person cannot mix the two!

SOFIA: And where is the dividing line between the real life and theatre? Is that dividing line the edge of the stage? And does that dividing line exist at all?

VASILYIYE: And should we be happy, like for example Filip, or should we turn to stone with horror, like for example me, when that dividing line does not exist?

SOFIA: And what if that dividing line can only exist as invisible?

VASILYIYE: If it's invisible, where is theatre then? On the market, in the blacksmith's workshop, in the chemist's? Then even basket-weaving can be a performance!

SOFIA: Well, let it be so!

VASILYIYE: "Well, let it be so!" It's easy to say that! And who will watch the basket-weaving and pay for it like paying to watch a performance?

YELISAVETA: Without the dividing line I wouldn't know where I am!

VASILYIYE: We know, theatre is here, and life – there! I never mix the two! I am Hamlet only on the stage, full stop!

SOFIA: That's why your Hamlet smells of a provincial apothecary from farces!

VASILYIYE: Don't tell me that I should look for the spirit of the Danish prince at the Uzhitse market! The theatre stops for me at the edge of the stage!

SOFIA: It is not all neatly cut off one from the other as if with a sword!

VASILYIYE: For God's sake, did I say it was?... And anyway, Filip does not claim that there is no dividing line between the stage and real life! He is behaving as if the real life does not exist!

YELISAVETA: It's only fair to let him say something too!

VASILYIYE: Well who is keeping him?

FILIP: If an actor wants to achieve...

VASILYIYE: What?

FILIP: And to express...

VASILYIYE: Express what?

FILIP: What do you, as an actor want to achieve and express, with your art, in this so-called real life?

VASILYIYE: I want to help people understand life!

FILIP: And what else?

VASILYIYE: And I want to help them forget!

FILIP: And what else?

VASILYIYE: Well, is what I said not enough?

FILIP: In this world,
in which we turn
a sheep into a rug,
a bear into a hat
and a pig into boots

who will achieve,
if not you,
for the rug to bleat,
for the hat to groan,
and for boots to farrow?

(A transparent curtain of The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich is lowered. In front of it there unfolds the following Interlude.)

Interlude

VASILYIYE: This curtain hides behind it
poverty more expensive than gold
a century into two hours rolled
an infinity squashed onto ten square feet.

YELISAVETA: In front of this curtain red
There's a dark expanse where
saviours set cities on fire,
with all their houses, boats and spires!

SOFIA: In the darkness before this curtain
the wise men outwitted
the fools, and the fools
outwitted the sages!

YELISAVETA: Before this curtain, the war
boils bandages with turnips, and the peace

pays for the hole in the head
with the hole in the pocket!
FILIP: Behind this curtain, Rome
turns into the Alpine slopes,
the Alps into a fish stall
and the stall into an endless steppe!
SOFIA: Behind this curtain, a blue
evening wind gently creases
the sea where you can find
a boat bigger than all the seas!
VASILIYE: This curtain divides the world
into the seas of fire and ice
into the stage and black void
studded with staring eyes!
FILIP: This curtain does not divide
the gold into black and white
behind it the black and white
is blue and the gold is whole!
VASILIYE: With the thought of a sage
voiced by the bell on jester's hat
behind this curtain a sparkling world
has gone all dim at that!

(Lights go down on the stage and up in the auditorium.)

The main curtain goes down.

ACT TWO

Scene Five

The Prohibition

The courtyard as before. Late afternoon. VASILIYE and SOFIA, whilst arranging the costumes into suitcases, continue a conversation which has started before the curtain went up.

VASILIYE: We should be happy to have at least this theatre.
SOFIA: Great theatre – three planks across two barrels!
VASILIYE: You think that's little?
SOFIA: You'd be happy with a stool!
VASILIYE: You don't know what can fit on a stool! The whole of the Bartholomean Fair can be recreated on a single barrel!
SOFIA: And the whole of the hundred years war can be played on a single chest! I know those stories!
VASILIYE: You don't need any brick-a-brack in order to make great theatre!
SOFIA: But a lot of talent and brains, I know!
VASILIYE: I have seen many exhibitions of scenic machinery, in many theatres around the world, but I was never taken in by all that! For me a fish is a greater miracle than a boat, and a swallow a greater miracle than a plane!
SOFIA: You can't make theatre out of nothing!
VASILIYE: You have to study every prop in great depth!
SOFIA: I study it as much as I can, given time!
VASILIYE: You have to try to really get into what you have. And when you get into it... you can create miracles with a simple pot!
SOFIA: With a pot?

VASILYIYE: With whatever you want! As a young actor in the province, working on a part of a miser, I was thinking for days about the use of particular props. And at the same time I was observing, unconsciously, what one peasant did with his cap. He wore the cap on his head; at a funeral he took the cap off to express his respect towards the deceased; he dried his face with the cap having washed it; he rolled the dice in his cap whilst playing a game with some rail-worker; he waved the cap in front of the fire to help it burn; he was sitting on his cap; he carried a letter in his cap; he put a flower on his cap; he killed a fly with his cap; he carried a hot pot with his cap to protect his fingers; he put his cap under his head and fell asleep; a fruit-seller at the market tilted a kilo of cherries off the scales into his cap, and when he ate the cherries, the peasant shook his cap and put it back on his head. Do you understand?

SOFIA: The way you speak about it, one could think it would be possible to sail the seas in this tub, and discover America!

YELISAVETA (*from the veranda*): Sofia!

SOFIA: What is it, what's burning?

YELISAVETA: Do you know where the swords are?

SOFIA: How do I know?

VASILYIYE: Aren't they in the wicker suitcase?

YELISAVETA: That's where the wigs are!

(*SIMKA comes out of the house.*)

VASILYIYE (*to SOFIA*): Help her find them. They must be in one of the chests. (*SOFIA goes into the house.*)

SIMKA: You are packing up for the performance?

VASILYIYE: Yes. We've got a free ticket for you.

SIMKA: I have no time for the theatre today. And it's not appropriate. I should be around for Gina. You see what's happened to them?

VASILYIYE: That son of theirs...

SIMKA: Sekula?

VASILYIYE: How old is he?

SIMKA: If he survives this, he'll be nineteen in December.

VASILYIYE: Why do you say if he survives this?

SIMKA: Do you know of anyone, by any chance, who came alive out of those cellars?

VASILYIYE: You reckon they'll shoot him?

SIMKA: They'll shoot him if he is lucky.

VASILYIYE: If he is lucky? And if he isn't?

SIMKA: Have you not seen the trace that Clobber leaves after himself?

SOFIA (*from the veranda*): Vasiliye! They are not in the chests either!

VASILYIYE: Well, where are they then?

YELISAVETA: If you don't find them, tonight you'll have to sword-fight with leeks! And the audience will bombard you with tomatoes!

VASILYIYE: Without me you wouldn't be able to find your own heads!

(*He goes into the house. YELISAVETA and SOFIA withdraw from the veranda.*)

SIMKA (*alone*): I don't know why I had to get myself into all this. (*She goes to the table.*) They are looking for the swords and here they are on the table! (*She wants to call the actors, but from the house on the right there emerges GINA.*)

SIMKA: Have you calmed down a little?

GINA: I'll calm down when I die.

SIMKA: Were you able to at least get some rest after all this.

GINA: To get some rest? With you and your actors around?

SIMKA: I was trying to get them to be as quiet as possible... They're nervous, they're performing tonight.

GINA: I was burning Sekula's papers.

SIMKA: Did you find anything?

GINA: I found this! (*She gives a letter to SIMKA. SIMKA looks at it, goes pale, sits on the threshold, covers her face with her hands. In a moment, FILIP will walk in from the river, and will be following their conversation attentively.*)

GINA: You started that... whilst the late major was alive?

SIMKA: Is that important now?

GINA: And you, the first neighbour, with my son?

SIMKA: Gina, please!

GINA: Do you know how old Sekula is?

SIMKA: I do, you don't have to tell me!

GINA: And how could you be unfaithful to such a man?
SIMKA: Such a man!
GINA: You only lacked the stars off the sky!
SIMKA: I had everything, yes! And everything smelt of the military cloth and boots!
GINA: I'm attacking these theatre whores and...
SIMKA: You have a whore at your doorstep? That's what you wanted to say?
GINA: This between you and Sekula... How did it happen?
SIMKA: It didn't happen... it just flourished!
FILIP (*interjecting dramatically*): Yes, flourished! That's the right word!
Like billions of buds all at the same time!
Dear mother, give a hand to this woman,
the way she took me to her flowering breast!
GINA: When did you manage to take him too?
SIMKA: Him?
GINA: You betray your husband with Sekula, and Sekula with an actor! And who will you betray the actor
with tomorrow?
FILIP: Mother!
GINA: For God's sake, man, what's got into you, leave me alone!
FILIP: Don't be cruel, listen to me, mother!
GINA: I am not your mother!
(*BLAGOYE enters. FILIP runs up to him.*)
FILIP: Come, father, to see, how a mother renounces her only son!
BLAGOYE: Are you crazy to renounce him now, when he is in the worst of troubles?
GINA: Who am I renouncing, what's got into you?
BLAGOYE: You renounce him now when he is in prison!
GINA: I renounce my son?! You are mad!
BLAGOYE: You heard what he says!
GINA: He can say whatever he likes, it's not true!
SIMKA: Like it's not true that I had anything to do with him!
GINA: I wouldn't bet on that!
SIMKA (*to FILIP*): Why are you interfering with my life all day? I haven't given you any reason for it!
FILIP: Where am I?
BLAGOYE: You're asking me?
FILIP: You are not my father Megaron, and this is not my mother Megara?
GINA: Far from it!
FILIP: If you are not my parents, who am I?
BLAGOYE: What is he on about?
FILIP: And who, in that case, are you?
BLAGOYE: Me?
FILIP: You do not have a hunchback?
BLAGOYE: A hunchback? What do I need a hunchback for?
FILIP: And you do not have a scarred face?
BLAGOYE: What?
FILIP: And you do not have a clenched hand and a limping leg?
BLAGOYE: Are you trying to say I'm some kind of a monster?
FILIP: You are not Richard!
BLAGOYE: And who said I was?
FILIP: I do not know any of you here... You are not ugly... and there's no Richard without ugliness! You
haven't a big nose... and there's no Cyrano without a big nose! Who are you? Lear, if you are Lear, where is
your madness? How can I recognize you Fortinbras, if you come without drums and flags? I do not know
where I am... How can I orientate myself? If I could only see a spade or a skull... a bag of coins, or a sword or
helmet... If only you had a fan or a bouquet of flowers in your arms... I do not know who I am, I do not know
what to say! Does this theatre have a prompter? Does this play have a director? Is there a stage manager here?
(*He exits towards the river.*)
GINA: This one really needs a blessing!
(*She goes to the tub and continues washing.*)
BLAGOYE: He must have got drunk on an empty stomach somewhere!
SIMKA: What can he drink when he has nothing to eat?

BLAGOYE: I didn't understand a word of it!

GINA: You think I did?

SIMKA: He is just rambling on about something from some plays! He says the boots should farrow and the rug should bleat...

GINA: His mother's milk will bleat out in him, the idiot!

BLAGOYE: Boots should farrow?

SIMKA: Meaning pig-skin boots.

BLAGOYE: To farrow?

SIMKA: Please don't mock me, I am all confused! Let the actors explain it to you, I can't.

BLAGOYE: Explain what? *(To GINA)* And why did he say you renounced your son?

GINA: Because he is momentarily ill!

BLAGOYE: What did you say he was?

GINA: He calls me his mother, and you his father! When I look at him, crazy as he is, and you drunk as you are, I wouldn't be surprised if it weren't true!

BLAGOYE *(going towards the river)*: Of course, if I'm not drunk, then I'm crazy! And if I'm not crazy, then I'm drunk!

(He notices CLOBBER's traces. Follows them attentively.)

GINA: What are you looking at?

BLAGOYE: Has Clobber been around again?

GINA: Why should he have been around again?

BLAGOYE: There's his trace... If I could only know what he wanted around here!... Have you burnt everything?

GINA: I've burnt it. If only I'd been wise enough not to read what I was burning! Then at least I'd never have got to know...

BLAGOYE: What wouldn't you have got to know?

SIMKA: Gina, I beg you!

BLAGOYE: What are you begging her for?

GINA: Leave that bottle alone for a while, let it rest!

BLAGOYE: I don't drink because I need drink!

GINA: But you drink because you worry for Sekula!

BLAGOYE: Are you trying to say that I am looking for an excuse?

GINA: And what do you all of a sudden need that georgina in your buttonhole for?

BLAGOYE: I put it in to annoy you!

GINA: I'm long past getting annoyed by you! And leave that bottle alone, I say! You only need to get drunk and blurt something out somewhere!

BLAGOYE: Unlike you, I can control myself, and I know what I'm saying!

GINA: Well, if you can control yourself why do you depend on that brandy so much?

(MILUN comes in from the street.)

MILUN: I heard the actors are staying here.

SIMKA: Yes, temporarily.

MILUN: I have an announcement to make for them.

SIMKA: They are inside, packing up for the performance tonight. Shall I call them or do you want to go in?

GINA: Are you the guard in the prison?

MILUN: Why do you ask?

GINA: My son got arrested today.

BLAGOYE: Her son got arrested, and mine didn't!

GINA: His name is Sekula. Sekula Babich.

MILUN: Ah, the assassin!

GINA: He was arrested and he's innocent.

MILUN: I know, only those ever get arrested.

GINA: Could you help me?

MILUN: Will someone call those actors?

SIMKA: Mister Vasiliye!

MILUN: Help you with what?

SIMKA: Mister Vasiliye! I don't know why they can't hear me.

(She goes in.)

GINA: To tell me how he is, to send him my love, to take something in for him.

MILUN: What can I take for him? A file?

GINA: What file, what are you talking about? Something warm, he left in light clothes. So that he is not cold at night until he comes out. And something to eat.

MILUN: He gets prison food.

GINA: You must be a father, yourself. You understand. Blagoje, offer some brandy to the gentleman. May good God help you and your family like you help us.

MILUN: It's not very good this brandy of yours.

GINA: And we wouldn't forget your favour.

MILUN: It's not well fermented.

(VASILIYE and SIMKA come out onto the veranda.)

VASILIYE: You are looking for me, sir?

MILUN: Yeah. Come down 'ere, will ya.

VASILIYE: Is it urgent?

MILUN: Can't be more so!

VASILIYE: I'm just packing up some stuff... I'll be there in a minute!

MILUN: Don't keep me waitin', I've got other things to do.

(VASILIYE and SIMKA go into the house.)

GINA: Can you just take him a blanket and a loaf of bread!

MILUN: It's a risk, you understand, I might end up at the front!

GINA: You won't risk anything! I'll wrap the loaf in the blanket, nobody will see anything!

MILUN: I've had enough of the front, do you know!

GINA: Just to take something warm for him.

BLAGOYE: You'll get a bottle of brandy.

MILUN: Get it together, and we'll see.

GINA: Thank you SO much!

(SIMKA comes back out.)

BLAGOYE: Maybe you could stick something in the oven?

GINA: Stick what in the oven?

BLAGOYE: Whatever... an apple pie!

GINA: And when can I do the pastry? And what with? Ashes? And where do I find the time for a pie? Crazy man!

(She runs into the house.)

BLAGOYE: And bring a bottle for him.

MILUN: You said two!

BLAGOYE: Did I? Bring two!

MILUN: Is he meaning to get down 'ere?

SIMKA: He said he'll be down in a minute... Mr Vasiliye!

VASILIYE *(from the veranda)*: I'm coming, I'm coming!

(Confused like when he left the stage, FILIP comes back. He will be following the dialogue below with increasing interest.)

SIMKA: Do you know what exactly happened this morning?

MILUN: You 'aven't heard?

SIMKA: We have, but everybody tells a different story.

MILUN: The councillor was slaughterin' a calf, be'ind the house. And just as he slaughtered it, skinned it, opened it up, he bent over the intestines, and he comes bang! The councillor couldn't even open 'is mouth! Just fell over into the calf's blood!

BLAGOYE: Some say he was killed in bed.

MILUN: Who says?

SIMKA: And what happened with Andja?

MILUN: Anja Karamarkovich? She was killed afterwards, I'm tellin' ya! She was getting' ready to visit 'er daughter on 'er confinement. And they got in. You could hear 'er screaming from the outside! And the guards then arrested this bandit of theirs.

(FILIP livens up, as if he has got a message. He notices a wooden sword on the table, gets hold of it and leaves the stage in confident stride. How he understood this conversation will be revealed later.)

SIMKA: Sekula?

BLAGOYE: Sekula has nothing to do with that crime.

MILUN: We'll see about that. They're still investigating at the scene. We 'aven't even removed the corpses yet.

(GINA comes back.)

GINA: Here, give him this. And please tell him... What can you tell him? Tell him not to worry! And tell him... tell him he'll soon be out! And to look after himself! And not to be afraid! Tell him we know it's not his fault!

BLAGOYE: It's of great help to him that we know it!

MILUN: What on earth have you packed up 'ere?

GINA: Just the essentials!

MILUN: You said only blanket and loaf!

GINA: And take this for yourself, for a drink!

MILUN: It's dangerous, you understand!

GINA: And don't forget this brandy, it's for you! Smells like ambrosia!

MILUN: You might as well give me a carhorse!

GINA: One more thing, I pray to you, please try to keep him away from Clobber!

MILUN: You'd better not pray even to God for that! They used to give 'im golden watches to stop beating, but the fool doesn't even take notice.

GINA: What can I do?

MILUN: The same as everyone else – nothing!... So where is that Stefan of yours?

BLAGOYE: Which Stefan?

(With suitcases in both hands and under both arms, VASILIIYE comes out of SIMKA's house.)

VASILIIYE: Sorry to keep you waiting, we are late for our performance tonight!

MILUN: You ain't!

VASILIIYE: Of course we are! It's almost five and it's starting at six!

MILUN: It ain't starting at six!

VASILIIYE: It is, that's how we advertised it!

YELISAVETA *(from the veranda)*: Vasiliye, wait! You've forgotten your wig and boots!

VASILIIYE: I haven't got nine arms!

MILUN: It ain't starting at 6, nor at 7, nor at 8! It ain't startin' at all! Do you understand now – Stefan!

VASILIIYE: I am Vasiliye Shopalovich, not Stefan!

MILUN: You always interruptin' me, Stefan!

VASILIIYE: All right, call me as you please, just hurry up! What is the matter?

MILUN: Meitzen says that theatre of yours is banned!

VASILIIYE: Banned?

MILUN: The regional councillor got killed! It's the time for mourning now, not for theatre! You should've thought of it yerself! We can't be thinking on your behalf all the time!

VASILIIYE: But we have the licence! A police official cannot annul the licence issued by the chief commander!

MILUN: Let me 'ave a look at that licence of yours!

(SOFIA comes back in.)

VASILIIYE: Mr Meitzen saw it!

MILUN: Let ME 'ave a look!

YELISAVETA *(from the veranda)*: Why don't you show him, he won't eat you up!

VASILIIYE: There... In German and in Serbian!

MILUN: I can see!... Which is in Serbian?

VASILIIYE: On the right in cyrillics!... There's the signatures and the stamps, all that's necessary!

(MILUN folds the licence up neatly, slowly tears it up in small pieces, which he puts into his mouth and swallows up.)

VASILIIYE: What have you done?

MILUN: What 'ave I done?

VASILIIYE: You've torn up my licence!

MILUN: What licence?

VASILIIYE: Why are you playing a fool, what do you mean 'what licence'? The theatre licence, which I've just given you in front of all these people!

MILUN: You gave me it?

VASILIIYE: Yes, and you tore it up and ate it!

MILUN: Me? What're you on about? Have ya got a proof?

VASILIIYE: You've eaten up the proof, but I've got witnesses here!

MILUN: Have you seen 'im giving me some licence?

GINA: We haven't!

MILUN: Has there been any licence 'ere at all?

GINA: There hasn't!
MILUN (to *BLAGOYE*): Have you seen me tearing up some licence 'ere?
GINA: He hasn't!
MILUN: And that I ate it after I tore it up?
GINA: He hasn't seen any licence, nothing at all!
YELISAVETA (from the veranda): Why don't you let him speak for himself?
GINA: I'm not holding his mouth! Come on, say for yourself that you haven't seen anything!
BLAGOYE: I haven't...
GINA: Happy now?
YELISAVETA: Shame on you!
MILUN: And now listen to me! I want you out of here by tomorrow, you understand!
VASILIYE: Where can I go?
MILUN: I don't care! You're free to go wherever you want! Go wherever your eyes and legs can take you! While you still 'ave eyes and legs! And don't let me find you 'ere again tomorrow! And remember: if I take you in once again, there's no going out! And you won't be eating paper, but stone! And don't let Clobber decorate the gallows with you... Stefan!
(*HE leaves. GINA, not without a certain discomfort, goes over to her tub, and starts washing mechanically. BLAGOYE is confused and ashamed.*)
SOFIA (to *VASILIYE*): Is that those people of ours you're talking about?
YELISAVETA (to *BLAGOYE*): Do you still feel like a room?
BLAGOYE: Who, what?
YELISAVETA: Like a room somebody's just thrown the violets out of!

Blackout

Scene Six

Clobber's Traces

The courtyard on the same evening. The full moon.

GINA: No I don't feel guilty! Not a bit! A mother would give false statement even against her own father for the sake of her son!
TOMANIYA: Sometimes, the most holy thing such as mother's love, can be the most evil thing!
GINA: When my son's concerned, not only will I lie, but I'll kill if necessary!
DARA: Show us where you've seen his traces!
GINA: I haven't seen them, Blagoye has! There they are, coming to here! And from here they continue... going up along the river!
DARA: That they've got Clobber to spy on anyone, that I cannot believe! That would be too complicated for his brain!
TOMANIYA: Why is he hanging around here then?
DARA: That's what I'm wondering about!
GINA: I'm happier when I know he's here.
TOMANIYA: Why happier?
GINA: At least I know, whilst he is here, he's not in the prison! So my Sekula can take a break from his whip!
DARA: To tell you the truth, that's what really worries me!
GINA: Why?
DARA: You know that it is impossible to separate Clobber from his victim when he lays his hands on it.
TOMANIYA: Nothing can lure him away.
GINA: What could have lured him away from Sekula then?
DARA: We have to face the truth eye to eye! The fact that Clobber is not in prison at the moment, and that he is roving around here, can mean only two things: that the torture has finished because Sekula gave in and died...
GINA: Shut up!
DARA: ...or even worse, that he has given everything away, and they don't have anything to pull out of him anymore!

GINA: It's worse for you that he gave everything away than that he died.

DARA: If he died, at least he's died like a hero, for a holy thing! And at least he's died in an honourable way! And if he gave in, he's lost his honour, and the worst torture is yet to come! And it means that the whole organization is in danger! And that's why we need to find out as soon as possible what's going on, so that we take the right measures in time! If it's not too late already!

GINA: You have no feeling at all!

DARA: Emotions will get us nowhere!

(BLAGOYE enters.)

TOMANIYA: What do you think we should do now?

DARA: First we need to follow the trace, see where it's going!

BLAGOYE: It's going up along the river.

DARA: I know, I've seen it! Maybe it'll get us somewhere! Do you have some weapon?

BLAGOYE: Nothing apart from this razor!

GINA: And a bottle in his pocket! And this georgina in his buttonhole!

BLAGOYE: This bottle is the proof!

GINA: The proof of what?

BLAGOYE: That you've made a rag out of me!

GINA: I can't make of you what you are already!

BLAGOYE: And this georgina – you haven't asked me about it! It means that I don't want to be a rag any longer!

GINA: But a vase!

BLAGOYE: I'll get rid of the bottle and of you!

GINA: You may and can get rid of me – and please God, that you do – but you can never get rid of that bottle, not in a hundred years!

BLAGOYE: I can't? See how I can! *(He flings the bottle into the river.)* Have you seen how I can't? Have you heard how it splashed in! Now it's floating down to the Morava, and from the Morava into the Danube, and from the Danube into the Black Sea, and from the Black Sea into Nowhere! I've finished with alcohol. For ever and ever!

GINA: For ever and ever, until the first opportunity!

BLAGOYE: You kept my spirit bottled up in that bottle!

GINA: And then came an actress, a little fairy, and opened the bottle!

BLAGOYE: Opened it and set me free!

GINA: The great liberator! She wouldn't even mind Clobber stuffing her closed.

BLAGOYE: Just you keep on clucking! Your clucking doesn't get to her!

GINA: I know it doesn't, she is too far up above! Can't be taken down only by those who don't want to!

BLAGOYE: Blagoye learnt to tell silk from sackcloth!

GINA: I'll ask you what you can tell when you sober up!

BLAGOYE: I am totally sober! As sober as a star!

GINA: I can see!

BLAGOYE: You can let me into an ocean of brandy! I wouldn't even so much as sniff it!

GINA: I know how you wouldn't!

BLAGOYE: Never again!

GINA: You'll be swimming after that bottle, both crawl and butterfly!

BLAGOYE: You won't live to see that!

GINA: A rag remains a rag! You are nothing more than a simple rag thirsty for brandy! And that flower of an actress of yours! She can put you on! Put you on her open wounds! Like a compress!

DARA: How long do you mean to go on arguing? Until Clobber runs away?

GINA: Male middle age crisis is much worse than female!

DARA: Leave your arguing for later! We'll go slowly, we can't be careful enough with Clobber! Who knows what we might come across! And you Gina, you'll wait for us here!

GINA: You can give commands to someone else, not me! It's my child that's concerned here!

TOMANIYA: There are some things that are above that!

GINA: Not for me!

DARA: OK, then, when you insist so much! But let me tell you that I won't allow anyone's emotions to get in the way of our action, yours included!

(They go towards the river. VASILIYE and YELISAVETA appear from the house.)

YELISAVETA: The witch never stops arguing! How does she never get tired!

VASILIYE: You'd better mind your own business!

YELISAVETA: What do you think about these blood traces?
VASILIYE: I tell you, you'd better mind your own business!
YELISAVETA: May I ask where do you think we'll go tomorrow?
VASILIYE: You may.
YELISAVETA: Well... what do you think?
VASILIYE: Nothing. Without the licence we can go nowhere.
YELISAVETA: That licence is required only in Serbia.
VASILIYE: So what?
YELISAVETA: We could go over to Bosnia. To play in Vishegrad and Gorazhde...
VASILIYE: It's more difficult now for a Serb in Bosnia, than for a snake in a cleft!
YELISAVETA: And you think it's easier here?
VASILIYE: The Drina separates and divides us! And the Sava divides us! I'm only afraid that the time will come when the Ibar and the Morava will be dividing us!
YELISAVETA: The way we are, we can even be divided by the Deaf Stream!... And as for money, I'd better not ask, I bet we've none?
VASILIYE: You know that we don't have any. The last money we had we gave for venue hire!
YELISAVETA: The innkeeper didn't want to give you anything back?
VASILIYE: He didn't even give me a chance to ask him! I could hardly recover the props... And we won't have anything to give Simka for the rent!
YELISAVETA: Well, we can't kill ourselves if we don't have anything! I'll give her one of my dresses from "The Cherry Orchard". We are not playing the Russian plays anyway.
VASILIYE (*acting*): "I love life in general, but this life of ours, provincial, Russian life - I hate and detest from the bottom of my heart"... I played Astrov in "Uncle Vanya".
YELISAVETA: I played in "The Three Sisters", the part of Kuligin, Masha's husband.
VASILIYE: In Shakespeare, the tempest rages, battles are fought, blood trickles from one wheel to another, the machines operated by blood are fuming, all the cog-wheels of the heaven and earth are screeching and revolving, the planets, heads and crowns are rolling! In Chekhov, people are tired of all that. They've gathered together after all the lost battles in some autumnal den, sheltered from the winds, they are keeping warm in the cold sun, biting, yawning and dying...
YELISAVETA: What time could it be?
VASILIYE: I don't know, I paid for our accommodation in Pozhega with my watch.
YELISAVETA: That pumpkin today run me through so much that I am now more hungry than I would've been had I not eaten at all.
(*SIMKA comes in from the left.*)
SIMKA: You are taking a rest in the moonshine?
VASILIYE: We're packing up so we thought we'd take a break for a while.
SIMKA: Such a nice night, peaceful. As if it wasn't wartime... Do you know where you are going tomorrow?
VASILIYE: We don't know yet. But I think it would be better to leave even tonight!
SIMKA: Why tonight?
VASILIYE: I'd better be open with you... You saw that our show was cancelled. We gave our last penny for venue hire.
SIMKA: So you won't have the money to pay me for the rent?
VASILIYE: That's what I was about to say. So it's best to leave straightaway.
SIMKA: We won't make problems about the rent! Stay the night and don't think about the rent! And anyway, you shouldn't be going anywhere during the curfew! I only need to have you on my conscience! There's no one around at Gina's?
YELISAVETA: No. They went to the river, following the blood trace.
SIMKA: I don't know what Clobber is looking for around here! I don't dare go out of the house during the day, let alone at night!
(*She goes in.*)
YELISAVETA: And I thought she'd dig our eyes out for the money!
VASILIYE: There, at least we've solved one problem! But our situation is so bad that even that doesn't change it much for the better. Do you know where Filip is?
YELISAVETA: How do I know! Sometimes I envy him for that madness of his! Who knows how far he is from all this!
VASILIYE: And Sofia? I hope she hasn't gone swimming again?
YELISAVETA: I'm afraid she has. She's put her swimming costume on!
VASILIYE: Let's hope she is not crazy enough to go too far! Shall we continue with the packing?

YELISAVETA: Not only do I have to play male parts but, it seems, I'll have to do male jobs too!

VASILIIYE: I don't know what I'd do without you!

YELISAVETA: What would you do, you'd pine to death after me like after a spring snow!

VASILIIYE: We'll be finished soon.

YELISAVETA: If I could only sit in this moonlight and think of nothing on earth at all! If there could be no yesterday, no tomorrow, no people, no words, nothing!... When I look at the stars like this, it seems like this world is only a threshold!...

VASILIIYE: It's not a threshold, it's just a bottle! And we are all bottled up in it! And the Moon up there, is the cork!

YELISAVETA: Whether or not we are bottled up, we need to move on tomorrow! We need to move on, and we don't know where! We've only just unpacked, and now we have to pack up again!

(They go in.)

Blackout

Interlude

(FILIP appears on the dark stage with a sword in his hand.)

FILIP: I will rise, having been
trampled on, tortured, destroyed,
I will rise against big armies
with as much as a wooden sword!

To the oppressed children,
to mothers distraught,
I will bring freedom
on the wooden sword!

I will conquer England,
Europe and of course,
with a wooden sword,
on a wooden horse!

I'll show the world
the black iron stump:
with a wooden sword
cut the anvil up!

In the darkened countries,
barking and immured,
I will kill a dragon
with the wooden sword!

Flying on a cloud,
red-hot and abhorred
to impale the dragon
with a wooden sword!

Upon my descent
to the shadowed world,
I will win a princess
with a wooden sword!

Carried by the screams,
growling overawed

I fly into fire
with a wooden sword!

(He runs off the stage.)

Blackout

Scene Seven

The Vid's Flower – Scarlet Pimpernel
or
The Cutting of Sofia's Hair

The river bank. Moonlight. Humid summer's evening, full of flowers, crickets and fireflies. SOFIA is drying her hair after a swim. In the dark, on the right, at first invisible to the audience, there stands CLOBBER. He is staring at SOFIA motionless. It is not clear whether he is prying on her or whether he is possessed by the sight of her. SOFIA feels his glance, turns towards him, notices him and lets out a scream. CLOBBER approaches her slowly.

SOFIA: How you frightened me!

CLOBBER: Ya swim at night too?

SOFIA: Who are you?

CLOBBER: Yer not afraid?

SOFIA: What should I be afraid of?

CLOBBER: 'oo knows 'oo can come out a this darkness.

SOFIA: So what if they do? You didn't tell me who you were?

CLOBBER: 'e may be able t' slit someone's throat. T' kill. 'e could... 'e could throw 'imself on someone...
Ya understand? Ya don't understand!

SOFIA: How can you even think of such horrors! Where do you get such ideas from?

CLOBBER: Then screaming wouldn't 'elp ya much around 'ere.

SOFIA: I don't see why I should need to scream!

CLOBBER: And even if someone 'eard ya, they wouldn't dare come!

SOFIA: Well, I hope you'd come to my rescue then!

CLOBBER: Me?

SOFIA: Wouldn't you?

CLOBBER: Would... We would...

SOFIA: There you are! So why should I be afraid?

CLOBBER: And yer not afraid of me?

SOFIA: Why should I be, you don't have horns! I only jumped up because I hadn't heard you!

CLOBBER: Them are calf's skin shoes. No one 'ears you when you walk in them shoes.

SOFIA: You still haven't told me what your name is.

CLOBBER: Our name is... Clobber.

SOFIA: Is that your name or surname?

CLOBBER: That's my everything. Both name and surname. Ya 'aven't 'eard of me?

SOFIA: Oh God, what a nice smell!

CLOBBER: That's savory. It's good for rheumatism.

SOFIA: And this?

CLOBBER: Verbena. Verbena's a holy remedy against sciatica! And that, that's sage, for the 'flu.

SOFIA: I know this one, this is mint!

CLOBBER: Mint's good for great sadness.

SOFIA: What is great sadness?

CLOBBER: That's... when yer... can't breathe!

SOFIA: And this?

CLOBBER: That's heliotrope – against cramps. *(SOFIA shrieks.)* Whass up?

SOFIA: I've burnt myself!

CLOBBER: Ya should look where yer goin'.

SOFIA: Damned nettles!

CLOBBER: It's not nettles' fault yer goin' 'round barefoot!
SOFIA: It really stings, the evil thing!
CLOBBER: Why yer scolding the herb. It's not its fault that it stung you. Ya should know that the nettle's good for something too. They can heal the inflammation of the guts. And they can help with consumption.
SOFIA: Nettles, really? I've heard you can cook them and eat them, but that they can heal...
CLOBBER: Even the worst plant has its uses.
SOFIA: Even the weeds?
CLOBBER: The weeds are good for kidneys!
SOFIA: And do you know what this is?
CLOBBER: That's lion's foot.
SOFIA: How can you recognize them and tell them apart in the dark?
CLOBBER: By their smell!
SOFIA: Not all of them smell.
CLOBBER: It only seems so to you. And it's clear enough, look at the moonlight!
SOFIA: And you know the name of each of these plants?
CLOBBER: I hope so.
SOFIA: You must be a herbalist!
CLOBBER: Herbalist?
SOFIA: You must be healing the sick with your herbs!
CLOBBER: Me?
SOFIA: Someone has a headache and you give him the mustard seed, the camomile flower, some thyme! They suffer from epilepsy you give them a leaf of St John's Wort, the root of peony! If they have blood problems - you give them violet's root, or sage-leaf. And you put plantain leaves onto wounds and ulcers, don't you?
CLOBBER: Plantain leaves?
SOFIA: For jaundice, you pick horse's tail and immortelle! To those with loose bowls - you offer wild flowers, ginger-root and walnut's leaf! Blue ones, purple ones, white, red, golden, striped... all summer and winter you gather flowers in the mountains... Some of them you dry in the sun, some in the draft and some in the moonlight... And everybody gets better from your remedies!
CLOBBER: I am not a herbalist!
SOFIA: How do you know all the names then?
CLOBBER: And how do you know?
SOFIA: And how do you know what heals which ailments? Where have you learnt all that?
CLOBBER: Every child from my village knows it!
SOFIA: And have you ever baked pumpkins in that village of yours?
CLOBBER: Pumpkins? Of course. When we minded the goats. And we also baked corn on the cob. We smoked the silk, and baked the corn. And we also made lanterns out of pumpkins!
SOFIA: Out of pumpkins?
CLOBBER: You cut off the top of the pumpkin. Take out all the seeds from the inside, clear everything out. Then you make various holes on the pumpkin. Like eyes and a mouth. Or like different patterns. Then you put a candle inside. And light it. And then you put the top back on. And the candlelight comes out through the holes!
SOFIA: That must be very beautiful!
CLOBBER: Sometimes we had five or six of those pumpkins lit like that.
SOFIA: You talk nicely. I could listen to you for hours!
CLOBBER: Who me?
SOFIA: And can you guess which is this flower?
CLOBBER: That blue one? Mouse-droppings!
SOFIA: Scarlet Pimpernel. We call it the vid's flower. It heals sight.
CLOBBER: This morning my sight came back without it. I wish it never did!
SOFIA: Your sight?
CLOBBER: When I saw you this morning... When that hair of yours brushed me...
SOFIA: It was you I bumped into on my way back?
CLOBBER: As if you took blood off my eyes!
SOFIA: I did? Oh, really, you don't say! And now you see, of course, your eyes opened up! So tell me, what do you see!
CLOBBER: I see...
SOFIA: Fire away!

CLOBBER: I see your beauty!
SOFIA: Oh, listen to him! And of course, nothing else apart from my beauty?
CLOBBER: I do... I see my ugliness!
SOFIA: Ugliness? Why ugliness?
CLOBBER: You don't know how I earn my living!
SOFIA: How? With a hammer? With a mattock? With needle and thread? With a rolling pin?
CLOBBER (*shows the whip*): With this!
SOFIA: You are a coachman?
CLOBBER: A torturer?
SOFIA: What?
CLOBBER: A torturer... I beat people... I tie 'em up and flog 'em... Ya understand? Ya don't understand!
SOFIA: You're lying!
CLOBBER: I wish I was.
SOFIA: You are only trying to frighten me!
CLOBBER: If I'm lying, see for yourself, the hands are not lying! The water won't wash it off, the gas won't, alcohol won't.
SOFIA: Unbelievable!
CLOBBER: Look at the trace I leave behind me...
SOFIA: Don't come near me!
CLOBBER: Now yer afraid a me.
SOFIA: I'm not... I am!
CLOBBER: I'm more afraid a you, then you a me...
SOFIA: Couldn't you do anything else?
CLOBBER: What else?
SOFIA: Whatever else... You could've been collecting herbs, to have everything around you smell nice!... You could've been digging graves, cleaning stables, pounding rock! Even the worst jobs... everything's better than that!
CLOBBER: I could've worked the land, could've been making sheep-skin rugs... Could've been dying wool and making thread... Could've learnt the locksmith's trade... Could've been making pots, baking bread...
SOFIA: Well why didn't you?
CLOBBER: I could've, almost, I fell short of it...
SOFIA: And how short of it did you fall, what prevented you?
CLOBBER: When you don't know on time how short that short is, that short is both long and big! Now it's too late to talk about it!
SOFIA: It's never too late!
CLOBBER: Even if I had a thousand mouths, it wouldn't be no use talking! It'll stay in me till it kills me!
SOFIA: So why don't you give it all up now?
CLOBBER: A snake cannot go back to its egg... nor a louse back to the nit it once was!
SOFIA: You should run away as soon as possible!
CLOBBER: From what?
SOFIA: From everything! First of all, from that whip!
CLOBBER: I can't even run away from my own trace! And where could I go, anyway...
SOFIA: There must be some place for you too...
CLOBBER: What place? A bug's nest? A wasps' nest? A snakes' nest? A cockroaches' nest?
SOFIA: For God's sake!... well you are a human too!
CLOBBER: What kind of a human? Human, and I envy a louse on being a louse! Is that being human?
SOFIA: If you want to be human get rid of that whip! Throw it into the river, what are you waiting for?
CLOBBER: I can't!
SOFIA: You can't, or you don't dare, or you don't want to?
CLOBBER: This whip and I are like married together, both before people and before God! It wouldn't help even if I cut my hand off, I couldn't separate from it!
SOFIA: What darkness, my God!
CLOBBER: Outside moonlight, and inside darkness and stench. And I have to go on roving through that darkness and stench...
SOFIA: How long for?
CLOBBER: Who knows how long for.
SOFIA: Wait!... Take this vid's flower! It may light up your...
CLOBBER: What?

