

LINKS IN THE CHAIN

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*God save you from being born in the time of changes.
Old Russian proverb.*

The book of eight Croatian plays *Different Voices* presents the reader and theatre practitioners with a variety of genres, which echo the wealth of theatrical forms in 19th and 20th century western theatre. One could find all the »isms« in this collection: from poetic realism, to expressionism and surrealism, if one decided to do so. But the study of the variety of genres of these plays is not the purpose of this paper. I will look at these plays from a historical angle, which throws light upon the highly dramatic events which took place in Croatia during the last quarter of the 20th century. I would like to analyze the people's understanding of their selves and their past, and to guess the point of view of the generation born in the sixties towards all these questions, as portrayed in the plays. In such an approach, the meaning of theatre is wider than its practical aspects: theatre becomes a mechanism for collecting and recycling cultural memory. Such an approach is influenced by Marvin Carlson's works, and in particular by his book *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine*, where he describes the hidden multiple layers of the collective memory existing in theatrical texts and performances. He calls these layers *ghosting*. Carlson analyzes

the always mutually dependent processes of the spectators, readers, actors, and directors in the recycling of their memories, which are absorbed by theatre and expressed in every new theatrical endeavor. Such recycling, always culturally determined and specific, Carlson puts at the core of theatrical experience. He writes:

Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations.¹

For someone like the author of this paper, familiar only superficially with Croatian theatre and the history of Croatia itself, the collection of plays started a very interesting journey into the wealth of genres, themes, and stage craft in Croatian theatre, as seen through the eyes of Croatian playwrights of the 1990s and early 2000s. Unfortunately, without knowing the living and breathing theatrical world in Croatia for the past 30 years, I can only guess about the wealth of hidden, but mutually understood references to real performances, actors and directors, to banned or criticized shows, etc. However, there are certain layers of memory, to which I certainly could relate: most of the authors were born in the 60s, and thus we belong to the same generation. Having grown up in the Soviet Union, we have experienced similar problems: the tight ideological control, the impossibility of free self-expression, and the suffocating presence of the iron curtain. Not being familiar with the specifics of the Yugoslavian and Croatian governmental ideological machines during the last 15 years of the socialist regime, I am aware of similar methods, which were employed in the USSR. Another important common feature is that in our late twenties – early thirties, we witnessed the collapse of the economic and political structures, the end of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, the racketeering and

¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2003, pg. 2

poverty of the 90s, and the stabilization of a new society. The systems collapsed together with their official and unofficial myths, which are always echoed in theatre. But if WWII was the last war for Russia as a nation, Croatia went through the hardships of the War of Independence in 1991-1994. In the bold process of rethinking the past and the present, a process which will take several generations to complete, the themes of war, death, and suffering are as fundamental for the cultural memory as they are for theatre itself. This is why I chose to write about two plays in particular from the collection, in which the memory of the events of the 20th century are *ghosting* theatrical narrative and theatrical genres. These two plays are Lada Kaštelan's *The Last Link in the Chain* and Philip Šovagović's *Bricky*. As Sibila Petlevski wrote, »the youngest generation of Croatian playwrights opted for 'small form'«, which is, according to Petlevski, a protest against the »neo-romantic grandeur of the national theatre«.²

Lada Kaštelan wrote a »memory play«, a genre that was coined by Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie*. The first of its kind, *The Glass Menagerie* combines a perfectly realistic environment with alienating interruptions through the use of screens with titles. *The Glass Menagerie* premiered exactly 70 years ago, in 1944. The genre of the play would be the first open *ghosting* of its kind if we use Marvin Carlson's term: Williams portrayed the active invasion of memory in both, the character's life and the genre itself, as well as the subjective power to hold its crooked mirror up to nature. For Williams, the process of the character's storytelling was as important as the story itself, and it is so for Kaštelan as well. Just as it was for Williams, for Kaštelan memory stands for both the content and the formal organization of the play. Performing memory also becomes a tool for re-evaluating life and one's own position in it: through the crooked mirror of memory we find the truth of our existence.

