

Dragan Komadina: “A Short history of Croatian theatre in Bosnia and Herzegovina”

Dragan Komadina

Faculty of Performing Arts
University of Sarajevo
Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
dragon_k@net.hr

Abstract

The history of Croatian theatre in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be separated from the Western European theatre – from poorly documented ancient to somewhat stronger and more visible medieval influences. However, the development of Croatian drama and theatre in Bosnia and Herzegovina, interrupted during the Ottoman occupation, was renewed in the spirit of national revival during the 19th century, first in Mostar, and then in Sarajevo. The peak of the theatrical development was reached in the late 1990s, when the Croatian National Theatre was established in Mostar. It was the first theatrical institution with the prefix Croatian. Over the course of nearly half a millennium, Croatian dramatic works succeeded in not only preserving the national identity, but also in making a significant contribution to intercultural exchanges in this part of Europe through the rich and stormy political past of the Balkans.

Key words: Croatians, Bosna and Herzegovina, theatre, Croatian drama in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatian National Theatre in Mostar

The history of theatre in Herzegovina could be extended to the primordial image from the cave of Badanj at the locality of Borojevići in the surroundings of Stolac: the indigenous inhabitants of present day Herzegovina gather round a fire telling stories. One of them unexpectedly rises to conjure up the tale of the hunt so that it is convincing for the audience. Suddenly, a figure larger than the story-teller appears on the crag of the cave. This first stage effect before an audience in the early Stone Age could be one of the entirely probable hypotheses regarding the emergence of theatrical phenomena in Herzegovina.

One had to wait a few thousand years for the codification of agricultural rituals or rituals of fertility from which, according to historians and anthropologists, the first theatre emerged. Equally, we can only presume that Greek influences reached the Illyrian city of Daorson – modern day Ošanići near Stolac. Did the inhabitants living behind the thick megalithic walls of Daorson enjoy the Dionysian festivities, out of which Greek tragedy later developed, as well as the scenes of the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Aristophanes? Or is it more probable that, through the concentrated network of their roads which traversed Herzegovina in all directions, it was the Romans who served as the medium between the indigenous people of Herzegovina with the theatre of antiquity? It is not impossible that Roman comedians performed their Attelan farces, which began in the second century BC, in one of the Roman *municipia* throughout Herzegovina – in Delminium (Tomislavgrad), Bistue Vetus (Rama), Pelvium (Livno) or Diluntum (Stolac). Or did the *Herzegovinian* theatre lovers have to be dragged to Naronā – which, alongside Epidaurum and Salona, was the largest city of this part of the Empire – in order to enjoy the comedies of Plautus and Terence?¹ These are all hypotheses ...

What is certain is that Christianity did not look favourably upon the theatre as it existed in Rome in the fourth century, when the Church Fathers suggested to the people that they avoid the theatre because it was considered a nursery of impious deeds and debauchery. Nevertheless, thanks to travelling actors (*buffoons, histriones, jesters, joculars, minstrels*), who were skilled in dance, music and circus juggling, the theatre would, as a

¹ For the Roman settlement in hinterland of Roman Dalmatia, modern-day Herzegovina and Bosnia see in Croatian Bojanovski (1988), and in English Wilkes (1969).

public deed, survived the Middle Ages.² They amused audiences with a stable repertoire as well as free improvisations with the occasional sharp satire.

Owing to its proximity to Dubrovnik (Ragusa), the nobles of Hum (*Chelmia* – future Herzegovina) also followed the European trends of the day with regard to medieval forms of theatre. Hence, permanent acting companies existed at the courts of Bosnian and Hum rulers in the mid-fifteenth century, founded on the model of similar musical and entertaining groups in Renaissance Ragusa, while the archives mention the name of the first authentic actor from this area – Mravac. Alongside the court of the Kosača family, the courts of the Pavlović, Vujinić and other noble families of Hum also hosted performances by jesters and entertainers of the most varied kind.

Amongst the inhabitants of villages, gatherings linked to periods of the year and cultivation of the land were popular, including songs and carols such as *koledarske i kraljičke pjesme, ladarica, dodola* and others. The first musical-dramatic plays developed from such folkloric forms, and this is indicated by images found on medieval tombstones *stećci* (sing. *stećak*) or *bilizi* (sing. *bilig*) One should also single out the theatre of masks as the most widespread example of the people's oral theatre, which is attested by “... an archaeological discovery which contains an image of a youth with a goat mask leading a kolo of girls.”³

After the fall of the Bosnian kingdom (1463) and the duchy of Herzegovina (1481) under the Ottoman rule, and the subsequent ruin of the nobility, the acting craft also noticeably declined and became one of the most contemptible of professions. Popular forms of entertainment and street theatre with its acrobats, impersonators, tamers, musicians and ‘those that walk on stilts’ existed from the sixteenth century onward.⁴ The most significant form of theatre during the period of Turkish occupation was the *karagöz* or *Karagöz-Hacivat*, (Croatian: *karadžoz*) – shadow theatre, Ottoman Turkish puppet play, which traces its origins to the Indonesian shadow theatre: “*The last known performance of karagöz theatre in Mostar*

² One should not understand the negative attitude of the Church toward the theatre as contempt towards all forms of art. “Medieval culture had a sense for novelty, but it endeavoured to conceal it under the cover of repetition (in contrast to modern culture, which pretends to create novelty even when it repeats). Eco (2007): 12.