SOFIA: Maybe it'll take you out of..

CLOBBER: Where?

SOFIA: Out of that darkness! And take you...

CLOBBER: Where?

SOFIA: I don't know!

(CLOBBER, carrying the plant and the whip, goes to the left towards the water. From the right, enter DARA, TOMANIYA, GINA and BLAGOYE.)

DARA: What is it, our little primadonna, your beloved's walked out on you?

SOFIA: What beloved?

TOMANIYA: Have you come down to that torturer?

SOFIA: Who?

GINA: She doesn't know who! The torturer who is killing my son!

SOFIA: What are you talking about?

TOMANIYA: Is that why God gave you such beauty?

DARA: Don't you mind his blood-stained hands?

GINA *(to BLAGOYE)*: Clobber's hands have creased up your silk!

DARA: You are cavorting here with that bloody criminal!

SOFIA: What are you talking about? Are you not ashamed?

DARA: In front of who should I be ashamed? In front of a shameless creature like you?

GINA *(to BLAGOYE)*: There's your liberator!

TOMANIYA: She's decorated him with scarlet pimperl!

GINA *(to BLAGOYE)*: Look how high she's climbed!

DARA: It must've been great love! Look how much grass and flowers they've gone through!

BLAGOYE: You whore!

SOFIA: Let go of me!

GINA: What's up with you all of a sudden?

BLAGOYE: My eyes clouded up!

TOMANIYA: You've found who you'll decorate with flowers! A sodomite!

BLAGOYE: That's who you've been bathing for so much!

SOFIA: It hurts!

BLAGOYE: Is that whom you've put your make up on for!

GINA: A whore, she even puts the rouge on her nipples!

SOFIA: Have you gone mad, it hurts!

DARA: You should be sent to Siberia!

SOFIA: What are you doing, let me go, it hurts!

DARA: We know what we do with German whores! BlagoYe, cut!

SOFIA: It hurts, do you hear!

BLAGOYE: Of course it hurts! And now you'll see how much more it can hurt!

SOFIA: Let go of my hair!

BLAGOYE: No use trying to get away!

SOFIA: Let go of me, I'll scream! It hurts!

GINA: Just you scream! Your Clobber will come on a white broomstick!

TOMANIYA: She's biting, a whore!

BLAGOYE: Get hold of her, tight! Get hold of her hands!

DARA: I can't, she's fighting!

BLAGOYE: Then hit her!

TOMANIYA: She's fighting like a wild animal!

BLAGOYE: Let her go!... Now she can fly if she wants to!

(They withdraw from SOFIA. With all her hair cut off, she kneels centre-stage. Everybody is speechlessly staring at her for a moment.)

GINA: What have we done?

DARA: She should remember how the people's court judges!

GINA: Which people?

DARA: She can thank God that this time it's gone without tar.

TOMANIYA: And feathers!

GINA: God, what's remained from all that beauty!

BLAGOYE: There, take a georgina, decorate yourself!

TOMANIYA: Do you know how much you'll save up on combs, pins, rollers? No hair-washing, rolling, time-wasting!
GINA: Do we have to tease her on top of everything?
BLAGOYE: And why, are you trying to defend her? The torturer's bitch!
GINA: And what do you all of a sudden have against her?
BLAGOYE: She gives herself to bloody Clobber!
GINA: And you think you are much better than him? He would do this same thing the same way!
DARA: We are wasting our time here and Clobber's slipped away!
BLAGOYE: I'll find him by his trace, he won't escape!
TOMANIYA: Dara!
DARA: What is it?
TOMANIYA: Up to here, up to her, he's left a blood trace... and from her, look...
DARA: No trace!
TOMANIYA: As if he flew away!
DARA: I hope he's not turned into an angel!
GINA: That raven?
DARA: BlagoYE, look around!
(BLAGOYE is looking for the trace.)
TOMANIYA: BlagoYE, stop!
BLAGOYE: What is it?
TOMANIYA: Take a step!... And another!... Oh, God!... Take another step!...
BLAGOYE: What's the matter?
TOMANIYA: Gina, look!
GINA: Poor BlagoYE!
BLAGOYE: What is it?
DARA: You are leaving a blood trace behind you!

Blackout

Scene Eight

The Continuation of Scene Seven

The same place, some minutes later. Suddenly it's got dark, the moonlight's disappeared. The wind is blowing. Everyone has left the stage apart from SOFIA. She is on her own, her hair cut, confused, sobbing, she is wandering about the river bank. Out of the darkness and wind, there comes FILIP, excited, he comes out in front of her, holding the wooden sword. He blocks her path. She doesn't recognize him. She's trying to run away.

FILIP: Stop, you poor thing! Don't be afraid of me!
SOFIA: Oh God! Please don't kill me!
FILIP: I'll kill some others who are more hateful to me than you!
SOFIA: Leave me alone! Don't touch me!
FILIP: There's no one else whom I can touch with more right than you!
(SOFIA manages to free herself and runs away, FILIP is left confused. The wind blows more strongly.)

Blackout

Scene Nine

The Removal of Corpses

Late at night. The corner of two streets. The CHEMIST'S, THE "LUXOR" CINEMA and the BOOKSHOP can be seen. Citizens stand in front of the house of the regional councillor, waiting for the public removal of corpses. The wind from scene eight is still blowing.

THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Did they kill them here at home?
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: They did!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: In bed!
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: I'm surprised Domazet didn't shoot!
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: What can a naked man shoot with?
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: Don't tell me you don't know!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: We won't see anything, your hat's in the way!
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: We are not in the theatre!
 TOMANIYA: Domazet wasn't killed in the house but outside the house! Whilst he was slaughtering a calf!
 And Andja was killed later, inside!
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: Whilst she was getting ready to visit her daughter who was in her
 confinement!
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Who are you talking about?
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: About Andja.
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Karamarkovich?
 TOMANIYA: The bitch got what she deserved!
(YELISAVETA approaches, she is anxious.)
 YELISAVETA: What's going on here?
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: Nothing, the devil came for his dues!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: We are waiting for them to bring out the corpses!
 YELISAVETA: Did it happen here?
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: It did!
 YELISAVETA: Does anyone know who killed them?
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: They say he fired straight from the door!
 YELISAVETA: Who?
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: Out of a pistol!
 TOMANIYA: Not a pistol, a machine gun! The plaster fell off half of the walls from all the bullets. A pistol
 cannot do that!
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: They've arrested a young man!
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: What do they say, when do we get the ration cards?
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: For what?
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: For soap.
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: Someone said tomorrow!
 YELISAVETA: Who is in there now?
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Meitzen, with a team!
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: They are carrying an investigation out!
 TOMANIYA: The investigation was carried out this afternoon, now they are taking them to the morgue!
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: What took them so long?
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: You tell me!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: Will you take the hat off, I can't see anything!
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: I'd take it off, but I'm prone to getting a cold!
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Have you read this morning's papers by any chance?
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: No, why?
 THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: There they are, coming out!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: Are they bringing them out?
 THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: They are! On two stretchers!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: I can't see anything from here!
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: We should've tried to get a better place!
 THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: I can't watch this!
 TOMANIYA: Why did you come then?
 THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: "And when the day of reckoning comes, justice will be seen!"
*(Some guards are bringing out the stretchers with covered up corpses. MEITZEN follows. The stretchers are
 lowered down on the ground. Out of darkness, FILIP steps out with a wooden sword.)*
 FILIP: Look at this deed, all this blood,
 look at the two corpses on the ground!
 My good right hand has done the deed!
 To avenge my heart for all my suffering!

(General commotion and surprise. Everything that is said until the end of this scene is said simultaneously, with great panic and excitement.)

MEITZEN: Guards!

YELISAVEATA: Filip!

MAYZEN: Don't let him escape!

THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Is that the killer?

THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: May his hand be blessed by God!

THE FOURTH FEMALE CITIZEN: That's why the innocent lose their lives!

THE THIRD FEMALE CITIZEN: I can't see anything from this hat!

THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Is that the actor?

THE SECOND FEMALE CITIZEN: Mind, they'll shoot!

THE FIRST FEMALE CITIZEN: Why doesn't he run away, the fool!

(The guards shoot. FILIP falls dead to the ground.)

Blackout

Scene Ten

The Departure of the Actors

A road outside town. On the empty stage to the left a signpost can be seen: Kosjerić 22km, Požega 21km, Valjevo 69km. Early afternoon. The ACTORS have stopped to take a break. They have a lot of luggage: chests, leather-, canvas- and wicker-suitcases. SOFIA, who is wearing a wig, is shaking sand out of her shoes. VASILIIYE wipes his forehead and lights a cigarette. YELISAVETA is stiff sitting on a suitcase, staring at some non-existent spot.

YELISAVETA: It wasn't for no reason that I was so anxious, then! We are packing up, and I am totally seized by some alarm, something's urging me to go out onto the street! As if someone took me by the hand and to that house!

VASILIIYE: Stop going on about it all the time!

YELISAVETA: I cannot understand any of it! Filip, totally confused, totally possessed coming out like that! And killing a man, so cold-bloodedly! And then going into the house and killing a woman! And then admitting to it all, publicly, like that! I still can't believe it... as if I dreamed it all!

SOFIA: Had I not thought of Filip last night, I might have lost my head, let alone my hair!

VASILIIYE: Why Filip?

SOFIA: Well, not Filip, but that acting of his! When that torturer turned up, I almost died! If I'd tried to run away, he would've caught me! If I'd tried to shout for help, who would've heard me? If I'd tried to defend myself - how can you defend yourself from a lunatic? And by some stroke of luck, it occurred to me to start chatting him up!

VASILIIYE: How?

SOFIA: I remembered the part of the herbalist from "The Exiled King". I was in that play last autumn. And I talked about herbs, all I could remember of her lines! I acted as if my life depended on it! In the end, I was even sorry for him.

VASILIIYE: Who?

SOFIA: That torturer.

YELISAVETA: Maybe it was all calculated!

SOFIA: What was calculated?

YELISAVETA: The whole thing with Filip.

VASILIIYE: All the time, one and the same story!

YELISAVETA: It's bugging me. Maybe he had a double mask! The mask of an actor, first! And then underneath, the mask of a lunatic! And what was under the mask of the lunatic?

SOFIA: And what do you think there could've been?

YELISAVETA: He could've been a Party-member!

VASILIIYE: That muddle-head?

YELISAVETA: As a member of a travelling theatre, and as a lunatic and a muddle-head, he could have moved freely through the whole of Serbia, and nobody could have grown suspicious of him!

SOFIA: You think he used us only as a screen?

VASILYIYE: What screen, what for?

SOFIA: What for!?

YELISAVETA: I only remember him standing by those corpses and saying that was his vengeance for his suffering!

VASILYIYE: What suffering?

YELISAVETA: You ask too much!

SOFIA: In fact, he said in advance that he was going to kill them! Only I didn't pay much attention to it!

VASILYIYE (*with growing interest*): When did he say it?

SOFIA: Last night when those brutes cut my hair off! I was on my own, somebody came to me, and I was so frightened and confused, I didn't recognize him, I thought it was someone who wanted to kill me... And I could hardly hear what he was saying, the wind swept away half of his words. But I think he said: "I'll kill those who are more hateful to me than you!" Something like that!

VASILYIYE (*very interested*): That was after they cut your hair off?

SOFIA: Yes, why?

VASILYIYE (*for himself, as if remembering*): "My wounded heart and my bare head..."

YELISAVETA: What did you say?

VASILYIYE: "And I cut my hair off my head with a dagger..."

SOFIA: What are you saying?

VASILYIYE: When Filip turned up in front of you, did he say by any chance: "Stop, don't be afraid of me"?

SOFIA: Yes, how do you know?

VASILYIYE: And when they brought out the corpses and when Filip saw them, did he say:

"Look at this deed, all this blood,
look at the two corpses on the ground..."

YELISAVETA: "My good right hand has done the deed,
to avenge my heart from its suffering!"

SOFIA: Are you trying to say?... That means...

VASILYIYE: Of course it does! When he met you your hair had been cut off! He thought you were Electra! He told you what Orestes tells Electra after she has her hair cut! And when he saw the corpses, he saw the corpses of Aeghistus and Clytemnestra!

YELISAVETA: You are not trying to say that he thought all of it was theatre?

VASILYIYE: Filip wasn't admitting to the policemen that he had killed that councillor and his mistress – he probably never even heard of them! – it was Orestes announcing to the citizens of Argos that he had killed his mother and Aeghistus!

YELISAVETA: Could it be possible?

SOFIA: But why did he think of Electra?

VASILYIYE: All that happened resembled the scenes from "Electra"! That councillor was killed while he was slaughtering a calf, like Aeghistus! And Clytemnestra was lured into her death by being invited to her daughter's who was in her confinement! And you came out in front of him with your hair cut off! And even the display of the corpses – it's all like in the play!... Bit by bit... the story of Orestes unfolded around him like a net!

YELISAVETA: He was then killed by the theatre?

VASILYIYE: Which has then saved the real murderer!

YELISAVETA: And what we thought was the mask, was in fact the real face!

VASILYIYE: Which mask do you mean, the mask of the actor or the mask of the lunatic?

YELISAVETA: I mean the mask of the lunatic actor!

SOFIA: Something else's just occurred to me... Maybe Filip sacrificed himself for that Sekula?

VASILYIYE: Why should he want to save Sekula? Whatever is Sekula to him?

SOFIA (*acting*): "And whatever is Hecuba to him and he to Hecuba?"

YELISAVETA: Had there been some policeman around there with the minimum of theatrical education, all this would never have happened!

SOFIA: Whatever happened, Filip was, above all, an actor!

VASILYIYE: Whatever happened, he is now a corpse!

SOFIA: Filip raised his wooden sword a bit too high!

VASILYIYE: It's more like life has used Filip and played with him! And he... He neither knew which part he was playing, nor why, nor in which play!

(*From the right, almost running on, there comes SIMKA. She is wearing a white muslin dress with a red waistband. She has a daisy in her hair.*)

SIMKA: I never thought I would catch up with you!

VASILYIYE: What are you doing here?
SIMKA: They released Sekula this morning from the prison!
YELISAVETA: That's why we put on a white dress!
SIMKA: He was released on the basis of Mr Filip's testimony last night... Gina also wanted to come with me, to say thank you, but she had a lot of washing to do!
YELISAVETA: She will be buried in that tub!
SIMKA: The real reason is - she wants to hide her shame!
YELISAVETA: Gina and shame!
VASILIYIYE: Why shame?
SIMKA: Why – because of everything! Sofia saved her Sekula from torture...
SOFIA: I saved him?
SIMKA: Clobber was following you like under a spell, he didn't even touch Sekula! And the late Filip saved him from the death penalty!
YELISAVETA: Filip freed him with a wooden sword!
SINKA: And there you see how we rewarded you for everything! In fact we are all guilty of our behaviour towards you! Me especially!
VASILIYIYE: Why you?
SIMKA: Had I not kept you to stay overnight... had I let you go...
SOFIA: Filip wouldn't have lost his head, and I wouldn't have lost my hair!
YELISAVETA: Everything that ever was, however it was, it could have been much better, but also much worse than it was!
SIMKA: I'm afraid you'll never be able to forgive us!
VASILIYIYE: We have nothing to forgive you for! Everything that happened was part of our job and our fate!
SOFIA: I could forgive everyone apart from Blagoye!
SIMKA: Blagoye started drinking again, hell ruin himself!... (To SOFIA) Have they not cut your hair?
YELISAVETA: They have, this is a wig!
SIMKA: It's even prettier than real hair!
SOFIA: Oh, thank you very much!
SIMKA: When they released Sekula this morning, they gave him this envelope to hand over to you! They found it in Filip's pocket...
SOFIA: What is it? A letter?
VASILIYIYE: It looks like Filip has left a will!
YELISAVETA: A will?
SOFIA: What could he have written in a will?
VASILIYIYE (*reading*): "When I die, whether of natural or incurred causes, if any money is found in my pockets, I leave it to the actors to have a drink for the peace of my soul."
YELISAVETA: Was there any?
SIMKA: Nothing. Just some copper.
VASILIYIYE: "Personal belongings and the estate I have none, apart from this sinful body, which did not belong to me anyway, and which will be returned to the mother earth: ashes to ashes! I ask only one thing - that my head does not meet its final destination together with my body...."
YELISAVETA: Whatever does that mean?
VASILIYIYE: "... and that my skull is given to some theatre troupe, as a prop."
SOFIA: As a prop?
VASILIYIYE: "Whenever a gravedigger, singing and digging, digs it out of Yorick's grave, and whenever Hamlet takes it into his hands and says: 'This skull had a tongue and could sing once' – it will be my resurrection!
SOFIA: Is that all?
VASILIYIYE: That's all.
YELISAVETA: Poor Filip!
SOFIA: Is it known where he was buried?
SIMKA: Probably somewhere unknown. Nowadays they throw everyone into mass graves, pour limestone over them and cover up!
SOFIA: Which means nobody will ever find his grave! Neither his grave nor his skull!
YELISAVETA: How can we make his last wish come true then?
VASILIYIYE: His crazy head – even when dead – will find its way from the mass grave to the hand of some Falstaff who's playing Hamlet!
SINKA: And you? On with the theatre?

VASILYIYE (*taking the suitcases*): Of course, what else!

SOFIA: The great floods are coming, boats, mountains, continents are sinking! And we are trying to save ourselves by climbing onto chairs!

YELISAVETA: As if the flood were a mouse!

SIMKA: And where are you off to now?

VASILYIYE: Fifty meters down the road, maybe we'll be in England! In five minutes time, maybe will end up in the sixteenth century!

YELISAVETA: Through the lands destroyed
ringing with cries

we conquer fires
with a wooden sword!

SIMKA: May God help you!

(The actors are picking up their suitcases and slowly moving, disappearing in the distance, towards a grey sky behind the stage. Behind them, the transparent curtain of The Travelling Theatre Shopalovich descends.)

SIMKA: Hang on, wait!

I almost forgot to tell you!

That Clobber, the torturer, he was found hanging!

He hang himself up in the mountain, off a pear tree!

A big pear tree, bears wagons of fruit!

He hang himself with that whip of his!

And they found a scarlet pimpernel in his hand!

They can't hear...

(Lights dim.)

Curtain

The End

Claustrophobic Comedy

(The Theatre Informs on Life)

By Dušan Kovačević

Translation by Duška Radosavljević Heaney

Characters:

Sava the Chimneysweep

Nina Herbert

Vule the Policeman

Yagosh Krai

Teya Krai

Joy Krai

Leopold Vazhik

Mr Grabinyski

First Act

1. The Brothers Krai¹ Talk about the Premiere of "The Claustrophobic Comedy"

Teya Krai is sitting at the kitchen table which is covered in open books and manuscripts. Thin, rough and unshaven (a teacher of English out of work, a translator for his own pleasure), he has crossed his bare feet under the table. With a smile, he is observing his brother Yagosh who is taking a new white shirt out of a box. The brother is older in years but younger in appearance.

Teya has propped his head up like a sleeping traveller at a railway station.

In the corner of the little room, the shortsighted sister Joy is sitting on a stool. She is a sad girl, in mourning for her mother and herself. She is bent over her life and Teya's sock which she is darning with difficulty under the lamplight. She is not participating in the conversation and the argument between the brothers by even as much as casting them a glance – as though they don't exist.

Yagosh is picking pins out of the shirt, and carefully placing them in an ashtray on the table.

YAGOSH: What are you translating now?

TEYA: Othello.

YAGOSH: Othello?... It's not been translated until now?

TEYA: Othello is just an inspiration. I'm writing something like a contemporary story about Othello.

YAGOSH: A-ha... Good. You're right. The old Othello wasn't good enough. There you are, it took centuries for you to come up with it.

TEYA: It had to happen some time.

YAGOSH: Of course... And who are you doing it for?

TEYA: For myself.

YAGOSH: You are still working for yourself?

TEYA: As you can see.

YAGOSH: Why don't you change your employer. He's been ruining you for years, for no good reason.

TEYA: What can I do – we've made friends. It's not easy for him either, working with me.

YAGOSH: You're right... Anyway, I've read that 'thing' of yours in The Literary Magazine.

TEYA: What 'thing'?

YAGOSH: The thing you wrote.

TEYA: Doesn't that 'thing' have a name?

YAGOSH: Yes – when it's good... When it's good it's called a poem.

TEYA: Otherwise it's a 'thing'... Did you manage to read the whole of the 'thing'?

YAGOSH: I did... And I can tell you, one can only do something like that for one's brother.

The poet laughs, Yagosh is still picking out the pins as if de-boning a fish.

TEYA: Were you reading The Literary Magazine for personal or official reasons?

YAGOSH: You mean, as a lover of art or as a lover of the government? I was reading it for very personal reasons.

TEYA: And if you don't like something you attack it for very official reasons.

YAGOSH: I am not a poet so to respond to your poems with verses.

TEYA: So you respond with curses.

YAGOSH: I can only respond to you the way you attack me. After all, your papers insist on a clear, democratic dialogue, without im-personal pronouns – everyone gets it by their own name and surname. Isn't that so?

TEYA: Our papers insist, above all, on truth. That's first, and second, there is a small difference in that 'democratic dialogue' of ours. We are only warning you – how can it be an attack in a paper with a circulation of 10 000 – and you get back at us via TV, radio, all the papers, by post, telephone, telegraph, telex, telegram and postcards... Don't you think that dialogue of ours is more like a monologue?

¹ The characters' surname is *Kraj*, which I have transcribed as Krai in the translation but have referred to as *Kraj* in the thesis.

YAGOSH: Possibly. We don't rule it out... These shirts have more barbed wire in them than cotton... Like system like shirts. So what do you say, how can I be against you?

TEYA: Why do you, Yagosh, have to be the one to attack everyone. Of all the horse-thieves, felons and bank robbers, you had to agree to become an assassin. Forget about me and my politics, the system and the shirts, I'd like to know why you are doing what you are doing?

YAGOSH: That's your brotherly concern?

TEYA: Both concern and shame!

YAGOSH: Both brotherly concern and brotherly shame?

TEYA: Yes.

YAGOSH: I have to, man, when you and your lot are such scum. Simply – I have to! I don't give a damn either for the state or politics or the Party, least of all for your scribbling, but I really do give a damn when you call me out by my name and surname. You call me a scoundrel, a thief and a robber. Me – the one who is attacking you only so that the people can see what a serious, important and concerned lot you are. I'm only doing you a favour--

TEYA: Thank you very much!

YAGOSH: –increasing your circulation, I'm amplifying your oppositional tone – had I been praising you, you would have disappeared; and you – you poke me in the eye in return. And when I slap your wrists, totally privately, as a citizen, because I need my eyes, you start shouting and crying. You can write what you like, just leave me alone! Whoever touches me, he is dead meat! You can certainly pass that on to those... there... that lot of yours... in the editor's office... Dead meat! They'll be fired like... like... like...

TEYA: Like I was.

YAGOSH: Whoever is ready to kill, must be ready to die! Is that clear?

TEYA: What are you talking about, man? What, my dear brother? What eyes and killing? It's not enough that everyone accuses me of showing you the manuscripts before printing, that they are calling me names and spitting on me, claiming that I am a spy, that my professorial position was taken away from me only as a formality and that I am still being paid because I'm helping you to build a career, and when you make it – as they say – 'to the top', you'll return the brotherly favour to me by sending me to Pittsburgh as a cultural attaché! Do you know what you are talking about?

YAGOSH: I know, that's why I'm telling you this. Did you go last night to the premiere of that... that...that...

TEYA: What?

YAGOSH: That... what the fuck was it called... Claustrophobic Comedy? In that, that... that... theatre... what was it called?

TEYA: No.

YAGOSH: And have you read that, that... that... shit?

TEYA: I haven't.

YAGOSH: You haven't?

TEYA: I haven't.

YAGOSH: And do you know who printed that first?

TEYA: I don't.

YAGOSH: And do you know the playwright?

TEYA: By sight.

YAGOSH: And do you know what that... that... play is about?

TEYA: I don't know. I don't know anything.

YAGOSH: You don't know anything?

TEYA: No.

YAGOSH: You don't know anything, and you are asking me whether I know what I'm talking about? And... and... and... why I went mad? The play was printed in your magazine, it was written by your man – your friend – and it is all about me. I am the main character. It's all about me! About me!

TEYA: About you? How?

YAGOSH: Disgusting, that's how! About comrade Yagosh Ending. Our surname Krai², an honourable name for four hundred years, is here being used, in its literal meaning, as an ugly political symbol... as an ending to everything... as... Aaaaaah, you'll get the bill at the end of the month and then you'll see your ending!

TEYA: Don't be paranoid, brother. You see yourself in every political villain.

² *Kraj*, the main characters' surname (here transcribed as *Krai*) actually means 'the end' in Serbo-Croat. Denis Barnett in his unpublished thesis on Dušan Kovačević quotes from another unpublished translation of the play, which he has also adapted for his own purposes. He transcribes the name as *Kry* and uses the English 'cry', 'weep' in order to re-construct the pun here. (1998:283)

YAGOSH: Especially if the 'villain' character is called Yagosh The End, if he is of my age, if they find an actor who resembles me perfectly, who has got all my gestures, manner of walking, tone of voice, who has stolen my physique as if I myself were on the stage. That's when I am particularly paranoid!

TEYA: And what is it about?

YAGOSH: Please don't playact with me! You know it all!

TEYA: I don't know, man. I really don't!

YAGOSH: Big deal! Great art! As if!... It's pure rubbish. Insult after insult... Is there anything sacred to you apart from your own selves?

TEYA: Will you tell me what it is about?

YAGOSH: You'd've done much better to have done a children's show... I'm trying to treat you as honourable people and you stab me in the back... Comrade The End... You don't know what it is about? You haven't got a clue?

TEYA: I don't know.

YAGOSH: A renowned Polish ballerina Nina Herbert emigrates whilst on tour in Yugoslavia... during the Festival of Polish Ballet, and she runs away from the stage as well... from the National... in the role of Desdemona...

Yagosh is talking and inquisitively observing his brother to see whether he knows the plot.

YAGOSH: She disappears, like that, in costume, and leaves her fiancé, the ballet dancer in the middle of the stage... Afterwards she is found near the theatre by Sava, some chimneysweep. He hides her in his place, and whilst he is looking for some bastard lover of hers – again one of our politicians, because of whom she had emigrated – he falls in love with her... The Ballerina and Sava the Chimneysweep!?

TEYA: Why not?

YAGOSH: A ballerina and a chimneysweep?

TEYA: OK, what does that have to do with you? You are not a chimneysweep. You didn't think...

YAGOSH: I didn't 'think' anything, I saw and heard it all... In that chimneysweep's neighbourhood there are two brothers living with a half-blind sister. The sister just keeps quiet and darns socks for the poor poet, who is otherwise a sharp and talented man, but – of course! – ruined by the communists. However, the poet still has enough energy to sit barefoot and translate Shakespeare all the time, as he is above politics and his own poverty. On the basis of his modest life, his brother, a politician, is building his colossal career!

TEYA: So what? What's the big deal?

YAGOSH: What's the big deal? Are you serious?

TEYA: Well, the problem of art and politics has always been...

YAGOSH: Art? What art? If that's 'art', from now on I'll be referring to my speeches as 'artistic expression'. That's the most gruesome political game... During the play the audience was looking at me more than the actor who was playing me. They were listening to the words and looking at me. The entire auditorium turned around looking at me, without batting an eyelid... Me – in the auditorium, me – on the stage. Whilst my brother is barefoot, I am, like, unpacking a new shirt... That should... that should... supposedly be an artistic metaphor of power and poverty... And besides me, besides the bastard comrade Yagosh – the Polish police system,³ the universal decay of socialism and our non-aligned movement get their share too. Like, the people are waiting for some African president, not knowing who he is, what his name is, what he is and where he's from. They don't know anything but they have to die of happiness that they are waiting for him... I am drawing you into 'civilisation' – into the primitive tribes and driving you away from enlightened Europe? Me – of all people!?

TEYA: Calm down, please, what's up with you...

YAGOSH: Art? Theatre – the temple of the arts! Muses! Pegasus! Poetry! Wisdom and dignity!... Shit up to your knees! I felt like I spent two hours in the public loos of a railway station!

TEYA: As far as I know you do it in better places.

YAGOSH: You liar! You haven't seen the play!?! How can you lie to me eye to eye!?! In the play the poet also says that to his brother. The same sentence. Word for word!

TEYA: Does the brother say something back to him?

YAGOSH: He does, the only clever thing in that whole piece of junk:

³ It is unclear why it says here 'the Polish' police system, as the only police featured in the play are actually Yugoslavian. Despite the great political freedom that the play demonstrates, this could still have been a measure of caution – or maybe even an in-joke: whereby the playwright claims that the play is a satire on the Polish police system when it is self-evident in the play that it is a satire on the Yugoslav police system.

“Yes, my brother, but you’ll never be able to join me. You’ll keep on doing it in the parks, dumps and alleys! The essence of all great historical upheavals and changes boils down to – who shits where!”

Outside a car-horn is heard. Yagosh grabs the box, stuffs the shirt into it and rushes out of the house. Teya lifts his arms trying to stop him.

TEYA: Wait! Wait, let me tell you what the essence of the big changes is! Yagosh! Yagosh!

Annoyed, he turns around to his sister who is neither looking at nor listening to him.

TEYA: Did you hear him, Joy? And let me tell you it’s not only his fault that he is like that. He can thank our poor mother that he became a ‘successful’ politician. From his early childhood it was she who took on the responsibility for all his mistakes and wrong-doings, she allowed him to lie as much as he wanted, she was proud of his stupidities, she skipped her meals so he could have a double portion – so he thought we lived in luxury, she carried him on her own back through the mud and snow, when all the other children were getting up she was putting him to sleep, she was rejoicing in the fact that of all books his favourite was the cookery book: he would stop in front of a bookshop window and look at the roasted lamb on the sleeve of a cookery book, begging: ‘Mum, buy me that book with roasted pictures’... He was growing up in the world which he did not deserve, so he got used to it and that’s how he is living now. Our poor mother lived for twenty years less so he could live for twenty years more... Mother, our poor, good mother... However, to be honest, it wasn’t all mother’s fault. She became that way because of our poor father... Do you remember, Joy, mother was cleverer than father, but she pretended she wasn’t. And she pretended so skilfully that everybody believed her, first of all father himself. All her life she was patiently trying not to say something clever so as not to insult him. That’s the fate of our good – and as those fathers used to say – ‘slightly dumb women’... Our poor, good mother...

He sinks his head in his hands again as if he is reading a manuscript carefully. The sister gets up and carries one mended sock to her brother. She approaches her brother, looks at him, then slowly puts her hand on his shoulder.

JOY: There’s one... The other one won’t be long.

Teya lifts his head as if she brought him back from some ancient times that he is engaged with in Othello.

TEYA: Sorry, what did you say?

JOY: I’ve finished one... The other one won’t take long.

TEYA: Have you seen how he ran away. Whenever he senses I’m about to tell him something uncomfortable – he runs away.

JOY: Who?

TEYA: Yagosh.

JOY: Yagosh who?

TEYA: Our brother Yagosh.

JOY: When did he run away? When was he here?

TEYA: Joy!?

JOY: When was Yagosh here?

TEYA: Just now. He’s left just now. He got upset!

JOY: Our brother Yagosh?

TEYA: Yes... What? Why are you looking at me like that? What?

JOY: My dear good God and my poor, good mother in heaven... what have I done?

TEYA: What’s up with you Joy?

JOY: You spend your nights with your friends, you come home when people are going to work, you sleep at the table and then you wake up and scare me. I really have no more patience, strength or intention to listen to you and your gobbledegook – the way you speak, like a madman. For God’s sake Teyo⁴... my poor brother... my dear God, what have I done...

TEYA: He’s just gone out.

⁴ The vocative form of the name is here deliberately left intact. This is because of my belief that the name is actually derived from Othello, and therefore in its vocative form it bears more resemblance to it.

JOY: You can only tell *me* that, I have to put up with you, I promised to our mother I would. Yagosh hasn't been here for a week.

Teya gets hold of the ashtray and empties the pins into his hand.

TEYA: And what about these? He's taken these pins out of his new shirt...

The telephone rings. Joy picks it up.

JOY: Hello, dear... Not too well... We've just been talking about you... I've just been arguing with our poor brother. What else could I be doing... He's been trying to tell me that you've just been here. He's out of his mind completely... When he finally manages to persuade me into something like that, you won't have anyone sane in this world... Yes... What? To stop mourning after mother... I am now wearing black for myself. I died a while ago too... What are you doing, dearest?... You are going to the theatre? The Polish ballet... Othello... very nice... But please don't go marrying another ballerina again. Last time you were only going to watch a ballet and you know how it all ended... Had you not been what you are, you'd never have got another flat... If I have to wash after you, I don't have to wash after those loose-limbed women too... After the performance – straight home... I saw you on TV last night, in the news. Dear, you'll have to grow a moustache. You look too young for all your duties. The higher the position, the older the person – that's what our people expect... Yes, I'm breathing heavily, I'm a bit ill... I'm dragging my life on my back... Come for lunch on Sunday. My good old Sava the Chimneysweep gave me a wild goose. He found it by some chimney with a broken wing. Given the situation with meat shortages, Sava says, we will only be eating whatever doesn't manage to fly *over* the country... What have you got against Sava? When we came to Belgrade he received us in his house as though we were his own family... Yes... Sorry I'm keeping you, I've no-one to talk to... OK, lots of kisses, bye.

Joy puts down the phone... She goes past her brother who is still holding the pins out on his palm.

2. The Ballerina Nina Herbert Disappears from the Stage of the National Theatre in the Character of Desdemona

“As part of the Polish Cultural Season in Yugoslavia, the Warsaw Ballet is performing on the stage of the National Theatre. Some prominent artists will be playing extracts from the most successful productions.”

This is how the newspapers announced the guest performances of the 'exceptional ballet masters' from the friendly socialist country. And, just as it was expected, the National Theatre filled up with magical music, extraordinary movement and enthusiastic applause from the Belgrade audience, up until the appearance of Nina Herbert as Desdemona and Leopold Vazhik as Othello. Then something strange happened.

“The young ballet duo was playing the scene of Othello's jealousy. Under a glittering black mask on his face, amid the whirlwinds of his suffering and his native passions, he was fighting the ancient forces within himself and the forces of human evil around himself. It was a magnificent, irreplicable performance up until a certain point... She, on the other hand, disturbingly graceful and beautiful, she was a perfect image of chastity, wonder and poetic anxiety. Tall and blue-eyed, she trembled like a humming-bird, trying to avoid the advances of the dark-faced man. The rich orchestral music, featuring the discrete and dissonant undertones of Shakespeare's tragedy, also suggested the sounds of primeval Africa. However, Othello's theme also featured a hardly perceptible sound of tribal drums. To an observer of particularly sensitive taste or with a strong political standpoint, this could have suggested a potentially overstated tinge of irony?

The young ballet dancers would have certainly taken the most heart-felt applause on the evening, had Othello not been abandoned on the stage at a particular point. He continued to dance, however, obviously beyond the directorial framework. The first spotlight which followed Desdemona, was trying to locate and bring the young ballerina back centre-stage. It seemed to us that – by choreographer's inspiration – she left Othello's lodgings for a moment. However, that 'moment' stretched into eternity... After three or four minutes of successful though helpless improvisation, Leopold Vazhik as Othello, left the stage somewhat uncertain and anxious in his stride. The orchestra continued to play, just as confused as Othello himself... Only after the performance we found out – unofficially – what had actually happened.”

And this is how journalists and dance critics wrote after the performance. The mysterious disappearance of the famous ballerina was the main news of the following day's morning papers.

All of this happened around 8.50PM. The continuation of the story follows – on one of the badly lit alleys near the National Theatre on the same night...

3. Sava the Chimneysweep Meets Nina Herbert in the Costume of Desdemona

In the semi-darkness of a little street near the National Theatre there stand two rubbish containers. They are lit by an old streetlamp. The yellowish light trembles in the autumn wind.

Around the corner there appear Teya Krai and his Polish friend and fellow-poet – an important guest during the Polish Season. As is the custom, the poets are appropriately intoxicated and locked in a friendly embrace... Teya stops suddenly, points to the lamplight and starts reciting a bohemian poem.

(...Poem...)

Teya bows, whilst his Polish colleague applauds enthusiastically.

TEYA: In your honour, Mr Grabynski, and in the honour of your excellent translation of the Serbian poet's verse into Polish – your estranged ballerina will be found immediately. If only we had the industry that was as good as the police force!

Oh, my dear homeland, steeped in suffering
my land of steep footpaths and short memory!

Teya Krai and Mr Grabynski leave down the street...

Soon Sava the chimneysweep appears in his black uniform, his face covered in soot. He approaches the first container, lifts the lid, peers in and begins to look for pieces of bread which he picks with a hook attached to a broomstick... He approaches the second container, lifts the lid and – jumps aside. Out of the metal container, there appears the frightened ballerina Nina Herbert, dressed in a purple costume... Sava is stiff looking at her as if she was an apparition.

SAVA: Who are you? What... are you doing here?

NINA: Ucieklam z teatru... Z teatru.

SAVA: You – Russian?

NINA: Nije Rosjanka. Jestem z Polski. Polska.

SAVA: Polish? From Poland?

NINA: Tak, tak. Ucieklam... Emigrantka.

SAVA: You want to emigrate? You want to be an emigrant? Emigration?

NINA: Mam przyjaciela w Belgradzie. Do niego chc.

As she speaks she looks around herself, frightened... Sava is looking around too as if he was a fugitive himself as well.

SAVA: There's no-one here... Come out... And do you know where you'd like to emigrate to? Come out.

NINA: Nie zgloszi mnie pan?

SAVA: Sorry... I don't understand you at all.

NINA: Nie zaprowadzi mnie pan na policj?

SAVA: Sprechen sie Deutsch? Nein? Not at all?

NINA: Moj wielki przyjaciel mieszka w Belgradzie. A oto, oto... to jego adres...

SAVA: Somebody's address? Pavle Hall, Shakespeare's Street...

Sava is reading the address on the piece of paper that the ballerina gave him... A policeman appears around the corner. The girl hides in the container. The chimneysweep pulls the lid back on and then goes onto the other container looking through it again. The policeman is keeping in touch with a patrol car on walkie-

talkie... He stops, looks carefully at the dark man, partially lit by the trembling light... He switches off the radio phone and crosses the street.