² Sibila Petlevski, »Small Form of the new Croatian drama«, *Revue des Eduted Slaves*, 2006, volume 77, pp. 43-54, pg. 46

In Kaštelan's play, from the corridors of the main character's memory, the mysterious Servant brings two dead women from her clan and their dead men. Just like in Williams' play, in Kaštelan's the main character is a poet. The organization of the play easily includes her reciting a poem as a key device to the beginning of the poetic drama: the recitation establishes the non-realistic environment within which the events will take place. Three women appear on the day of their 36th birthday: they do not recognize each other (how could they possibly?) They are connected only by Her memory, there is no objective connection between them. They talk with each other about their mothers and daughters without realizing that, in fact, they themselves are these mothers and daughters. This pattern has its multiple meanings, including that of dramatic irony, rather funny for the spectators. But another meaning is purely metaphoric, and is about our inability to recognize, to listen, and to hear each other. More than any other devices in the play, this one gracefully and naturally portrays the disconnectedness between the generations.

True to the way human memory functions, when it pulls emotional traumas from the depths of sub-consciousness, every woman brings her traumas as a gift to the birthday table, and relives it. The only day Grandmother re-enacts again and again is the last meal with her husband before he was killed by the partisans in 1944. The day Mother relives is the process of steady detachment from her Lover. The day the main character relives is the day of realization of how to approach the future and [of the necessity/desire?] to break away from the women in her clan. Will she be able to do it?

The memory genre allows Kaštelan to play with the reality from the past, including the events that took place in the real history of Croatia. The memory itself always plays tricks on its carrier: thus Grandfather, who was killed by the partisans, appears in a partisan uniform. As is often the case in our memory, agents and objects are obscured. But in this case, there is no mistake, and the image deeply touches upon the Croatian national history and the process of the re-thinking of it under new political and social

circumstances. What was grandfather killed for? Who killed him? Whom did he protect? Memory, as a tool of reevaluation of history, makes the losers and the winners trade places, and causes the whole meaning of the events to be re-interpreted. The image of Grandfather killed by the partisans and yet wearing a partisan uniform has become a metaphor, which can remind us of that from Agnieszka Holland's film *Europa, Europa*: in the main character's dream, Hitler and Stalin are dancing together, emphasizing the idea of the always double-faced evil of war. There is no surprise that in the play, which re-evaluates the war, the three main characters are women, while the men have supporting roles. On the battlefields of the 20th century, in politics and power struggles, men had had the lead. Here, in the world of the home, with its domesticity, farewell dinners and birthday parties, pregnancies and divorces, it is the women who have the task of carrying, preserving and passing on memories. In order for the main character to liberate herself from the link to the unchangeable female line of grandmother and mother, and to break away, She first has to know the »naked truth«. Kaštelan wittily uses the metaphor »naked truth« as literally as possible. In the play, the main character undresses all the others and makes them dance. In a similarly grotesque manner in which Stalin and Hitler dance in Holland's film, here, half-undressed characters are clinging to each other and their ways of life, which they are incapable of changing. But the main character's life would be different from now on. Will it be?

The theme of disconnectedness between the generations continues in the play *Bricky* by Filip Šovagović. Unlike the strong female lead in Kaštelan's play, *Bricky* is a male lead in a male dominated world, with two female characters in supporting roles, neither of whom is of any importance to the story. It is a world where women are accidental and not essential – they put light color strokes upon the canvas, which has certainly been painted before them and without them. *Bricky* is the one who, like Sisyphus, pushes up the hill the rock of his life, not knowing why he was chosen to do so (unlike Sisyphus who knew why). He is a torn and confused

individual, burdened by the failures of his older brothers as much as by his own. It will be Brickly, however, who has to be sacrificed from the entire family of men in the time of war, and who – after the war – vanishes: he is sacrificed so that they can start anew.