³ Palameta (1996): 176.

⁴ Šarić (2006): 8.

occurred in the summer of 1921 in the garden of the Balinovac coffee-house, when a Bosnian with a karagöz show entertained guests for a few days.”⁵ In spite of all these forms, the Ottoman authorities essentially interrupted continuity and the influence of Western theatre in Bosnia and in Herzegovina, so that a true theatrical life in this area only begins under the conditions of the Habsburg Austro-Hungarian administration (1878-1918). The last decades of the Ottoman rule correspond with the rise of national movements in the South Slavic lands. As the Croatian national revival in Bosnia and in Herzegovina was an echo of the Croatian national revival in Zagreb, the former emerged a few decades later due to the socio-political conditions in Bosnia and in Herzegovina. Although the revival began in Sarajevo, its rise occurred in Mostar, political and cultural centre of Herzegovina, which had more favourable national and other socio-political circumstances. The first reading school was opened in Mostar in 1852, while a library and reading-room were opened in the same town in 1861.

The first Croatian printing press was founded in Mostar in 1872 and was directed by Don Franjo Miličević. The opening of the printing press heralded the appearance of the first newspapers, textbooks and manuals in the Croatian language in Bosnia and in Herzegovina. Inspired by the national revival, in 1888 the Croats of Mostar established the National Singing and Musical Society *Hrvoje*, which changed its name in 1897 to the *Croatian Singing and Musical Society 'Hrvoje'*. The first performance in the repertoire of *Hrvoje* was Josip Freudenreich's *Graničari* (Frontiersmen). It was performed on 2 December 1888, and its director was the son of the play's author, the actor Dragutin Freudenreich. The first significant playwright amongst the Croats of Mostar was Ante Jukić (1873-1906), who, under the pseudonym of Veljko Obradov, adapted to stage the novel by Eugen Kumičić, *Urota Zrinsko-Frankopanska* (The Conspiracy of Zrinski-Frankopan), under the title of *Mučenici* (Martyrs). The first permanent director in *Hrvoje* was the choir conductor from Zagreb Vinko Šubir, who was succeeded by Petar Soldo.

Nevertheless, the real revival of activity in *Hrvoje* begins with the appointment of Marko Veble (1873-1926) from Zagreb as artistic director of the theatre. This young student of Dragutin Freudenreich worked as a producer, actor, dramaturg, set designer, musician, singer and administrator.

⁵ Šarić (2008): 9.

During his seven year stay in Mostar, he succeeded in consolidating the acting ensemble, breaking standard stereotypical dilettantism and establishing a professional attitude toward the theatre. During his mandate, the stage of *Hrvoje* hosted premier plays such as Gogol's *Marriage, Around the World in Eighty Days*, by Jules Verne and Adolphe-Philippe D'Ennery, while in 1902 Mostar hosted its first performance of a work by Ivo Vojnović – *Ekvinocij* (Equinox). During this period, theatrical companies from Croatia also performed in the Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina (in Sarajevo and Mostar), which was closely followed and encouraged by Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević in his journal *Nada* (Hope). It was due to his efforts that the Circle of Sarajevo writers (including 15 writers) was founded, while Adalbert Kuzmanović, a member of this association and a diligent collaborator and co-editor of *Nada*, wrote, among others, the play *Vitropir* (Vagabond) in 1901.

During the interwar period, several dramatic writers were active in Bosnia and in Herzegovina, including, above all, Jakša Kušan and his drama *Nevjerojatni san gospodina ministra* (The Incredible Dream of Mr. Minister), and Verka Škurla Ilijić and her expressionist drama *Na tankom ledu* (On Thin Ice). At the beginning of the 1920s, Ilija Jakovljević published his drama *Na staklenim nogama* (On Glass Legs). During the Second World War, Ruža Lucija Petelinova was active and received *Demeter's award* in 1943 for her drama *Petra*. From the end of the Second World War until the present day, fifty Croatian playwrights from Bosnia-Herzegovina are known to have published (in print or through performing) around 200 plays. One should also not forget Nikola Šop and his *Bosanska trilogija* (Bosnian Trilogy); Jurislav Korenić, the renowned theatre director, the founder of the Kamerni teatar '55 (Chamber Theatre '55) and one of the founders of the Festival of Small Scenes in Sarajevo (today better known under the abbreviation MESS). Korenić wrote comedies with the actor Rejhan Demirdžić such as *Karađoz* and *Fistikovi šejtanluci* (Fistik's mischiefs). There is also Radovan Marušić and his plays *Otočanke* (Female Islanders) and *Katarina Kosača*, Ivan Kušan and his play *Svrha od slobode* (The Purpose from Freedom); Tomislav Bakarić and the play *Hasanaga* (Hassan-Aga) or Darko Lukić and his play *Važno je biti pozitivan* (It is Important to be Positive). When one adds another fifty playwrights who were born before 1900 and worked in the 20th century, then we arrive at the

number of 65 Croatian playwrights who have written a total of 230 plays.

The Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina acquired their first professional theatre during the last war (1992-1995), when the government of the Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosnia founded the *National Theatre* in 1993, which, beginning in 1994, bears the current title of the *Croatian National Theatre of Mostar*. The first play performed in this theatre was *Božićna bajka* (A Christmas Fable) by Mate Matišić. The majority of the current ensemble consists of actors from the National Stage of Mostar who, together with technical staff, joined the newly established theatre, including Dana Kurbalija, Tatjana Feher, Ante Vican, Jozo Lepetić, Toni Pehar, Velimir Njirić, Sanda Krgo, etc. One of the successes of the theatre from this period was certainly the duodrama *Rodijaci* (Cousins), based on the text by Petar Miloš, with the leading roles performed by Toni Pehar and Velimir Njirić.

Nevertheless, the first decade of the existence of the *Croatian National Theatre* (HNK) of Mostar, the plays of which are performed on the large and small stages of the Croatian club Herzog Stjepan Kosača, was marked by works with a national-romantic pathos. Good examples are the adaptation of the novel *Tena* by Ivan Kozarac directed by Bobo Jelčić, as well as the historical spectacle *U godinama gladi* (In the Years of Hunger), written by the Franciscan Ante Marić and directed by Želimir Orešković. The play portrays the Franciscan Didak Buntić (1871-1922) and his mission to save children from an outbreak of hunger in 1917. HNK Mostar performed this play whilst on tour in Germany. Alongside Jelčić and Orešković, other directors included Joško Juvančić, who was also at one stage an artistic advisor, Robert Raponja, Dražen Ferencina, Vanča Kljaković and Nina Kleflin.

At the beginning of 1996, a foundation stone was laid for the new building of HNK in Mostar, into which the theatre relocated – albeit on the small stage in the basement – which concluded the first phase of construction, after almost ten years. Whilst they were still performing on the small stage in the rear part of the Croatian Club of Herzog Stjepan Kosača, the ensemble of HNK Mostar produced two significant plays, which were directed by Robert Raponja: *Fernando Krapp mi je napisao ovo pismo* (Fernando Krapp Wrote me this Letter, written by T. Dorst) and *U agoniji* (In Agony, written by Miroslav Krleža). After the relocation to the small

stage, the most praiseworthy and most performed projects were the plays directed by Nina Kleflin – particularly *Bljesak Zlatnog zuba* (The Flash of the Golden Tooth) and *Ujak Vanja* (Uncle Vanya, by Chekhov). The repertoire generally consists of classic Croatian dramas and the dramatization of the works of local authors. Despite difficulties caused by the lack of suitable space and enduring all the consequences of socio-political turmoil, the theatre has succeeded, in the space of little less than two decades, in producing 38 premieres and hundreds of repeat performances throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and overseas, thereby gaining the artistic, cultural and national legitimacy of a worthy and viable institution, before which there are decades of maturation and expansion of repertoire.

Bibliography

Bojanovski, I. (1988): *Bosna i Hercegovina u antičko doba*. Djela 66/6 (Sarajevo).

Eco, U. (2007): *Umjetnost i ljepota u srednjovjekovnoj estetici* (Zagreb). Croatian translation of *Art and beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, 1986).

Palameta, M. (1996): *Usmeni narodni teatar u Hercegovini* (Split & Mostar).

Šarić, S. (2006): *Pozorišni repertoar u Mostaru od 1879-2001* (Mostar).

Wilkes, J.J. (1969): *Dalmatia* (London).

Sažetak

Povijest hrvatskog kazališta u Bosni i Hercegovini se ne može gledati razdvojeno od zapadnoeuropskog kazališta – od slabo dokumentiranog antičkog teatra, do nešto bolje vidljivih srednjovjekovnih utjecaja. Razvoj hrvatske drame i teatra u BiH se prekida tijekom Otomanske okupacije, i nastavlja u duhu narodnog preporoda. However, development of Croatian drama and theatre in BiH, interrupt 19. stoljeću, prvo u Mostaru a potom i u Sarajevu. Vrhunac teatarskog razvoja se dostiže u kasnim 1990-tim kada je ustanovljeno Hrvatsko narodno kazalište u Mostaru, kao prva teatarska institucija s hrvatskim predznakom. Tijekom skoro pola milenija, hrvatska drama uspijeva ne samo u očuvanju nacionalnog identiteta, već također u značajnom doprinosu međukulturnoj razmjeni u ovom dijelu Europe kroz bogatu i turbulentnu političku povijest Balkana.