POLICEMAN: Sava? That you Sava?

SAVA: Yes... Oh... Is that you Vule?

POLICEMAN: Me!... What're you up to?

SAVA: Well... how come you are in that uniform... Haven't you trained to be... a doctor? When you lived at my place you were a medical student.

POLICEMAN: Leave that now... What are you up to, Sava?

SAVA: I'm collecting old bread for the pigs.

POLICEMAN: Have you by any chance seen a ballerina running around here? You know, in costume and all?

SAVA: A ballerina? No, nobody came down here for a while... The uniform suits you.

The policeman leans a long metal pole against the container, pulls out a cigarette case and offers a cigarette to Sava. Sava takes the cigarette and leans himself against the container with the ballerina in it.

POLICEMAN: You're keeping pigs?

SAVA: I'm not keeping them, just feeding them. After I sell them they feed me... So we feed each other.

POLICEMAN: Hm... You don't get much for your wages.

SAVA: Not much... I am helping my son, daughter, sister, brother and mother.

POLICEMAN: There's too many of them.

SAVA: It's not too many of them but too little of me. If there was more of me it would be easier. As for them, thank God, it's never too many...

POLICEMAN: Yeah... You still sweeping chimneys?

SAVA: Yes.

POLICEMAN: So you're not retired yet.

SAVA: I'm not. I'd like to, but it doesn't pay off – until I die... I haven't got a salary and the pension would be even less than that.

POLICEMAN: Yeah... You have no lodgers anymore?

SAVA: No... I'm not very good at charging them, and I cannot finance them anymore.

POLICEMAN: I know... You fed me for eight moths. For free.

SAVA: Oh, I didn't. You used to bring things down from the mountain.

POLICEMAN: Oh, yes, you did... When I had the hardest of times. And I never get a chance to come by and thank you. But I often think of you. You look very bad, Sava. As if I'm talking to your father... My brother, the miner, has grown old like that as well.

SAVA: You never told me you had a brother.

POLICEMAN: You never asked me.

SAVA: One mentions a brother without having to be asked.

POLICEMAN: Yeah... And I thought you were taking out the rubbish, so I was very glad to see you.

SAVA: Half a year ago I stopped paying the council tax. When they took me to court I said to the judge: I don't want to pay because I have no rubbish to throw out... But earlier I was just thinking that I made a mistake. I should be paying, but not because I throw out the rubbish, but because of what I pick up... What's the matter?

POLICEMAN: Hm... It sounded like somebody sneezed... I heard it clearly... Somebody sneezed... Like a child...

SAVA: There, it must've been the cat.

POLICEMAN: Cats sneeze?

SAVA: You must've heard cats crying like children. They also sneeze like that... You're a bit sad that I'm collecting bread.

POLICEMAN: Yes, I am... And I'll have you know, I shall help you. If you could help me... when I had my bad times...

SAVA: Thank you, Vule.

POLICEMAN: You should... come and... work with me.

SAVA: I'm too old for the uniform.

POLICEMAN: In the warehouse... I won't have you roam through the rubbish.

SAVA: It all depends, my dear Vule, on what one considers by 'rubbish'... A neighbour of mine – a very fine gentleman as well – went out one day just before the New Year to throw his rubbish out. The lift got stuck,

and the people who repair lifts were out celebrating. When they got him out two days later, the man ate up everything he intended to throw away.

POLICAMAN: The rubbish?

SAVA: It was rubbish until he got hungry. The day after he got stuck he started to roam through the bags: this is still edible, this is not rubbish, this is, this isn't... That was the first day. The next day he ate up everything. They found him with empty bags. And they even got it out on him: "Why did you go to throw it away when it wasn't rubbish! You're going up and down for sheer luxury!" He had to apologize because he spent two days stuck in the lift and ate rubbish.

POLICEMAN: Yeah... there's all sorts.

SAVA: And another neighbour of mine, a poet – Teya, who often calls me flippantly 'a communist negro', when he heard this story, he said to me: "You know, Sava, some eat rubbish in a broken lift, but the majority do it in a broken state". He says, before they repair the state, we'll be stuffed with rubbish.

POLICEMAN: I know.

SAVA: That we'll be stuffed with rubbish? You know it, too?

POLICEMAN: I know him... That... poet... I know what he's saying... Anyway, Sava, have you gone through all the containers in this street?

SAVA: Yes.

POLICEMAN: You haven't noticed anything strange? Nothing, like, suspicious?

SAVA: No... nothing.

POLICEMAN: Where could she be?

From the walkie-talkie on the policeman's belt, a sharp, screeching signal can be heard. Vule takes the official receiver and puts it on. A metallic, coarse voice:

VOICE: Vule, have you finished?

POLICEMAN: Just about. There's nothing here.

VOICE: I'm waiting for you at Yovan's Market. Hurry up.

POLICEMAN: I'm coming. The end.

He turns off the machine. Picks up the metal pole looking indecisively down the street.

SAVA: What do you need this pole for? You're looking for the ballerina with it?

POLICEMAN: Some... drunkard killed his wife and threw her into a container. Now we have to get through all the rubbish before tomorrow, before it gets collected.

SAVA: Big city, there's all sorts of people.

POLICEMAN: People? Scum! Scum, my Sava! Our law is for people, and it should be for scum! When you are using the law for people on scum, you are again offending people! You charge people twice as hard, and let the scum free. The scum should not be judged by the word of law – but by rope!

SAVA: I'm looking for old bread, and you – for corpses. And you call me to work for you.

POLICEMAN: In the warehouse... I'll come by one of these days for a chat... Take care, Sava... You'll be working at my warehouse before too long!

Vule goes away... Turns around the corner.

Sava lifts the lid of the container and helps the ballerina out. Takes her by the hand. They are going away, prancing from time to time as if they were on the stage. From the direction of the theatre Leopold Vazhik runs in breathlessly, in the costume of Othello. Tormented by personal, most genuine jealousy – out of his character and out of his mind – he is turning around and calling for his fiancée: Ninaaa! Ninaaa! Ninaaa!

4. All Because of a Russian Film

In the modest lodgings belonging to Sava the chimneysweep, on a sad little sofa, there sits Nina Herbert crouching. She's wrapped up in a faded blanket and in the fourth day of emigrant's sorrow. She's looking at something invisible.

Sava enters the room, carrying a big parcel in his arms. He's smiling as if justifying himself or apologizing for something. The girl lifts her head. She looks at him with her frightened, sleepless eyes, awaiting any kind of salvation.

SAVA: For four days they've been sending me to and fro from one office to another, from one institute to another, one establishment to another, one secretary to another, one cabinet to another...

NINA: Czy odnalezicie Pawla?

SAVA: I found out where your Pavle works, but he's not there... If that's what your question was about – this is the answer.

Nina gets up... The dark man puts the parcel down on the table. Very slowly and carefully he's tearing the wrapping. He's avoiding her glance. He's embarrassed as if everything that's happened to her was his fault.

NINA: Czy widzieliście Pawla?

SAVA: Pavle exists, which is the most important thing. I thought somebody fooled you, introduced himself under a false name... that he gave you a false name like he gave you a false address... Your Pavle works in a big marble building, but he is not an engineer. He nein engineer. He is doing something there which I don't know how it's done.

NINA: Gdzie jest Pawel? Czy go wreszcie zobacz? Powiedział mu pan, że przez niego zaostalam... Sawa, co si stało?

SAVA: Slowly, slowly, please. I don't understand you at all. Do you at least understand me when I don't understand you? Your Pavle is – if they are telling the truth, as he himself is impossible to get to – he is on a business trip in Warsaw... Verstehen? Your Pavle... on business trip... in your Warsaw.

NINA: Pawel w Warszawie? Moj Pawel w Warszawie?

SAVA: In Warsaw... When they told me I was also amazed like that, and they were amazed that I was amazed: "What is so strange about him being in Warsaw?" He's staying there for eight days. Eight days... Another eight days.

NINA: Jeszcze osiem dni? Osiem dni?

She is showing eight fingers as well. He is helplessly nodding whilst unwrapping the parcel.

NINA: Ja w Belgradzie, Pawel w Warszawie? Ja tutaj, on tam. O moj Bosze!... O matko Boska... Jeszcze osiem dni... Jeszcze osiem...

The girl is going around the table repeating the same words and laughing hysterically. Then she bursts out crying; the suffering and anger bursting out of her.

SAVA: Nina, don't cry... He'll come back. Do you hear me... Please, don't cry... Come on, sit down... Everything will be all right.. Sit down... Just don't cry...

The girls sits down on a chair. Eyes full of tears, she is looking at the soot-covered man who is trying to explain something to her using his words, smile and hands.

SAVA: Eight days is not eight years... You'll live here like in your own home. Do you have an uncle in Warsaw? An uncle? Like, your father's brother... So, look at it as though you came to an uncle's in Belgrade... Do you understand?... Just don't get upset, don't cry... You be here, so the police don't catch you without documents, I go to work, you wait for me and listen to the ballet music... if this is the ballet music?

He is taking a gramophone out of the box. Takes the lead to the plug-hole, plugs it in, comes back and puts a big record onto the gramophone disc... The girl calms down. She's looking at this good man like at some apparition from rural winter tales.

SAVA: I asked in the shop for something for listening and for ballet practice. The shop-keepers laughed and asked: "Would you like something more for listening or more for practising, sir?"

NINA: Moj Bozse, Sawa... Pan to wszystko kupil z mojego powodu? I adapter, i plyty... Z mojego powodu? Sawa?

The chimney-sweep takes a folded newspaper from his pocket.

SAVA: The newspapers say you are a great ballerina and that... this is what they say: "If you stopped practising... or if you had... a long pause it would be an unre...mediable loss for Polish and the world... ballet... because you are am...mazingly talented, or...riginal, and a self-styled artistic personality..." Where did

they find this picture? Look... I wish I could take your photograph now and send it to them. The picture in black and white, and you – all colourful... Now, you listen to the music and practise a little, so that they don't say later – she was staying with Sava the chimneysweep, she didn't have the conditions to practise... Only I don't know, Nina, whether this is the music for ballet or for those who practise instrument playing... They sold it to me as if it was for ballet.

He presses a button on the gramophone, with the same excitement and responsibility as if he was pressing a button for launching some big spacecraft. And the small, poverty-stricken room lights up with the rich lustre of Tchaikovski. Nina is looking one moment at the gramophone, one moment at the dark man. Sava has dug his elbows into the table, listening thoughtfully and nodding his head – as if he has seen an unknown city from the top of a mountain, and liked it at first sight.

SAVA: Very nice... Piano... and the violins... I got to like the violins six and a half years ago... One of my lodgers was playing in the opera, so he was practising every day, something like this. All day long... Then he started playing in cafes... He took me to listen to him playing one New Year's Eve. He was complaining that it was impossible to live from art... And in the cafes they stuck lots of money into his bow... One morning he jumped in front of a tram... Poor thing, he killed himself and he was only twenty eight.

Nina is listening to him without batting an eyelid, as if she understands everything. And he is talking to her as if she does.

SAVA: Yes, the violin is – the violin... but the piano is – the piano... Had I had good fortune in my life, had somebody given me a better life – like they didn't, and if they'd asked me: Which instrument would you like to play, Sava? I would say: the piano. The piano. Really, the piano? Really – the piano... Neither the violin nor the accordion does it for me, I don't know why. Maybe all because of a Russian film which I watched when I was little... In that film, some boy was playing the piano, he was as little as me then; the fire-place was burning, the gentlefolks were listening, sipping champagne and crying... And through the window, covered with big Russian snow, a poor, little sister of the piano-playing boy was peering there. The boy got ten golden coins in the morning, and they found his sister in the snow, dead from frostbite, below the window... The boy became a big composer later. But he never wanted to play for the gentle-people again, and all his music he dedicated to the memory of his sister Vanya... When we came out of the cinema, it was snowing outside, and we cried... Whenever I hear the piano, I remember that film... Is it possible, Nina, that I fell in love with the piano that night... Maybe... You never know when exactly you start to love something or somebody forever. You only find it out much later, when that something or somebody has gone.

Nina gets up, walks to him and puts her hand on his shoulder with great gratitude. Then she turns around, walks two or three steps, smiles and throws the grey blanket off her shoulders. She remains in the costume of Desdemona. At first slowly, as if walking on thin ice, she circles the table and the confused chimneysweep, and then increasingly quickly and with inspiration, she starts to dance. She is flying around the poor man's room.

Sava is looking at her without batting an eyelid. She comes to him, takes him by the hands and lifts him off the chair. Teasing him and dancing around him, she is trying to get him to make at least one move. The dark man is standing still, his arms spread open, like a scarecrow... And then he smiles, waves his hand and sits down again, looking at her like a divine apparition.

When she takes a deep bow, Sava tries to applaud, but what we hear are only two meagre claps of his hands.

5. Who is Jean Ounga Boumango? What is He? Where From? And – Where is That?

The Belgraders line the pavement of the Marshal Tito Street. They are protecting themselves from the mid-day sun and from a brooding mood by placing their hands and newspapers above their eyes. Among the people there lingers the fiancé Leopold Vazhik, wearing a grey coat over his Othello's costume. He's turning around looking at the faces of people around him.

The speakers on electric poles, covered in Yugoslavian and some green-yellow-purple flags, are blaring out a melody from some 'remote, unknown but to us a very dear and friendly country'.

The Policeman Vule is walking up and down making sure that nobody steps down on the road... Sava is pushing through the second row, dark like a raven and carrying coiled wire on his shoulder. People are moving away lest he smudges their clothes. The chimney sweep notices Yagosh Krai who is reading The Literary Magazine.

SAVA: Good morning, Mr Krai! Who are you waiting for?

YAGOSH: Hello, Sava.

POLICEMAN: Hello, Sava! Straight from work?

SAVA: These guys of yours pulled me down from the roof. They say I should be on the ground while the comrade is passing through. There are more of them up there on the roofs than all of you down here. And who are you waiting for today?

Vule looks over his shoulder and in a familiar tone, as if expecting his own uncle:

VULE: We are waiting for the comrade Jananga Doubanga.

YAGOSH: Who?

VULE: Comrade... Jan...

YAGOSH: Jean Ounga Boumange. If the people are getting it wrong, you as an official, according to your official duty, should officially know who is coming for an official visit. The one you are waiting for is not coming today.

SAVA: And where is he from?

POLICEMAN: From... Jaffamba.

YAGOSH: Where?

POLICEMAN: Well... we were told...

YAGOSH: Say it, please, say it.

POLICEMAN: From... Joufamba.

YAGOSH: From Joufamba!?

Yagosh bursts out laughing... Sava doesn't know whether these mistakes amuse Yagosh or whether he is terribly annoyed.

YAGOSH: From Joumanda. Jou-man-da!

SAVA: Never heard of it. But then again, I am not very familiar with those – as the papers say – ‘remote, unknown, but to us very dear and friendly countries’.

YAGOSH: That, my dear friend, is former Katoumba. I hope, you’ve heard of it?

SAVA: Almost... And why former?

YAGOSH: After Yakomba Dadi Benga Ha Takinga was overthrown on 14th October last year, Joumanda was proclaimed a republic under the presidency of the person you are waiting for. We were one of the first countries in the world to recognize the creation of the new Republic... Right after the Czechs.

SAVA: Right after the Czechs. The second among the first?

YAGOSH: Yes, my friend.

SAVA: Now, my dear friend, you might get seriously offended, but with the greatest respect, however, I must tell you this: that President has already been here.

YAGOSH: When was he here?

SAVA: Last autumn in April.

YAGOSH: Last autumn in April? Or last spring in November?

SAVA: In November. Yes, in November.

YAGOSH: Well, not so, my friend. You’ve made a little mistake.

SAVA: I haven’t, my friend. It was also a President who overthrew a dictator, and also – right after the Czechs. Vule, weren’t you waiting for him?

POLICEMAN: I don’t know... If Comrade Yagosh says it wasn’t...

YAGOSH: Last autumn in November, my friend, it was Danbanga Yasami Rajah Mgatu, the President of South Bajanme. And he never overthrew anyone, but the former kingdom of Kamariba divided itself into North and South Bajanme. It is true, we were among the first to recognize the new government of South Bajanme – right after the Czechs, and we condemned North Bajanme because of its attack on the independence and non-alignment of South Bajanme, with which we established...

POLICEMAN: ... friendly and neighbourly relations in the spirit of mutual understanding and trust.

SAVA: Aren’t they a bit too far for ‘neighbourly relations’?

POLICEMAN: Excuse me... Where're you going! Where're you off to!? Come back! Come back! This must be one of their students.

The policeman was shouting at the fiancé Leopold Vazhik, who was trying to cross the street in his search of the estranged girl.

SAVA: And as soon as they divided themselves up they attacked each other. Oh my God, what savage people!? It's no wonder we are so much in love with each other.

YAGOSH: Yes, that was because North Bajanme remained a puppet state under the regime of the dictator Aian Yasaki Hail Khan Mkabin... You remember him, I hope?

SAVA: That was the little, rickety, gilded dwarf, known in Belgrade as 'Heil Ducket'. Whoever he shook hands with he gave him a golden ducket with his own profile.

YAGOSH: The people who visit us bring their customs and their culture.

SAVA: And national treasure. Somebody over there, among those poor people who are dying of starvation, has to pick cotton and bananas all day, on a thousand degrees Celsius, somebody over there has to slave all day like I do here, so that in his name and without his consent, his president can distribute his blood and sweat around the world. An ugly profile on golden sweat. And he became a politician only because of his unfortunate height. He was too tall for circus and too small for life... A notorious dictator and bandit.

YAGOSH: Yes, my friend, but we only got to know all of that much later.

SAVA: Right after the Czechs? What else could a man be if he is distributing the gold of his people all over the world without the consent or knowledge of his people? How do you call a man who has nothing of his own but owns everything?

The police car sirens are heard... The music grows louder. The policeman freezes. The people are waving the flags unenthusiastically. Yagosh is still reading the papers... Sava is shouting over the noise of the cars and the procession.

SAVA: He waved at me! He doesn't know I'm a chimneysweep! He must think I'm one of his people!

After the noise of the cars and sirens subsides, the people start to disperse. Yagosh folds up the paper.

YAGOSH: Have you found that Polish ballerina?

POLICEMAN: We haven't.

YAGOSH: You are causing us unnecessary diplomatic embarrassment. How long is it since she disappeared?

POLICEMAN: Around... two weeks?

YAGOSH: And you can't find her anywhere?

POLICEMAN: Nowhere...

YAGOSH: Does your boss go to the theatre?

POLICEMAN: Theatre? Well... he prefers hunting.

YAGOSH: Give him these two tickets and send him there tonight. You are looking for her all over the city and she hid herself in a play.

POLICEMAN: Somebody is hiding her in the theatre?

YAGOSH: The play, man. We are on there. Let him go tonight, everything will be clear to him.

POLICEMAN: He's... gone hunting.

YAGOSH: Then, you go.

POLICEMAN: I will. Yes, sir.

YAGOSH: It'll be interesting. You'll meet yourself there too.

POLICEMAN: Who?

YAGOSH: You. Yourself.

POLICEMAN: Myself? I'll meet myself?

YAGOSH: Go tonight, and tomorrow, please report to me.

The policeman is holding the two tickets, confused, afraid to ask any more questions.

SAVA: So, my friend, how about if we wait for another notorious dictator?

YAGOSH: Who 'we'?

SAVA: Well, all of us.

YAGOSH: It would be good, my friend, if at your age you spoke only for yourself.

SAVA: But... you also waited for him.

YAGOSH: Me? What on Earth are you talking about. I never waited for anyone.

SAVA: How can you say that? What are you doing here then?

YAGOSH: I am waiting to cross the street. My car is parked across the road.

POLICEMAN: Why didn't you cross straightaway, comrade Yagosh?

YAGOSH: I didn't want to affect your demeanour of authority... What do you think, my friend, why have the people come out to wait for this one...

SAVA: Because all employers gave out instructions to their employees to come out at 11.

YAGOSH: You think it's because of that? Because of the instructions?

SAVA: Yes.

YAGOSH: The whole state endorses the laws which prohibit theft, embezzlement, robbery, mugging, destruction – but nobody respects those laws because nobody has any use of them. But everybody has use of these instructions – everybody runs away from work. An hour of standing, and then everyone goes wherever they like. If they had to do any work whilst standing, nobody would come. A lazy nation respects only those laws which are in keeping with idleness, all the others they ignore. If you didn't come out for a reception once, there would never be another one. Nobody wants to embarrass oneself twice. Small gains and small calculations which allow you to work against yourself, will be the end of you.

Yagosh puts the papers in his pocket, smiles and leaves. Sava is looking at his neighbour, confused, whilst the policeman Vule still stares at the two tickets in his hand.

POLICEMAN: Would you like to come with me. I've never been... to the theatre.

SAVA: I can't, Vule, I'm on duty... I'll call on you tomorrow to bring you a request from a friend of mine, a chimneysweep.

POLICEMAN: Please, do... What has comrade Yagosh got me into!

They leave followed by some dwindling ceremonious music, dominated by the tones of some distant, sunny land. Only the unfortunate fiancé Leopold Vazhik remains on the street, looking around himself in despair and repeating to himself the whisper: Nina... Nina... Nina...

6. A Sparkling Ring on a Black Palm

Sava the chimneysweep comes into his little home.

Nina is sitting at the table and cutting a piece of blue silk with scissors. She is anxious about the news that her host is bringing her. The dark man is looking at the floor, comes to the table, leans on the back of a chair as if he was in court.

SAVA: I talked to Pavle... There, they didn't lie. He came back after eight days... We talked for two hours.

NINA: Widzial pan Pawla? Czy wie, je jestem w Belgradzie? Prosz pana, panie Sava, niech mi pan wszystko opowie.

SAVA: Calm down... We talked in his office... And... I can tell you... and I have to tell you: it would've been better if I'd never met him. It would have been better if somebody had presented himself to you under a false name, if he didn't exist at all... Pavle isn't a good man... Do you understand me? He nicht gut. Pavle nicht gut.

NINA: Nicht gut?

SAVA: Ja, ja. Nicht gut, my Nina... Nicht gut.

NINA: Pawel? Sawa, Pawel nicht gut? Varum nicht gut?

SAVA: Varum, varum? That's how it is in life, my Nina. After a big love without questions, there come big questions with even bigger wonder... He told me that you two made an arrangement whilst he was working in Warsaw that you'd come to Yugoslavia for a summer holiday, to the seaside... Verstchen? You come in August and then you go to the seaside together. You, Pavle and Dubrovnik.

NINA: Tak, tak. Umowilimy si, ze razmem spdzimy wakacje, ale ja nie moglam przyjechac. Pisalam do niego. On wszystko wie...

SAVA: Please, calm down... He meant you'd go on holiday 'like friends', and then everyone goes home. Everyone back home... Verstchen? He didn't expect you – it never even occurred to him that you would emigrate because of him. Verstchen? Nina?

NINA: Nein, nein, nein!

The girl is looking at him with her beautiful, big, Polish-blue eyes; collects the blanket around herself as if she was suddenly cold.

SAVA: Now you can keep repeating 'nein, nein, nein' as long as you like... Listen what your Sava has to tell you: Pavle is just a mere twat!

NINA: Nein, nein, nein...

SAVA: You don't understand anything that doesn't suit you; I'd have to lie to you so that you'd understand... But I must tell you everything. Pavle is married. Pavle has a wife and two little children.

He is showing a ring on a finger and something small twice. Nina is shaking her head negatively.

NINA: Nein, nein, nein...

SAVA: I saw a big picture on his office desk. In a leather frame. A wife and two children in front of a house beside a rose bush, and he is standing behind them, smiling and beautiful, like a ruler with his family. A sunny day, a red roof and a big green crown of an oak tree above the house. As soon as I saw him, it was clear to me why you ran away after him, but as soon as he spoke, it was even clearer why you ended up this way.

NINA: Pawle nie jest jonaty. Wiem o tym na pewno. Rozpytywałam si wrod jego przyjaciol...

SAVA: Ja, ja. Zwei klein kinder... And... how do you say wife?

NINA: Sawa, prosz pana, to nie prawda. To nie prawda, Sava!

SAVA: You either don't understand anything I'm telling you, or you do understand but you pretend that you don't, or maybe you do understand everything, but you don't want to understand... When I told him, Nina, that you stayed because of him, he almost fainted. He grabbed hold of a bookshelf, turned around very pale, then he started going red, then going dark, until he completely went black in the face. He was shouting so much that all the windows were shaking: "If all the women I had all over the world decided to emigrate, we would have a real refugee camp in here! Tell her to go right back to where she came from! If she turns up here, I shall deport her to Warsaw personally! I know her plans. She thinks I am a fool... Get out of here!" And then he threw me out.

Nina is covering her ears with her hands, whether because of Sava's shouting, or because of the words which she understands with the instinct of a betrayed woman. But as soon as he finishes with the 'quotations', she starts justifying herself hysterically.

NINA: Przez niego chciałam opuchich balet, kraj i rodzicow! To wszystko co miałam i kochałam w zyciu! On pisywał do mnie, codziennie dzwonił zebym przyjechała! Ja bym tego nie zrobiła dla przygody! Nie jestem gasia prowincjonalne! Prosz pana, niech go pan przyprowadzi albo niech mnie pan do niego zaprowadzi! Chca porozmawiać z nim! Prosz... Przez niego ja... ja...

The girl starts choking, then bursts out crying, gets hold of the scissors on the table and lifts them with both hands.

NINA: Przyprowadzcie go! Albo sia zabija!

SAVA: Nina! No!

He jumps up and gets hold of her hands. Nina surrenders and starts sobbing and wailing. Sava walks her to the sofa. Helps her to sit down... A thin trickle of blood appears on his right arm. Nina fearfully looks at the blood on his arm.

NINA: Zranilam pana? Sawa, niech mi pan wybaczy. Prosz, niech mi pan wybaczy! Juj sama nie wiem co robi... Juj nie wiem...

She pulls out a silk handkerchief out of her bosom and starts bandaging his arm... He wipes her tears off her face with his soot-covered hand, leaving a black trace.

SAVA: Nina, do you speak English? English?

NINA: Tak, tak.

SAVA: My friend, the poet, speaks English... I'll bring him right now. This makes no sense anymore: I am speaking, you are looking at me, you are speaking, I am looking at you. He is a great friend of mine. He will

not tell on you. He's been reading his poems against the police to me... You sit here, listen to the music... I'll be right back...

Sava pushes a button on the gramophone, puts the volume up, as if he was increasing a dose of sedatives and almost running, he leaves the house... Nina covers up her face with her hands, she lowers her head down to her knees as if taking a bow. She is crying silently, sadly, self-pityingly...

The chimney sweep comes back leading in Teya who is swaying. The poet has a mended sock on one foot, the other foot is bare; he carries a rose bud in his hand, having probably picked it somewhere in the courtyard.

SAVA: Nina, this is my friend Teya... I told him everything. He will...

Teya approaches the ballerina, takes a bow, kisses her hand and gives her the flower.

TEYA: Dear Miss, I'm honoured to meet you. As an admirer of your art, I am sincerely sorry for everything that has happened to you.

NINA: Dear friend, it looks as if I've made a terrible mistake. Tell me everything, I want to hear the truth no matter how unpleasant it may be.

TEYA: Miss, my dear friend has told you – though I'm not sure how much you've understood – that your Pavle is a man unworthy of confidence, respect or love. He has taken your great and pure love as a passing affair during his idle days in Warsaw. He is married and has two children... He doesn't want to see you... I'm sorry I had to tell you all this. There are so many nice things I would have liked to translate to you... Well, that would be about all... the essential.

NINA: So that means he doesn't want to see me?

TEYA: No, he doesn't.

Sava is curiously observing the conversation of the two young people, as if he was observing some mystical ritual: the ballerina in the costume of Desdemona, with a rose bud in her hand and the poet without a sock – in his little room so far away from artists and art – and they are speaking in English.

NINA: Is it possible, dear friend, that such a man exists?

TEYA: As you can see, it is. This world wouldn't exist if it weren't for Sava... Of course, in the great world of darkness and savagery, with every passing day, he becomes more and more a pure metaphor. A good, tender and lonely metaphor.

Nina lays her head on her knees. Teya stands still, like his own monument.

SAVA: You've told her everything?

TEYA: Yes. The most essential bits.

SAVA: No, you haven't.

TEYA: I have...

SAVA: You haven't. I haven't told you everything... I thought to keep quiet over something, but it's better that I tell her everything, so that she can decide for herself what she wants to do. Teyo, my friend, translate this to her: Pavle told me that she stayed here only because she hoped to get married and get a passport, and that she would then leave for Canada straightaway. She has an aunt there and she wanted to open a ballet school over there. Her aunt is also a former ballerina. He says, in her family everyone is doing some art or some sport convenient for emigration. He says, as she actually needs a passport rather than himself, she can get married to anyone. He says: "I don't want to be used as a bridge for Polish emigrants!"

TEYA: Uncle, please, I don't want to translate the banal insults of one of our bandits. He knows all about the faults of others and he never sees himself for the scum that he is.

SAVA: Teyo, I have to tell her everything that I've heard. I want to have clear conscience. During this time... I've... grown to love her... as if she was my own blood relative... She has to know everything, she has to decide what she wants to do. We can't go on keeping things hidden anymore. Tell her to make her mind up and either go back to her country or to marry someone else. If it is true, if there is only a spec of truth in his claim that she only needs a passport so that she can go to Canada, here, translate to her – you know me as a man that I am, I am prepared to marry her, like that, fictionally. I tell you, from the bottom of my heart, I really want to help her. We'd get married tomorrow... And as soon as she gets the passport, she can go. I have some money, I can sell something – and I'll have enough to buy her a ticket to Canada. If she makes it over

there, she can return the money to me, if not – never mind... You know, it's better that she leaves me, when we have made an honest agreement, than to leave somebody who has really fallen in love with her. Why should she do put somebody through something which she herself has had to suffer...

He takes a small red box out of the pocket of his chimneysweep's shirt; keeps it on his palm for a while, and then opens it carefully. A tiny diamond sparkles on an engagement ring. Nina is confused, looking at the sparkling ring on a black palm.

A police siren is heard from the outside, and the little room lights up with the rotating blue light of the police car. Nina shrinks and covers herself up with the blanket. Without any warning, as if coming into his own home, the former lodger Vule, comes into the room. After many years, he has come for the first time for a 'visit'.

TEYA: You can talk to him without me. I don't understand his language. I would need an interpreter.

Teya angrily leaves... The policeman sits at the table. Sava is standing still in the middle of the room, still holding the ring on his palm. He doesn't know what to do and where to go. The music of Tchaikovsky sounds as if coming from another, more beautiful world.

The End of the First Act

Second Act

7. Theatre Informs on Life

Sava the chimneysweep and the policeman sit at the table. They are silent. Nina is crouching on the sofa. She is looking fearfully at the uniformed man, who doesn't even take notice of her – as if she doesn't exist.

Nobody asks any questions, and without questions there is no conversation. The policeman makes a sudden movement with his right hand; he has caught a fly and throws it on the floor. A blunt hitting noise is heard, as if he has thrown a grain of wheat... Then he lays his hand on the table again, as if nothing has happened. Sava takes a deep breath, looking at the dead fly on the floor.

SAVA: I don't know why we are getting so many flies, butterflies, cockroaches, mosquitoes, yellow ants, mice, rats... Maybe they are gathering around former people.

POLICEMAN: In my village, the flies gather around cattle... lizards gather around the flies... and snakes gather around the lizards.

SAVA: Are they poisonous?

POLICEMAN: Doesn't even have to bite you, it's enough for it only to look at you... All snakes are poisonous, only some of them pretend they are not.

SAVA: Mushrooms are very poisonous too.

POLICEMAN: Yes, but the biggest danger in mushroom picking are bombs and mines. It's a real wonder how mushrooms always grow around mines. As if metal attracts them... Sometimes, at night, we are sitting around the fire, and suddenly, somewhere in the mountains – an explosion! Some wolves came across a mine. The day after we usually find several of them... unless the scavengers take them away.

SAVA: There are many wolves were you live?

POLICEMAN: Well... our village is called Wolfville... I am – as you know – called Vule Wolfich... In my part of the world, villages and people get their names either from some physical defect or from animals. My uncle is called Tom Bum, from Snakes Village.

SAVA: Where do you get so many wolves from?

POLICEMAN: Well... to tell the truth, it's all our own fault. One year we killed off all the bears. As soon as we killed off the bears, hordes of wolves sprang up.

SAVA: A wolf is not much worse than a bear?

POLICEMAN: No way... A bear is a kingly, noble animal. A wolf is evil, treacherous. Not to mention the fact that a bear sleeps through all the human suffering. A wolf can't wait for snow and storm. The worse it is for man – the better it is for wolf. At night they plough paths through mountains as if an army had walked through. As soon as it gets dark, they sit waiting in front of your door.

SAVA: Why did you kill off the bears then?

POLICEMAN: Why!?... Because we always work against ourselves. Enemies only give us a hand, from time to time.

SAVA: You were good hunters?

POLICEMAN: Ah! When we went hunting, we only ever carried a bullet each. One hunter – one bullet. One bullet – one prey... These days, you can't see the hunters for the weapons. As if they were going to war.

The walkie-talkie on the policeman's belt beeps. Vule takes the handset and switches it on. A metallic voice is heard.

VOICE: Sorry, mate. Just wanted to play you your song.

POLICEMAN: What song?

VOICE: Your song: "A Girl Set Fire to a Falcon's Nest".

The volume goes up and the song is heard. Vule is looking at the receiver, deep in thought, as if he's forgotten where he is... He switches off the walkie-talkie.

POLICEMAN: My mate from the car... Young, cheerful...

They keep quiet...

Nina is listening to their conversation, probably thinking that the policeman is interrogating the poor man. Vule is staring at his shiny shoes and has shrunk up a bit. As if he is suddenly very ashamed.

Sava gets up indecisively.

SAVA: What could I offer you? Would you like a glass of good brandy... You haven't called round for years, you can't really leave without anything.

POLICEMAN: No thanks... I don't drink... Since five years ago... Not a drop.

SAVA: Why not?

POLICEMAN: Just because of hunting. Because of what happened the last time.

SAVA: What happened?

POLICEMAN: Ah... Leave it... Hm! Ts, ts, ts, ts... If I were to tell you, you'd think... Hm!

SAVA: Why, what happened?

POLICEMAN: Well... five years ago I get a call from my folks. They say, the wild boars have eaten up everything. Even the wolves have dwindled... I set off, get home, my father's locked himself in... And he was ill already. All that mountain of a man turned into a stick... We put on the hunting clothes, take out the guns, and in the evening we set off – me, my late dad, the late Milo and the late Buda... First we stop at the late forester's and there we meet up with the late Cheda and the late Ibro... So we all agree to cross the river at dawn and to make a trap right next to the cliff... At the river bank the late teacher Krsta was waiting for us. He had already made a raft, but the Tara river rose like a sea. As wide as it is deep, foaming and frothing like a rabid dog... He's sitting there, by the side, smoking... smoking... one after another... he's put his legs up on a tree-stump, and he's smoking. Keeps quiet and keeps smoking...

SAVA: Who's smoking?

POLICEMAN: Rade the ferryman... The late Rade is smoking and he says: "It won't make it across such a big water, guys..." But no use! We've made up our minds... Half-way through, the raft falls apart like a paper-boat... I was the only one to swim out.

SAVA: You were drunk?

POLICEMAN: Drunk!? Ruined! I wouldn't have made it either, had I not taken hold of a wild boar who was swimming across the river... I was saved by the very creature I'd set off to kill.

SAVA: Incredible...

They are silent again...

Sava is looking at the ballerina clandestinely. The girl has put her arms around her knees, she's almost stopped breathing.

POLICEMAN: You must keep those pigs?

SAVA: I must... You see what a crisis we live in.

POLICEMAN: Crisis, crisis, crisis! What does that word mean any more when you hear it a thousand times every day, even the government keeps repeating it! It is by now only the crisis of the word 'crisis'. Unlike us, the Germans lost the war, they were beaten to the bone, and now they've risen again as an economic super-power! And they could've still had a big crisis.

SAVA: Excuse me, but that's not our case.

POLICEMAN: How can it not be?

SAVA: I mean it's very important whom you lose a war with.

POLICEMAN: You mean, it's even more important whom you win a war with?

SAVA: I haven't said that.

POLICEMAN: But you thought it.

SAVA: Let's leave thoughts alone, let's talk about words... Though, it's true, thoughts are stronger than words. My late uncle used to say: "Leave arms aside – does anyone dare thought-wrestling me!?"

POLICEMAN: Yeah...

SAVA: So...

POLICEMAN: So... Yeah...

SAVA: Yes. Yes.

POLICEMAN: Well... almost... Yes... When you think about it...

SAVA: Hm... Do you miss your village?

POLICEMAN: Lucky that one who doesn't have to dream of his village... An old adage which I've made up myself, out of pain... Where is that request of yours? That chimneysweep of yours.

Sava takes a folded, soot-stained piece of paper out of his pocket. Vule takes off his hat, and wipes his neck with a handkerchief.

SAVA: I don't know whether it's written properly. Have a look and if something needs adding... or taking out... Here.

POLICEMAN: Handwritten? Please, read it out, if you don't mind... And find someone to type it up for him...

SAVA: Dear Comrades Policemen, I am writing with a friendly request on behalf of my wife and myself. We would like to ask you to imprison us at the beginning of November and keep us in prison until the end of March, or even April if the winter is too long and too cold. I have taken an early retirement because of sciatica, lung problems, heart problems, varicose veins, kidney failure and eye problems, and my pension is such that it is almost imperceptible. We are old people and we wouldn't like to make any problems so that you have to arrest us because of thefts and cheating; we are honourable people and have always lived that way – which has after all brought us into this situation. We have been thinking about what we might do to earn six months of imprisonment without having to compromise ourselves too much. I have been asking around, and some people have given me advice to go out to a public place and scream insults at our greatest historical personalities who have in any case made it possible for us to have all this that we don't have...

POLICEMAN: Hang on a minute... Has he given any particular reason why they are making the request?

SAVA: He has: I am writing because I have been very concerned about the case of my friend Steve Chardak, a retired chimneysweep, who has recently bought four coffins – one for himself, one for his wife and one each for his mother and father, because he has heard that the price of coffins would go up 280 per cent by next month. Steve wouldn't have had so much money and he was afraid that he might have remained unburied, which would have caused problems to his family and to society, and he wouldn't have been in a position to help. Dear Comrades Policemen, if the coffins do go up by 280 per cent, I would have to put aside my whole pension for the rest of my life for me and my wife, and that on condition that we are not much worse off than we are now. You Comrades, please have a think about it and let us know when to come for an arrest. You don't have to send a car and your people, we know where you are and we can come on foot. In return, I would clean your stoves, fireplaces and chimneys, and my wife could cook and wash dishes. We wouldn't just sit there for free, but we would like to stay there like honourable people. Yours, Velya Popich... There.

POLICEMAN: OK... Find someone to type it up for him...

Long silence... Sava is looking at Nina, and the policeman at his big hands on his knees. Sava sighs and turns back to his former lodger.

SAVA: Is it necessary?