Bricky is another example of Carlson's idea of ghosting in genre (or we can use Mikhail Bakhtin's term »genetic memory of genre«, which is a similar idea to Carlson's): Šovagović uses the Brechtian alienation effect throughout the entire play. While Kaštelan builds her play in an uninterrupted performance mode, Šovagović consistently imposes the alienation effect upon his spectators. But both playwrights are preoccupied with the theme of the individual who is trying to find answers in the times of the total collapse of previous values. The two plays, so different in approaches, techniques, and performance modes, are very deeply connected in their drive to get to the core of their characters' understanding of themselves. Toward this end, Kaštelan creates one unified poetic space and time (as the main character's stream of consciousness). Šovagović, on the other hand, as soon as sympathy and empathy start hypnotizing the spectators, interrupts the effect with the straightforwardness and directness of a journalist, and with purposeful primitivism. The characters step towards the audience and deliver information about each other, which is very similar to Brecht's device of slogans and songs.

BRICKY: And so I finally returned to Croatia. I knew what to expect, but my own brothers surprised me. Ploffy and Floppy, who I was so excited about seeing, have gone forever and who knows where they are now?! When I look at my brothers, I can see traces of another life on them. Perhaps they are not the best example, but people in the town, on the street, they've been living as if nothing were happening. And we were fighting a war. Who for? For drunken billionaires. Perhaps, I wouldn't have taken it all so tragically if I hadn't been taken prisoner.³

³ Philip Šovagović, *Bricky*, in *Different Voices*, Hrvatski centar ITI, Zagreb, 2003, pg. 530

Šovagović's portrait of the generation of Bricky's older brothers is merciless: they are burnt out, live in a crumbled, handicapped world, but they are very much part of it as well. They are dispirited by the hypocrisy throughout the years of socialism, and they are not prepared to give themselves either to joy or to sorrow. Bricky's story about his war experience disgusts and alienates them. The fact that Bricky, their brother, was raped and beaten in the army constantly, affects them more as an inappropriate subject at the dinner table rather than by its content. Šovagović, during Bricky's telling of his war experiences, joins together with Kaštelan in one very essential theme: the impossibility to understand who fights for what and against whom, who the winners are and who the losers are from the perspective of future history and the following generations.

»I thought they were ours, and they thought I was theirs«, says Bricky.

Kaštelan and Šovagović, just as Agnieszka Holland had a few years before them, touch upon the most essential theme of the 20th century: the re-evaluation of the purpose of war and its further impact upon the generations to come. As Petlevski wrote, both plays are in the format of small dramatic form. Neither play is political, nor has any intention of proving any ideological point. But both of them, thematically and formally, remarkably signify the end of the 20th century. Experiments with form are as important as the new characters both playwrights created. In both characters we find a lot of »ghosting« – Lada Kaštelan's *She* finds her literary grandmothers and mothers in the characters of Françoise Sagan and Iris Murdoch; Šovagović's *Bricky* has his literary forefathers in Chekhov's plays, as well as his relatives in Mrozek's. The ending of both plays I see in a rather symbolical light: both characters, literally and metaphorically, enter a new realm. Kaštelan's main character enters the future with a child, and an imperfect man she accepts into her life; while Bricky simply vanishes. The play *Bricky* ends with simplified, newspaper-like information about the main character's disappearance into nowhere, as if the playwright were in a hurry to finish the play and did not know how. In fact, I believe, he

did not know, but it does not diminish either him as a playwright, or the play itself. By the end of the play, the tale of Brickly's life and the plot of the play have separated: Brickly becomes a mythical figure, having told everything that has happened to him, and having moved beyond suffering. He can neither die nor live: he needs to vanish, together with the end of the century, into the realm of the unknown. This is why the end of the play is so sudden, abrupt, and almost documentary. The play is over, but Brickly lives.

The volume of Croatian plays called *Different Voices* is an eye-opener for theatre practitioners. It provides them with the wealth of themes and genres in contemporary Croatian theatre. The book explores the themes of *disconnection* and *disconnectedness*: between the people and their memories, between the people and the surrounding reality, and between the generations, encouraging a variety of potentially daring theatrical interpretations.

