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Why was Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet staged by Slovene Youth Theatre in 1983 Censored?

Поніж Деніс. Чому було цензуровано шекспірівську «Ромео і Джульєтта», поставлену Словенським Молодим театром у 1983 р.?

У статті продемонстровано вплив «незримої цензури» (за відсутності у колишній Югославії цензури офіційної) на словенські драматичні тексти та вистави. Автор наводить докази цензурування трагедії Шекспіра «Ромео і Джульєтта», що була поставлена у 1983 році сербським режисером Любішею Рістичем на сцені Словенського Молодого театру. Приміром, у повідомленні таємного агента зазначалося, що текст Шекспіра нібито містить висловлювання, «образливі для соціалістичного духу трудового народу».

Ключові слова: Вільям Шекспір, «Ромео і Джульєтта», Любіша Рістич, Словенський Молодий театр, цензура.

I.

In the middle of the seventies, when stage director and playwright Dušan Jovanovič started to run it, the Slovensko mladinsko gledališče (SMG, Slovenian Youth Theatre) signed on to the concept of productions that subordinated theatre aesthetics to modern concepts. By 1980 the main Slovenian theatre for children and youth had been transformed into a modern theatre that with two productions by the Serbian director Ljubiša Ristić suddenly showed a new political concept of the socially committed and historically oriented theatre.

In her review of theatre events for the collected essays on the avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes and retro-avant-gardes in the area of the former Yugoslavia (1918-1991), Eda Čufer¹ enumerates the following theatrical artefacts from the last decade prior to the collapse, and they bring together elements of the *political* and *neo-avant-garde*: Slovensko mladinsko gledališče, EG Glej (Experimental Theatre “Look”), Gledališče Ane Monro (Theatre Ana Monro), Gledališče FV-112 (Theatre FV-112), (Borghesia, a multimedial group)) and Gledališče sester Scipion Nasice (Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre, a theatrical group founded and conducted by Dragan Živadinov).

A large number of judgements, aesthetic analyses, dramaturgical profiles and socio-historical studies have been made regarding SMG and his concepts in early 80s. Yet it appears that its function in the eighties can be condensed into a quotation from Toporišič's study *Od političnega gledališča do gledališča podob* (From Political Theatre to a Theatre of Images), which reads:

This theatre was a theatre of *opposition, non-agreement (dissidence)*. Its protagonists were the author and director, and its tools the space and body. And there was the special Brook approach to plays, which critics rather clumsily labelled as a phenomenon of ensemble acting, while in fact it needs to be understood in terms of the comprehensive – including political – and especially artistic engagement of the team of actors in an individual performance and of the theatre as a whole, as well as of the entire collective of artists who collaborated on the individual project of this theatre².

¹ Čufer E. Between the Curtains: New Theater in Slovenia, 1980–1990 // Impossible Histories / Ed. by. D. Djurić, M. Šuvaković. – Cambridge (MA): M.I.T., 2003. – P. 381.

² Toporišič T. Od političnega gledališča h gledališču podob. Slovensko mladinsko gledališče osemdesetih let 20 stoletja // Ali je prihodnost že prišla? Petdeset let Slovenskega mladinskega gledališča / Ur. Tomaž Toporišič, Barbara Skubic, Tina Malič, Mateja Dermelj. – Ljubljana: Slovensko mladinsko gledališče, 2007. – S. 89.

Dissidence and political stakes are certainly terms that most accurately describe the social and aesthetic dimensions of the theatre, which gave notice of this trend with Ristić's productions of Aeschylus's *The Persians* (9 December 1980) and the Kiš-Ristić *Mass in A Minor* (with the significant subtitle *de re publica et de rebus novis*, 21 December 1980). It was no coincidence that Ristić revived the first political tragedy in the history of European drama (and the first to be politically censored!), while at the same time he pointed the way with "his" monumental collage production, based on book *Grobna za Borisa Davidoviča (A Tomb for Boris Davidovič*, 1976) of Danilo Kiš (1935–1989), a prominent dissident Yugoslav writer of Hungarian-jewish and Montenegro origin. The concepts of so-called political theatre with significant dissident marks both in stage directory concepts and adaptation of Kiš's texts were used again in a the-part project of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

We may say, that one of the most successful stage productions directed by Ljubiša Ristić was an adaptation of the most beautiful romantic tragedy of the Renaissance, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The production was part of a series of modern, provocative stagings of classic works, from the already mentioned production of Aeschylus' *The Persians* to Genet's *The Balcony*.