The policeman keeps quiet, without raising his head.

SAVA: You didn't come voluntarily? They gave you an order?

The policeman keeps quiet.

SAVA: Will she have to return to Poland accompanied by the police? Will they insult and condemn her over there?

The policeman keeps quiet.

SAVA: You could've come for the first time for some nicer reason... Can I ask you a favour like an old friend?

POLICEMAN: Go on.

SAVA: Take her later on tonight. Give me some time, I want to... I have to help her. Please do me the favour.

POLICEMAN: And that's all?

SAVA: That's all.

POLICEMAN: How... are you going to help her?

SAVA: I'll find Yagosh. I'll tell him everything. His brother is a poet, he must respect artists. She was cheated by some Yugoslav man, it would be nice if another Yugoslav man could help her a little. It's not nice, Vule, if she doesn't meet a humanlike guy in this city, even if they return her back. It would be a shame because of good people and the city itself.

The policeman gets up.

POLICEMAN: When should I come back?

SAVA: Well... around six, seven... The later the better... I do understand you, Vule. There are too many terrible animals in your village. I wouldn't go back there either.

POLICEMAN: Never mind about that.

SAVA: I'd only like to know one thing. Who told you?

POLICEMAN: No one... just, personal-

SAVA: No one?

POLICEMAN: No one... I saw it all in the theatre last night. If you'd come with me, Sava, you would've been awe-struck. I have never seen or heard anything like that in my entire life.

SAVA: Someone in the theatre told you she was here.

POLICEMAN: No! I saw it all on the stage. How the ballerina danced in the ballet, and how she was in the container while the chimneysweep and the policeman were talking, and how the chimneysweep brought her home, and how he bought her a gramophone so she could practise...

SAVA: Where did you see it, Vule? What are you talking about?

POLICEMAN: I wouldn't believe you either if you were telling me. A play like that is on at the theatre. One ballerina - just like her, one chimneysweep - just like you, one policeman - just like me. And all this I'm telling you, and you listening to me, and the car waiting for me outside, and her shaking on the sofa - all of that, exactly the same. I swear, Sava, exactly the same, only, for example... if there was an auditorium over there and I was sitting in the front row.

He is pointing at the auditorium, where there is a uniformed policeman, Vule's lookalike, sitting in the front row.

POLICEMAN: All the same. Me - on the stage, me - in the auditorium. The audience recognizes me on the stage... and in the auditorium... and then the people were turning towards me. And when I was coming out of the theatre they asked me: "Will you really arrest the ballerina? It's a bit awkward, she is in the home of your friend. But you will have to, now you know where she is." And they asked the same questions of that policeman in the play, and he told them: "I'll have to. I wouldn't like to hurt my friend, but now everybody knows where she is." And in the play, he told his boss about it in the morning, and the boss issued an order for her arrest. And he goes to your place and after a chat about his village, you ask him a favour not to arrest her until later that evening. And he agrees... And in the play the car hooting was also going on like this... And the policeman also shouted from the door: "Wait a minute! Wait!"

The policeman goes to the door, while talking about 'that policeman' and shouts at his colleague in the car to wait for him.

SAVA: Dear God, Vule, what are you saying... You're telling me that theatre is informing on life?

POLICEMAN: I don't know, Sava, but I couldn't sleep all night... I'll see you tonight. Take care.

He starts to go... Stops at the door, turns around and conspiratorially tells him:

POLICEMAN: I'll tell you something, but, please, let it stay between us... That one fell.

SAVA: Which one?

POLICEMAN: That one?

SAVA: Which?

POLICEMAN: The one... we were waiting for... Janangu Debang

SAVA: Where did he fall?

POLICEMAN: Over there?

SAVA: Where, for God's sake?

POLICEMAN: Over there, at home. Our papers won't write about it. They'll see him off with all the ceremony as if he didn't fall, but as soon as he leaves the country, they'll announce that he fell. However, it seems that it's not all that bright for him. Nobody wants him.

SAVA: How did he fall?

POLICEMAN: They pulled him down. As soon as he left the country, the people made a counter-revolution.

SAVA: A counter-revolution?

POLICEMAN: That's when a new revolution happens very quickly restoring everything to its previous state, as if the revolution never happened. Two revolutions take place, but nothing changes, apart from the size of the population. The word speaks for itself: counter-revolution.

SAVA: Strange.

POLICEMAN: We don't know what to do with him. If he had only trained in something.

SAVA: He's without a job now?

POLICEMAN: Without anything. Since it's grown cold, they've found him a coat... His wife found someone else who is the same as this one. He was in power for ten days, they didn't even know it wasn't him. And this one just got a message from him, telling him that they'd eat him up if he returns.

SAVA: Listen, Vule, could I ask you another favour?

POLICEMAN: Go on.

SAVA: Can you recommend her to receive a passport for Canada, and I'll find this one a job.

POLICEMAN: A chimneysweeping job?

SAVA: Why not?

POLICEMAN: Sava?

SAVA: I'm not asking him to steal. He'd be eating black and bitter bread, but honourably earned. Maybe even for the first time in his life.

POLICEMAN: You haven't had enough problems with the Polish ballerina, you only need the toppled president of Joufamba? Dear Sava, will you ever be as good to yourself?

SAVA: There... I agree to anything... What's the ending of that story like?

POLICEMAN: Which story?

SAVA: In the theatre?

POLICEMAN: You mean, the very end? Well... quite dark, for that chimneysweep... Like, he... Leave that now... Theatre!!!

SAVA: What happened?

POLICEMAN: Nothing.

SAVA: Tell me.

POLICEMAN: Well, like you... like he... commits two suicides.

SAVA: Two suicides?

POLICEMAN: Yes... I went last night and – never again! It's better that you didn't go. I'll be back at six.

He leaves the flat in a hurry... Sava goes over to Nina, sits next to her on the sofa.

SAVA: Nina, we have to go and find a friend of mine straightaway. He will do us... he will do you a favour, for sure. He is a very important and powerful man. If he pulls his strings, and he should – I've done him many favours too...

The girl rests her head on the chimneysweep's shoulder; her back is shivering like the back of a frightened animal.

SAVA: Please, don't cry. When you cry I can't think of anything... Calm down... and then we'll go.

The girl wipes her eyes. The chimneysweep gives her a strong and protective hug. Somewhere in some garden, the fiancé Leopold Vazhik's cries can be heard: Nina, Nina, Nina!

8. An Attempt of Murder Off-Stage

The unfortunate Teya is lying on the table amid books and manuscripts. His legs are seen under the table; the right sock is on his right foot, but the left is still being done by the poor sister in mourning.

His brother Yagosh enters the little room. He's turning around, looking for something.

YAGOSH: Teyo, have you seen my grey tie anywhere? Teyo!

Teya lifts his head, looking at his brother, startled.

YAGOSH: You fell asleep at the table?

TEYA: It seems so... I fell asleep.
YAGOSH: When you never sleep like all the normal people.
TEYA: I don't live 'like all the normal people' either.
YAGOSH: And how do you live? I'm very interested – how do you live?
TEYA: Like a dog.
YAGOSH: You are doing well for a dog.
TAYA: I'm still in the best of dog's years, brother. Last night our neighbour took a dog out for a walk, and I – took myself. Everyone's walking their own dog.
YAGOSH: Were you barking?
TEYA: We did. Me and the neighbour. He was barking about how he bought the dog so that he could at least feel like a man beside him.
YAGOSH: Why don't you get a dog?
TEYA: It's too late, brother. I'm too much of a dog as it is.
YAGOSH: You think it's too late?
TEYA: I do.
YAGOSH: Excellent! Excellent!
TEYA: What is excellent?
YAGOSH: That you started to think... Do you have anything like a decent tie?
TEYA: I have... a collar and a chain. You at least have someone to walk you.
YAGOSH: I'll get you a shirt! A madman's shirt! I'll sort your head out, you madman! Go away now! Away!

Yagosh runs out of the house. Teya waves his head and starts studying a manuscript. He gets hold of his head as if it's someone else's and very heavy.

The sister is mending the sock, and from time to time she sighs as if she hasn't breathed for years. Yagosh runs into the little room, he's turning around as if looking for something.

YAGOSH: Teyo, have you seen my grey tie anywhere? Teyo!

Teya lifts up his head, looking at his brother, startled.

YAGOSH: You fell asleep at the table.
TEYA: I didn't... Earlier on I fell asleep and I dreamt that you were waking me up. Now I'm awake.
YAGOSH: What are you on about, I've just woken you up.
TEYA: You haven't.
YAGOSH: You have to sleep at the table, when you don't sleep like all the normal people.
TEYA: Please, I know it all. You've told me everything. I've just dreamt about us arguing about how I live.
YAGOSH: Well, how do you live? I'm really interested – how do you live?
TEYA: Please, Yagosh, don't start.
YAGOSH: Where on earth is my tie, I'll be late.
TEYA: You won't be late, you said it all yesterday. I was listening to your speech at the opening of the Cultural Centre.
YAGOSH: You were there? I didn't see you.
TEYA: You didn't see anyone. The speaker's box was two kilometres away from the people. But you were very well heard. You have a very good sound system.
YAGOSH: The strongest possible. Was it rustling?
TEYA: Yes – in your head.
YAGOSH: So, I said something wrong.
TEYA: Yes.
YAGOSH: What, for example?
TEYA: Everything.
YAGOSH: Everything? Really, all of it?
TEYA: Really, all of it.
YAGOSH: And nothing right ever slipped out?
TEYA: No. You were very careful not to let it slip.
YAGOSH: Very interesting... And you heard the whole speech?
TEYA: The whole speech. Out there on the field, without a trace of shade, in the burning sun, you were speaking for three hours. The children forgot all their songs, the flowers in their hands wilted and their shirts

were all wet with sweat. There was a terrible heat; the parents looked at the poor children hoping to God that you'd finish as soon as possible or that you'd get a stroke. They were wondering: "What kind of a Cultural Centre will this be if it's being opened in such an uncultured way?" And you, my dear brother, it never occurred to you to stop and say something simple and understandable. And in the end the sun-stricken children were reciting your programmatic poetry, which it is inhumane to have to learn by heart in the first place.

YAGOSH: Our programmatic poetry? Our poetry? You've made a small mistake, my dear brother. Those are the poems of your greatest and best poets. Your poems.

TEYA: And who chose exactly those poems?

YAGOSH: Your best teachers. And they were recited by your best pupils. And your best parents were listening.

TEYA: You want to say that we are working against ourselves?

YAGOSH: You are, my brother.

TEYA: And you are just giving us a hand?

YAGOSH: No, we are just making it a little difficult for you. You have every right to work against yourselves. However, you and your humility, hypocrisy and idiotic cunning are the source of such stupid mistakes that we are completely taken aback... For example, yesterday I was against the idea to light the fire and dance dances around it on 30 degrees Celsius as if you were some African tribe. Of course, they are dancing on 50 degrees over there, but their purpose is completely different – to rid themselves of evil spirits.

TEYA: And we are dancing in order to attract them!

YAGOSH: Exactly, my brother! Exactly! Even African tribes wouldn't do that. You are attracting them, and when they turn up, you are clutching your heads and wondering about what you have attracted, what has happened to you. What do you want? What did you want for the last half century? You want somebody to read your mind and eavesdrop on your whispers and prayers? Or do you want somebody to take your drunken lamentations seriously and read your nightmares? You want somebody to kill themselves in guessing your secret wishes? And which one of us could do that for you, which one of us is capable of that, when we are – as you know – stupid, simple and primitive? Do tell us, brother, what you want – but speak as a people, not only the five of you. Agree between yourselves like people and say: "We don't want to dance around fire on 30 degrees!" All right, extinguish the fire or the Sun! Extinguish what you like, for fuck's sake!

TEYA: And you'd agree?

YAGOSH: We'd have to, man.

TEYA: Shall I tell you when you'd 'agree', how you'd yield to our wishes and how you rule.

YAGOSH: Please do, I haven't got a clue.

TEYA: You apply the old, cattle-rearing trick: when you have to fit 15 sheep into a small, tight space for transportation, then the farmers push 20 sheep in by force, and after a while, when the sheep start to asphyxiate, they take out 3 and 17 remain – they feel very good, because to begin with there wasn't enough room even for 15. That's your understanding and agreement, all calculated in advance for when it comes to asphyxiation.

YAGOSH: And 17 happy sheep go on a long journey... Where could my tie be... That trick with sheep does not apply to you, my brother. You've said yourself you were a dog. You don't sleep at night, because you're barking at shadows and the stars while looking after an unhappy herd. And you bite, maliciously and in the dark, you bite me from behind.

He pulls some newspapers out of his pocket.

YAGOSH: You've laid this for me...this... this... this correction... in this... this... rubbish of yours...

TEYA: What correction?

YAGOSH: This... this is... your dog-like joke... "Correction: In the last issue of The Literary Magazine we published an extract from the book 'The Paths and Cul-de-sacs of the European Left' by Yagosh Krai. By mistake we signed the name of the professor Boro Milich under the extract. We would hereby like to apologize to professor Milich."

Teya laughs, Yagosh finds his tie in his jacket pocket.

YAGOSH: All of this that's being done nowadays would have taken someone to prison not so long ago.

TEYA: And do you know why you don't dare arrest anyone nowadays?

YAGOSH: Because we are fools!

TEYA: On the contrary, because you're very smart. If you arrest everyone who prevents you from realising all your fantastic plans, and you continue to make mistakes – because you know that you don't know how to do better – people would ask you: Who is your problem now? Why isn't it better without them? Whose fault is it now? This way, whilst the culprits are all out and about – you are all fine. They are the trouble-makers. Were it not for them – as it is not, you would have invented them – like you have.
YAGOSH: Go away! Away! You've really turned into a dog! A rabid dog!

Yagosh throws away the tie, goes to Teya like he's about to hit him, then he turns around and – he would have left the house had the doorbell not rung... He opens the door angrily. Sava the chimneysweep and Nina Herbert enter. The ballerina has a blanket around her shoulders and the dark man is carrying a gramophone.

SAVA: Good afternoon, dear friend.
YAGOSH: Good afternoon. What's the trouble?
SAVA: How do you know there's a trouble?
YAGOSH: Nobody comes to me without a trouble.
SAVA: Well, Comrade Yagosh...
YAGOSH: Yagosh, my friend. Or just Yago – like you used to call me when I was little... What's the problem?
SAVA: Dear friend, I beg you, help me... help us... help her...
YAGOSH: How can I help you, you, her?
SAVA: I'm sorry, it seems I've... we've come at a wrong time.
YAGOSH: I'm in a hurry. Tell me what the matter is.
SAVA: I'd like to ask... you...
YAGOSH: This one under the blanket is some artist?
SAVA: A great artist! She is...
YAGOSH: A world-class artist?
SAVA: A world-class artist, yes indeed.
YAGOSH: I knew it, as soon as I saw her like this, under the blanket.
SAVA: She is...
YAGOSH: Is there anyone in this country who is not a world-class artist? One writes two poems and immediately they want a flat – a world-class poet! Another one's written half a story, the other half follows – as soon as he moves in! One draws a rabbit, and immediately they want a studio – a world-class painter! My dear friend, I am not a building association for accommodation of world-class jesters! 'World-class' artists should seek assistance from the world, I'm here to help ordinary, simple folk. Builders, foundry workers, miners without the roofs over their heads. The working class in the government and on the streets.
SAVA: Comrade Yagosh...
YAGOSH: Do you have comfortable lodgings so that you can take a bath after all the roaming through smoke and soot? You don't. And why don't you?
SAVA: Well, I am...
YAGOSH: You've been cleaning other people's chimneys for thirty years. And you are a world-class chimneysweep.
SAVA: I'm not. I tried to clean in Düsseldorf, and I couldn't... Dear friend, she doesn't need a flat.
YAGOSH: She doesn't need a flat?
SAVA: No, she doesn't.
YAGOSH: She has a blanket! The first world-class artist who doesn't need a flat! So, she has a flat!
SAVA: She had. She is...
YAGOSH: Divorced! And when we give a flat, when we take it away from the workers, there they come after a year: they got divorced, they are out on the street again. The flats have gone around to lovers and philanderers. That's why I was suggesting that they should all get park-benches first.

Ballerina has hidden her face with a corner of the blanket. She's leaving... Sava is trying to stop her whilst still clutching the gramophone.

SAVA: Wait, Nina, please. Our friend is in a bit of a bad mood. He's not really like he is. I know him since he was this big. I taught him to walk... and talk... Teyo, my friend, please tell your brother who Nina is. Teyo...
TEYA: Introduce the lady, as it is customary.
SAVA: Comrade... Yago my son, the comrade... the lady is... the Polish ballerina is... Nina Herbert.

Yagosh stops in the middle of his angry pacing. He's looking at the dark neighbour as if he hadn't heard him properly.

YAGOSH: Who is the comrade?

SAVA: The ballerina – Herbert Nina.

YAGOSH: The ballerina, Herbert Nina?

SAVA: Yes, she is being sought at the moment, and we thought... I thought, if you could try...

YAGOSH: Ballerina, Herbert Nina. Uncle, you haven't fallen off some roof recently? What ballerina, man?

SAVA: She is, my friend. Ask your brother. I wouldn't introduce to you somebody who is not what they are.

He runs back and forth whilst talking, trying to hold the girl from leaving and justifying himself to Yagosh; on the way, he plugs the gramophone in, lays it on a table, pushes the button... The music of Tchaikovsky blares out.

SAVA: Nina, please, show us a little dance – only a couple of paces so that our friend can see that you are – you... Come on, Nina, they like to watch dancing and singing. Dear friend, she will only dance for you... Come on, Nina, just a couple of paces and a turn on your tip-toes.

The girl moves, makes a movement as if something is hurting her. In response to the pleading of her dark friend – who is waving his arms as if gathering birds – she makes a second and then a third stride... Then she rids herself of the horror and fear, and starts dancing as if she is on a big, magnificent stage... Yagosh sits down on a chair slowly, he is spellbound by the beauty under the blanket and the glorious dance. Sava has turned himself completely into a big, victorious smile; the dark man has turned into a white smile.

And somewhere in some garden, the cries of the fiancé Leopold Vazhik can be heard again: Ninaaa! Ninaaa!... Teya dives into a manuscript, as if he was feeling unwell because of the demeaning dance or as if he was copying the life that is happening around him. Sava turns up the volume and applauds – but towards Yagosh.

SAVA: Bravo! Comrade Yago, you are watching so beautifully!

Yagosh puts a finger to his mouth. He is watching Nina's dancing without a single breath. The music of Tchaikovsky is carrying her around the sombre, tense room... And when she has almost forgotten where she is and who she is dancing for, her fiancé Leopold Vazhik fly into the room – like a wind . The angry fiancé has finally found his estranged heart-throb. He shakes off the grey coat and remains in the costume of Othello from the unfinished dance at the National Theatre, and in one swing he tries to catch and restrain the ballerina, but she turns around and dances away from him. Crazy by endless roaming and crying, insulted and humiliated, Othello-the ballet dancer is becoming increasingly aggressive. Nina manages to escape likeso many times before in the well rehearsed scene of jealousy. During their dancing dispute, the appropriately inebriated Polish poet and translator, Mr Grabynski enters the house. He approaches the table and shakes hands with Teya, who offers him a seat. Mr Grabynski, just like Yagosh, is watching the domestic ballet with great pleasure, without sensing anything unusual in the sharp and sinister movements of the bewildered fiancé. After several particularly poignant turns of the ballerina – with which she has escaped the advances of the man 'outside his character' – Yagosh and Mr Grabynski enthusiastically clap and shout: Bravo! Bravo! Bravo! Their shouts are driving Nina to dance the scene the best way ever in her entire career. Only Sava feels perturbed. He turns to Yagosh, trying to tell him something, but the spellbound man is waving at him to calm down... And who knows how long their 'domestic scene' would've gone on for, had the angry fiancé not taken the girl by the hand. With a sudden move he turns her around, 'bends' her in the waist and across his knees and starts strangling her... Yagosh and Mr Grabynski start applauding again and shouting: 'Bravo!' thinking that the great scene is being played to its famous end. However, when the girl's arms flop, and she starts losing her breath, and when the angry man pushes her against the floor, everybody stands up confused. Leopold Vazhik is screaming at his fiancée:

OTHELLO-VAZHNIK: Zabij ci! Nina, ty mnie zdradzila! Taczysz po domach! Zabija cia, Nina, zabija!

SAVA: For God's sake, he's killing her! He's strangling her! People!

The chimney sweep runs to the struggling couple, grabs hold of the fiancé, trying to defend the powerless girl. Vazhik tears himself away, but his movements are still reminiscent of the balletic hero. But maybe that was only the effect of Thykovski's music, which turns the battle for life into a stylised choreography. Outside the house, the police car-breaks screech, accompanied by the shrill sirens and the rotating blue light. The policeman Vule runs right 'onto the stage'. He tries to restrain the bewildered ballet dancer, but the dancer manages to escape, bringing the policeman into an unfortunate and uncomfortable situation to have to 'dance' himself too. The famous scene of jealousy, seen all over the world so many times, thus turns into chaos, however a very apt chaos for these people and the times they live in. Teya watches the end of the 'domestic scene' with great contempt and then continues to write his manuscript. The policeman finally grabs hold of the fiancé, with an official gesture, he locks his arm behind his back and walks him towards Yagosh, who starts screaming into the ballet dancer's face.

YAGOSH: Are you mad?

OTHELLO-VAZHNIK: Zbij j! Ona nie bdzie dla wan tacznych! Zbij j!

YAGOSH: Take him away! Take him away!

POLICEMAN: Comrade Yagosh...

YAGOSH: What is it? What are you waiting for? Take him away!

POLICEMAN: I have an order to take her...

YAGOSH: She is my concern... Take the madman away!

SAVA: Thank you, comrade... my friend.

POLICEMAN: What shall I charge him with?

YAGOSH: An attempt of murder off-stage.

POLICEMAN: I don't... Yes, sir!

The policeman takes Leopold Vazhik away... Soon after the car drives away.

The chimney sweep has knelt beside the ballerina, holding her head like a little bit of water in his hands.

SAVA: Nina... My Nina... What has he done to you... Nina... Please say something... Comrade Yagosh, she is dying... Nina...

Yagosh comes forward. He is feeling her pulse with great trepidation... Nina lifts her head and opens her eyes.

YAGOSH: Would you like some water? Water?

SAVA: She doesn't understand our language.

YAGOSH: And how did you talk to her?

SAVA: Very carefully.

YAGOSH: Very carefully?

SAVA: Yes. Nina, would you like some water?

NINA: No... thanks... Sava.

YAGOSH: Mademoiselle, parlez-vous francais?

NINA: Un peu... mais je comprend tout.

YAGOSH: Chere mademoiselle, je vous presente mes excuses les plus plates parce que tout est arrive a cause de ma negligence. Je pensais q'il s'agissait d'un jeu, que vous et votre ami repetiez la scene que j'avais vu au theatre. Pardonez-moi, s'il vous plait.

NINA: Ce n'est rien... monsieur... J'ai pense la meme chose... Excusez-moi que je me ressaisisse... Aidez-moi a me lever, s'il vous plait.

YAGOSH: Oui... Oui...

Yagosh helps her to get up, holding her up by the waist... Sava remains kneeling on the floor.

SAVA: She was, my dear friend, cheated by one guy of yours... and ours.

YAGOSH: Chere mademoiselle, ce soir-la apres spectacle, je suis reste au theatre a cause de vous. J'esperais vous voir a la reception. Ja voulais vou feliciter de tout mon coueur. Je ne suis pas un grand connaisseur de ballet, mais apres votre performance, j'ai compris pourquoi les gens vous admirent et boyc aiment tant. Avec votre permission, je voudrais vous feliciter maintenant... J'ai ete comme encorcele par votre dance.. et par vous-meme.

Yagosh bows and kisses her hand... He keeps his lips on her hand for a very long moment – or maybe only it seemed that way to Sava, who is watching them from his kneeling position. The French language, nice words and a kiss on the hand have revived Miss Nina Herbert.

NINA: Je vous remercie, monsieur.

YAGOSH: Je me permettrai de vous demander, ma chère mademoiselle, de venir avec moi. Après tant de désagréments inutiles, vous avez bien besoin du repos. Considérez-vous comme dans votre ville, parmi vos plus chers amis. Ma voiture est dans la cour. Permettez-moi...

SAVA: Will you help her?

YAGOSH: Of course, of course. After so many years, I have finally met someone who is indeed a world-class artist... She will now go to my place to recover a bit and to have some rest, and tomorrow we'll sort out all the formalities. Are there any belongings of hers at your place?

SAVA: No... And where is she going now? You are... dear friend... a bachelor... On your own... and a young man.

YAGOSH: Yes. You are, also, a bachelor, and besides you are an older man. You wanted to tell me something or to ask me something? You, dear friend, are keeping quiet very loudly?

SAVA: I mean, does she also want to... She has already been cheated on by one guy of yours... ours... Nina, you are going now? You are going? Nina, do you understand me? Do you understand me, Nina?

YAGOSH: Just 'very carefully'. Very carefully.

NINA: Thank you, Sava... Thank you very much, my Sava.

The girl embraces him, gives him a grateful kiss, picks up the blanket off the floor and makes for the door. Yagosh is following her closely, keeping his hand on her waist. They leave... Sava is still kneeling. He is lost for words. His glance is empty. He approaches the table on his knees, as if he doesn't have the strength to get up. Mr Grabynski is looking at him pityingly, sadly.

SAVA: Teyo, my friend, your brother has taken Nina away. Have you seen, Teyo? How can you keep on writing whilst all sorts of terrible things are happening? I was begging him to help me like a man... and he... in his car... to his flat... Teyo!?

TEYA: Why are you so surprised, uncle? You know very well that there are some people you should never ask for help – even if it's a matter of your own life and death; because when they decide to get their 'dues' – one regrets that one is still alive.

SAVA: He'll cheat on her too... and I'll – die of shame. I'll die, Teyo... She's forgotten the gramophone and the records. And the handkerchief with which she bandaged my arm. It's all hers. Nina! Nina!

The sound of Yagosh's car leaving the house. Sava unplugs the gramophone and collects the records. He runs out of the house, carrying everything in his arms. Mr Grabynski shakes his hands with Teya, who presents him with several books. Somewhere in the gardens the voice of Sava the chimneysweep is heard like formerly the voice of Leopold Vazhik used to be heard: Ninaaa! Ninaaa! Ninaaa!

Teya sees his Polish friend to the door, talking to him whilst the chimneysweep's voice is fading in the distance.

TEYA: You see, Mr Grabynski, our neighbourhood is full of pitiful, poor and unfortunate people; they are the same like those people who we have a great understanding for when we are reading about them as heroes of good literature. As soon as we close the book, however, that's when we should really try to understand them – to help them, before they make their way into the world of literature. If we did that, maybe there would be less good books around but certainly there would be less unhappy people.

Mr Grabynski nods, embraces the books he's just received, sighs and leaves the house. Teya walks back to the table, sits down and continues to write very hurriedly. He and his sister Joy are once again on their own. After the departure of the passionate people, music, dancing and noise, the sombre house is even more empty and sombre.

The sister gets up, holding onto a painful spot on her back. She comes to the table and lays the mended sock on the manuscript.

JOY: Teyo, put some clothes on... you'll get a cold.

TEYA: Yes... sorry, what did you say?

JOY: Here's the other one. I've mended the other one, too. I hope you'll get some money for all this work, so you can get new socks.

TEYA: I hope so... Had it not been for all these guests, I might've finished the last scene too... It's good you didn't get involved. You'd've only got upset.

The sister moves so she can see his face a bit better. She crosses herself.

JOY: What are you talking about, Teyo?

TEYA: About them.

JOY: About whom, my dear brother? Who are 'they'? My dear God, my Lord, my good and only one, our Father. You can see everything, give me some strength and some hope, help me to persevere, help me preserve this little bit of strength and sanity, my dear God...

Telephone rings... The sister walks over to it, still looking at the brother who is writing away. She lifts the receiver.

JOY: Hello? It's you, my brother... What's happened? It can't be? Oh, God... Oh, dear Lord... Where is he now? Yes... Can you help him? Please help him, for me... Do everything you can, as if you were doing it for me... He was everything to us after the death of our father... Oh, dear... Where is he? I have to see him... No, no, no, I have to see him straightaway... Does he need any blood? I'm going, straightaway, I'm setting off!

She puts the phone down in floods of tears. She goes to look for something, turning around, not knowing what to do and where to go... Teya has got up.

TEYA: What happened?

JOY: Our Sava... Sava has... had an accident... Oh, dear...

TEYA: Where did he have the accident?

JOY: He fell off Yagosh's roof... Our Sava...

TEYA: Eh, my dear uncle, my dear uncle... He didn't fall off, Joy, he jumped off because of Nina.

JOY: He jumped off because of Nina? Which Nina?

TEYA: The one that our brother took away. Nina Herbert, the Polish ballerina.

JOY: Sava jumped off because of a Polish ballerina?

TEYA: Yes.

JOY: The one that our brother took away?

TEYA: Yes, our brother. Yours and mine.

JOY: Teyo! What are you talking about, Teyo!? What are you talking about, you madman!? Our brother's fault? My Yagosh? Go away! Leave me alone! Teyo! Mad Teyo! Mad Teyo! Mad Teyo!

Joy grabs a black bag and leaves the house screaming. Frightened because of his bewildered sister, the unfortunate poet gets hold of some shoes and puts them on hastily – the left one on the right foot, and the right one on the left foot, then he runs out of the house calling:

TEYA: Joy! Wait a minute, Joy! Joy!

9. The Second Suicide

Sava the chimney-sweep is lying in intensive care.

He's tied to a machine which counts the beats of the heart and soul. He's receiving blood in the vein of his left arm. A bottle of blood is hanging on an iron stand. He has an oxygen mask on his face. The soot-covered head on a white pillow looks like it's sleeping.

The policeman Vule arrives for a private/official visit. The uniformed man comes to the bed, looking at the beeping screen, as if he's checking how alive Sava is.

POLICEMAN: Sava, do you hear me, Sava... It's me, Vule... The policeman Vule, your former lodger... I was on duty when you had the accident... The doctors say you'll make it... They say, the worst is over... Do you

hear me, Sava... My sister Yelena works here as a nurse... I told her to keep an eye on you... How did you fall off a roof which has a fence... What happened, Sava? Do you hear me?

Teya and Joy arrive. Joy comes to his pillow, silent, she's swallowing her pain. Teya talks, very quietly.

TEYA: Keep fighting, uncle.

Joy chokes, looks away and bursts out crying. Her brother takes her to the side, trying to calm her down.

TEYA: Joy, please... you heard what the doctor said... Joy...

The policeman waits for the woman in mourning to stop crying; comes to the pillow and bends over the unfortunate man.

POLICEMAN: Sava... tell me if somebody pushed you or threw you over? One can't fall off accidentally from up there... What happened, Sava? Some bandit claims that you jumped over the fence, but I don't believe it... I arrested him. He has a criminal record... Tall, fair, balding, unshaven, in a leather jacket, jeans and trainers... Did he push you over? Do you hear me, Sava? Just nod if you do... Or blink.

JOY: They threw him off. Somebody threw him off the roof.

TEYA: Joy, please... Nobody threw him off, he jumped himself off the roof of Yagosh's building.

JOY: Comrade, please don't listen to my brother, he's not normal. You don't know my brother, he's mad, poor thing.

POLICEMAN: I know him, I know him. And why do you, comrade, claim that he has jumped off? Why are you so sure?

TEYA: Because, comrade, my brother...

Yagosh Krai enters the room. He is in a spotless black suit, carefully groomed, and with a poise which only needs a carnation in the buttonhole. His sister embraces him, kisses him and starts crying on his chest.

JOY: My dear brother, please save me... Please, I beg you... He keeps accusing you for Sava's accident. He is trying to convince me that it's your fault... He says that my... that our Sava jumped off because of you.

POLICEMAN: I am a witness, Comrade Krai. He has made the same statement in my presence.

YAGOSH: My fault? Teyo?

TEYA: Just spare me impudence and bandit-style surprise. I've had it up to here with that aggressive surprise of yours! Up to here! Did you not take Nina Herbert away to your flat? The man asked you nicely to help him and you pranced on like a wild animal...

YAGOSH: Who did I take to my flat?

TEYA: Nina Herbert, the Polish ballerina.

YAGOSH: Joy, what is he on about? What's happened to him?

JOY: He's ill, my brother. I've been telling you for years that he's ill and that you should help him. He sees everything that's non-existent. He's mad, that's what's happened to him. He's mad!

TEYA: Who is mad, Joy? I see everything that's 'non-existent'. And what is non-existent? You all see it all but you are feigning that you are blind, deaf and dumb, because of the bandits and scum like this!

YAGOSH: Teyo...

TEYA: I'm not mad, but I'll go mad. Very soon, I'll really go mad, because you've done everything you could to make me go mad. This is becoming unbearable and intolerable for any normal human being. You either have to be scum – or go mad!

YAGOSH: Stop barking, Teyo, stop barking, you rabid dog.

TEYA: Honourable people can't bear to look at you any more, they are retreating, running away from you, dying in poverty or killing themselves like Sava. Your mafia-style successes are their impoverished lives and even more impoverished deaths. That's what you can have as much as you like of, and everything else is indeed non-existent!

YAGOSH: Take him away!

TEYA: The lords of poverty, suffering, bitterness and shame!

Teya screams with profound contempt, shaking his fists at his brother and pushing away the nurse who is trying to calm him down. His words and appearance are further emphasised by his badly worn shoes, which

are adding a tinge of great sadness, pity and powerlessness to everything. As if a clown has run out in front of a tank, trying to stop it in its tracks with his words and gestures... Yagosh shouts at the policeman.

YAGOSH: What are you looking at me for? Take him away!

POLICEMAN: I've had an order...

YAGOSH: To the first madhouse! To the first madhouse with the rabid dog! And I'll say when he is sane enough again! Take him away! Take him away!

The policeman grabs hold of the wiry Teya and without much effort takes him away. Yagosh embraces his sister protectively.

YAGOSH: Forgive him, Sava, if you heard him. Our unfortunate brother is ill. By the time you are better, he'll get over it too... Let's go, Joy.

JOY: Leave me... You leave me alone too... I'm not going anywhere... Nowhere... Sava, do you hear me... That goose you gave me for Sunday lunch – I let it go... It got better, and it flew away... Please, get better... You know... You know... Please, get better... Please...

Yagosh gets hold of his sister's hand and gently pulls her away from Sava's pillow. Takes her away... Somewhere in the corridors her hysterical crying can be heard. Sava moves his hands. Opens his eyes. With some effort he reaches a pipe on the bottle, tugs the arm bandaged with Nina's handkerchief and stops the flow of blood into it. The arm flops by the side of the bed, and some blood starts dripping from the pipe on the bottle. With the other hand he takes off the oxygen mask. The beeping noise of the electrocardiogram starts fading away. Losing consciousness, Sava the chimneysweep whispers:

SAVA: Nina... Nina... Nina...

And whilst the lights on the stage are fading and sticky darkness envelops the unfortunate chimneysweep, in the auditorium, the uniformed policeman – Vule's lookalike – is the first to leave his seat in the front row and exit from the auditorium. He leaves deep in thought, and somewhat confused, as if he had been in the theatre for the first time or as if the story disturbed him or moved him to leave straightaway.

One day, there will hopefully be

The End

Belgrade, 1987

The Propmaster

By Uglješa Šajtinac

Translation by Duška Radosavljević Heaney

This version has been published in
Three Contemporary European Plays: Escalation:obscene, The Propmaster, Hand in Hand;
Alumnus, Leeds University Press, 2000

Translator's Note

At first the script arrived in pieces, the last few pages missing. I read it on the train breaking out into spontaneous laughter, fully captivated by its language, its undertones of nostalgia, well crafted suspense and, above all, the main character – Zhiva. I didn't know anything about the play or the playwright.

I'd lived in exile from Yugoslavia and its theatre world for several years, struggling to understand what was happening to the country I once lived in, trying to find a sense of belonging on a larger scale and devoting myself to the studies of theatre. Then in 1997, I asked my friend Vladimir – then a student of Theatre Direction at the Drama Academy in Belgrade – to send me some new Yugoslavian plays, which might be worthy of translation. Reading "The Propsmaster" was more than reading a play – it was an experience, a revelation and a means of re-connecting with what was the best about my roots. I wanted to share it.

Presenting a Yugoslavian play to a British audience is problematic. There are no pigeon-holes as there is no significant history of Yugoslavian drama in English translation. The audience cannot know what to expect. On the other hand, the audience's expectations may have been formed by less than glorious political reputation of the Serbs over the last few years, or cultural stereotypes associated with the Balkans, Eastern Europe and communism. Consequently, I hesitated about laying such a tender story open to potential misinterpretation – and the translation of "The Propsmaster" remained a personal endeavour confined to the drawer of anonymity. It was an exercise, sections of which formed part of my final year project at Huddersfield University.

When I moved on to the Drama Department at Hull University, and the Performance Translation Centre invited contributions for potential inclusion in the Hull Literature Festival, I re-opened the drawer. I found that following the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia nothing could be at risk anymore and that if any play was to represent the country's new writing for the stage – it had to be "The Propsmaster". Its universal level, dealing with the human condition and the meaning of theatre at the time of crisis, speaks to everyone. Its fabula set in a provincial Serbian theatre and documented by a real life character needs no introduction... Its wit, warmth and truth say it all...

As a mutual friend and a kind of agent between Uglješa and myself, Vladimir – who has also had the honour of meeting the hero of this semi-biographical play – was invited to direct the English translation of "The Propsmaster". And this was only the beginning. We worked on the translation in rehearsals. The actors' generous contribution has been invaluable in making the script more colloquial, more sincere – more alive; I am grateful to them.

The song "Raskinulas more širokoe" – Zhiva's favourite, was the song of the Russian emigrants who left Russia after the Revolution – "The great big sea broke asunder...". Every Russian can sing it but the recording of it is impossible to find. The tune has travelled to the production via telephones and answering machines – a woman singing it on the phone in Ukraine, her daughter writing down the music in Bristol and then playing it on George's answering machine in Leeds...

The great big sea broke asunder... I've never met Zhiva, I wish I had. Those last few pages that first went missing in the post have been re-written by Life...

Our special thanks are due to the staff of the Drama Department, University of Hull, particularly Tony Meech and Carole-Anne Upton, as well as the staff of the Hull Literature Festival.

We are just as equally grateful to everyone involved in making this publication and performance at the festival possible, especially David Barnett and Steve Nicholson, Theatre Studies Department, University of Huddersfield and Mark Batty, University of Leeds.

And many others...

Duška Radosavljević Heaney,
April, 2000

Author's Preface

Monday. 3rd April. Zhiva is in a coma. The doctor advises us that we, as a family, should not live in hope that our grandfather and father will recover from the deep sleep. From the British isles there comes a message: it is necessary to write an introduction, as "The Propsmaster" is ready for publication in English. I am just doing that.