KARIKE U LANCU

S a ž e t a k

Autorica osam hrvatskih drama prevedenih na engleski i tiskanih u antologiji *Different Voices* (Zagreb, 2003.) sagledava s povijesnoga stajališta, u nakani da iz njih iščita način na koji naraštaj autor(ic)a rođenih u šezdesetim godinama prošloga stoljeća shvaća sebe i dramatične promjene u Hrvatskoj u devedesetim godinama. Teorijsko joj uporište daje knjiga Marvinina Carlsona *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, 2003.), koja tematizira slojevitost skupnoga pamćenja u dramskoj književnosti i kazalištu, a razumijevanje dramskih tekstova nastalih u kulturnoj sredini koju nedovoljno poznaje olakšava pripadnost istom naraštaju i usporedivost njezina iskustva odrastanja i kazališnog obrazovanja u Sovjetskom Savezu i, nakon povijesnih promjena, Rusiji s iskustvima autor(ic)a zastupljenih u antologiji. Kao ključnu razliku utvrđuje, dakako, hrvatsko ratno

iskustvo koje prožima i suvremeno hrvatsko dramsko pismo. U članku najveću pozornost posvećuje dvjema dramama, *Posljednjoj karici* Lade Kaštelan i *Cigli* Filipa Šovagovića, u kojima sjećanje na zbivanja u prošlom stoljeću najdublje prožimaju i kazališnu naraciju i kazališni žanr.

Dramu Lade Kaštelan žanrovski određuje kao »dramu sjećanja« (usporedivu s dramom *Staklena menažerija* Tennesseeja Williamsa, rodonačelnika tog žanra) u kojoj je način na koji se likovi sjećaju prošlih događaja jednako važan kao i ono čega se sjećaju. Ističe višestruko neprepoznavanje žena koje glavni lik, Ona, uz pomoć mistične Sluškinje, posrednice između realnoga i irealnoga iz dvaju prošlih razdoblja, naime Drugoga svjetskog rata i Hrvatskoga proljeća, priziva u sadašnjost, a to je vrijeme Domovinskoga rata. U neprepoznavanju i neprihvatanju triju naraštaja pripadnica iste obitelji, na djelu je s jedne strane ironiziranje, prije svega dramskih žanrova koji se temelje na prepoznavanju, a s druge strane metafora mnogo složenije i šire shvaćene nesposobnosti međuljudskoga prihvaćanja, slušanja, razumijevanja. Likovi se okupljaju na irealnom ženskom rođendanskom slavlju, a kao darove pripadnice triju naraštaja iste obitelji jedna s drugom dijele iste ili slične traume (smrt, supruga, raskid s ljubavnikom, smrt majke, neželjena trudnoća). Neke potankosti u drami autoricu priopćenja podsjećaju na film *Europa, Europa* Agnieszke Holland.

Neprihvatanje članova različitih naraštaja prožima i Šovagovićevu dramu *Cigla*, u kojoj su razvidni odjeci epskoga teatra Bertolda Brechta i njegova »efekta očuđenja«, primjerice u izravnom obraćanju publici te komentiranju situacija i u žurnalističkom portretiranju likova. Dok je drama Lade Kaštelan izrazito ženska, s muškim likovima na margini, u središtu drame Filipa Šovagovića muški su likovi, redom gubitnici i žrtve rata, odnosno tranzicije, a dva su ženska lika potisnuta ustranu. Posebnu pozornost autorica posvećuje glavnom liku, Cigli, koji je, usprkos neprekidnu ironiziranju vlastite patnje, poput mitskoga junaka žrtvovan za dobrobit zajednice te, kao i mitski junaci, neobjašnjivo iščezava u trenutku kad je ispunio svoju funkciju.

Na kraju se izriče sud da antologija *Different Voices* kazališnim praktičarima omogućuje dobar uvid u suvremenu hrvatsku dramu u kojoj su, uza svu žanrovsku i tematsku raznolikost, naglašeno prisutni nepovezanost i nemogućnost povezivanja ljudi i sjećanja, ljudi i okoline, pripadnika različitih naraštaja.