Because the building that houses the Mladinsko Youth Theatre contains, in addition to the two theatres belonging to Mladinsko, also a large public ballroom, Ristić and his collaborators devised a three-part production. Professional ballet dancers from the National Opera and Ballet would perform a ballet version of *Romeo and Juliet* in the ballroom. In the middle theatre, professional actors from Mladinsko Theatre would perform a "spoken" version of *Romeo and Juliet*, while for the basement theatre he came up with a dramaturgically complex reinterpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* which he placed in a modern context. Here, professional actors

would collaborate with amateurs selected by the director at a public audition. He therefore decided to call the production *Romeo and Juliet – Commentaries*.

From the point of view of our research into the attempt to censor the entire production, which lasted a total of more than four hours, it is the third and final part of the production that is most interesting. The performance was conceived in such a way that the audience would move from one venue to another, while at the same time symbolically descending from higher, more brilliantly lit settings to progressively darker and abandoned ones. The basement venue at the Mladinsko Theatre was not originally conceived as a theatre but was temporarily converted into a theatrical venue in the 1980s, when a series of "dissident" performances were staged. The brick-built vaulted cellar, with its associations of prisons, interrogation rooms of secret political police and the underground, also had an unusually suggestive effect in the case of the third part of *Romeo and Juliet*, and in the opinion of the majority of critics the venue was extremely well chosen.

In the third part of the production, Ristić asked his collaborators to formulate the details of the fictional contemporary story presented to them: Julija Novak, a student of comparative literature, falls in love with a worker called Stevo Macura, an ethnic Serb from Kninska Krajina in Croatia, who is working in Ljubljana as a seasonal worker. During the Carnival season the two lovers watch at that time very popular Zeffirelli's film *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). After the film Stevo (Romeo) gets involved in a quarrel with some Slovene youths. In the ensuing altercation he fatally stabs one of them and runs away. Later on, the police inspector who is questioning witnesses, particularly Julija, tries to reconstruct the event but at the same time raises all the dilemmas of Julija and Stevo's love, both in its contemporary dimensions and in its associations with the Renaissance story. In a police racia Stevo was killed although he wanted to surrender.

If the first ballet version of the narration of the tragedy, entitled *Principles* (and divided into four parts: Agon, Eros, Polis and Thanatos) is the opening chord, which only announces the transition to modernity and contemporaneity with its final scene, featuring "youths of Verona" who are no longer wearing historical, Renaissance costumes but are dressed as modern teenagers, the second part is already a synthesis and, at the same time, a political supplementing of the Shakespearean story which is placed in a contemporary context: a group of young people watch a professional production of *Romeo and Juliet* and decide to create their own drama group which will also perform this Renaissance tragedy but will try and set it in the present, "without all the Renaissance junk", as one of the participants describes it. This part, called *Space*, takes place in four locations (a suburb of Ljubljana, a fictional Verona, Knin and, finally, the centre of Ljubljana) and we are constantly moving between Shakespeare's time and the present, i.e. the mid-1980s in a country where deep ethnic, religious and political disagreements between nations and republics are already apparent.

The third part, which moves completely into reality, is called *Time* and once again has four parts. The action takes place between 14 February (Valentine's Day) and 17 February, where 15 February is Shrove Tuesday, 16 February is Ash Wednesday and 17 February is an ordinary day, the day the police killed the murderer and the story ends.

In the last part, where the course of the story and the dialogues were created by the participants themselves and the entire story had an extremely provocative background (tensions among ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia were in the mid-1980s already very evident and strong), there were quite a number of places that disturbed the so-called invisible censors.

Even the theme of the third part attracted their attention: a crime caused by an interethnic dispute between Slovene students and a non-Slovene seasonal worker, similar to the dispute between the two rival Veronese families living in a state of mortal enmity. Officially, even in the 1980s, when it was already possible to foresee those quarrels that degenerated in the 1990s into armed conflicts and, eventually, the "Balkan wars", there were no tensions. All problems were blamed on the "enemies of socialism" and the foreign intelligence services that supported them, in this way igniting conflict between individual nations and ethnic groups. This was the official explanation of the situation in the country. Talking about tensions was actually not permitted – especially not openly and in a context such as the one in which Ristić placed them. But Ristić (and his collaborators) as Shakespeare had done in original *Romeo and Juliet*, open both levels of dramatic narration: political one, which is devoted to the crowd, to the public sphere and intimate one, the story of unhappy and unfulfilled passionate love between student Julija Novak and worker Stevo Macura.