"The Propsmaster" as a story has always existed in me. The Zhiva from the play is almost the exact copy of the Zhiva in real life. My grandfather, a propmaster, a lexicon of theatrical and other anecdotes from life, has found his way into the play through a true friendship and understanding, which we shared as a definitely untypical grandfather and grandson. There was a sea of anecdotes on the paper. So what? Only when, as a student of dramaturgy, I realised that the time had finally come to write "The Propsmaster", I confronted the multitude of material that already existed for the play. Through the support of my professor Vesna Jezerkić and the assistant Boško Milin who had recognized the 'invaluable material', there occurred a motive for the play "The Propsmaster" to reach beyond the limits of a scholarly assignment. I worked hard. I was cutting things out, re-inventing the frameworks of the story and storylines, and searching for the essence. I wanted "The Propsmaster" to have an aroma of nostalgia so to counterbalance with the nostalgia the demise of all values and the negative anarchy which surrounded the setting and the heroes of the play. The heroes of "The Propsmaster" are people from 'the off'. This is one thing which could give rise to criticism as it constitutes an escapist thread of the story about three people in a theatre in Serbia, at the time when the whole of Serbia is one bad off-theatre. I do not mind such interpretations. I think I've succeeded at least in some ways.

In a small, improvised, homemade barber's shop, which my grandfather Zhiva had opened so he could as an old man continue giving haircuts to his contemporaries and in that way complement his miserable pension, in the frame of the mirror there stands a postcard from Hull. On the other side of the postcard, written in English, there are greetings from the actors who had just played in the premiere of "The Propsmaster" in Hull. I translated the greetings. Zhiva was proud. We were making new anecdotes. "There you are, Zhiva, now you are famous even in England!" – I was telling him. He was smiling.

Yesterday, in the last moments of consciousness, jokingly he mentioned 'Ascasio's death speech'. I told him off for that. I mentioned this translation.

It is night. I cannot sleep. In Serbia, when someone tells you not to live in hope, even if that someone is a doctor – don't live in hope.

But I am hoping. I am hoping that the English translation of "The Propsmaster" will find a good response with the readers.

Thanks to Duška.

Uglješa Šajtinac,
April, 2000

Director's Note

Several years before his death, Oscar Wilde said that he would not live till the twentieth century, and he died two months before its arrival. Zhiva, a propsmaster from a little town in Serbia, also felt that he belonged to an era which has finished, that he had no purpose in the new, coming one and indeed he left us two days ago – eight months before the arrival of a new calendar era.

What the actors of “The Propsmaster” and I tried to do, was to penetrate and understand the world of nostalgia and traditional values of this modest philosopher of life from Banat about whom the play was written.

The young propsmaster is a man who spends his youth in a world which has dispensed with everything it had previously been based upon. He finds his salvation in that which had been created over decades. This play, with three marvellously written characters and fantastic dialogue, gives us hope that we can live again in the world which builds and creates rather than destroys.

Vladimir Popadić,
April, 2000

Sadly, Živa Šajtinac died on 4 April 2000. We would like to dedicate the performance and publication of *The Propsmaster* to his memory.

THE PROPSMASTER

A full production of the play in the English translation was first performed on 7th February 2000 at the Drama Department, University of Hull and was sponsored by the Performance Translation Centre, University of Hull.

Cast:

- Živa (63)	Donald Roy
- Alex (34)	Sam Spruell
- Nada (48)	Diane Dubois

Director:	Vladimir Popadić
Production Manager:	Ed Kennon
DSM:	Hannele Niva
Music:	George Rodosthenous

[] Bracketed text indicates cuts for this production. Also, some stage directions given in the script were disregarded or changed in rehearsals – these alterations are not always indicated in this version of the script.

A Note on Pronunciation:

The vowels in Serbo-Croat can be long or short, but they are always clear:

- "A" is pronounced as in "car", never as in "ace";
- "E" - as in "red", never as in "even";
- "I" - as in "trip" or as "ee" in "steep" never as in "side";
- "O" - as in "hot" or as in "door", never as in "old";
- "U" - as in "put" or as "oo" in "pool", never as in "use";
- "C" is pronounced as "ts" in "cats", never as in "card";
- "Č" - as hard "ch" in "chair"
- "Ć" - as soft "ch" or "ty";
- "G" - as in "great", never as in "germ";
- "J" - as "y" in "yes", never as in "jug"
- "Š" - as "sh" or "s" in "sure";
- "Ž" is pronounced as "zh" or "s" in "treasure";
- The letter "Lj" or "lj" corresponds with a single sound "ly" as in "allure";
- "Nj" corresponds with the sound "ny", as in "lasagne";
- "Dj" corresponds with the sound "dy", as in "dew";
- "Dž" corresponds with the sound "dzh", as "j" or hard "g" in "judge".

In Serbo-Croat all foreign names are spelt phonetically. I have tried to guess the original spelling of some foreign names and have anglicised the spelling of some Russian and Yugoslavian names.

Monday. The propsroom. Shelves with small props, telephones, sabres, one small antique table which is being used as a coffee table. There are two chairs next to it which do not match it in style. In front of the shelves there is a chest with pieces of costumes strewn on top of it, including a creased flag of the Third Reich. To the side there stands an old barber's chair with head-rest. Nada, the cleaning lady, is sitting at the coffee table, pouring coffee into two cups. Alex is roaming through the props, picking out some old gramophone records, leisurely wrapped in paper envelopes. Nada is bored, wistful and deep in thought, Alex is nervous and short of breath due to the percentage of alcohol in his blood, which he tops up from time to time. He keeps losing grip of things in his hands. He takes an SS officer's shirt from the top of the pile and tries it on. Leaves it on, unbuttoned.

NADA: Oh, God forbid—

ALEX: Is that coffee ready yet? What is it, what are you looking at me like that for?

NADA: Nothing. You've just reminded me of my late Vidosav.

ALEX: Have I? What, your husband was in the SS?

NADA: Come on Alex, don't you remember my Vidosav?

ALEX: That's the last thing on my mind. I don't know where I am, as it is.

NADA: And I remember you as a little boy receiving your presents here for Christmas. You were a naughty little boy, you kept annoying your late Svetislav.

ALEX: Isn't there anyone left alive?

NADA: What can I do, I always remember Svetislav when I come to your propsroom. Your late father and master Živa always had stories to tell, always made fun of everything. Come on, your coffee's going cold.

Alex is trying to read the titles of the records.

ALEX: You remember my father better than I do, believe me. He was never at home; spent all his time in the theatre.

NADA: What have you got against your father. If it hadn't been for him and master Živa you'd never have got this job.

ALEX: Job... They've been messing about for fifty years, and now I have to tidy it all up.

NADA: If you ask me, their propsroom was never in such a state as it is now with you. If master Živa walked in now, he'd get a heart attack.

Alex puts a record on and goes to the coffee table. Sits down and slurps his coffee. A tune is coming from the gramophone and the words of a Russian song "Raskinulas more shirokoe, valyni bushuyut v dalyi..." Alex freezes momentarily, Nada's face lights up. She stands up.

NADA: That's master Živa's favourite song.

ALEX: Boring old story, I know....

Nada starts dusting the shelf.

NADA: I hear he is not well. My neighbour told me. She works in the hospital where he is staying. She took him a bag of oranges for me. I should go and visit him.

Alex nervously lights a cigarette.

ALEX: Now, you tell me, what do I need all this for!? How many new productions do we have each year? Times have changed, there used to be sixteen new productions a year. Different things are being put on now, all this is reject stuff. Classical theatre! God, when he starts going on: "Where is that gun from the 19th century!?". What does he need it for? As if anyone's still playing that stuff. No, they are not going to do it for the next hundred years. No more productions of that kind, understand? Off to the museum, to hell with all this!

Alex gets up, goes to the gramophone and takes the record off suddenly. Sits in the middle of the pile of things and starts sorting them out with an expression of disgust.

NADA: And what are you, some kind of a director? How do you know? I know why you are raging. The theatre advertised for a new propsmaster, that's your problem, isn't it?

ALEX: You hit the nail on the head! Do you think I'm stupid? I gave my notice in to the manager, that's why they advertised.

NADA: Really? And what are you going to do now? Really? You got a job on the farm!

ALEX: No, I didn't get it.

NADA: Why?

ALEX: They need an agricultural engineer, not a technician.

NADA: Well, you've got a degree in farming.

ALEX: I've got two years of study and five years of time-wasting. I haven't got the diploma. And how many times do I need to tell you, it's not a degree in farming but agriculture!

NADA: And you haven't finished that?

ALEX: I haven't.

NADA: Why?

ALEX: Emotional reasons...

NADA: Why, did you fall in love?

ALEX: The guess is correct, unfortunately.

Nada starts to laugh genuinely.

ALEX: What's funny?

NADA: Nothing, I apologise...

Nada laughs even more loudly, Alex is shouting.

ALEX: What's funny? I was twenty six then! I loved with all my heart! I didn't drink then...

NADA: I'm sorry, OK, now I'm really sorry...

Nada continues dusting, Alex is staring aimlessly.

NADA: If you only knew how difficult it was to find a job these days, you wouldn't let go of this one. As if I don't have children. Look at my daughter, she's selling coffee in a shop and she has a medical degree, and my son is starting on a new degree for the fifth time.

ALEX: Come on, as if I don't know why your son is starting again for the fifth time!?

NADA: And why do you think?

ALEX: Because he wants to avoid military service, so every year he re-takes his exams. He's got as many student cards as James Bond has passports.

NADA: Well, when his father died there was nobody to vouch for him and find him a job at the railway station. Why, do you think he couldn't bang the wheels with that hammer? Master Živa vouched for you when your father died because you are the son of his colleague, and you are behaving like this.

ALEX: I'm leaving peacefully. Without scandals. They'll find somebody else.

NADA: That just goes to show that theatre is falling apart. In the past, everybody used to love their job, and now, everybody's running away, hating what they do.

ALEX: And you? You are still carrying a love affair with your mops and buckets. You are in love with the toilet.

Nada stops dusting.

NADA: Listen you, I couldn't afford to be choosy thirty years ago. If I'd been choosy, I'd've got nowhere. In love with the toilet! As if love's got anything to do with work!?

ALEX: I meant a special kind of love—

NADA: What love! Work is work, love is love. When my late Vidosav and I decided to get married he was already working in the railway. We wanted a family, and I was sorry for him working. I thought – two salaries will make it easier for the children. I didn't have any education, I couldn't pick and choose. I was a cleaning lady in a building organisation, worked hard, among these untidy, messy people; after that I cleaned in an Arts Centre, and

over there it was even worse, all the work on my back—

ALEX: And so what? You came here to the theatre and you are still just a cleaner.

NADA: I am. I'm not complaining. For the last twenty years, if nothing else, at least I've seen a lot of plays, talked to clever people and learnt a lot. Who knows, perhaps I won't be a cleaner forever.

ALEX: Perhaps. Perhaps they'll give you a part in some play, ask you to direct a piece—

NADA: Oh, I've acted, you know. I was an extra once playing a peasant woman, then after that, I even played a lady at a ball in a George Feydeau's play. Diamond necklace, satin gloves, sipping champagne, nice manners. You think anybody could recognise me?

ALEX: No, everybody expected you to turn up with your bucket and a plunger and with gloves, but PVC gloves, not satin ones.⁵

NADA: If some people around here crapped less I'd have less work to do.

ALEX: Well, you see, you are right there.

NADA: At least I don't hate my job.

ALEX: I don't hate my job either.

NADA: Why are you running away then?

ALEX: I'm not running away I need a better salary.

NADA: And you've only just learnt the trade in the last five years. You think it's easy to find somebody else for that job? You have to train them all over again.

ALEX: Why are you getting uptight about it. You said yourself that theatre is falling apart. If it was destined to fall apart neither you nor I can save it.

NADA: You don't remember the days when this was a big theatre, that's why you are talking like that. I remember, and I want it all to be as it used to.

ALEX: With the greatest respect, but I don't know of any theatre being saved by a cleaning lady.

NADA: Everybody should take responsibility, including cleaning ladies!

ALEX: So, the actors and directors can take a break. Now you are taking the repertoire into your hands.

NADA: Very nice! You are already talking as if you don't have anything to do with this place. You should be ashamed. You coward. Deserter!

ALEX: OK, if you are so passionate about it, I'll recommend you to replace me.

NADA: You think I wouldn't be able to get around? I'd get all this in perfect order, you should see. Look at all this dust. Everything has to be moved and cleaned and returned to its place.

ALEX: Master Živa will teach you about the styles and periods, give you instructions.

NADA: Yes, I'd learn the trade with him, you should see. I have talent. He used to praise me, not only once. Ask him. We got on very well. And I used to protect his props from other cleaners.

ALEX: That story he hasn't told me yet.

NADA: Yes. They played "A Boat on the Green River". There was somebody called Capablanca in that play, and he played chess. There was this chess set among the props. But one pawn was lying down on the floor, I can't remember why, but that's how the director said it had to be. Yes it was a pawn! And the late Bosa, the cleaner—

ALEX: Another dead one—

NADA: She always used to sweep that pawn off when she cleaned the stage. Then I explained to her that she shouldn't do that, that it was part of the play, and that it had to stay there.

ALEX: Very good. That makes a good reference for you.

NADA: My reference is the fact that I've spent so much time here, I could've been born here, I could've even been your mother!

Nada leaves everything, starts collecting and throwing the cups onto a tray noisily, then cleans the table.

ALEX: So I don't have to bother. Soon you'll be sorting all this out, won't you. Wait I haven't finished my coffee!?

Nada gets stuck with all the things in the door.

NADA: I'm going before my sugar jumps up.

⁵ In performance this line changed to: '...with your bucket and plunger and a pair of marigolds'.

She leaves and slams the door behind herself. Alex waits a little, then he starts looking through the telephones that Nada had tidied up. He gets hold of one and plugs it in somewhere behind the shelf. He gets a bottle out of there as well, takes a generous gulp, and propped up against the shelf, he starts dialling a number.

ALEX: Hallo! OK, put it through! Hello, Alex speaking. Listen, five thousand is all right... You'll get the old weapons too. I've got some guns from the 1800s, there's one with a pearl butt, Mauzer, there are about twenty pistols, some handmade, there are fifteen or sixteen revolvers, I've got one parabella Walter, in working condition, beautiful barrel, it's got an ivory handle, and something written in English and an engraving that says Montenegro. I've got dozens of sabres, one is an original Kozak sabre. I've got some old telephones. Listen, that's just the small pieces, but listen... I've got a big leather ship-suitcase, it's got locks, it's very secure, I've got a silver samovar made in Vienna...

As Alex is listing things, the lights fade out gradually until a complete black out. In the dark, the same song as before "Raskinulas more shirokae..." is being played again from the beginning. Somebody's baritone is singing along on the stage which is gradually being lit. Alex is sleeping in the barber's chair, aback to master Živa who is standing in front of the messy pile of things. Živa is wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown on top. He looks through the things on the pile, takes his dressing gown off and puts on a very long caftan. Živa is a little old man with a beer belly and thick moustache. He is humming to the tune and looking around himself displeased. He takes one of the sabres from the shelf and turns towards the barber's chair. Goes to the gramophone and lifts the needle when the song is finished. With his left hand he skilfully rotates the barber's chair so that sleeping Alex is facing him. Živa is teasing Alex with the sabre, and Alex giggles disapprovingly.

ŽIVA: Come on, Aufstehen! "Only the army is going to make real men out of you, you donkeys!"
Where is that from?

Alex awakes suddenly, taken by surprise.

ALEX: Oh, hello, master Živa, where've you come from?

ŽIVA: From "Schweik". You don't remember. What is this? I expect an explanation.

As Alex tries to get up, Živa is poking the sabre at him pushing him back into the seat.

ALEX: Aren't you in hospital? How are you?

ŽIVA: "And when you hear I died, don't shed a tear". What are you doing in that uniform, trying to be officer Seiler?

ALEX: No, no, I wanted to tidy this up...

ŽIVA: And what do you need my barber's chair for?

ALEX: I just wanted to mend it a bit.

ŽIVA: Yes, it's worn out. Now, it looks like that poverty stricken barber's chair. Have I told you that story?

ALEX: I don't remember.

Whilst Živa is telling the story Alex manages to get out of the chair, tries to hide the bottle behind the shelves.

ŽIVA: There was this poor barber before the war, and everything in his shop was poor, including the chair. He didn't even have a cushion on the seat, just a bit of netting. And of course, his clients were all poor. One day a man comes into his shop with ragged trousers. He doesn't even have coms to wear underneath. So he sits in the chair and his balls drop out through the trousers – sticking through the netting. But the barber has a kitten, a naughty kitten that likes playing around. The kitten looks around and sees something's sticking out of the netting, dangling there. So he goes to play with it, flip, flip, with his little paw, and the poor guy is twisting in the chair. What's up!? The barber thinks it's the razor, perhaps it's blunt and hurting the customer, but no, it's the kitten playing.

ALEX: Was that in your shop?

ŽIVA: You mean at my master's shop!? Nooo, I'm telling you, I was an apprentice at a proper high

street shop, elite clientele. A trendy barber's shop it was.⁶ You've been drinking again?

ALEX: A little.

ŽIVA: You have, you stink of brandy. You look really scruffy. I should give you a haircut. You need the complete service. Haar-schneiden, Kopf-waschen und Rasieren. You need a shave. Sit down!

Master Živa pushes Alex into the chair, puts a white towel around his neck and grabs a black bag off the shelf. He takes a brush, a razor and a soap box out of the bag. Takes a glass of water off the table and starts getting ready for shaving.

ALEX: Oh, God, you are here!? And what about the hospital? Why-

ŽIVA: I ran away. I have a weak heart, I wouldn't want to die there. I can't come back to the theatre, so I decided to come and teach you a few more things so I can go home and die in peace.

ALEX: Come on, what are you talking about, you've got a long way to go yet. What do the doctors say?

ŽIVA: Oh, I've had enough of their talk whilst my late Stana was ill.

He applies the soap foam onto Alex's face.

ŽIVA: What can they say!? "Oh, Death, you win this time!" There you are. Where is that from? I know you'd like to say, but don't open your mouth whilst I'm working. From "Montserrat", isn't it? You haven't got a clue. And you are drinking... What do you want with this book?

Master Živa takes a big, old book off the top of the pile.

ALEX: "Demoniche Jahre"? Oh, I thought we could re-bind it, it needs new covers-

ŽIVA: Don't talk, the foam⁷ is falling off! What do you need that for. It's authentic as it is. And your father and I had such fun with that actress and this book, it still brings a smile to my face when I remember it.

Živa takes the razor and starts shaving Alex.

ŽIVA: She comes, young, naive, sees the two of us technicians carrying this book around as a prop. And I say to your father: Have you read that passage on page thirty six, the way he wrote it, bloody hell, I've never read anything like it. And your father was a bit of a wag so he says: Yes, but you should see, a few pages on there's something even better. And the actress is looking at us, thinking probably: God, what kind of a theatre have I got myself into when the props master and the stage manager are talking about "Demoniche Jahre", such heavy gothic stuff, and yet they are admiring the style. In the end we admitted our conspiracy to her.

[Don't move. God, in that uniform you remind me of that actor that was with us-

ALEX: Why what's wrong with it?

ŽIVA: Nothing. After the war, we put some production on about the war, and this actor had his picture taken in the uniform and sent it to his mother in Bosnia. So they can see him. So mum can be proud of her actor son! Fortunately his brother opened the letter. They never showed the picture to his mother. Like, he wanted to boast about becoming an actor, and when they saw him there in the SS uniform they almost started a pursuit after him. He got away with it much better than he could've done.]⁸
But what do you intend to do with my propsroom?

⁶ 'A trendy barber's shop it was' is a literal translation. In performance this line was changed to: 'A hairdresser's salon it was!'

⁷ In performance, the more archaic 'lather' replaced the word 'foam'.

⁸ All bracketed text from here on indicates the cuts for this production. Also, some stage directions given in the script were disregarded or changed in rehearsals – these alterations are not always indicated in this version of the script.

ALEX: Nothing, I'm just tidying around.

ŽIVA: You don't need to be tidying anything around here, everything has always been tidy.

ALEX: New repertoire, new assignments.

ŽIVA: Listen I don't like it when somebody gets too big for their boots. You have to know why that was all arranged the way it was arranged, so that one day they don't take you for an idiot. What was wrong with it? You were lucky, you got into a tidy propsroom, not like me. If you only knew what I found here in October '52! "Ein Besteck für Julia". That Kraut, Schiller, he was a costumier and a propsmaster, and he ran everything in German. Not one suite of furniture was complete. I had to find everything myself using my own connections, but I never bought a thing.

ALEX: I know you've told me that story a thousand times.

Živa takes all the excess foam off Alex's face with the towel, and skilfully pulls the towel off his shoulders.

ŽIVA: Would the gentleman like any talcum powder or after shave?

ALEX: I don't know.

ŽIVA: For you talcum powder would be better. You've already applied alcohol yourself, from inside. There you are. Done.

ALEX: How much do I owe you, Sir?

ŽIVA: Please follow me to the counter, tips welcome.

ALEX: I should've gone to that poor one.

ŽIVA: Maybe it would've been cheaper, but you'd've lost your balls too. Imagine, he never had enough for himself, let alone having to feed the cats as well, and they were never hungry, the kittens—

ALEX: So what did they feed on? Poor people's balls?

ŽIVA: OK now, what did you want with this suitcase?

Alex has got up and now he is trying to disconnect the wires on the telephone.

ALEX: To put new leather over it.

ŽIVA: A-ha... And suppose: I take you, rip your skin off and put somebody else's skin all over you? Eh? Idiot! Would you look the same? No... Of course, not. So with this suitcase, if you take its leather off, nothing could help to make it look like anything decent. I got this from a friend of mine whose grandfather used to be a military attache. Where are the dress-coats?

ALEX: I haven't touched anything.

ŽIVA: You look suspicious to me. You'll never make a propsmaster. What is your big production!? This contemporary rubbish!? You've never done Sterija, Ostrovski, "Montserrat", where's your "Miss Julie" to be proud of?

[ALEX: I have no Shakespeare either, but I know. I've remembered everything. The most important thing in "Hamlet" is the grave.⁹

Živa listens carefully like a teacher, whilst going to sit into the barber's chair.

ŽIVA: Yes ...And goblets and the swords for the fight scene between Hamlet and Laertes...

Živa is sitting and Alex continues whilst putting small props back on the shelf.

ALEX: And flowers for Ophelia, when she goes mad...

ŽIVA: OK, you know that.

ALEX: What don't I know!? You told me everything. Chisgal's "Love", there is some drowning in that play, and to avoid using taped sound effects, you made that same sound in the wings by using a plunger and a bucket.

ŽIVA: It wasn't the same. You think I'd've made all the effort if it was going to be the same. But it

⁹ The reference to Hamlet here actually replaces a reference to another – Serbian – play *Laža i paralaža*. It was my decision to transpose this reference completely in order to make it more accessible to the British audience. The choice of Hamlet rather than any other play was made due to its affinity with the themes of the play. However, other references to Hamlet in the play are there in the original version too.

was more convincing with an echo, better than the tape. You get the exact picture when you hear it, and you know: "A-ha, he fell into the water, he jumped". Off the bridge. And do you remember "Schweik"?

ALEX: A carriage on the stage, I remember, and on the carriage female names written in chalk: "Greta, Marzhenka..."

ŽIVA: Yes and the late Rade, the techie played a guard as an extra in that. And there was this scene when they take Schweik and Peppy to the trial for high treason against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and he arrests them and says: "C'mon then!" How can anyone take him seriously as an Austrian guard if he says "C'mon then!", it just doesn't sound right...]

ALEX: And how about if you, master Živa, think about going back to the hospital.

Živa jumps up off the chair.

ŽIVA: And how about if you, Alex, think about going up to the loft.

ALEX: Why?

ŽIVA: There is a coffin up there. Find that coffin and bring it down for me.

ALEX: Straight away?

ŽIVA: Just you go.

Alex starts to leave, and bumps into Nada at the door. He lets her in and exits. Nada sees Živa.

NADA: Master Živa!?

Živa arranges the caftan he is wearing.

ŽIVA: Nadezhda, "Why do you spoil your sweet face with worry?" Where is that from? You don't know... Steria, "The Evil Woman". And how would you know, you were chasing chickens around at the time.

NADA: But, aren't you supposed to be in hospital!? What is this you're wearing? How are you? I heard it's not all that good.

ŽIVA: Come on Nadezhda, you sound all patetico dello rosso.

NADA: But we were so worried about your health.

ŽIVA: Oh "what a great pity for our minister"!

NADA: What minister?

ŽIVA: You don't understand. It's a joke. It's a line from "The Minister's Wife". Nobody left, nobody to share a joke with any more. The late Svetislav and I used to be at it all day.

NADA: I just mentioned him today. I said to Alex he is nothing like his father.

ŽIVA: Oh, leave it. I remember it like it was yesterday, when we did "The Victims of Fashion", we were extras, him in the costume of Karadjordje, and me in the costume of Napoleon. So I say to him "Poor Serbs when you represent their history", and he retorts: "The French are not much better off with you either". He was quick... That's what we need around here these days-

NADA: I don't know, master Živa, whether you are in a good enough state, for me to tell you-

ŽIVA: You don't need to, I can see for myself. Falling apart, is that what you mean?

NADA: He'll ruin everything.

ŽIVA: Who?

NADA: Alex, he has this idea about new theatre.

Živa gets hold of his left hand, goes to sit down, Nada assists him...

ŽIVA: I'm not feeling well...

NADA: Good God, you are in your pyjamas!? What's wrong?

ŽIVA: Angina Pectoris, Nadezhda.

NADA: I know, that's a symptom followed by a heart attack. Sit down. I sometimes get these pains in my chest too.

ŽIVA: I've got it, in my pocket...

NADA: What?

ŽIVA: Nitro-glicerine.¹⁰

NADA: How could they let you leave the hospital in such a state?

ŽIVA: I ran away.

NADA: You didn't! How could you!? Do you want me to call the ambulance?

ŽIVA: No need. I'm feeling better already.

NADA: Let me give you a massage.

Nada massages Živa's left arm, shoulder and chest.

ŽIVA: They kept me in for seven days for the tests. The doctor came around twice, but really came around, in a big circle, as if he'd seen a dead cat... They gave me a diet, that's all...

Živa takes a piece of paper out of his pocket. Nada takes the paper.

NADA: You really need a diet, master Živa. It's obvious. Let us see... "An example of a diet...", aha, "Diet number 13"...

ŽIVA: Thirteen! You don't need to read it then, when it's number thirteen, it's all quite clear.

NADA: No, no, no, why be so despondent, "8 o'clock", that must be breakfast, "skimmed milk, 240 grams...", "coffee, tea, toast", "25 grams"...

ŽIVA: And a slice of bacon...

NADA: No, that's not allowed. You've got to have discipline, after all you are not burning so much energy anymore..

ŽIVA: "Disziplin, disiplin und disziplin", where is that from? You don't know. "Pilot Quaks". I'm not burning, dear Nadezhda, I've burnt out already.

NADA: Don't talk like that. You'll get used to the diet. At the beginning I thought it was going to be difficult too.

ŽIVA: What, you are on a diet too? You should eat more, you are so thin.

NADA: Yes, that's because of diabetes. I eat well, but I'm losing weight, and that, they say, is the first symptom of diabetes. Hereditary, they say...

ŽIVA: "Hereditary"... Whenever they don't know where it came from, the doctors say "hereditary". When you tell them that none of your relatives suffered from it they say "Yes they did, but didn't know it. Just lived with it." Bloody hell, I can live with it too then, without the doctors, and if I could only live as 'ill' as my grandfather Obrad who was 'ill' for ninety-six years and in the ninety-seventh he just took a bow and left-

NADA: It's all psychological.

ŽIVA: Yes, but psychological problems come from hunger. When I'm hungry, I can't work.

NADA: You will survive. There, as soon as 10 "o'clock", "fresh cottage cheese", "fruit", "melon", "watermelon"...

ŽIVA: "Melon, watermelon...". What shall I do in winter?

NADA: In winter, "bananas"... At "12 o'clock", "vegetable soup", "lean meat"... At "4 PM", "skimmed milk, coffee, tea", "240 grams"...

ŽIVA: I've eaten that already at eight in the morning!

NADA: Yes, but that repeats. At "7 PM", "lean meat", "vegetables"...

ŽIVA: That all?

NADA: Yes, that's the whole day.

ŽIVA: I'll never survive till that dinner at 7PM. What about a slice of bacon!? Where is it? And a glass of brandy before lunch!?

[NADA: Everything in moderation. You'll get used to it, and you'll enjoy it before you know it.

ŽIVA: Oh, really, and now you speak in verse too.

NADA: No, I just wanted to say that that's normal. Your resistance. How do you think I felt? Shall I give you an example of my diet?

ŽIVA: Please do. I'm all ears.

NADA: I won't go in detail, just as an example: lunch – 70 millilitres of soup, 50 grams of lean meat. No sugar at all. Desert: apples, apples and apples...

ŽIVA: Apples, in general.

¹⁰ 'Nitro-glicerine' – as used by coronary sufferers. In production this became 'tri-nitrate', which is probably a more accurate translation. However, I kept the original term in precisely because of its double meaning.

NADA: Only apples!

ŽIVA: Pears – out of the question?

NADA: Out of the question! But what's worst of all, is the snack... One hard boiled egg's white...

ŽIVA: Horror...

Nada remains deep in thought, Živa is genuinely sympathising with her.]

Alex enters with difficulty, covered in dust and coughing.

ŽIVA: What is it, have you found it?

ALEX: I have.

ŽIVA: And?

ALEX: It looks very bad. In fact, it's falling apart.

ŽIVA: Never mind, go back up and bring down whatever there is left of it.

ALEX: And why don't you come with me master, to see it. It seems to me it's not usable.

ŽIVA: If I went up to the loft, I'd stay there for ever.

ALEX: So, I'll bring it down, shall I?

ŽIVA: Yes. In fact, take a break first. Let's have a drink.

Nada reacts, Alex goes to where he'd hidden the bottle and comes back to the coffee table.

NADA: Master Živa, only one, please.

ŽIVA: Half! There, I'll have half a glass, would that please you?

Alex pours the brandy into two glasses, goes to the barber's chair and drops into it.

NADA: Please, don't get me wrong, but you are a coronary type.

ŽIVA: Pardon?

NADA: You know there are some people whose heart is, simply, the first to suffer. That's their type. They don't have to be fat or lazy, none of those things you'd expect to find in a person with heart problems. Nothing, but still they suffer.

ALEX: Yes, that's right.

NADA: You Alex, you don't need to worry. You are just an 'escaper' who lives like a parasite.

ALEX: Pardon?

NADA: An 'escaper', that's an English expression. The one who escapes, who's run away from a heart attack – he can drink and eat as much as he wants and has no problems!

ALEX: Isn't it too early for a heart attack in my case...

NADA: Your heart never suffers! You have no feelings. When it gets difficult, you pick your things up and leave.

Alex calmly gets up and goes to leave.

ŽIVA: "Not so quickly, Emile!", where's that from? "The Street Players". Come on Nadezhda, calm down, you mustn't get upset!

NADA: You don't know, master Živa, you don't know what's going on in here. It all started well before your illness. Here, in the theatre. They want to take everything away, to ruin everything, everybody has their own politics here...

Živa gets up and helps Nada to sit down, trying to comfort her.

ŽIVA: I know it all, Nadezhda. Like in Svarkin, exactly the same. "Someone Else's Child". Contemporary Russian comedy. A musician. Cellist. They want to pull his house down in order to build a motorway. And the civil engineer falls in love with the musician's daughter, and now, if the daughter will show some interest, he'll re-do the plan, and keep the house standing. And that's where the conflict is, she loves someone else.

NADA: How interesting! Shall I make us some coffee. Shall I? And then, what happened then, who did she choose?

Nada is busying herself with the coffee cups and the kettle, whilst Živa walks about.

ŽIVA: Oh, well, it's not so simple. The daughter argues with her father all the time, she is like a young communist. And he gets offended when she says: "We have to treat our cultural heritage with reservations"...

Živa stops at the shelf and takes some books off.

ŽIVA: So the father collects some books, takes them outside the house and starts throwing them about.

Živa throws several books against the floor.

ŽIVA: "To hell with cultural heritage!" he shouts. When he gets to Lermontov: "The hero of our time", he says. "Who is Pechorin to you? A Whiteguard from the Caucasean front!?" Then he gets to Pushkin: "You, Alexander Sergeevich, I cannot throw you away"...

NADA: Oh, I so much like your stories about plays!

Živa picks up the books and puts them back on the shelf.

NADA: Please, please, leave that to me...

ŽIVA: No, my dear Nadezhda, nowadays nobody is as crazy as we used to be. Even then it was a rarity. Everything for the theatre. I started off as a runner, became a propsmaster, did a bit of acting. Not anybody could be an extra, and it was well paid, only you needed a bit of brains so to understand what it was all about. And I was hardly ever at home. Touring, festivals...

NADA: I know what it's like, like my late Vidosav at the Railway.

ŽIVA: And nobody to help you. Everybody just wants something. When I started working as a propsmaster, the theatre didn't have a single complete suite of furniture. They didn't even have a proper propsmaster before me, but used the costumier as a propsmaster. That's where they wanted to have their cake and eat it, all right, so I had to do everything from scratch. I used to steal for the theatre, too. Wherever I went. I remember once we went to this village, and it was all Krauts living there before the war, and there in the village hall I find this gramophone, excellent working condition, and some records, a dozen. Waltzes, marches, Strauss and the rest. Of course I lift that straightaway and bring it here. And already in "Schweik" we had that music playing. The Radetsky March. That's how you have to think! You can't throw anything away! You may need it for a play. When you steal, of course, you do it so that nobody notices. On tour as well-

NADA: I approve of that. Those are noble thefts. So many times I had to go about finding detergent and gloves myself. God forbid, once at a wedding reception, I'm thinking how we don't have any detergent left in the theatre. So I go to the toilet and see it straightaway there, in the corner. So I hide it underneath my skirt and leave. Why should I wait till they supply here!? These are my hands after all-

ŽIVA: I remember we went to Bosnia once with a play. And they had this gadget there, a wooden rattle which faked the sound of machine-gun fire beautifully. Ra-ta-ta-ta-tak, you just keep winding the handle and you get perfect machine-gun sound effect. I hang around backstage next to this thing for about an hour or two, thinking - how can I lay my hands on it, it was very important to me then, all the plays after the war had shooting in them all the time, so this was a necessary piece of technology. It must still be around here somewhere-

He goes to look through the drawers.

NADA: They must've got rid of it-

ŽIVA: They couldn't have got rid of everything. Only Živa has the keys to this drawer.

He takes a bunch of keys from his pocket, opens the lock and looks through the drawers.

ŽIVA: What did I tell you! There it is... All the most important things. All the drawings and notes,

comments and plans... Everything! Everything I've worked on for years. Whoever manages to work this out he is a genius... This is the key to every play, for every scene—

He lifts the paper in his hand.

NADA: A genius... The key—

ŽIVA: It's a drawing, you understand! Ra-ta-ta-ta-ta, I'm standing there and I don't know what to do. At my wits end, the thing is quite big, they'll notice if I take it out. I'm standing there, can't part from the rattle, I feel sorry to leave it. In the end I take a pen and paper and start sketching the thing, in detail, like a spy, with precision, then I roll the paper and smuggle it over here, I take it to the carpenter's workshop and they make the same mechanism, even better.

[NADA: That's very brave. You have to know how, not like some, like when I prevented a theft of bags for the Hoover. I don't want to mention any names, but that Vida from the administration and another one from the bar... I caught them—

ŽIVA: I've never been caught stealing, but it happened that I had to return something after I've stolen it.

He takes the paper back into the drawer.

ŽIVA: We hosted a theatre company from Subotica once, and their technicians had these hammers one each – with handles in leather, beautiful hammers, with slits on the other side for pulling nails out. So I notice them straightaway. I put one away and keep quiet. When they were to leave, this guy from whom I stole the hammer refuses to get into the coach until he gets his hammer back. Swearing, shouting something in Hungarian, but finally gets into the coach. And I had this colleague in my crew who was also Hungarian, so I ask him: why is he angry, what is he saying? He says the last thing he shouted was: "May the one who stole my hammer make himself a coffin with it!". Well, I wasn't very comfortable till their next visit. Then I take the hammer and return it to the guy. He cheered up straight away, although he'd forgotten all about it anyway, and I'm like: "Oh, it must've fallen between the ropes somewhere, we found it recently".

NADA: Oh well, there's no such honesty anymore. And you could've taken anything away, but you didn't. Nowadays you only get some robbers who just look how to pull everything apart, and yet you trust them...

ŽIVA: To be honest Nadezhda, the only thing I ever took for myself were a couple of horns, which I got from a doctor whose father went on safari to Africa. There, I've still got them at home gathering dust. What do you need real horns on the stage for when you can always make any kind of horns out of papier-mâché, besides a punter in the fifteenth row will never know whether the horns are real or fake.]

He takes the paper back into the drawer.

NADA: I remember those big productions... Spectacular. No such thing anymore. Now they do everything in a rush, few actors, playing like that, nothing to see around them, empty sets, and when they reach a silence, and they reach these silences more and more often, they just sit there and look at each other, like, God forbidding—

ŽIVA: There's nobody to write them a script. They are left speechless. Only a grimace. That's modern theatre for you. Oh, dear William, what have they done to you—

NADA: Who's that William, now?

ŽIVA: Eh, Nadezhda, chaos, busy, working. A real atmosphere. That's the whole point! A premiere, Shakespeare. "Winter's Tale". You are doing the props, dancing with joy. And when the first night's through all right, that's the real feeling... Not like today, I fall ill, they cancel the show. As if they can't do it without me! Shitty socialist self-management.

NADA: I know, I know, nothing can be washed or put away without me.

ŽIVA: Imagine, any discussion on the stage – they would come to me straight away, for an opinion. I remember once an actor complained: "I'm so nervous, my mouth's dried up", and the director told him: "Go to Živa and ask him to spit into your mouth".

NADA: You didn't have to do that sort of thing too?

[ŽIVA: Aaah, I played with them too. There was this production once about some illiterate guy and his brother Isak. This Isak spent 11 years in a Turkish jail, but he is literate and he can read Arabic too. Now, this guy receives some letters and always gives them to Isak to read: "Go on Isak, you are a man of letters". And the actor who plays Isak, never learnt his lines for the letter, he just keeps saying: "Živa will write that for me, all authentic". And I wrote him one letter which he receives from a Serbian prince – authentic Serbian Cyrillics. He jumps with joy: "Well done, Živa!". But when I had to write him a letter in Arabic, I go down to the foyer and find this Muslim shop-keeper. So I ask him nicely to write me this letter in Arabic script on the parchment. Then I take that to the actor, he unrolls it on the stage, and dries. Completely lost. "What is it, Isak", I say, "You are the man of letters, so read on. You wanted it authentic, I got you authenticity".]

Nada gets up and goes to collect the coffee cups.

NADA: I just wanted to say that Alex–

Alex enters suddenly, covered in dust even more.

ALEX: I've got it down.

NADA: What?

ALEX: What do you mean 'what'!? The damned coffin!

ŽIVA: Where is it?

ALEX: Out here.

ŽIVA: Bring it in.

Alex brings in the coffin, without the lid. Živa is observing it carefully. Nada is surprised.

ŽIVA: And the lid?

ALEX: I couldn't find it.

ŽIVA: How come?... Where could it be?... Ah, yes, it must be underneath that drape. Go and see, there is a red drape up there, it must be underneath it.

ALEX: Up there?

ŽIVA: Yes, yes, in the loft.

ALEX: Oh, God! You want me to go up again!

Alex turns and goes. Nada waits for him to leave.

NADA: What do you want this for?

ŽIVA: Ah, that's a secret, Nadezhda... Nothing, it just needs repairing.

NADA: I heard everything, he's making a deal.

Živa inspects the coffin.

ŽIVA: Who is making a deal?

NADA: Alex. I stood by the door, and I heard everything. He talked to somebody, but I couldn't hear the other one. He was telling him what he has to give him.

Živa goes slowly into the coffin.

ŽIVA: Telling whom?

NADA: What are you doing, master Živa?

ŽIVA: Nothing, sorry, I just got carried away... What did he want to give, to whom?

Živa gets out of the coffin just before he has almost lied in.

NADA: He was talking about some weapons and a suit-case, a samovar and 5000...

ŽIVA: Who visited my propsroom this morning?

NADA: I didn't see anyone coming in or leaving. But he gave his notice in to the manager, and he is getting ready to leave the job.

ŽIVA: Who is leaving the job?

NADA: Alex.

ŽIVA: Let him leave, he's not cut out for this job anyway.

NADA: I don't want to interfere, but he drinks too much, and he's such a young man. Could he have been talking to himself?

ŽIVA: If he is talking to himself he's either crazy, or he's buying a house! But I'd like to ask you a favour. Could you go to the office and phone my son on this number. Tell him I'm here. No, tell him to come to the theatre car park in half an hour. Don't mention me.

NADA: How can I?

ŽIVA: Of course you can. Don't think too much. If nobody's noticed me yet, I don't want them to see me now. I can't be messing about, you understand? Phone him and tell him to be here in half an hour, with his car. And tell him to put the roof-rack on. The roof-rack is in the garage behind the barrels. So, where is the roof-rack?

NADA: The roof-rack is in the garage behind the barrels—

[ŽIVA: Where we found Kadifa's kittens last winter.

NADA: Where you found the kittens—

ŽIVA: Don't mention the kittens, he'll get all confused. Just tell him behind the barrels.]
Why are you standing there? Hurry up, they'll find me out!

NADA: I wanted to ask you... I can see that you need somebody – a caring person—

ŽIVA: I am all right, just you hurry up!¹¹

NADA: I know, but who can take this propsroom over after you—

Alex almost breaks into the propsroom, losing his balance under the weight of the lid.

ŽIVA: Careful, for God's sake!

Alex picks himself up and lays the lid next to the coffin.

ALEX: Now, there's the lid—

Nada gets up and goes.

[NADA: I'll bring you "The Ten Commandments by Dr Keindle" for coronary sufferers. You'll find everything you need to know there for going on to home-care: walks, change of occupation, sleeping patterns, sexual activities...

Nada exits. Alex drops into the chair breathing heavily.

ALEX: So, master Živa, Nada is taking care of you?

ŽIVA: Forget it, I need a woman, not a nurse!

ALEX: And what are these ten commandments about?

ŽIVA: How do I know!? The Ten Commandments already exist, and now some physician decided to invent another ten!]

ALEX: This coffin's killed me. If I were to lift it up once again, I might as well just lie in and put the lid on.

ŽIVA: You don't say! You are copying me there.

ALEX: What?

ŽIVA: Well, you know that I want to sort this coffin out for myself.

ALEX: Thank you, very much.

ŽIVA: What's the big deal? Why should they go around buying a new coffin, when I can sort out this junk. And anyway it's my size. I tried it already when I played a corpse once. I'm gonna sand it down a bit, put some varnish on and it'll look like new.

ALEX: Will you manage?

ŽIVA: I think I will.

¹¹ In performance, the line 'Hurry up' was replaced with the more colloquial 'Get cracking'.

ALEX: It's nice when you can sort your own coffin out for yourself. It's not normal, but it's nice.

ŽIVA: If you were not the only son of my colleague, I would slap you right now. You tell me what is normal? Is it normal that you go around getting rid of everything I've been putting together for years to make a decent propsroom?

ALEX: Who says that? What's missing? What is not here?

ŽIVA: You've planned it all out. To take everything that's valuable away before they find somebody else, you handed in your notice, sorted everything out. You've made a deal for 5000...

ALEX: What can you find in here that's valuable? If I'd've wanted to, I could've taken out anything I fancied long ago. And I gave the notice in because I can have a bigger salary elsewhere.

ŽIVA: And where is that, pray?

ALEX: That's a secret, I've been promised a job.

ŽIVA: Oh, Stupidity, I love you when you are mysterious! Where is that from? You don't know. Of course. I've made it up, this very moment as I was looking at you. Who was here this morning?

ALEX: Nobody.

ŽIVA: Don't lie, you've been observed. You were talking to somebody, making a deal. Suitcase, weapons, samovar.

ALEX: What is this codswallop, nobody was here, and not a word of that is true!

ŽIVA: "There is no man left!", where is that from? "Hamlet". OK, you weren't making a deal.

[ALEX: Nada... She made it all up. Really, master Živa, nobody was here this morning.]

ŽIVA: Are you buying a house.

ALEX: No.

ŽIVA: OK, I understand, then.]

ALEX: She's invented it all, like her whole story about the theatre! Her theory is, everybody is irresponsible apart from herself!

[ŽIVA: She is a responsible person.]

ALEX: She is over-ambitious! She thinks she could take over after I leave the job.

ŽIVA: Why not? She is tidy and clean. She loves the theatre, she loves her job. She does everything thoroughly. OK, I'd invested my hopes in you. I believed you had the gene. Like I believed that my son might have been able to take over after me. But he wasn't interested. I realised that when he decided to do teacher training. That's what I also wanted to do when I was young. To set an example and teach new generations. Nice. In fact anything that's done with love is nice. I did my job so nobody could think that there was anyone who could do it better. Nobody ever dared ask me what education I had and whether I had a degree. I did it with love and that's why everybody loved working with me.

ALEX: I never said I hated this job. Simply, it's the money.

ŽIVA: You see, perhaps that wouldn't be a bad idea. She would be the first woman propsmaster in this theatre.

ALEX: I can't even imagine it.

ŽIVA: We did "A Boat on the Green River". There was this character in the play, he played chess, I can't remember who played the character, he was called Capablanca. Yes, that's right.

ALEX: Is that the story about the pawn?

ŽIVA: Yes, how do you know?

ALEX: Everybody runs to sweep it off, only Nada runs to save it, because it's a prop, I know.]

ŽIVA: Why are you leaving?

ALEX: What is this, an interrogation!? I'm going, full stop-

ŽIVA: Anyway, why do I worry so much about it? It's not long before I go...

ALEX: And where are you going, master Živa? To the hospital? Home?

ŽIVA: I am going on a journey. I'm waiting for my son to come with the car, to load the coffin and off I go. Don't worry, I'm not coming back.

Alex goes to get his bottle and on the way gets a notebook off the shelf. He pours some drink into Živa's glass and withdraws.

ALEX: I never told you, I had an idea to write these stories down, the ones that my father used to tell, and these that you remember.

[The other day in the bar I was telling some actors about – that story from the madhouse,

they fell about laughing.

ŽIVA: Which one?

ALEX: I've got it written down in this notebook, and some other stories too... The one when you played in a madhouse and when you arrived all the patients ran around you saying: "Give us something to do, to help you, you can trust us!"

ŽIVA: So you remember that. Yes, we played Bernard Shaw, "The Devil's Disciple". I had some arms among the props, and I'm thinking, how can I give them the arms to carry, what if they run away somewhere with them.

ALEX: Fantastic! I have to write this down...

ŽIVA: Write that bit about the actress, from the same production. The one where she had to change the script. She had the line: "I've got two sons, one is mad, and the other's gone to war". She felt a bit uncomfortable saying 'mad' in front of the given audience, so she decided to soften it up a bit by saying: "I've got two sons, one is a bit naughty, and the other's gone to war".

ALEX: Ah, that's a good one! Almost like the one about the bag-piper and the manager!

ŽIVA: A-ha, wait, wait, it went like this-

ALEX: There is a whole prologue there. This is how I've got it written down: First the director wanted to have sheep on the stage. So you went to some acquaintance of yours who had a flock of sheep, however he refused to give you the sheep saying: "I'm not giving you my sheep, you are going to be crude with them".

ŽIVA: Yes he was rather obstinate, wouldn't give us the sheep. And the director was so sorrowful about it: "What shall we do without our agnus dei".

ALEX: And then he wanted a bag-piper. Again you found someone, and he liked to drink, of course. They brought him in for a rehearsal, he is sitting in the bar drinking, waiting for his call. One, two, three glasses, and suddenly everyone wants to hear the bag-piper playing. The manager happened to be there too, and he was also very interested in the bag-piper. Poor man, doesn't know who is who, and the manager insists: "Come on then, are we going to hear this bag-pipe or not"?

ŽIVA: Yes, he grew suspicious. Who is this man? Who brought him here, and who is buying him the drinks? He calmed down a bit when he saw the bag-pipe, otherwise – you know he was a bloated politician, like many managers at the time. He is rushing the old man, and the old man turns around at him, gives him a look – doesn't know he is the manager – and already drunk, tells him: "What do you know about the bag-pipe? You think it's all about farting, you arse-hole!" I had to go around saving both the old man's and my own head.]

ALEX: I wrote down the one about you playing Karadjordje, and my dad playing Napoleon...

ŽIVA: Me playing Napoleon and your father playing Karadjordje, please. I know that he always wanted to play Napoleon, but it was the other way round. We used to do a lot of extra-work, nothing pretentious, but you know, there is an extra and an extra with an objective. Your dad, he didn't push too much. We knew our own potential, we didn't want to be Salced Alvares-

ALEX: Salced Alvares?

ŽIVA: Yes, that was the name we had for those non-talented stage-struck types. We had all sorts hanging around here, with various ambitions. Some of them had played something in an dramatic society, then did a cameo on the real stage and fancied themselves big. One of them literally cried to stay here. He used to say: "But I'm dying to be on the stage!", so in the end your father and I advised him to see an undertaker. We were wicked.¹²
But now you write down an anecdote about yourself.

ALEX: Who me?

ŽIVA: Yes, when you were little. Your father brought you to the theatre to watch a play in which we were extras, playing some peasants in a peasant uprising. After the play I come to you

¹² A more literal translation of this would be: "...But I'm dying for the boards!" So in the end your father and I gave him the address of a saw mill'. In Serbo-Croat, theatre is often referred to by professionals as 'the boards that mean life' – or the means of survival. The expression 'I'm dying for the boards' meaning 'to tread the boards' is therefore more accessible in Serbo-Croat than it is in English. It also has slightly pathetic connotations, and is therefore difficult to translate. I have offered an alternative translation here, in the script, with an emphasis on the pathos of 'dying for the stage', rather than the boards themselves. However, in rehearsals, the more literal translation was introduced.

and start teasing you: Your dad only ever plays peasants. And you said: "But, Uncle Živa, you played a peasant, too. Yes, I said, but I played the First Peasant, and your father played the Second one.

ALEX: I don't remember that–

ŽIVA: You were that big–

[Živa sees a pile on the floor and goes to it, pulls out an old ventilator.

ŽIVA: Eh, dear Alex, you were going to throw this away.

ALEX: No, I was just going to tidy up a bit.

ŽIVA: I don't care! Throw it all away! Do what you like! Just remember, this ventilator saved a production. I remember, Krleža: "In Agony"... Mmmm, Krleža, the genius... No, it was "The Glembays", that's right... The director wanted some curtains blowing in the wind in one scene, like, there's a window, and the wind is blowing outside. Next rehearsal, I set this rickety thing up in the wings, it's working, blowing the curtains gently, so you can picture a balcony on the other side and a garden below it. The director's gaping at it, that's what he wanted! "Whoever thought of this – he is a real genius!"...]
What's this?

Živa picks up a roll of paper.

ŽIVA: Look, it's the poster for "Montserrat"! Who can forget this! At least we who loved the theatre can never forget it. That was great stuff, that production, cruel stuff, that Izquierdo, he was cruel, killing there, looking for Simone Bolivar, and this Montserrat, a junior officer, knows where he is, but won't say. And he says: "If you don't say, I'll kill one of these people every hour" and he's got ten people there. And in amongst them there was a woman with a child, and then a merchant with a very beautiful wife, and he's devastated, and then a Red Indian woman, it was so interesting, and the actor playing the merchant was brilliant. And then there was this window with a lattice, stage left, and he is climbing up, and the director wanted some arm chairs with ivory arm rests. We couldn't find such armchairs anywhere in town, and then he chose some other stylisation, anyway what's important is that we played, we played great stuff....

And then there was this speech of Juan Alvaro Salcedo–

ALEX: A-ha, the famous Salcedo!

ŽIVA: Yes! He's got this speech of– what's his name – "Ascasio's death speech"... This guy knows he is gonna get killed, so he asks Salcedo to give this speech, because he had heard him speaking it once on a royal ship, and he liked it... That speech, you see, that's a difficult one, if I had been an actor, I'd've always fought for that part. These are big words, and people remember them and the actors who speak them, you always remember the words that you don't hear every day. And, yes, there is also this speech where this bloodthirsty Izquierdo talks about the actors' wonderful profession: "Every time they're a different person". "They die a hundred times, and a hundred times they are born again". "Dying when the lights go out and being born again in the love or pain of someone else", great stuff, I loved that play. Only there was a lot of shooting in it, I was shooting with rattles, guns, everything, I shot down everything out there in the wings. I'll never forget it.

Breathless Živa sits down and gets hold of his glass, which is empty. Alex pours some more brandy in each glass.

ŽIVA: Health, wealth and happiness...

They drink it up and Alex pours some more.

ŽIVA: Eh, my dear Svetislav...

Živa starts weeping, but recollects himself quickly.

ALEX: You loved the theatre... It's true. I will never experience something like that. At least three

hundred premieres. Those were different times. And you were something else, you and my father.

ŽIVA: Changes. Lots of changes. The techies are helping us, Svetislav runs around the stage – whatever he brings on for the following scene, the techies take it off, whatever he takes off, they bring it back on again.

ALEX: Complete chaos–

ŽIVA: It's not difficult when you've got a good cooperative team, and everyone consults you on everything. But I what couldn't stand were those well-read, intellectual directors.

[ALEX: Trying to portray life, and haven't got a clue. If they are really so clever they wouldn't hesitate to ask.

ŽIVA: But there is always someone around who knows everything. And when an actor doesn't know something about life, they send him to me.

ALEX: Yes, dad told me. Some actor had to eat like a ploughman in the field. Of course, he's never seen a ploughman or a field. So you had to teach him the manners. A piece of bread between the thumb and the first finger, a piece of ham between the first and the second finger, an onion between the second and the third, a knife in the other hand, cutting a bit of everything, making mouthfuls.

ŽIVA: They don't know what an incense burner looks like, and I make it in a tick out of talcum powder holder. When they needed a barber's set, I used to give them my own. I take my shaving blade, make it blunt, show them the moves – how to shave, how to sharpen the blade up...]

ALEX: Furnish a play with props – and half the job's done.

ŽIVA: I've told you all about it already, but you won't need it anymore.

ALEX: From the first rehearsal you have to be there, every time. To mark the text, to list the props – this, that, the other. And when they come for the props – you've got everything ready.

ŽIVA: I always used to sit in on rehearsals. I remember, we were doing "The Hedgehog". A First World War play. The director is explaining to the actors what their soldiers need to look like...

Without looking at each other, together:

ŽIVA & ALEX: "Let your eyes rest on the horizon – somewhere over there is the homeland."¹³

ŽIVA: He is explaining–

ALEX: And you say: "Like in the paintings of Golubović."

ŽIVA: That's right, he says. "How do you know about Golubović?" As if a propsmaster is supposed to be stupid, totally ignorant.

ALEX: Oh, master Živa, I haven't shown you...!

Alex gets up, goes over to the shelf and pulls out a brass ink-holder. Živa's face lights up.

ŽIVA: Hell's bells, it does look good.

ALEX: I found it at my mate's, in the loft.

ŽIVA: Excellent. That's always useful. Office scenes, writing desks. It's in good condition.

[ALEX: Shall I pour us another one–

ŽIVA: Well, yes, go on, one is like none.

ALEX: Two, two are a couple!

ŽIVA: So you've learnt it? Let me hear...

ALEX: Three. "God helps three times"!

The mood improves, almost to the point of hilarity.

ŽIVA: Four?

¹³ The original says: 'Somewhere over there is Serbia' and this was the translation used in performance. During the First World War the Serbian soldiers were driven into retreat by the Austrian army and consequently spent a long time outside the country – recuperating and fighting in Greece. The line 'Somewhere over there is Serbia' is therefore meant to have a nostalgic undertone. This is why I translated it as the more universal 'Somewhere over there is the homeland'.

ALEX: "Four wheels on a car"!
ŽIVA: Five?
ALEX: Five...

Živa is waving his hand in front of Alex's nose.

ALEX: "Five fingers on your hand"!
ŽIVA: Six?
ALEX: "Six are the working days"!
ŽIVA: Seven?

Alex is not sure.

ŽIVA: "And the seventh is a holiday"!
ALEX: Eight. "Eight days deadline for complaints"! Nine. "A stitch in time saves nine"! Ten. "The Ten Commandments"! Eleven. "A football team"! Twelve. "A dozen". Thirteen. "Bad Luck"! Fourteen. "A fortnight"! Fifteen. "Half a month"! Sixteen. Sixteen...
ŽIVA: "Sweet sixteen"
ALEX: Seventeen. "No bills"! Eighteen. "A fresher"! Nineteen. "A student"! Twenty. "Two decades"!
ŽIVA: Twen'y one!

They shout together:

ŽIVA & ALEX: "Pontoon!"

ALEX: Twen'y two!

Both disheartened:

ŽIVA & ALEX: "Bust"...
ŽIVA: You see how easy it is to learn some things. Easier to learn bad things than good.

They clink their glasses and drink. Nada rushes in with some papers in her hand.

NADA: There we go: The Ten Commandments!

Živa stares at her, Alex doesn't even glance at her.

ŽIVA: "Grechanka vernaya! nye plach – on pal geroem!"
ALEX: "Fair Grecian maid! Don't cry – he fell like a hero!" Pushkin...
ŽIVA: Alexander Sergeevich... "You, Alexander Sergeevich, I can't throw you away"...
ALEX: Svrakin.]
NADA: You two... Master Živa, please, let me smell your breath.
ŽIVA: "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down"!

Alex laughs, and Master Živa joins in, Nada stands in amazement.

ALEX: "The Three Pigs"! Children's theatre.
NADA: You are drunk. Shame on you!
ŽIVA: No, we are not ashamed... OK, we are a little... Have you rung my son?
NADA: I've tried but it was engaged, I'll try again. I have to watch out for a convenient moment when I can do it in secret.
ŽIVA: Just you watch out, but hurry up, I don't have much time left--
NADA: You don't!?! And you have enough time to get tipsy, and it's not even mid-day yet--
ALEX: Drunkenness is a category that evades time.

Živa and Nada look at Alex.

ŽIVA: A nice thought–

NADA: Nice, very nice! And I'm trying my best here to look after you. There, I've brought you [the ten commandments, and] a diet if you are interested at all–

[ŽIVA: All right, all right, we are sorry. Of course we're interested. What kind of a diet is it?

Alex tries to hide his laughter, Živa points for Nada to sit down.

NADA: Your kind. It's a diet for persons aged 60 and over. I copied it out of "Here's Health", a brilliant magazine, you have to start buying it regularly, it's got good medical advice, all approved... And every issue comes with a free gift...

ALEX: "Here's Health" for Master Živa!

Alex is falling about with laughter.

ŽIVA: Alexandar!

ALEX: OK, I won't, I swear–

NADA: So, the diet has been approved by a leading medical institution in Great Britain. Here's what you can have in a day...: Half a litre of milk, if possible, but not less than that.

ŽIVA: Aha.

NADA: One portion of meat – 55 grams – fish or poultry. Once a week – some liver. One egg..."

ALEX: Poverty stricken barber's diet!

Alex laughs hysterically, Nada is mesmerised, Živa smiles.

ALEX: No, actually, a diet for kittens, flip, flip...

He imitates a kitten playing. Živa laughs.

NADA: What is funny!?)

ŽIVA: [Nothing.] OK, Nadezhda... Let me see that diet of yours... One tomato or half an orange, a potato... 28 grams of cheese... 28 grams!... Such precision!

ALEX: That's an ounce...

ŽIVA: "A portion of porridge a day".

NADA: That I do not know–

ŽIVA: Porridge? How can anyone not know what porridge is–

NADA: And what is it, pray?

ŽIVA: It's an English meal. They eat it in English plays, and indeed in English life. I assume that it is something – not very tasty but useful–

ALEX: It's soft food made by boiling a cereal in milk, with sugar–

ŽIVA: Really Nadezhda, we've forgotten we've got a BSc Farming here!

ALEX: It's not farming, but agriculture! And I haven't got the degree–

ŽIVA: I do apologize... Nadezhda, I shall certainly follow your diets. And I shall eat porridge as though I'd grown up with Galsworthy's Forsyte, there... And now, hurry up, telephone, I have no more time left.

He pushes Nada towards the door and she gets stuck on the way out.

NADA: And the boot, I mean the roof-rack...

ŽIVA: Behind the barrels in the garage.

[NADA: Where you found the kittens.]

ALEX: "The door should be either open or closed", a theatrical proverb in one act, Alfred de Musset...

ŽIVA: Yes.

Nada closes the door after herself. Živa turns around, sighs and looks at Alex.

ŽIVA: Let me cut your hair once more before I go...

ALEX: Oh no, don't bother.

Živa manhandles Alex out of the barber's chair to fix it to the right position.

ŽIVA: Come on, come on, you need a haircut. Sit down!

Alex sits down, Živa gets the black bag off the shelf. Takes a pair of scissors, a white towel, a brush and a comb out of the bag.

ŽIVA: That's all I'm taking back with me from the propsroom...

He starts to fix the towel around Alex's neck, but Alex stops him.

ALEX: Just a moment...

Alex goes over to the telephone, checks the cable, and starts to dial a number.

ŽIVA: How now, what's this? A working telephone!?

Alex smiles, Živa is serious, traces the cable to see how it's been connected.

ŽIVA: You little bugger! You've installed a line...

ALEX (*into the receiver*): OK! Put it—

ŽIVA: I'm not touching it!¹⁴

ALEX: Yes, hallo, Alex speaking... I can't do it for you today. I'm busy. The agreement still stands.
I'll call you tomorrow. Cheers...

Živa is still flabbergasted, Alex puts the receiver down and sits in the barber's chair. Živa goes to the telephone, picks the receiver up and listens.

ŽIVA: It's working!

ALEX: It is, but keep quiet... It's a secret. Nobody's found out yet.

ŽIVA: But how?

ALEX: It's simple. I connected it to the cable.

ŽIVA: You bloody rascal, you've really—

ALEX: If the manager has one, why can't I?

ŽIVA: Fine. Just you look out—

ALEX: I'll be all right.

ŽIVA: Don't tempt fate. In my thirty years I never thought of it, and you—

ALEX: Take as much as you can.

ŽIVA: And I've sent Nada to rove around the offices, and I could've done it from here.

ALEX: Please do.

ŽIVA: No need. She must've done it by now. So you weren't talking to yourself, after all...

ALEX: What?

ŽIVA: You were talking on the telephone. To this guy. You were making a deal with him—

ALEX: Oh, that's my mate. I promised to help him this afternoon, he's decorating his house. It's not urgent he's got someone else to help him.

ŽIVA: Ha, so it is to do with a house! Now I don't understand anything.

Alex is pointing to his hair.

ALEX: Go on master, just a trim please.

¹⁴ The exchange is playing on the double meaning of the word *pusti* which means 'let go' but can be used in a variety of ways. Alex uses it as 'put it through' aimed at a telephone operator, and Živa responds to the second meaning of the expression 'let go of it'.

Živa puts the white towel around his neck, takes the comb and starts combing his hair. From time to time he cuts the ends sticking through the comb.

ALEX: You see, if you'd continued working as a barber, you'd never have seen the theatre – you'd never have ended up working here.

ŽIVA: I didn't continue as a coiffeur, and I could've. [But I fancied all sorts of things.] After the war, a whole new world was opening up, and I was so young and full of energy, I wanted to be useful in some serious way. We were re-building the country. And my military service lasted for almost three years, from '44 till '47! Can you imagine how long that was!? [Came back here, found all of my friends had been sent somewhere else on duty already. Couldn't find my way around at all.] I went back to my master, the barber, and found that they were already talking about nationalisation of the shop. Well, I wasn't that keen on it anymore, anyway. What do I want back in the barber's shop!? For three years in the military service I'd been shaving people and cutting their hair. I go to the job market and I say: I want to create something. With hair, it's all the same – you cut it one day, it grows back the next! So they put me on duty in the ironworks – physical work. But soon, they see I'm organizing these people, the workers, and they reckon, I'm not so stupid. So I get a post as a clerk. Doing a bit of everything. That was in '48. And all the time they are going on about the Party. "Party this, Party that", "How come you're not in the Party"! And you couldn't just join the Party when you wanted to, but when they decided you were mature enough for it. But I was old enough, and I was wondering: why don't they want me to join? Only afterwards I discovered why. I was considered a bit of a ladies' man. And bloody hell, you know I really was surrounded by women at work. Every now and then two or three of them would come around to my desk, lean over and start chatting. Well, I was quite handsome too. Once they even called me to draw my attention to it.

ALEX: To the fact that you were handsome?

ŽIVA: No, no, nooo, to the fact that I was supposedly chatting up every single woman around. I tell them: What on God's earth are you on about, I've got a fiancée. And really, my Stana, God rest her soul, and I were already going out then. [And we got married on 28th June 1948. Then they wanted me to go to the Head Office of the Railway in Belgrade.] Wall to wall bureaucracy. The old system. I couldn't get used to it. [All that mechanical stuff. In Belgrade], I didn't even have a flat, I slept on trains. I had a travel pass as an employee of the state. After work, straight into some train, sleeping to some station in the middle of nowhere and than back to Belgrade. In the morning off to work. I wore the same suit for a week. And for weekends I went home. I couldn't go on like that for very long. My son was born and growing up already, and I said to them – I'd rather do some field work, have a base somewhere, I'd be more useful that way. [And they send me back as a secretary. After that,] I became a Station Master. We got on wonderfully well before the bloody self-management system came in. [Everything was worked out to the most minute detail, nothing ever went wrong.] After that I worked as an Education Officer at a technical college. I liked working with young people. I would probably have stayed in education if I hadn't got on the wrong side of the manager. [He was a careerist, never took interest in our problems. I had 90 students under my care and did I take care of them! I did something naughty once, but they never found out. We received rations for various things, I took rations out for 290 people, and used them all up for my 90 students. New clothes for everyone.] That's when I first went to look for work in the theatre. But they said NO. Somebody had said something about me. In those days everything was written down, passed around and so on. And so I did all sorts of things for another two years, worked in shipbuilding till '52. In autumn that year I put in another application to the theatre. And they offered me a job on 1st October. There you are... Happy day, that 1st October! My grandson was also born on that day... Hold the mirror. "You go not till I set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you"... Where is that from?

ALEX: "Hamlet"–

ŽIVA: The scene between Hamlet and his mother, the Queen. Now you should suspect that I want to kill you and shout: "Help! Help! Ho!"

Alex looks at himself in the mirror.

ALEX: Help! Help! Ho!

ŽIVA: Wait, let me tidy it up a bit around your ears, like that...

ALEX: It's all right now.

ŽIVA: And so you connected the telephone and nobody knows?

Živa shakes the towel, brushes the hairs off, brushes Alex's clothes, cleans his tools and arranges them back into the bag.

ALEX: I use it only in emergencies.

ŽIVA: I don't like the telephone either. I prefer to talk to people properly, when I see them.

Telephone is only suitable for making arrangements. Brief and to the point.

ALEX: Sometimes I can't go and visit the child, so I phone him up.

ŽIVA: What child?

ALEX: My child.

ŽIVA: You are talking about your child?

ALEX: Yes...

ŽIVA: You... have a child?

Alex goes over to the coffee table and pours brandy into the glasses.

ALEX: Yes, I have a son. I'm sure he's mine. You remember, five years ago, when I came to you for a job, I was a bit strange, wasn't I? I was irritable, do you remember? Really angry. Only I didn't talk about it then. Of course, it all happened in another city, so fortunately, nobody knew anything, nobody asked any questions...

ŽIVA: What did you do in that other city?

ALEX: I fell in love.

ŽIVA: Children don't come just out of infatuation.

ALEX: I didn't want a child. She was my first proper girlfriend in my entire life.

ŽIVA: How old were you then?

ALEX: Twenty eight.

ŽIVA: That was your last train, my dear fellow... Had you missed that train you might've ended up a puffter.

ALEX: Might've...

ŽIVA: Not might've – would've. And you know you wouldn't have had a comfortable seat on that train. OK, I'm joking... You fell in love...

ALEX: It didn't last long. We weren't made for each other. And anyway she landed on her feet straight away – I didn't. I couldn't stay there any longer, I had to come back. Couldn't even bring myself to think about finishing my studies. Then my dad died, and I started getting used to it all.

ŽIVA: And the child?

ALEX: She had it, and by that time I'd already moved here. She called to get me to acknowledge the child. I knew she was with someone else. It could've been his.

ŽIVA: And what did you do?

ALEX: Nothing. Kept quiet and hated her.

ŽIVA: Did it not occur to you to acknowledge the child?

ALEX: I hated her so much! Nobody could make me believe it. I sorted it out with myself. Forgot about it. It never happened to me.

ŽIVA: One can't sort such things out oneself.

ALEX: I know. Well, yes, stupidity can never be forgotten. Stupidity. Suffering. I don't know.

That's why I drink! That's why I want to get away from here! That's why I can't settle down and devote myself to a single thing...

Alex starts crying, Živa approaches him, and Alex squeezes his hand.

ALEX: A spitting image, little bastard, a spitting image! There, Uncle Živa, see for yourself...

He takes a photograph out of his wallet.

ŽIVA: Really, Alex, get serious. It's Svetislav's blood...

ALEX: Eyes, nose, ears! Everything! That's when he was three, and you should see him now. And We're bickering already, it's unbelievable...

ŽIVA: So where is that child now?

ALEX: Where his mother left him four years ago, in the centre-

ŽIVA: In an orphanage... Eh, Alex, I can see you've sorted things out perfectly!

ALEX: I know. She went abroad, emigrated with that other guy, I never got to know anything in time, and still, I'm waiting-

ŽIVA: What for!? What the hell for!? You are waiting for the child to come to you and sort your life out, you stupid fool!? And what is that child doing in an orphanage when he's got a father!?

ALEX: Do you understand that I never acknowledged my own child, please don't shout, if anyone is suffering for it, I am. Now I have to go about adopting him, as if it's someone else's child, I have to look for another mother for him, I have to listen to the solicitor and everyone else, and now even you, telling me how I should be sorry!!! I am sorry, I am so sorry, it's beyond belief!!!

Alex clutches the table, loses grip and falls, pulling the table with him. Gets up and starts rearranging everything.

ALEX: I decided to sort out the place in the country that I inherited from my uncle. I'll keep some sheep, start a farm and we'll live there... For a start, I'll look after someone else's herds, and then I'll get my own. Svetislav will help me, and I'll hire a cook as well... I have to, the solicitor said so... I've got to have a live-in cook straight away... And that solicitor - I owe him 5000... I was in two minds about everything... It was so hard, until I finally made the decision... But one trouble breeds another... [What is it, master Živa?]

Živa turns around and wipes the tears off his face.

ŽIVA: I remember there was some boring commemoration in the theatre. Something to do with the Liberation Day. 1 October, I'm standing in the wings, smoking. Suddenly, I hear somebody is rushing excitedly through the auditorium - your father... Straight from the stalls, up onto the stage, coming towards me; he knew where we were normally sitting backstage... He stands next to me, pulling a big smile... I'm thinking, he must be up to something, some trick of his, and now he's waiting for me to bite... Suddenly, dead serious, he says: "For God's sake, where are you? Down in the bar, everybody's drinking on you, and you don't even know." Why are they drinking? "I don't know, they say you became a granddad this morning." And he congratulates me. But, there, it was he who brought me the news...

Živa goes over to the coffee table and sits opposite Alex.

ŽIVA: You need money?

ALEX: I've started stealing. I've started taking out of here what doesn't belong to me. Because of money. I thought I could get more money that way than by working for it. For the farm... to pay the bills...

ŽIVA: What have you sold?

ALEX: Nothing. I've just tried to. I was offering all sorts of things. Only now I've got someone Who's interested to buy. I don't know the value of things, so I'm haggling... Stealing. Selling the stolen...

Živa gets up and goes over to the shelves, starts looking for something. He finds some old photographs and shows them to Alex.

ŽIVA: You see these kids on these pictures. You know who gave me these photos? Old Dyadya Speransky. And that old record which I like to listen to and which gets on your nerves. He also gave me that. You can't possibly remember him. He was born in the last century, he was a commander in tsarist Russia, the chief of the administrative army headquarters, Nikolay Nikolayevich. Some relative of his, a direct relative, that can be proven because he

was from a family of priests, I think his name was Philip, he took Ana Dostoyevsky's confession before her marriage to Fyodor Mikhailovich. You've got that described in the Memoirs of Ana Dostoyevsky. But what is interesting about it is...

He is showing the things that he mentions, taking them out of little piles that only he understands the organization of.

ŽIVA: This sabre – he presented it to me. And this insignia – a decoration from some Russian artillery school. That's the czar's coat of arms, you see? That, and these two ceremonial swords. Before the war you could only see these worn by certain officers on very rare special occasions. Those are valuable things. Sell them. And the samovar. The rest is worth nothing... Why should I worry about it. I've lived my life. Now, give us that brandy.

Alex notices that there is no drink in the bottle on the table anymore, so he goes to pull another one from behind the shelves.

ŽIVA: You are now like that guy from "The Street Players". He was also hiding drinks everywhere, even in the chandelier.

Alex pours the drink into the glasses.

ŽIVA: To Svetislav junior.

ALEX: To Svetislav...

ŽIVA: "Eh, my Živa..." You know where that's from? You don't... From my life. 1941. In the Barber's shop there's only my master and me left. The Army left the city. The Germans already in the country. Then my master Bata takes the picture of King Peter off the wall and puts it behind the cabinet. He just says: "Eh, my Živa..." And I knew what he wanted to say. "One part of history has gone, I've already seen it off, I've seen off Franz Joseph, in whose army I served" that's probably what the master thought, "And now I'm seeing off another one". Eh, my Alex... There goes another part of history...

The sound of a car horn is heard. Nada enters.

NADA: Master, your son is here.

ŽIVA: Please, Nadezhda, go and ask him to hang on for a minute...

Nada exits quietly looking at the mess around her.

ALEX: Shall I take the coffin down–

ŽIVA: Leave that now... Pick up those things you want to sell, put them in the suitcase and take them down. Hide them in my son's car. Come on, what are you waiting for?

Alex collects the items that Živa mentioned, puts them in the suitcase and takes it down. Živa stands in the middle of the mess after Alex has gone out and closed the door.

ŽIVA: "Oh Death... you win this time! This night your wings will cover me. In twenty battles you flew over me, always beside me, watchful and loyal! Castilians, I do not hate you! For I am called by God, and one should respond to such a call with a pure heart, free from hatred! I do not hate you. I never will. For our Saviour bade us forgive, as he forgave! And it is my immeasurable love for Him that gives me the strength, that saves my tongue from cursing and keeps my soul full of joy! Ah! Never in my life have I faced a more bitter battle than this one! The day has come, and the hour is near! Almighty God, you who watch over me and read my soul..."

He draws a breath and goes to the barber's chair. He sits down, with his back to the audience. The sound of a car horn is heard again. Nada enters, looking swiftly around.

NADA: Master Živa, they are waiting...

Živa's right arm falls off from the armrest down by the side of the chair. Nada is scared.

NADA: Master Živa!

The arm rises and the hand starts opening, he lifts a key between his fingers that had been hidden in his hand. This is the key from earlier on that unlocks hidden drawers.

ŽIVA: Only Živa has a key to this. All the most important things are here. Notes, drawings, plans. Everything I've been working on for years. Whoever works this out, he is a genius. This is the key to every production, every scene.

Nada comes nearer.

ŽIVA: Take the key, Nadezhda.

The sound of the car horn is heard.

ŽIVA: Tell them that I'm ready and coming.

Nada exits. Živa gets up and goes to the gramophone. Puts a record on. The song from the beginning "Raskinulas more shirokae..." Živa listens in peace, then he turns suddenly and goes over to the coffin on the floor. Takes the lid off, then goes back to the coffin and starts to drag it towards the door, with great effort. Stops, catches his breath and goes to the window. Starts shouting through the window.

ŽIVA: For God's sake, what is this!? Do you expect me – an old man to drag this coffin around? One of you, over here, quickly!...

Comes away from the window and goes back to the coffin. Starts dragging it again.

ŽIVA: Shitty self-management... Nobody does anything... You've got to do everything yourself...¹⁵

Drags the coffin out of the propsroom. Slams the door.

THE END

¹⁵ In performance, the last line was replaced by: 'When something has to be done – you're on your own'.