II.

Since invisible censorship operated informally³, the attempts to put pressure on the theatre management to considering deleting or at least radically softening the third part were also informal. Naturally, neither the Mladinsko management nor the team involved in the production were willing to agree to this. The problem was that the theatre management included people whom the regime already had its eye on because of certain earlier stories. Dušan Jovanović,

³ Poniž D. Nekaj vprašanj in ugotovitev v zvezi s cenzuro in samocenzuro v slovenski dramatik 1945–1990 (Some Questions and Statements About Censorship and Self Censorship in Slovene drama production 1945–1990) // Cenzurirano (Censored) / Ed. by Mateja Režek. – Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2010. – S. 192.

director of the Mladinsko Theatre and a well-known theatre director, was one of the contributors to literary magazine *Perspektive* (1960–64), a publication which the regime had suppressed because it considered it to be crossing the line into open political opposition. In 1968 the theatre's artistic director, the poet and dramatist Ivo Svetina, had caused a scandal with the publication of a poem in which he portrayed the Communist authorities during the war as a band of brigands, only escaping prison because he came from a well-known Communist family (his father was the political head of the secret political police after the war and his mother was a national heroine and a senior Party official). The dramaturge Marko Slodnjak was also from a well-known dissident family of literary historian dr. Anton Slodnjak. All of them were mentioned in files of secret political police as unreliable persons with dissident ideas, pro-western oriented.

The first pressures came by telephone. Later, however, the director and artistic director were summoned to an "informative discussion" at police headquarters where they were interrogated (as they put it) by two members of the secret political police, which in the meantime had obtained a copy of the text (and parts of the director's script), with the result that the two interrogators knew precisely what was contained in the text that the theatre was planning to stage. According to the account of the two subjects of the interrogation, the police officers were initially polite. When, however, they would not be persuaded to delete the third part, the officers became increasingly rude and began making threats. One of them even tried to prove that there was no connection between Shakespeare's text and the additional text, and that Shakespeare was merely a pretext for undermining the regime and insulting a Communist Party that was not capable of resolving both ethnical and economic problems in society. The interview, which lasted several hours, did not lead to the result that the interrogators expected. Finally, they resorted to

threatening that they had "sufficient means to prevent the performance".

Since the director and artistic director refused to be intimidated, since there were no serious arguments for halting or invisibly censoring the project, the authorities adopted new tactics.

A few days later, as the creators of the play continued to work on the project, the secretary responsible for theatre at the Cultural Secretariat (a cultural ministry) called on the director of the Mladinsko Theatre. He persuaded the director that it was not only the third, additional part of the play that was problematic, but also the fact that in the second part of the play the students who wanted to transpose the tragedy to the present day had "an uncultured attitude towards a classic dramatic text of worldwide fame" and that their attempt at adapting the text was actually a kind of "censorship". The culture ministry, which co-financed the activity of the Mladinsko Theatre, could not "stand idly by and watch such a cultural violation of the text of a world-famous dramatic text". He added that the ministry would cancel financial aid to the theatre, but the director replied that they would pay for the project with their own money and that the participants in the project would waive their fees. Since this attempt was clearly a failure, the culture minister himself (actually a state secretary, because Yugoslavia did not have ministries at the republic level) summoned the theatre director Dušan Jovanović and once again attempted to convince him to consider omitting the third part of the production. He also cited excerpts from the text as proof of the "unsuitability" of the whole. Unfortunately, however, because the person who had prepared the material for the secretary was not sufficiently familiar with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, he also quoted fragments of Shakespeare's text. The director asked the secretary whether this meant that Shakespeare had also become controversial, to the point that he needed censoring. This provoked a furious reaction from

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the secretary. When the theatre director, who had with him a copy of Shakespeare's tragedy, pointed out the places in the text that the ministry wished to censor, the secretary apologised and explained that there had been an "administrative error".

This was the end of the attempt at censorship and *Romeo and Juliet – Commentaries* was successfully premiered on 23 June 1983.