THE PROPSMASTER

Required Furniture and Props:

- Stand-up shelves
- Coffin
- Two chairs & an old barber's/ swivel chair & small (coffee) table – various styles

- Suitcase
- Several telephones
- Several sabres
- Pistols/ guns
- A shaving set (razor, brush, talcum powder, a foam pestle etc) in an old black bag
- Coffee cups, coffee jug, sugar bowl on a tray
- Brandy bottle & two glasses
- A locker & keys
- Technical drawings
- Ink holder
- Pair of scissors & comb
- Old gramophone & some records
- Dusting cloth
- Big photo (interior, people)
- Old books & 1 big book
- Towel – white
- Play bills
- Brandy glasses
- Samovar
- Note pad

Costumes:

- Caftan
- SS Shirt
- Pair of marigolds
(pyjamas, dressing gown, apron)

Extras:

- Sound system
- Car horn SFX
- Music

APPENDIX TWO

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Dejan Mijač

28 March 2001, Atelje 212

It's a cold and windy spring's day. Vladimir and I are sitting in a tiny restricted access bar at the Atelje 212. This is the place where most of Kovačević's early plays were staged. He has also referred to this particular bar as a seat of dissidence in his play The Professional. It's a cafe bar with huge ashtrays and a Tannoy calling various people in for rehearsals – however, the Tannoy is often drowned out by the level of noise in the bar. The place is so small that it almost feels like the people sitting at various tables are actually sitting together. This quickly becomes apparent in the way the conversation is going. Every table has its own animator although most of the people present are all actors. We talk to Vladimir's colleague a formerly trained actor and now a director. At some point he comments in passing that he had had a quarrel with his girlfriend that morning. All of a sudden, it seems the entire bar – as if by magic – has heard this embarrassing confession. "Aaah," shouts someone from another table, "so, that's why you came out in short sleeves! Like, he says – no, I'm not cold, I really thought it was gonna be warm today. But, no, he was chased out of the house before he got a chance to put a jacket on". Meanwhile, a lesser-known actor has arrived and sitting on his own with a script. Tihomir Stanić, a current star of this theatre, greets him: "Where have you been, my compatriot! What are you up to?" "Nothing, just wanted to catch Mijač and talk to him about a script I've written." "Really? You know", he addresses the rest of us, "we come from the same village." There is about ten years difference in the age of the two, Stanić being the younger. "Do you remember how we played a king and a minister together?" Stanić is fired up: "Yes, we were recording this TV drama and I played the king and he played a minister. And I had this long speech after which he comes in with the line – 'Your majesty, you are wrong', followed by another long speech of mine. And he says to me – why should you bother to learn both speeches? Let me do the first speech instead of you. I could say – 'Your majesty, you wanted to say so and so, and then I do your speech – 'but your majesty, you are wrong'. And I say – no, thanks, my friend, I can very well do it myself. And they start to record the scene, and I do my first speech and then I say – and you my minister, wanted to say that I was wrong! And I steal his line!" General laughter. Soon Mijač enters in a raincoat and with a hat on. He is a man in his sixties of small stature and discreet manner. Vladimir tells me that he has recently suffered a double loss having his wife and his daughter die one after another. As soon as he enters everybody jumps up and surrounds him enthusiastically, testifying to the legendary status that he has acquired over the years as Yugoslavia's most significant contemporary theatre director. Stanić: "My compatriot wants to talk to you. But let me tell you this anecdote. Do you know the anecdote when the two of us played a king and a minister..." And he tells the whole anecdote all over again. Another actor informs him on the progress of the play he has directed him in in Novi Sad. "It is amazing that in the whole play the alarm clock gets the biggest laugh! I mean what is the matter with people!?" Soon we settle down, but Mijač is very meditative and very quiet, the recorder is hardly picking up what he says. I chose to interview him partly because of his significance in contemporary Yugoslav theatre and particularly because he was the first director of The Travelling Theatre Šopalović by Ljubomir Simović and has also directed The Roaring Tragedy by Dušan Kovačević. Here is a small extract from the conversation.

D.R.H.: As I said, I am interested in metatheatres and its ability to re-examine the function of theatre in a particular society as well as that society itself.

D.M.: You want to say – whether in that form, the primary thing is a social aspect? Or whether from a sociological point of view that form is interesting and efficacious?

D.R.H.: Yes.

D.M.: You know, I am not a very good person to speak about it. My view and my experience of the theatre is that theatre is an art where everything that has social significance, all those effects are stitches which make it possible for an audience to participate in the culture. The moment a play finishes – it is finished. Also, every member of the audience experiences it individually, and if there are any repercussions, then it is only something which the member of the audience had already received. I don't believe theatre can change anything socially. It has just as much effect as some work of art or some Chopin's prelude or waltz or a Beethoven's sonata.

D.R.H.: And, for example, if we take Brecht-

D.M.: Brecht! Brecht liked to engage in politics. Brecht engaged in a kind of theatre that's called didactic theatre. He went so far as to write so-called didactic plays. He used theatre for certain messages.

D.R.H.: That is why I am interested in metatheatres as a reaction to Brecht. I think that the theatre within theatre strengthens the theatre illusion which had been lost with Brecht. For example, Larry Thompson, which I have only read, I haven't seen it – but I think that the process of audience involvement in that play is so spontaneous that the audience is not aware of the moment when the theatre illusion sets in.

D.M.: Yes. For example, The Travelling Theatre Šopalović is a play about the power of powerless theatre in a historically crucial moment. The power especially in an ethical sense. The illusion of life and the reality of theatre. It's theatre in a context sharpened up by historical circumstances, which becomes a battlefield of great illusions which say nothing, and then the theatre becomes a definition of life in some way. And being face to face with that awful murderous machinery that was the Second World War, theatre is powerless to the lowest levels of powerlessness. And in some way life imitates theatre. Life begins to realise itself through theatre. Theatre doesn't deal with life but life sees its own reflection in theatre. It has to find the point of the everyday life – although that's an illusion too. It cannot find some essential meaning, but only some indirect and simple, acceptable feeling of life.

[...]

DRH: What was your approach to The Travelling Theatre Šopalović?

DM: There are several layers to the play. There is the travelling troupe which arrives to play on a city square where we already have the gallows. And they have to play in the shadow of the gallows. They intend to play Schiller's The Robbers but they enter a series of real life events which begin to resemble Electra. Then one actor steps out of the play into the real life, but without realizing the difference between real life and theatre, he enters into

another play. Thus, he resolves a real life conflict by pointing to the power of theatre. He confronts art and real life. That's the basic thought behind the play – the meeting of those two entities.

DRH: Where did you stand in relation to Filip and Vasilije's respective attitudes towards theatre and reality and in relation to the boundary between theatre and reality?

DM: I stood on the boundary. That's where the conflict is. The making of the decision between the two sides is something that is exclusive. But what is it that binds the two? That's what I was interested in.

Interview with Ljubomir Simović

29 March 2001, The Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences

It's a rainy and windy day. I am feeling very ill. Waiting for Vladimir in front of the SANU on the Knez Mihajlova Street, I listen to a newspaper-seller, yelling that the latest issue of the magazine he is vending is out. Dobrica Ćosić a long term member of the Academy, a famous post-war novelist and former President of Yugoslavia from the early days of Milošević's state is walking in. The newspaper seller is all humble and eager to please: "Good morning, Mr Academic, I've got the copy of the magazine you wanted..." Finally, Vladimir arrives and we go into the huge pre-war building with the obvious remains of the socialist interior adaptation – there is still a little counter there where we have to leave our IDs before going in. As soon as we walk into the bar, where we had arranged to meet Academic Ljubomir Simović, we see him sitting at the table waiting for us. He has the appearance of your favourite uncle.

D.R.H.: ...This is a big project for me as there is very little known about Yugoslav drama in the English speaking world. Has The Travelling Theatre Šopalović ever been done in England?

L.J.S.: No. No.

D.R.H.: Although in France it has.

L.J.S.: In France it has been on since 1990 up until now. I have various ongoing contracts in theatres in France. It has been on in Belgium and in three theatres in Switzerland, in Canada, and I have also recently received a copy of a two-language version – you will be surprised – from Seoul. Because they played it just during the bombing in one theatre at their Theatre Academy in association with the Slavonic department. So it has been played a lot. It has been translated into English and the translation was published in the Scena magazine. Unfortunately I have never learnt English so I don't know how good this translation is.

D.R.H.: I'd be interested to know why you decided to write a play about theatre at that moment.

L.J.S.: I don't think I could ever tell you that. It comes that way. At some point various experiences come together in one theme and so the die rolls that way – metaphorically speaking – falling on a particular theme, and then that theme absorbs a thousand others and the result is a novel or a poem or a book of poetry or a drama. I wrote that play – I finished it in 1985; I had carried that theme for a long time, it was interesting for me because it touched on a number of problems which occupied me then, and it offered a lot of scenic potential, as directors can tell you about that much better. I am now very far from that theme and in the meantime I have written some other things, so that I can't quite remember

what was the immediate reason for it. The immediate reason is your whole life, your knowledge, or the lack of it – it is always like that with writing.

D.R.H.: When you say ‘problems’, which problems were those?

L.J.S.: On the first level, there is obviously a moral problem. The question that one policeman asks: “Do you not mind the shadow of the gallows on your stage?” – that is the sharpest articulation of the moral problem of that play. Then you have the relationship between reality and art – when we use those terms we inevitably simplify those things in the worst way, and I do not like simplification – but for the sake of this conversation we can allow that. So – the relationship between reality and art, and then that which interests me in particular and which I suppose is obvious from my other plays – I like the theatre very much as play. I like theatre play. I hate nothing more than one person shows which have now proliferated out of necessity. Monologue is not play, it is not theatre, theatre cannot exist without two people. I like plays with lots of characters with lots of play in different senses of the word, so we have interweaving of many relationships, the conflicts of very many different levels of reality, because – hand on heart – art is nothing else, maybe, than one of the possible levels of what we call reality. Like, for example, I have never acknowledged the notion of fantasy as something that is separate from reality, but have always treated fantasy as a kind of reality – a reality which is more difficult to prove, more difficult to understand, but which is nothing less real only because it is more difficult to prove. You have mentioned earlier that in The Miracle in Šargan as well as in The Travelling Theatre Šopalović – and I could also say in Hasanaginica and in The Battle of Kosovo – there are those two levels; and directors often make a mistake when they separate the two levels, when they emphasise the borderline between the two. Before the first premiere of The Travelling Theatre Šopalović at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre I often talked to its director Mijač and then I had to write a programme note which I wrote in the form of a letter to the director, where I said something that he anyway knew without me saying it – and that is that the transitions from one level to another have to be unnoticeable and invisible. Now a lot of directors want to emphasise – when something is fantastic they emphasise the fantastic, when something is in some kind of opposition to that reality which happens on the cobbled street or in some realist or real courtyard and so on – by insisting on it, they practically ruin the fine tissue which exists between those different levels.

D.R.H.: We were just talking to Mijač yesterday and I was very interested in where the director positioned himself in terms of the duel between Vasilije and Filip regarding the understanding of theatre. You have already answered that question – but why is that interweaving between reality and theatre illusion important, what function does it have?

L.J.S.: I think I have already said that I consider art as one of the possible forms – or better still – levels of reality. And the second question?

D.R.H.: For example what is it that the audience needs to receive? What is your main idea of communication with the audience?

L.J.S.: When I write for the theatre I take audience into consideration in the same way as I take an actor into consideration or theatrical conditionalities themselves. But what and how the audience receives – the audience has to answer that question, I can make assumptions, I can make guesses, but I can’t answer that question, it depends on the presentation and the

way it's done and so on. But that is not as important, what is important is this – with regard to what I've just said about art being one of the levels of reality – we have too many prejudices regarding reality itself, we think we know what reality is, if we believe that reality is what can be seen, touched, heard, measured and so on. I always call on Laza Kostić – he was much bigger than he is credited for around here – who said that fantasy and dreams are just as real as is rain, for example. And that is where the key is, and the answer. So, hand on heart, what is art in amongst other things – it is full of proofs that reality is something much more complicated and much richer than we think or know.

D.R.H.: And in that context where is the truth?

L.J.S.: The truth is exactly in what I've just said – that the borders of reality do not exist.

D.R.H.: In Petar Marjanović's book you talked about various influences on your work,¹⁶ and I seem to remember that Brecht was one of them as well as for example Marat-Sade-

L.J.S.: Oh, Peter Weiss, yes. Well, I like many things in theatre, but Brecht is not my writer. I don't like the distance between the actor and his character. I like his texts, I respect them, but I'd never like to get into that school. I don't know, if you are asking me about my 'school' I don't think I'd manage to list them all – the range is huge from Chekhov to Shakespeare, Pirandello to Calderon and so on – one learns from everything. As for Brecht I admire his poetry much more than his dramaturgy but he is of a different temperament, a different mentality, not to say a different ideology.

D.R.H.: That is why I was wondering because Brecht was engaged in deconstruction of theatre illusion whereas in your work-

L.J.S.: It's the opposite.

D.R.H.: However, your play has songs.

L.J.S.: In that play there are two interludes. I wouldn't call them songs. As for Brecht, he was writing songs, or in The Three Penny Opera he was adapting some ballads if I remember well. Here there are two moments – simply, when I write a play I never forget that I am a poet too, so in two instances I resorted to rhyming poetry. It just came in handy, so to speak.

¹⁶ Marjanović actually quotes from Simović's autobiographical letter to him. This is the precise quotation I had in my mind: "For a long time, I really only liked to read plays. In that way I could achieve my own connection with the piece, with the author and with characters. Whilst reading I could see more than I could on the stage... At the time, the most relevant writers – Ionesco, Beckett, Sartre – weren't actually 'my' writers. I don't think one has a right to speak to others if he has no hope. I feel closer to Brecht, when he is not tendentious, and closer to Evgeny Schwartz with his *Dragon* and closer to Peter Weiss with *Marat-Sade*." And: "I am fond of every scenic form which is possible in theatre: from Brecht's *Mother Courage* to the *Letter for Queen Victoria* by Robert Wilson." Petar Marjanović: Jugoslovenski dramski pisci 20. veka; Novi Sad, 1985; p. 147. In his new edition of the same book, now entitled Serbian Playwrights of the 20th Century (rather than Yugoslav), published in Belgrade in 2000, Marjanović cuts out the first reference to Brecht but retains the second.

D.R.H.: There was something else I wanted to ask you earlier but the conversation took a different direction. Was there a particular picture, a particular scene or a particular concept that the play evolved from?

V.P.: I'd add something that could be useful here – and that is the question of the authenticity of Drobac¹⁷

L.J.S.: Well, you know, every character – not only Drobac – but every character is created out of a number of various people, there was not a particular person I knew who was Drobac. I was a child during the Second World War, I just started primary school, and I remember it all very well. The brain records it all, my head is still full of those pictures from the war and the occupation, the bombing of Užice and so on, the German bombing, the American bombing – the Americans bombed Užice in 1944 and the Germans in 1941. We had that bad luck to be bombed by the Allies too, and in those Anglo-American bombings there were even more civilian casualties. But I've digressed a little, you will wipe that footnote out. It is never only one picture which moves you, as it is never one person who inspires you to create a character. A lot of things play a part in the process, even the things you don't know. I didn't accidentally tell you earlier that the writing of a text involves all your knowledge and all your non-knowledge. One doesn't even know what different things they know and the logic of the creative process is much bigger than the one who uses it, it's much bigger than the writer. A writer doesn't always do what they want to do, but they do what the text wants. And the text itself, when it starts to be born then it starts to accommodate 'pictures' – I like it that you've used the word 'picture' instead of 'idea' – then the pictures from all sorts of directions start to enter it.

D.R.H.: I would like to return for a moment to something you have maybe already given a negative answer to – but I am trying to establish a connection with the events at the time, the various changes that came in in the 1980s – is there a connection, or something that caused the play?

L.J.S.: In those years when I was writing? I don't think so. And if there was anything – I don't think it's important, in as much as I can remember now.

D.R.H.: Yes, that is certainly a universal play which can be played at any time, and given that it is happening during the Second World War there is a sociological dimension to it-

L.J.S.: Of course. I can only tell you this – that theme is not only relevant in a war situation, that is – the conflict and the relationship between reality and art is not only such in a war, however, it is the sharpest in a war. And I chose the sharpest position which is so sharp that everything can be seen much more clearly and everything comes through in a sharper way. However, that kind of misunderstanding can happen every day without any wars and shooting.

D.R.H.: However, there is a moment in the play when one of the characters talks about the Serbs and how they can be divided by the smallest stream. This became very relevant in the 1990s – was it farsightedness or something that you have always thought?

¹⁷ Drobac is the character called Clobber in my translation.

LJ.S.: Yes, you are right. It's both. I didn't invent it, nor was I prophesying, I am afraid that that is a constant problem for us, you know, our people don't accidentally have the slogan 'Only Unity Saves the Serbs'. It only exists because there is no unity between us. And especially since the year 1990 when we were divided around every idea – Yugoslavia or no Yugoslavia and so on – we don't need much in order to create a big conflict about something. And that came to a head later on, but it is something that exists as a constant value in us.

D.R.H.: When Vladimir was working on the play in Gnjilane [in Kosovo in 1998], he found a relevant way of reading it in the context of what was happening at the time.

V.P.: I showed the very last picture of the actors' departure as an exodus – but in that given moment.

LJ.S.: Already in 1995 we had an exodus from Croatia, I remember the motorway. I was travelling to Kraljevo then – that was awful.

V.P.: And can you imagine me doing this with the Serbs in Kosovo, who did not believe that it could ever happen to them. They almost told me I was mad. However, I thought that it was inevitable – and it did happen. What you said about the war being the sharpest situation where you can see everything – I felt it was a big privilege to work on that text although I wasn't happy – please, don't get me wrong, but it is a big text which I'd left for later on when I matured as a director. I was privileged to do it there at that moment especially because I got that sharp situation to put the play in.

LJ.S.: It is good that you did it – maybe it was a preparation for something else.

V.P.: Yes, of course.

D.R.H.: And the plays you have quoted in the play, some of those I could recognize-

LJ.S.: I invented some. I used the licence. Simply because there wasn't in the dramatic literature everything that I needed, so I invented some texts. Like for example, Danilo Kiš invents documents which he relies on – that is a legitimate licence.

D.R.H.: It is interesting how all characters are completely rounded. Every one of them has something intriguing in them. In the cast-list every one of them has their own outer characteristic but also everyone of them has their own internal dynamics. Would you say that the play is primarily character-led, theme-led or plot-led?

LJ.S.: It is all three. No, drama has to have all of these. When I write a play there is a character who could be called a central character like in *Hasanaginica*. However, the characters who have secondary role are nothing less important to me than the title role. Everyone who comes out onto the stage has to have come out for a good reason, i.e. that they are a carrier of a specific fate and a specific content. So every character is important to me and I am trying – and I'd be pleased if I was really succeeding – to give every character that which you have mentioned, its own content and its own roundedness.

D.R.H.: How do you feel about the new production of the play at the National at the moment where one of the characters has been replaced by another – Meitzen is replaced by Domazet.

L.J.S.: I don't comment on productions. Some things I just endure even if I wouldn't approve of them. I wouldn't like to get involved.

V.P.: Where would be the end to it when the play has got as far as Seoul.

L.J.S.: Yes. When they asked me in an interview recently whether I participated in the rehearsal process I said that I didn't and that I always have Ezra Pound's line in my head: We will all die soon, so let us be as though we've died already. Because when a writer dies, how can they exercise their influence? So why would they now, when they are alive, use the privilege which is limited in duration. So I do not get involved. I don't like it for example – as they've done it on this occasion – when they insert somebody else's text into my play as I consider it a direct insult. However, one can't change it, and I won't try. I've written the play and everyone can read what I have done. As for influence, who can have any influence on what is going on between, as you say, Seoul and Toronto and – Gnjilane (laughs).

D.R.H.: I didn't know that they've inserted some other text.

L.J.S.: Yes, if you remember, at the end of the play when Filip has died, they are reading his will in which he asks for his scull to be donated to some theatre company as a prop. The director left that out and replaced it by Hamlet's advice to the actors. That may have something to do with actors, but absolutely nothing to do with my play, absolutely nothing. And if somebody didn't know what I have written they'd say – this guy is crazy, he didn't know how to solve the problem and arrive at the point he wants to make. So, he has erased my point. And at the press conference I said to him – I was saying this because of you, please restore my text to its place. Filip says – if I am dead, I can no longer come onto the stage to play Hamlet, but I can at least be Yorik's scull in Hamlet's hand. That is a resurrection for me. Because all the time he is saying that for him reality is real only on the stage, therefore a resurrection is possible only on the stage, in a play. And the director cuts it.

V.P.: I have a question – Filip dies in the end and like in The Miracle in Šargan he takes on somebody else's sin – that's a biblical or Christesque motif. How close was it to you that in the end he kills – even if it was with a wooden sword?

L.J.S.: No, no, no, he never kills in my version.

V.P.: Doesn't the Christian motif get negated if he becomes a murderer?

L.J.S.: No, no, no the point is – It's interesting that actors sometimes understand things better than directors. I have always had bigger collaborators among actors. When some director cuts something, an actor often insists that it should be brought back in, because I think they understand me better. It is not always the case, but that's often been the case in my experience. When I met the ensemble, after their first readthrough – which I didn't attend, I'd only come to meet them as there were a lot of young actors in it, which is always

very nice and interesting – one of the actors said: “Those actors were the only ones who never caused any suffering to anyone. Everyone caused some suffering apart from them.” The director who heard that, then gives the actor a wooden sword to kill with it, and the entire metaphor is immediately rendered meaningless.

V.P.: So you agree that with that murder the entire point is lost.

L.J.S.: Entirely.

V.P.: And Filip’s greatness is ruined.

L.J.S.: No, he becomes a murderer and is totally deconstructed. And then he has a technical advice for actors which is read and which has absolutely nothing to do with what’s gone on over the last two hours.

D.R.H.: The psychology of an actor is very prominent in the play – in Filip’s case in particular – but every one of them has their own brand of either actor’s inspiration or vanity. Is it a result of your very good personal knowledge of actors or just an observation?

L.J.S.: You know, you could now ask me whether I was a torturer as I wrote Drobac. (Laughter). You know, it is all a matter of imagination. One doesn’t have to spend 20 hours a day with actors in order to find some things out about them. Besides, to be an actor and to be a poet – that amounts to carrying the same fate in two different ways. So, I could – from this perspective, from the point of view and with the experience of a poet – I could get into the psychology of an actor¹⁸ much more quickly, as well as into the psychology of a torturer.

D.R.H.: So this question of mine has been a version of Vladimir’s earlier question about Drobac’s authenticity.

V.P.: I read that somewhere – that you had a particular torturer in mind.

L.J.S.: No, no. I used to know, actually, I used to meet a man with a whip on the street. And later that after the war, there was some Lucky the Gypsy who was an executor in a prison – who was killing people. And all of us knew that. We children used to watch him, Lucky going down the street. Therefore, that could’ve informed the character, but it wasn’t a decisive factor. Finally, to imagine evil is not at all difficult because there is so much evil around us.

D.R.H.: But in addition, Drobac also has a certain depth whereby it’s not all about evil but also about the reasons for it.

L.J.S.: Of course, on one occasion I was talking about the relationship between a writer and characters. The relationship towards negative characters is particularly interesting. I said – if I could remember precisely – that if a character were to succeed in literary and theatrical terms and so on, a writer has to build something personal and something that he values into

¹⁸ In the second, 2000 edition of his book, Marjanović actually adds that Simović’s mother was an amateur actress and his father a prompter in the local theatre, p 260.

the character. It is not accidental that Drobac remembers the lanterns made of pumpkins. As children, in the middle of Užice, we used to make those lanterns every summer – that's something really beautiful and unforgettable, and I gave those beautiful pictures to him. Because those pictures in his consciousness allow him to experience a transformation in his meeting with the actress. If it weren't for those pictures he probably wouldn't be able to experience that transformation. So he had something in him which was going in the direction of and towards that transformation.

V.P.: A salvation of a kind. And then he has no other solution than to kill himself.

L.J.S.: But which Drobac kills himself? It's not Drobac the torturer who kills himself but the Drobac who cannot accept the fact that he has been a torturer. The transformed Drobac kills himself. Those are big nuances, but one has to arrive at them.

D.R.H.: And there are very many nuances. That is why the text is so intriguing. When we were talking about the possible mise-en-scenes, I remembered that Vladimir was saying that in Gnjilane he was trying to persuade the actor to swallow the paper.

L.J.S.: That is not difficult to carry out as a technicality.

V.P.: He was saying – it's possible to hide it. I know that it is possible to hide it but – I want you to eat it, nothing will happen to you and it will be interesting. Because we always go for artificiality in theatre.

D.R.H.: But in terms of the significance of reality in this play, the idea of really eating the paper is in keeping with that reading of the play. So it is the details that really intrigue me. The way in which every scene too is rounded off with a punchy line, then the running motifs create almost a tapestry – the way that Drobac chooses the place of his suicide is interesting – and then the end of the play is an end of the characters' journey and there is a sense of emptiness and an isolation between them.

L.J.S.: Yes, it's characteristic that Simka tells them what has happened but they don't hear. They don't know the effects of their stay and of their unperformed play in that city which they are leaving.

D.R.H.: And in terms of the whole series of hostilities and attacks that they have to endure because of their profession – is that something you have also sharpened up or is it something that was really the case during the Second World War?

L.J.S.: Well, you know, that kind of conflict, as I said earlier, exists always. There is always certain mistrust towards the morality of an actor. That mistrust is not there only in war. As I said earlier, it is there always, in small, especially in small, towns. Only at the time of war you can see it more dramatically, more clearly, more sharply. And it doesn't have to be only actors. Around here when they say 'A poet!' they want to say 'Just leave him alone, he's not altogether sane.' That's what it is.

V.P.: So, the Republic Square during the bombing practically reinforces what you've said.

L.J.S.: What exactly do you mean?

V.P.: I mean that what was happening there was something most gross that could ever have happened in the culture of this nation. If at least they were playing Schiller at the Republic Square – like Šopalovičs play Schiller, it would at least be different than the concert of Zorica Brunclik.¹⁹ So in that sense, they were different.

L.J.S.: Oh, that was terrible. But they [the actors in the play] are real artists. Although often referred to as some insignificant actors, they are very committed to their definitions of theatre and the relationship between theatre and reality. Every one of them has their own experience, their own knowledge, their own definition – they are not ignoramuses.

V.P.: Privately they might as well be morally dubious-

L.J.S.: Why not, why not?

V.P.: Egon [Savin]'s²⁰ mild intervention gave Vasilije a sexually predatory relationship with Simka. Vasilije could be a person like that; however in artistic terms – they are relevant artists at the time.

L.J.S.: Yes, why would I otherwise tackle some third-class artists, why would I take them as a paradigm. But they carry that fate – on whichever level – and they are authentic carriers of that fate.

D.R.H.: It is interesting that that theme actually occurs for the first time in the eighties – the theme of the moral responsibility of actors who continued to work during the occupation and were therefore branded domestic traitors for entertaining the Germans. Or at least that was the official communists' view of the actors who never joined the partisans. That theme occurs in the film Već Vidjeno and more recently in Underground. I haven't found that theme anywhere else before your play.

L.J.S.: You know, the actors didn't entertain the Germans. The Germans didn't come to watch Serbian theatre. They entertained people. And the scene in the courtyard when Simka is asking the questions – how do you play, why do you play and so on, they want to tell her that their job is just as legal as the job of the baker. Just as a baker has to bake bread, because people have to eat; a human being has to have some other higher need apart from the need for bread. The actors are those who meet that need, and that need is greater when misfortune is greater.

D.R.H.: Have you seen any of the foreign productions of the play?

L.J.S.: I've seen the Paris one. It was very pretty, in Teatre de la Ville that's the theatre of Sarah Bernhardt. That was a very nice production – I was very happy. And the director came here once for the Sterijino Pozorje [festival of Yugoslav contemporary drama], they were supposed to come here and play, and they were supposed to go to Užice too – the Užice people were preparing a huge reception for them, they intended the whole city to be

¹⁹ Zorica Brunclik is a neo-folk singer who, to many people's horror, also ran for the position of the Minister of Culture at the time.

²⁰ Egon Savin is another well known Yugoslav theatre director.

a stage which would greet them, because it was going to be a big event – however, the sanctions started then. I remember that the French minister of foreign affairs [tried very hard] – I remember when I arrived to see the production, I saw various telegrams and his and mine were framed – he did all he could to make it possible for the production to come, however, all to no avail.

V.P.: They needed Vasilije Šopalović to find some way to do it.

(Laughter).

L.J.S.: Yes, it was a very good production. I haven't seen any other. A Polish production from Lodz came here once – it wasn't very good at all, they had some kind of an argument in the theatre and it was a kind of collectively directed production – so it is all clear.

D.R.H.: And the one that is played in France at the moment is some other production?

L.J.S.: Yes, it's completely different, the play has been on in twenty different theatres in France, and a lot of the productions are touring. I just recently got some reviews from some tour. They are going through various small towns. Usually in the summer they make a show and then they go to various festivals. Since you asked whether I've seen them – I've wanted to join one of these touring companies and go around with them. It'd probably be a very interesting experience.

V.P.: A real travelling theatre.

L.J.S.: Yes. I was also getting ready to go to Geneva to see their production – it was, I hear, one of the better ones – and I cancelled it at the last moment because Bernard Henri Levy – the French philosopher – politicised the whole story and he demanded that after my play there should be a screening of his documentary film about Bosnia. And then as a third part of the whole thing he wanted to have a discussion about the war in Bosnia. You know, that was politicising of the worst kind, and I refused to go and wrote them a nice letter. Of course I was the one who lost out, but you know, one cannot accept everything.

D.R.H.: I can understand that because I live in Britain and I am very aware of how the picture about us is constructed. It is all very narrow-

L.J.S.: A one-way street.

D.R.H.: Yes, there are lots of stereotypes, [...] the narrative is very stereotyped and the characters are all black and white. Of course, there are different people. There are people who understand the situation better and are trying to understand it, and then there are those whose level of awareness is very low as they are much more inclined to take the media picture on the face value. Last year we did a new Serbian play by a young playwright who recently graduated-

L.J.S.: What is his name?

D.R.H.: Uglješa Šajtinac.

V.P.: The Propsmaster – it's on at the Belgrade Drama Theatre at the moment.

L.J.S.: Ah, yes.

D.R.H.: I translated that and Vladimir directed it. I had a problem with that text because I didn't know how it would be received in relation to the general level of awareness. However, that went very well because it is also a story about theatre and it has a context. That is why I am interested in theatre-within-theatre because it gives simultaneously a picture about theatre as well as its context.

L.J.S.: That's a very nice topic. I think we've touched on many more things than I thought for such a short time.

D.R.H.: Thank you very much, you have really given me a lot of invaluable insights.

L.J.S.: I am glad if I could help.

PS:

L.J.S.: When we are talking about the composition of a play I cannot not think of the composition of a chess game. If in the seventh or eighth move, for example, you put the knight in a particular position – white or black – you already have an idea as to what that knight has to do in the twenty-fifth or the fortieth move. The architecture of a chess game is very educational for a playwright and in some way – for a detective story too. I want to say that everything has to be connected, everything has to be studied, nothing must be accidental or left out and forgotten. At the beginning you have to know the end and the role of a particular move or a line.

D.R.H.: Have you written any more plays after The Travelling Theatre Šopalović?

L.J.S.: Yes, I wrote The Battle of Kosovo which inspired a thin film – because they were in a rush to make the film in two months, and they were actually supposed to make a TV series – and they needed to have 70 exceptional actors for it. Because it was that kind of a play. It was never played in a theatre, because I don't know which theatre could have staged it.

V.P.: Yes, they did it in Gnjilane.

(Laughter).

L.J.S.: Really?

V.P.: It's unbelievable, the way they made costumes for that production. I never saw the recording.

L.J.S.: But what did they do? They probably had to cut a lot of it out, because it would have lasted for 6, 7 or 8 hours.

V.P.: I only saw the costumes which were handmade, very authentic! They put an awful lot of money into it.

L.J.S.: I never knew...

V.P.: It was directed by Oliver Viktorović. But you know, there was a very particular climate there.

L.J.S.: You haven't seen it.

V.P.: No, they did it when you wrote it. Or as soon as they'd taken the theatre over from Albanians.

L.J.S.: Yes, I was very unhappy, that coincided with the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo and everybody was jumping on that bandwagon and I was slightly embarrassed about it. I wish I had kept it in a drawer, because every literate person at the time felt obliged to write something or wanted to find some personal gain from the situation.

V.P.: That 1989 Vidovdan was like some kind of a deadline.

L.J.S.: Yes, I wrote about that 1989 Vidovdan and about Milošević's speech and I published it whilst he was still in power, without any reservations, I listed his mistakes. And his mistakes started there.

V.P.: It was a catastrophe.

L.J.S.: Terrible. Such an irresponsibility, such a lack of foresight in terms of what I've just said about the chess game and every move having a reason. A politician has to have some kind of a vision, to know what they are doing today and where that leads us in some years time. He never knew that, he did everything wrongly. I wouldn't say it now, had I not said it then in 1990-91.

D.R.H.: But was The Battle of Kosovo written for theatre or for film?

L.J.S.: It was written for theatre – it was written for the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, then the euphoria started, and I was no longer into it. Then the Yugoslav Drama Theatre wanted to do it two or three years ago. However, the theatre burnt down and they wanted to do it on a stage in Zemun. At the time the Radicals were in power in Zemun, and I only needed Šešelj²¹ to come and sit in the front row and ruin me completely. So I preferred not to do it, I said – it exists as a book, it is still read, and I prefer there not to be any production of it rather than to have it manipulated. The Battle of Kosovo has very many levels. I took the Kosovo myth and Prince Lazar – but I added to it a whole range of other viewpoints of his opponents, and it would be enough only to lose one level for the entire text to be falsified and manipulated.

²¹ The president of the Radical Party was the mayor of Zemun at the time.

Interview with Nenad Prokić

29 March 2001, Bitef Teatar

On the way back from the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, I make an impromptu call on the director of the Bitef Teatar, whose office is situated not far away. Nenad Prokić agrees to an interview on the spot.

NP: I wrote the Grail in 1983 and in 1985 it was premiered at Atelje 212. One can say that the political climate at the time influenced the creation and the reception of the play. At the time, the situation in Yugoslavia was such that Tito had just died, some strong conservative forces still survived but also a kind of communism that was as soft as a cat's paw. This communism in relation to the rest of the world – and Europe was then still divided by the iron curtain and in the shadow of the cold war – so that kind of soft communism was in some way an advantage as it created the fascination of 'walking along the edge' in the words of Karl Schmidt. So, when you walk along the edge you can see both sides clearly. We could, whoever wanted to could be fascinated by the walk along the edge, could see both sides clearly – the East and the West, and see the events in a broader context and perceive them from a broader perspective, of course on condition there was willingness to see things that way. I have to admit that at the same time there was a clear sense that one period was coming to an end and it was necessary then to create some kind of a future for the country. Although I can't say that I clearly sensed the end of Yugoslavia, I saw that the country needed some new kind of an illusion which would keep it together; the old one was broken and lay in pieces and simply couldn't guarantee a safe and bright future. At the same time, in parallel, we had The Kolubara Battle, Golubnjača – the plays which forced you into a kind of national mould, a Serbian pot, and beyond that nothing else existed. I however subscribed to a completely opposite view. I always supported the notion of an 'open society' and Karl Popper's philosophy. I wanted to establish some kind of optimism and develop an attitude towards the idea of an 'open society' in terms of the country's future. Of course, such an opinion was a lonely opinion. In the Grail there is a sentence which says that such intellectuals 'chewed over their theories in their reservation camps', nobody touched them, but they were not strong and powerful enough to stand up to some other camps which wanted something completely different. And, of course, that kind of attitude was inferior in its power in comparison to this other stream which insisted on the national question before democracy. And Koštunica today still insists on the national question before democracy [...], but the national question will never be solved so that we are all happy and content and that then we can think of democracy.

So, the Grail was written at the time with a completely different parallel in mind – the fascist regime which ruled in Italy for 25 years. It is interesting that following the end of fascism, Italy emerged completely unaffected by the regime which was revolutionary and which lasted for such a long time. I thought that the same would apply to us at the time, that communism would end easily, particularly as it had a much lighter grip here than it was the case in other parts of the world. Of course, I was wrong. Even though essentially I was right, I was proved wrong. I thought we were the first in the line to painlessly make a

transition into a different world, but unfortunately we are the last to cross over and are left with most pain.

The Grail appeared at the same time as the general tendency towards a cosmopolitan view of man; individual fate was being placed within a historical perspective. However, the nationally coloured plays soon took over – and all sorts of holes were being dug out, and the long buried bones unearthed all over the former country – they were trying to solve something that had happened thirty years ago. They talked about Goli Otok – which was important to address as a taboo – but the society was engaged in covering its back – looking into something that was long gone, however painful – and it didn't care about what that story would provoke, the story of who did what to whom. And of course it provoked nationalism which destroyed us all here and led to a long and horrifying war. I think that that was very wrong. The breaking of one set of myths and taboos resulted in some even more dangerous myths. And I think that the people who were doing this kind of writing – such as the president-to-be Dobrica Ćosić,²² for example, and his idiotic ideas about Serbia – had huge responsibility for what happened. I don't want to condemn all of those who made such plays, but they very much contributed to a terrible state of affairs. As did the war journalists. Today war is impossible without journalists. They prepare the ground, build up the atmosphere, raise the temperature, and at the end of the day you can't go into war overnight – the public opinion has to be created for it. And the theatre also contributed to this as much as it could. Therefore, I don't except the theatre at all from the responsibility regarding the preparation for the country's disintegration and the way in which it disintegrated. There were very few attempts before and during those events in the early 1990s on the part of the theatre to oppose those events. On the contrary, theatre was more often a collaborator in all kinds of horrors than it tried to voice resistance or point to the futility and danger of such method of problem-solving. You could count on the fingers of one hand the plays which directly addressed the greatest dangers which surrounded us. Theatre in general was either hiding behind all sorts of other things or it was rushing ahead with national flags and anthems alongside what was happening. In those terms the Grail – and I am embarrassed to have to say it – the Grail anticipated several important things, which still haven't been resolved in this society. In very basic terms, a certain equation was established in the play between communism and fascism – which certainly became very relevant later. The communism of Mira Marković is by definition fascist – and in the most banal form – so the thesis that those two totalitarian systems are very closely related can be proved in that way, by looking at our recent history. In addition, this system was accompanied by terrible kleptocracy – effectively it was a new social system where the point was to steal as much as possible, that the degree of irresponsibility became absurd, that anyone could steal and kill and that then there would be no proofs about it. [...]

That is the story about the Grail. It happened over 15 years ago. The production was very good. The German magazine Theater Heute voted it the best foreign play. I never went back to politics. I did directly participate in political organizations, but I didn't go back to politics in theatre. The Grail too is also political only in a particular way. I didn't do it simply because there is nobody here to hear it. Whenever you tried to speak against nationalism here or against anything that was happening, you always had a feeling of extreme loneliness, or that you were doing it on some very private level; you never got any

²² Ćosić was the author of The Kolubara Battle, the novel which was adapted into a play in the 1980s, as Prokić notes above.

affirmation from anyone apart from a few close friends who could fill a small room. In those terms, it was pointless to continue that kind of writing – I could do that in papers, essays or public speeches – but de facto, I think that this environment did not deserve that kind of writing as they ignored it. Serbs never wanted to watch Sterija Popović – I don't mean to compare myself to him – but the audience certainly doesn't want to confront itself. It is a nation in an adolescent stage of development, they can't handle it. Then it is better to turn to some kind of aesthetisation, to turn to the Bitez festival – which can help much more, which can introduce new ways of thinking, even though the festival doesn't have any kind of influence on our theatre despite 36 years of its existence. It exists on its own, it is tolerated, but has no influence. We still don't have a professional dance troupe.

As a writer I then went into some kind of aesthetisation – I went to Slovenia where I worked for several years – and the Grail itself is also a kind of aesthetisation, which is in itself already a political gesture in relation to the wide-spread naturalism in the theatre here and in the everyday life. That is already a definition of resistance towards something that is deeply rooted here – this is at the end of the day a conservative, xenophobic and a society resistant to change. The church is the same – it still hasn't adjusted its calendar to the rest of the world. It is the church of one essentially unreligious nation and that is why it is conservative, closed and resistant to any contemporarisation within. The institution of the church alone is xenophobic which then spreads to the people. Then the people choose xenophobic and vain leaders. Why didn't that kind of thinking occur in Austria or Italy or Hungary at the time, but it did here? That is something that I am aware of as a writer and I don't want to bring myself into a situation to write such things that nobody wants to hear.

DRH: Why have you chosen the theatre-within-theatre as a format?

NP: It is a philosophical approach – to see things from different perspectives. The theatre-within-theatre is very convenient as it can see things from different perspectives and draw a full circle around a particular problem. When things are shown through several inverted prisms, you get a clearer impression about the problem. The construction of the play is such that only half way through it is revealed that the play is in preparation. So up until that point we have watched one kind illusion, and then we watch a different kind of illusion and at the end we have a double suicide – one is theatrical and the other is real. But of course the second is theatrical too. Therefore we have a particular complexity – a complexity which offers different levels of signification and meaning of the central problem.

DRH: It's interesting that Pirandello also appears as a character.

NP: Yes, because he also tackles those kinds of relationships, and he explores the relationship between reality, and the so-called unreality, and what happens when the boundaries of reality are penetrated – what happens with a particular text, a particular theme, a particular problem which is being treated.

DRH: The main character also demands illusion, the right to illusion. Is that your own voice?

NP: I teach 20th century drama at the Academy, and often I teach very exact things, such as polemical drama, Brecht, Pirandello. So very often when I finish a lecture – not wanting to disappoint the artists, the students of a faculty of arts – I often say: despite all things that I

have talked about today, you must know that a man cannot live without ideals, or without illusion. That was very much discussed at the end of the century and the millennium. When you de-construct one state of being, one illusion, one system there comes a vacuum until the construction of a new illusion and system. Ultimately, [illusion] is an aim, it is something that holds us all together, everybody sees it differently, but it is the aim that we share. We are currently living in an intermediary stage of some new illusion of ours, and that is apparent from the fact that we cannot clearly express our interest. The Americans say to us: either deliver the man who has made your life hell for ten years, or else – no money. That's how they express it and there is no space for interpretation. And we are somehow not sure – we would give him away, but then again we wouldn't give him away, or we would give him away, but there are no laws, but if there were laws, that wouldn't be good. We can't go on like that. We'll either give him away and get the money, or we won't give him away and will bear all the consequences; but no whining. That's terribly simple. [...]

I don't at all want to claim that only I am right, But my opinion is this: I think that Serbia could avoid hardships and join the rest of the world long time ago, and that's what I wrote long before the war, and I still think so. I can't say that history has proved me right, at all. Maybe it was the right way to go about it, but than I am not a Serb. I am a Serb, because I was born here and because my father, mother and grandfather were Serbs, but that has no bearing on me, I really consider Thomas Maan as a spiritual relative. I don't have any obligation to automatically belong to a particular cultural model, my cultural model is different from the cultural model that this society has demanded for so many years. [...]

DRH: I came across an interpretation of The Metastable Grail as a primarily intellectual piece. How did this format communicate to the audience at the time?

NP: One can't discuss such a big theme without resorting to a complicated structure. However, theatre has to meet a number of criteria on a number of levels. It has to entertain as well. I think that this occurred in the Grail simply because a number of successive events kept all the characters together. All those philosophers, intellectuals and proponents of fascism who paraded there with their big ideas and loud protestations was something that the audience could watch easily. The second, representational level of theatre was achieved and therefore it enabled the play not to become a podium for discussion but a theatre play where we follow a clearly represented individual fate. At the same time was represented the environment around that man who in that theatre, within that society, at that time had his own dilemmas and problems and his own resistance. And therefore he was making a play about this at the time, and the play encountered censorship. At the time plays were being banned. There were some rumours around the Grail as well, but it came out precisely because the censors could not penetrate the structure and pinpoint what the play was actually about. They saw that the play was about the Italian fascists in the 1920s and they probably ascribed all the sentences they didn't like to the Italian fascists. But I think that the theatrical and the aesthetic value of that play was the fact that it was set in the theatre.

DRH: It is interesting that the play-within-the-play anticipates censorship and therefore the censors are disarmed as they cannot penetrate the structure. Was that a conscious choice?

NP: I personally don't like the expression 'auto-censorship'. It wasn't only auto-censorship. Here we had a great danger up until very recently – not in the sense that we had

a censor and certain things were banned – but you could have big problems in your private life if you challenged anything. At that time we had a very well organized state which didn't allow criticism of the social system. It wouldn't necessarily ban anything but it would find a way for it to sink into oblivion. They were very skilled at the time. But recently – the Milošević regime didn't care about theatre much – but everybody who was against the regime, particularly at the last stages of its disintegration, was directly under physical threat. They were prepared to assassinate those who didn't think like them. As the inheritors of the previous regime they were convinced they had the right to ban and they were getting more and more cruel on account of that right. But they were never open, they never said we are an authoritarian society – we don't allow such and such. They only became more and more cruel and more and more evil. And they always had a very sharp sense for anything that was likely to threaten their position. At the end of the day everything became dangerous, but they also couldn't cover themselves up anymore and were destined for ruin. [...]

DRH: In terms of what the Grail managed to prophesy, it suddenly occurs to me that in the play there are two brothers whereby one is Serbian and speaks the 'ekavica' [the eastern version of Serbo-Croat] and the other is half-Slovenian and speaks the 'ijekavica' [the western version]. On the general level this could have been a metaphor of the country's multiculturalism.

NP: In terms of the human freedoms and rights, language is also a matter of choice, among other things. If you were born in a big country, where several languages are spoken, and if your development was such – and in the play one of the brothers is in a Catholic monastery – then you have a personal attitude towards which language you speak. But if the state forces you which language you should speak, then it is a problem in the domain of human rights. And it is a manifestation of cultural manipulation. This country was brought to disintegration through the manipulation and destruction of the cultural domain – which is one thing I am really sorry about. [...]

Interlude: The Arrest of Milošević

30 March – 1 April 2001

The following night, 30 March 2001, Vladimir and I go to the National Theatre in Belgrade to see the new production of The Travelling Theatre Šopalović, directed by Kokan Mladenović. It is a mild disappointment almost from the word go. Apart from a charming young actress playing Sofia, the rest of the cast put their souls into the director's construction which doesn't quite work. He not only replaces the German official Meitzen by an otherwise invisible character Domazet, but also moves the action from the orderly police headquarters to a slaughterhouse. This only sounds good, but really the presence of a hyper-realistic model of a hanging slaughtered pig downgrades the entire poetic line of the play beyond all limits. Occasionally, the playwright's wit and poetic sensibility shines through, but the audience is seemingly unimpressed by the entire enterprise. The director seems to have taken sides with the realists, pragmatists and skeptics which renders Filip a mere charlatan or even madman.

After the play we go to the backstage bar where the birthday party preparations for one of the lead actors are under way. Some acquaintance of Vladimir's offers a quick greeting before saying: "Sorry, I've got to go home, I want to watch the direct broadcast of the arrest of Milošević." "What?" "The arrest of Milošević, I've just heard the rumours." "Please don't do this to me, I've had too much of false rumours and false excitement". "No, this is real, everybody's on about it". Without really buying the story straightaway we come out on the relatively ordinary streets of Belgrade, not really mentioning Milošević's arrest, but getting increasingly intrigued. We get back, put the TV on, and going through multitude of local channels, within ten minutes, we stumble upon the special news-break! It is true! There's shock and uncontainable euphoria. Immediately, phones are ringing left, right and centre: Milošević has been arrested! In the middle of the preparations for a celebration – another special report: Milošević is believed to have appeared in front of his residence dispelling rumours about his arrest. This is turning into some funny cross between farce and tragedy. Half an hour later – the pictures: Milošević's supporters in front of his residence. Not very many of them. Cameras, however can't quite get a close up of the gate. "We are not sure whether what we have on our cameras is a man or a doll [meaning the man Milošević or a doll of Milošević!]. We'll play the whole sequence in slow motion again and let the viewers decide for themselves." The slow motion is so slow that it disfigures everything. What do we decide for ourselves? Oh, what a terrible travesty of liberalism! Oh, the glory of the BBC! Within minutes, I'm on the phone to England to try and get reliable news of what's going on at my doorstep. No luck, no-one at home...

Vladimir leaves visibly shaken. I stay up all night watching the most amazing of reality TV one could ever have seen. The broadcast goes on live all night on various channels intermittently with various documentaries about Milošević's regime. A photographer gets hurt, his hand is bleeding, he is showing it to the cameras. Absolutely no cosmetic interventions, all raw, all running without any commentary. At some point later on, Milošević gives a telephone interview to Studio B (or maybe even B-92), his famous media enemy. He chats about how he is sitting quietly at his home, having coffee with his friends

and nothing strange is happening. Having coffee with his friends at three o'clock in the morning – and nothing strange about it? I mean we went to watch a play about theatre at the time of war and all through it there was the best of real life theatre going on on the streets of Belgrade! Later still, masked policemen in catsuits are seen trying to carry out a manoeuvre and break into the courtyard of Milošević's. I never thought I could see anything like this on television unless I was watching James Bond or something like that. And what do they do then – they actually start to shout obscenities at the journalists who line the streets like some funnily equipped theatre audience. "Fuck off, you stupid journalists! What do you think this is!?" I'm surprised they actually don't say : "What do you think this is – a theatre?" There are shots being heard from the inside. This is starting to feel like your first ever New Year's party when you're allowed to stay up until dawn, not quite knowing what to expect but knowing that it'll be special and that you'll have done it for the first time ever. And just before you get there you are really, really tired and zombified but you must stick it out.

This New Year's Eve actually went on the whole weekend. On Saturday there were confused statements by politicians, a certainty of something big happening mixed with the uncertainty of how it would happen and when, even clashes in front of the residence. People stayed there day and night, and the second night was just about waiting for something to happen finally – once and for all and to have done with it. In the end, Milošević's bow was humble though melodramatic, but he had taken an extremely long time – some 30 hours – to make his final exit. However, it wasn't an April Fool's joke.

Interview with Dušan Kovačević

4 April 2001, Zvezdara Teatar

We finally sit in Kovačević's office at the Zvezdara Teatar, where he is the artistic director. I had been trying to arrange this interview for ten days, having been instructed by various members of his family to call later or tomorrow or the day after. I was stood up two days earlier at an appointment we had carefully fixed. After an hour of waiting, the porter showed me the way to his office and his secretary told me on that occasion that he was away on a business trip for a week. I, however, refused to leave until I reached a satisfactory resolution to the absurd situation I found myself in. There was a lot of broken gramophone record effects: "He is away", "But I have an appointment" etc. Finally I requested to use the phone. She rang him on my behalf, he apologized profusely on the grounds of having had a very important – political – meeting on that day and having forgotten all about the appointment. He was indeed going away the following day, but can we meet the day after. And there we are. He is famously fidgety. Through the open window of his small and relatively empty office we can hear children at a school playground nearby. A perfect spring day. Also a dog is barking somewhere – throughout the interview. Below – a huge beer garden and a posh restaurant which is in the same building and where a wedding party is assembling.

D.R.H.: Claustrophobic Comedy was announced as a beginning of a trilogy about theatre which then included The Professional and Roaring Tragedy. Later Larry Thompson appeared in this series of the plays about theatre. I am interested in the use of theatre as a metaphor in your work, play-within-the-play and metatheatricality.

I would like to start our conversation with Claustrophobic Comedy which intrigued me as a play with many levels and it could also be seen now as almost prophetic in terms of, for example, the relationship between the two brothers...

D.K.: Claustrophobic Comedy is actually something which continued through the rest of the plays up until my very last play which I am working on at the moment – Doctor Cobbler, where again theatre in same way encroaches on the everyday life. In this play an opera singer comes to the house of one doctor where he sings in his honour. Of course, there is a confusion here because the doctor thinks that this is a relative of his. The point is that I am more and more interested in where we are privately – as actors, in our private lives. It is no longer the case that the thin line between art and life often gets blurred and often it is unclear, and often it is very close and often it is very concrete. I am more and more interested in how we – conditionally speaking, under inverted commas – as actors amateurs in our private lives can actually play someone else. We are all actors with the difference that some live from it, it's their bread, and for the rest of us it is a hobby. Because when someone is getting ready to go to some meeting – assuming that that meeting is very important in this person's career and life – he does everything that an actor does. He gets ready at home, he puts the make up on, he puts the costume on, he dresses specially for that occasion, he prepares a speech in his head – meaning he prepares his part. He goes, and depending on how good an actor he is, how well he plays the part of a businessman, how convincing he is, how much that audience – if he speaks, if it's a promotion and therefore a monologue, and he addresses them as a presidential candidate,

speaking in some big centre, some big hall or at a rally then it is a monologue, but if he has co-speakers in his team then it is a classical [conventional] play and if he has a chorus behind him then it is an ancient [classical Greek] play. And all of that together is morphing and moving from one state to another state, and all of that together has the smell and taste of theatre. And the whole story that as a result of a horrifying degree of the media's intrusion in our private lives, as a result of the fact that through the internet we voluntarily agree to being listened to, followed, that somebody can access all you write – it means that the police²³ don't have to have many employees anymore because you voluntarily apply to grass on your own self. The high technology – very soon every PC will have a camera and then you will be sending your image, given that your house is secured, it means you voluntarily expose yourself to the police to keep an eye on you – as a result of that hi-tech tool we are beginning to be people who are exposed to some other world, it doesn't have to be an audience, but in any case we have lost our intimacy.

That story began in Claustrophobic Comedy. Then came The Professional where we have a policeman coming to an office of a man whom he had followed, and more or less everyone of us would like to have someone turn up to him one day – it doesn't have to be a policeman – someone who will say: "These ten or fifteen years you have lost, I have found for you. I have found your stories, I have found the objects you have lost, I have found one big part of yourself, because I was enlisted to follow you, and there – I give you all of that. Everything that you've never done, I have done for you". That story is again about theatre in some way, because that man is a writer and he has never written anything, and the man who comes is an amateur – in fact those are stenographic records, those are police files, which turn into literature. That's where the thin line between art and everyday life starts again. Then we have Roaring Tragedy which happens in a house which will one day be visited by a married couple from a mental hospital, but the host of the house is a manager of a theatre. And that's how the theatre here starts to encroach on the story. To return to the Claustrophobic Comedy – there we have a policeman who says that he has been to the theatre and has seen the scene that they are now living and that he knows the end of the theatre play and that he believes that the end will be the same in life too. Those are the constant double games and some kind of layers which, in terms of dramaturgy, I would like to be accessible to a shoe cleaner – and that the story for the shoe cleaner is very simple and that he gets engaged and says: yes, that story is about a ballerina who ran away from some country and was found by a chimneysweep – and to the people who know Shakespeare who can see how one ordinary story about one chimneysweep turns into a story about Othello. Those layers – from the shoe cleaner to a Shakespeareologist, a literature professor – we have a terribly big range, we have several layers in between for possible interpretations of all of that. Roaring Tragedy is also in its own way a border area between fiction and that which is happening in parallel that night in one theatre. Then we have Larry Thompson which is happening directly in the theatre where one night a great actor who plays Cyrano doesn't want to come because he is depressed, because he is on the verge of committing suicide and one small actor who never had more than three lines on the stage, comes out to keep the audience in their seats, says a few lines and gets applause, and he begins to realise that night that he could – and all in the name of friendship and in the name of saving the show – that he could at least once in his life stay on the stage for longer than ten minutes. And he stays on the stage for two hours and begins to feel the kind of pleasure

²³ Kovačević very often has policemen characters in his plays.

that he never felt because the set of circumstances is such as it is.²⁴ And this last piece which I am working on, if the story is about where performance begins – theatre is one of the themes – then one lady whose husband was an opera singer, has a wish that the costume of her husband continues to live on the stage and she gives the costume of Prince Igor to one theatre so that some young actor can sing in it and she will come to the theatre from time to time to watch him and imagine that it is her husband singing. However, that actor later appears in that costume in one house and she thinks that it is her husband come back. And those are the constant connections between life – our real life – and that which we call art. Which is, as I said – by coincidence of circumstances – due to the horrifying pressures of the media, television, film and theatre to a lesser extent – our life is increasingly a life of someone else. And here at the time of the greatest poverty and misfortune, people were watching a Mexican series where rich people are suffering, crying and killing each other although they live in luxury, and then our unfortunate people were finding it easier to bear their poverty, thinking: OK, if that person – and by the third or fourth episode they weren't watching a series anymore but 'real life', thinking that it was a documentary programme – if those people who are so rich suffer as much as we do, then life is really a relative phenomenon and we are all beyond any help. And then it is irrelevant whether I am poor and he is rich, we all suffer in the same way.

D.R.H: Do you think that the blurring of the boundary between real life and art is a result of what was happening to us sociologically, politically and so on, or is it everywhere the case?

D.K.: I am not sure. Here it was all overemphasised and manipulated by the fact that all television channels were under the central management of one family which dictated all aspects of life – from banking and the economy to culture. Or the lack of it. And it is not accidental that over the last ten years those series proliferated like cockroaches. It is not accidental that the standard of good taste was increasingly lowered, because with the lowering of taste, follows the lowering of human need. The human need of any kind of aesthetics, because in your private life you can live in a cold room, not eating anything all day, and in the evening you will watch something called televisual cocaine. You will get your fix and you will live all day for that one hour. That is very similar to – as I like football very much – if I knew today that there would be a championship cup game on tonight and that Barcelona would be playing Manchester United, I would live all day for those two hours. Of course, that is on a different plane, but it is not far from the fact that the media have become in our lives something which replaces our life. It is not accidental that in the whole world – we are not talking now about Belgrade and Serbia now – in the whole world, the majority of people know biographies of actors they like, they know what is happening to them in their private lives, but they haven't seen their mother for six months. They don't know what is happening to their own sister, how she is living, where she is, but they know that the actress or the actor they adore is getting divorced and they suffer because of it or they are unhappy that they've caused some incident. That phenomenon of moving the human essence towards some peripheral, unimportant things, is actually a media manipulation of the Orwellian type. And the whole planet is beginning to resemble the Orwellian story and Big Brother who is observing us and manipulating us on different

²⁴ This is a useful piece of information, because the play can be, again, approached from many angles among which the story of the character Beli is not an obvious one and certainly not in terms of his moment of glory. As a narrative it is interesting, but the play is so brimming with political and sociological references that it is easy to overlook the simple life stories such as this one.

levels. One level is, of course, when Coca-Cola appears in an African tribe and when the trademark of Coca-Cola appears somewhere on some hut where people don't even have water but they have Coca-Cola – up to the level where the powerful and rich people are manipulated by the desire to have Madonna advertise their product (or to have any other one of those stars we have walking around these days) because they know that her one sentence is more important than all sentences of the complete board of their geniuses.

D.R.: That theme evidently exists, most explicitly in Larry Thompson, in terms of soap-operas. However, I am interested in the theatre-within-theatre. Is it some kind of a metaphor? For example, in Claustrophobic Comedy we have a 'theatre which informs on life', which has already in some way caused life – it's a kind of fatalism where that which has happened in the theatre is happening in the life of the heroes we are watching. Besides, the presence of the theatre off-stage strengthens the theatre illusion and we begin to believe that what we are watching is real life. I am interested whether theatre in that sense is a metaphor for something? Whether it is a metaphor for the society which we lived in then, where everything was predetermined by something and, later, that theatre is happening in the off (more or less) so that in Larry Thompson the audience is brought back into that theatre which has been somewhere else.

D.K.: Well, yes. I think that that story, as I said, ends as some kind of – not an experiment, but my sense of the world. It has gone through those five plays and it ran through as one running thread, one running sense of where in our private life we are that which we are, and where we are playing someone else. And where we are, privately, people from one piece and where we are people who are completely consciously getting ready to play some parts which do not suit us. Where we are making the compromise. Where we are playacting that we are happy, joyful and fulfilled and we are actually not. Where we are playacting that we are sad and unhappy because we have a personal interest in it. Or where we are actually misusing acting – or using it well – because of some kind of effect or personal interest. That story is inexhaustible and I know it very well because at the age of 18 or 19 I entered the theatre world when I did my first amateur production and effectively I have been in the spotlight for thirty two or three years since. I am still working and I can say for myself that I am an old theatre cat who has spent so many years on the inside. And probably that is why I am so interested in the theatre because I know – not from the outside, as a writer who is ex-cathedra and self-sufficient – but because at this moment, after three years we are finishing the building of a new auditorium and we are finishing the reconstruction of a building which will be the future Cultural Centre with two new theatre stages, now I have become involved in the process of theatre building, and I know how theatre is made physically. All of that together is my sense of the world which I know very well. It is very difficult for me to get into the part – if I had to write a part of a nuclear physicist tomorrow, I would have to get into space and a world I do not know. I would enter some kinds of relationships which I would have to learn artificially, but if I have a story about an actor who comes home from the theatre tired, I know what it feels like. I wouldn't have to invent much, it would be very convincing because I have spent two thirds of my life in the theatre, with the theatre people, starting from the porter to the theatre manager.²⁵

²⁵ Inevitably, this poses the questions of plausibility. The theatre world in Yugoslavia is very small and closed. Does it mean that the theatre artists are justified in focusing on their own profession and no others apart from those which do not require much research and can therefore be stereotyped, such as chimneysweeps, shoe-cleaners, porters and the like? Is this conducive to a hegemonic attitude of the theatre

D.R.H.: Since you have mentioned your beginnings, I'm interested in what were the most significant influences on your work in terms of playwrights or theoreticians of theatre.

D.K.: To be honest, I wasn't getting ready to work in theatre at all. I entered the theatre world somehow accidentally, although thinking about it later, I realised that in our lives nothing is accidental. Very often a profession chooses you, it exists within you, your profession exists in you from childhood, and one day you recognize it. Although your wish might have been something completely different, that which we are built from, which we are woven from, simply weighs over and you become that. But until my sixteenth or seventeenth birthday I thought that if I ever did art – besides sport which I liked very much – I thought that it would most certainly be painting.²⁶ I was getting ready for an exam at the Fine Arts Academy. However, by coincidence of circumstances, I went past the theatre academy, I met a friend of mine who was taking an entry exam there, I went in – and having written a bit, some stories and some pieces for my own pleasure – I applied, thinking that my application would not even get accepted as it was outside the rules for the entry exam in dramaturgy, as I submitted a novel instead of a play. I was picked on the basis of that short novel. The professors even accepted the novel, probably because they could see from the dialogues that it was very close to drama. And once I was accepted, I decided to finish the course. I have the trait of stubbornness and determination. And I think that had I gone and pursued painting, I would've become a good painter. Because I would have pursued my ideas and beliefs until the end, with very small compromises, which one has to make from time to time in life, but the fact that I accidentally went, probably wasn't accidental, somebody probably takes care of what you do. And all you do in life probably isn't accidental, it's probably written somewhere, it probably says in some book what you will do in life, how, what are your limits and what is your end like. And it is only a good thing that we don't have that book in our hands and can't read it.

D.R.H.: Your plays are often compared to Nušić's – this is a continuation of the previous question, but I also wanted to ask you something about what you've just said. I am trying to find some kind of a context in terms of both domestic dramaturgy but also – regarding Claustrophobic Comedy – the influence of Pirandello in some way and of Shakespeare.

D.K.: Regarding Nušić and Sterija, and domestic drama in general, I would say that the influence was manifold, simply through school education and reading, everyone of us is based on our home literature. More or less I was interested in the genres where that which is terrible is not mentioned and not underlined because in that case we would be proving the familiar theory that water is wet. I always like to tell a story with a fine distance and

people towards other spheres of life? Does this, in a way, lead to a kind of l'artpouir! artism, especially in terms of the recently lost focus of political or satirical enquiry? Is metatheatre a kind of l'artpouir! artism?

²⁶ It is interesting that Kovačević insists on his passion for painting but doesn't seem to have pursued it. I didn't ask at the time, but there has been no evidence of him engaging in fine arts even as a hobby. However, in terms of his playwriting, there are very few instances which could be described as pictorial in his oeuvre. A scene from Saint George Slays the Dragon depicting a group of physically disabled Serbian soldiers from the First World War comes to mind. And maybe even the dance of the ballerina and the chimneysweep from Claustrophobic Comedy. However, his plays in general could more readily be described as cerebral rather than particularly poetic in visual terms.

irony, because to tell people that life is hard and terrible, that it is difficult and that one will in the end die – I think everyone knows that. One doesn't have to underline that for someone who has their own dramas and tragedies in their private life and make those two or three hours in the theatre even more torturous for them. You can tell him a drama but at least let them laugh at least ten times and let him be superior in relation to the stage and in relation to himself. My feeling of the world is just that – that for two hours we are sad and then we are laughing for ten minutes, and then we are again sad and we are again laughing. And so it goes like ebb and flow. Many domestic authors have influenced me – starting from poets to prose writers to playwrights but each in their own way, not with their entire opus, somebody with a story somebody with a poem, somebody with – above all – some feeling. As regards foreign literature – certainly Pirandello was a subject of my final year dissertation in theory in the fourth year at the Academy – certainly Pirandello, as all of his plays were also border plays between life and art. Then Tennessee Williams, who has a thin line between what is true and what is not and then one of the greatest influences was Chekhov – but not as much as a dramatist as a storyteller – I think that his stories are the best and the most beautiful stories of all ever written. Then we have classical literature which I studied at the Academy – from classical Greek drama in which of course, Aristophanes was in his own way the most interesting for me, to all the greatest writers such as Molière, Shakespeare, Strindberg through the history of drama, which is actually one of the pillars of the entire literature. Then we have the story of the great classical novels, which are dramas in their own way written only in a different form. So there was an extremely big number of those so-called influences, and if I were to list those who were the most important, I'd have to say that in domestic literature it was Sterija who was the closest to my sensibility, and in the world literature – Chekhov as a dramatist and as a writer of stories – in addition to all others who at various points of my life had a particularly great significance. I don't know how I would read today or what feelings I would have in relation to the works I liked at the age of twenty or twenty five. Maybe some of it would be better and some of it worse, but at every stage of life you have some need for a particular knowledge and a particular discovery of the world.

D.R.H: Your dramas are also often ascribed the influence of the theatre of the absurd and the non-naturalist theatre.

D.K.: I think that the absurd stems from my feeling of the world. I think that the whole world is absurd and the whole life is absurd. It is absurd in terms of the fact that you don't know why you appeared on the planet, why you. Before you, before your appearance on the planet there was a million of years of darkness and another million of darkness will come again. That moment of light in which you live is a big absurdity. That fact alone that you come from an endless darkness and that you will return to it is a fact testifying to the absurdity of the entire life, and then underneath that level of global absurdity, there are little absurdities happening every day – when you are expecting one thing and something completely different happens. In principle, I don't like realism because I have too much of it in my private life. I have too much of banalities, I have too much of ordinary things, I have too much of stories which are based on the formula that two and two makes four. I know that, that two and two is four, although I don't know maths very well, but I am terribly interested in how to prove that two and two makes ten and in such a way that people in the audience believe it.

D.R.H.: And with regard to the political – OK, let me open my cards – I am trying to prove that what was happening to us in the eighties anticipated that which was happening in Western Europe in the nineties, when the illusion in communism finishes. An entire generation which relied on that ideal in the eighties has all of a sudden found itself in a vacuum and they don't know what to write about anymore. Then we have metatheatricity as a theme in the English theatre of the nineties. I am trying to show that that was happening here in the eighties and apart from your plays which are the most significant examples of that trend, we also have – starting from The Croatian Faust, if not Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja – The Travelling Theatre Šopalović, The Metastable Grail and so on, all of these plays are dealing with the boundary between theatre and real life. I am interested in whether this is a particular political tool or a result of something, especially because your plays starting with Claustrophobic Comedy enter a new phase of your entire opus.

D.K.: Politics are a passion for me. Politics is my way of thinking and I think that we are all in some way politicised – whether we are working in politics professionally or are just victims of it. In any case, politics is our fate. Regardless of which system and which society you are in, politics on a general level will determine your private life. In some country politics will be better, in another worse and in yet another – catastrophic. More or less we've been going through something tepid and cold, it was never warm. It has always been something undefined and indeterminate and for sixty years we've lived in a totalitarian, strictly controlled – one, I would say, gaol system. Everybody rebelled in their own way against it. Besides, from my early youth I had an allergic reaction to the mention of the word communism. Because, for a number of reasons I knew a lot about it, heard about it, and due to my profession had an opportunity to see people who were victims of it, and read a lot about it. So much so that I could do a doctorate on particular theories of communism of the twentieth century. Of course, politics must not be a placard. I was always trying, like in The Balkan Spy not to create a clean, socialist-realist play which rebels against socialist-realism, because then I would achieve nothing. I tried to ridicule that system and make it stupid and funny, and it worked much better than if I tried to say that communism was something terrible – because that means nothing. Because the horrors of communism cannot be represented in any better way than was done in the documentaries about Siberia, camps and gulags or as was done by Solzhenitzin. You can't tell a story about the inaccessible, because that goes beyond the science fiction of evil. However, you can turn it inside out and show how much in its essence that system was a big travesty, a defective and monstrous and almost a pathological illness. How much evil it caused, how it left deep traces on the people who have survived, not to talk about the fact that communism attempted to instil itself in all countries, races, nations and religions. That's why it never succeeded anywhere, nobody succeeded – it never succeeded to root itself anywhere. Here, and there through the use of force and terror it survived for ten years or twenty, in Russia a bit longer, because they were trying to maintain it physically as an experiment for a bit longer, and then the first time when there was no way to maintain it by force – it wilted away. And Milošević's idea of continuing Broz's communism through terror ended in such a way that the plant wilted, and it wilted in the hair of his wife²⁷ and she now goes with that wilted flower to visit him in prison. It's a very similar story to Djilas²⁸ who built that Central Prison – where Milošević is now sitting – who said that the rooms for solitary

²⁷ Mirijana Marković is famous for always wearing a flower in her hair.

²⁸ Djilas was a follower turned dissident to Tito's regime.

confinement for political prisoners should be built in such a way that they can never see the sun and then Djilas, when he was sentenced, ended up in such a prison himself. A similar story happened to Milošević. Communism is a nursery plant – like a plague – of endless evil, terror, and it ends, fortunately, with a basic proof that it doesn't work. Because, when its culprits come to the prison cell one day they have enough time to think about what is sin, and when they reach that point it ends with a life sentence or capital punishment.

D.R.H.: In terms of Claustrophobic Comedy, the two brothers – apart from references to Shakespeare where Teya is a deminutive of Othello and Yagosh a version of Iago – they have a conflict of political nature.

D.K.: That was a basic and essential story where 50% of the people were for one option and 50% for another. Whichever idea you came up with 50% would vote 'for' and 50% 'against'. Today it is, I think, a bit more clear, but until a year ago it was so. Whatever you decided, one half would be for one option, the other for another. Communism divided families, it divided people in such a way that they would believe one thing in the morning, and the same person would believe the opposite in the afternoon. Because propaganda and terror were terribly strong. So the whole story of those two brothers later applies to some other people and some other heroes in my plays and more or less all those plays are either a direct result of politics or they are a reaction to some political date or some events or they are just an act of endurance of that which was happening on the level of the state. I think that that mechanism of rule and power is just as interesting as the mechanism I discussed earlier in terms of where we start and stop being actors. Everyone of us is in a position of power in some way, the only difference being that one has a private enterprise with two employees, where he is a king in that enterprise or a state president in that enterprise – and somebody else is really a king and really a president. But that power of government over one person or over a whole people very often functions in the same way. And that hierarchy where you have subjects, slaves and masters or rulers, which is prehistoric, starting from the first most primitive society to the present day, is only different in the sense that the technology of power is different. In the past, in the case of war, a horseback rider would be carrying the news for days and days that there was a war somewhere else. Today one can watch wars live, and when there is a war breaking out somewhere there are 500 cameras on the spot and we are watching a war live on television.

D.R.H.: What about the references to the Non-Aligned Movement and instability and African mechanisms of political power in Claustrophobic Comedy? Were the connections with our situation some years later deliberate?

D.K.: Like in chess, it was possible to anticipate.²⁹ If you play a game which opens hard, then, you know, you can anticipate the next move. Politics are a kind of hard chess game. And now, in this situation, after the arrest of Milošević, you can anticipate two or three options which will certainly happen. If those two or three options happen, two or three new options will happen as a result, and like in chess, you can anticipate the end of the game. If you are also well informed in addition to that, then you know how that game will go – but all of that doesn't interest me in terms of labels, I am interested in the entire mechanism of the system of power and rule. When I finish working on this new play, I will sit down one day and start a play for which I've been making notes for several years, and which will be

²⁹ It's interesting to note that both Simović and Kovačević use the metaphor of chess.

happening somewhere in the 15th or 16th century in the palace of one ruler, where I will set a story which is actually a contemporary story and which happened here. I want to move it to that time and make it more romantic, but it will actually be a story of one ruler and how he starts to build a powerful state out of nothing, which will fall apart because he wasn't big enough for it. What is the time? Let me just see something? Can we finish in five minutes?

D.R.H.: Yes. I just wanted to ask you – I'd like to bring in The Gathering Centre and Underground very quickly here. In both plays we have several dimensions-

D.K.: Parallel worlds? Those parallel worlds are again the same story as that about theatre. Again it's frontier area. You know, my whole dramaturgy – if I were to open my cards now and talk about how it works and what actually interests me in writing – I am not interested in an ordinary peripheral event. I can read that in the papers every day and that's terribly exciting, and this chase and arrest of Milošević was one of the better thrillers I've seen in my life, but that's actually a real event. Gradually, over time, it will be forgotten, just like many people don't remember the day when Tito died anymore and when the whole of Yugoslavia was in shock. Not only because they were in mourning, I think it was a subconscious shock because people were afraid of what would come. And then really it happened – all of what's happened. In fact it was a kind of a genetic fear. I am interested in how one ordinary event starts from nothing. Then it slowly moves, slowly moves and moves, and the audience starts to accept everything that they would never accept in real life and then half-way through you transport the audience into some completely different world and they think that they are in real world and not in theatre anymore. I am interested in the possibility of making something out of a harmless story. Like in this latest play, a meeting of a criminal with a doctor on the Danube quay – the criminal recognizes the man who came out for a walk, and he comes to thank him because he had saved his life having operated on his heart when he was injured, he comes to thank him, but the doctor is slightly forgetful. However, the accidental meeting on the key leads to the criminal coming to his house to thank him, and he meets the doctor's daughter and starts to complicate his life...³⁰

Here the tape runs out and I don't dare do anything for the fear of reminding him that he wants to finish the conversation. In conclusion Kovačević declares that he would like to write a book about people who are not alive anymore and about whom many untruthful things have been written. On the way out I manage to pose a question regarding the translations of his works. He explains that he would like them to be better translated. Many translations of his plays are 'like telegrams'. He asserts that a translator needs to be just as good a writer, with the same sense of humour and virtuosity so that it can become almost an adaptation which suits its own context the same way as the original suits its own. Finally, he suggests that we continue the conversation in London as he is planning to visit at the end of the month. I am not all that sure it would be easy to arrange another meeting in London.

³⁰ Notice how he retells one and the same play in three completely different ways suggesting at least three perfectly developed plots.

Književne novine, 1.11.1987

(Extract)

“...In the case of [writing] the play St George... there was a degree of being bewitched [by it]. That story came to me a long time ago, I carried it for a long time [...it took a lot of effort...], it took ten years of my life [to write it]. After that I wanted to write a story that was very close to art. Claustrophobic Comedy has a certain distance to both classical and modern art, in it various genres are mixed, I am directing³¹ it as a series of classical pictures. Simply, amid all the misfortune, suffering and the poverty which surrounds us, I craved something classically beautiful. This play is my escape into beauty.

Where did you get the idea for Claustrophobic Comedy?

It is based on an event from my student days. We were sitting one night, as usual at the “Kolarac” [café], and at some point a friend of ours turns up and says it would be good for one of us to get married. Looking at each other we thought it was a midnight joke, however, he then tells us that the Polish ballet is on tour in Belgrade and that a Polish ballerina wishes to emigrate. She needs a residence permit and she can only get it if she gets married. One of the people who sat with us generously accepted to do that. I know that the two of them lived together for a while, but I don’t know what happened later. Whether their relationship began by accident that night and whether it really unfolded like happens in films, I am not sure, but I kept that story for years. It is not a story about emigration but about human destiny within a particular system. Maybe it’s a political story, a story about exile from a particular world, a story about imagining that in some other world there is something worth risking the home place³² and the private world for, but all of that is too small and too simple for my literary sensibility. Maybe it is different in life, but in my play, at the end it becomes a story about human destinies.

In the play there is talk of the premiere of this particular play, of a politician who comes to see the play and recognizes himself in it. What reactions do you expect from that particular plot?

As the rehearsals are progressing, and as the play is finding its feet, something is beginning to happen which is very interesting to me as a working process and which does not exist in classical dramaturgy. This is above all playing with art and theatre, so that all those streams – the story of the politician, the story of the chimney-sweep and the story of the ballet and Shakespeare – experience a miraculous union, they intertwine and eventually find confluence, and from a particular moment this will become a three-fold play-within-a-play within which even the audience will find itself involved. In the first scene it is mentioned that last night there was a premiere of ‘such and such a play’ which then unfolds before the audience, so that they have a feeling that they are not at a premiere but at a reprise, and they begin to watch the play which they have already been told about. What I am saying now is only my supposition as to what might happen although it is impossible to predict anything at the moment. I only know that I am feeling great joy at doing this job.

³¹ This is the first play Kovačević directed and he has directed all his premieres since.

³² The original word is *zavičaj* which denotes a place of origin – a village or a town. This is a key word in the entire work of Kovačević, and a recurring theme. In Claustrophobic Comedy, the character of the Policeman is the one suffering from homesickness and a nostalgia for the homeplace.

This – our conversation for The Literary Magazine³³ – also multiplies that multi-media situation contained in the play?

Yes, because this conversation will be printed in the issue which appears several days before the premiere. And The Literary Magazine is mentioned in the play. On the day of the premiere the politician in the play will be reading The Literary Magazine for real, in which it says that he is a character in that play, which he really is. I want to make the everyday as extraordinary as possible, at all costs, because I've had enough of the everyday such as it is, that petty-realist, black, grey everyday, I can't stand it anymore. And The Literary Magazine was not mentioned in the play by accident – there isn't a single politician who doesn't consider it his duty to attack The Literary Magazine in the interest of furthering his career prospects.

The actual theme of Claustrophobic Comedy resembles an attempt at breaking the paranoia which is very evident particularly in relation to politics. Who is the culprit for today's particularly tense socio-political state of affairs?

When we talk about the culprits we encounter a phenomenon which doesn't have similar forms anywhere else but here. We managed to divide the whole world into people and political power and to belong neither to people nor political power. Everybody tries to be a third something, so that I get an impression that here both the people and political power fell from the Moon, i.e. that they are some alien people who have never existed here. That is why I continually insist on the mentality of the people. [...] I think that the current paranoia is a result of our constant disbelief in our surroundings. At the end of the day, the people got what they wanted, what they fought for. Because the circumstances which we can condemn are above all a result of individual responsibility.”

(“*Mi smo uvek neko treći*” – “We are Always a Third Someone”, interview with Dušan Kovačević by Branka Krilović, Književne novine, 1.11.1987)

³³ The actual title of the magazine is Književne novine.