

An Actress Turned Writer – Eliza Gerner

Eliza Gerner (Sombor, 1920 – Zagreb, 2013) is the first Croatian actress to publish her memoirs. The paper contextualises eight memoirs by Eliza Gerner within the genre characteristics of autobiographic prose. Gerner's memoirs are social memoirs rooted in the author's polydiscursivity and fragmentary self-representation. The paper then explores the memoirs, focusing on specific topics: Gerner's professional engagement, the life and work of Tito Strozzi, her association with Bela and Miroslav Krleža and portraits of Croatian actresses. The analysis focuses on Gerner's discourse on the status of women and specifically actresses in the 20th century, which reveals Gerner's partial reinterpretation of the history of Croatian theatre, and establishes her books as a contribution to cultural memory in Croatia.

In the history of Croatian theatre there is a number of actresses who wrote memoirs. Some went unpublished, such as those by Ivka Kralj, while some were published – as is the case with those by Nela Eržišnik, Zdenka Heršak, Marija Crnobori and Anja Šovagović Despot. Some, such as Zdenka Heršak, published more than one book following the end of their acting careers, while others wrote while still active, such as Anja Šovagović Despot, who wrote two books in the course of her career. The first Croatian actress to publish her memoirs was Eliza Gerner (Sombor, 1920 – Zagreb, 2013) who, having written eight books, by far surpassed all her colleagues, both male and female, from the world of theatre. She began her acting career in mid-20th century, and at the close of the century, when she retired, she began writing memoirs. It can be said that Eliza Gerner had two important careers: one as an actress and another as a writer. Gerner herself wrote the following: “I can just say of myself that my exciting theatre boom lasted only about a decade. After that I was supposed to fill the gaping void left by the absence of work, when I was to look to other possibilities that did not always exist in theatre. I played minor roles in co-productions, translated, turned to my family, worked as a visiting actress, one day I discovered a possibility of working abroad, and there encountered exciting new undertakings. Finally, writing became a replacement for theatre.”¹

Eliza Gerner is one of the few actresses of her generation who obtained a college degree and then a doctorate in economics, and only then turned to acting. She grew

¹ GERNER 1999: 223.

up and was educated in multicultural European communities and spoke several foreign languages. She completed her secondary school in Sombor and then began studying economics in Zagreb in 1938, but, due to war, she completed her studies in Budapest. In 1943, she earned her doctorate, also in Budapest, defending the thesis “The Latest Social Tendencies in the Provisions of the Tax Legislation.” Enthralled with the theatre, following her studies she performed in community theatre in Sombor. She arrived to Zagreb to play the role of Laura in Krleža’s *U Agoniji* [In Agony] with director Tito Strozzi, which she had rehearsed in the Sombor Town Theatre in 1948. She ended up spending her entire working career in Zagreb, with the exception of a few engagements in other theatres.

Although this article does not focus on Gerner’s acting career, and information on the roles she performed can be found in more detailed historical theatrical studies,² some of her roles deserve mention here. At the beginning of her career in Croatia she was a member of Strozzi’s Drama Studio, where she performed Katarina in *Oluja* [The Tempest] by A. N. Ostrovsky. She spent a season as a member of the then Ivan Zajc National Theatre in Rijeka where she played Mira in *Povlačenje* [Retreat] by M. Božić, Eliza Doolittle in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* and Susanne in Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*. She performed in the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb from 1950 until her retirement, traversing the well-beaten path of actresses at the time – initially playing the roles of naïve young girls, and only then playing psychologically more complex character roles, with roles in salon pieces being the most suited to her.³ The most prominent roles of her acting career were those in Shaw’s plays: Vivie in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* with Bela Krleža in the title role, Cleopatra in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and Julia in *The Philanderer*. She excelled as Shakespeare’s Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, as Melita in Krleža’s *Leda* and Klara in Goethe’s *Egmont*. The role of Hortense in Anouilh’s *The Rehearsal, or the Love Punished* was one of her most popular among the public. Both audiences and critics responded favourably to her jubilee celebration when she played Lydia Vasilievna in Arbuzov’s *The Old Fashioned Comedy* in 1980. As a member of the Strozzi Drama Ensemble, she performed in Strozzi’s pieces and excelled as Il in his duodrama *Igra u dvoje* [Play for Two]. Due to her knowledge of German, she spent a season in Rostock’s Volkstheater in the 1960s. She also performed in Hungarian. She devoted the latter part of her life to memoir writing: “Retirement for me meant the end of my theatre performances in spite of good physical condition and a fresh memory. Memories and reminiscences began to haunt me, which I then expressed in my memoirs.”⁴

² For more on Eliza Gerner’s roles, see BOGNER ŠABAN 1994, ČAVKA 1998.

³ LJUBIĆ 2019.

⁴ GERNER 1999: 164.

Eliza Gerner is the author of eight memoirs published from 1988 to 2011 which are the focus of this analysis. The titles are indicative: *Osvrnuh se sjetno* [Looking Back Wistfully, 1988], *Oproštaj s Gvozdom – razgovori s Krležom* [Saying Goodbye to Gvozd – Conversations with Krleža, 1993], *Oteto zaboravu* [Snatched from Oblivion, 1995], *U sjeni stoljeća koje odlazi* [In the Shadow of the Departing Century, 1999], *Kazalište kao sudbina – hrvatske dramske dive* [The Theatre as Destiny – The Divas of Croatian Drama, 2001], *Svjedoci Krležina odlaska* [Witnesses to Krleža's Departure, 2002], co-authored with her husband Milan Arko, *Tito Strozzi – svjetla i sjene jednog životnog puta* [Tito Strozzi – The Lights and Shadows of a Life's Journey, 2004], and *Tragom mojih scenskih ostvarenja* [Tracing my Stage Performances, 2011]. Setting forth from the transitory nature of theatrical productions as experienced by actors and the wistfulness it engenders, Eliza Gerner attempts to “snatch from oblivion” events and memories of the persons she had met in her professional and private life. Therefore, her books are primarily examples of memoirs, models of autobiographical prose thematising “historical, political, social and cultural reality shaped from the perspective of the memoir's subject in first person singular,” by a person “who has acquired the position of the narrator as a result of her socially acknowledged public reputation.”⁵

Philippe Lejeune defined the categories represented in the autobiographical genre: the form of language, the subject treated, the author's situation and the narrator's position – where autobiography refers to narrative in prose and subject to the individual life or story of a personality, while the author and narrator are identical, and the narrator and principal character are identical.⁶ New research⁷ reveals that Eliza Gerner's memoirs can be situated in the interstitial space that departs from autobiography proper and approaches autobiographical prose. Detecting two types of texts within the category of autobiographical prose – narrative and essayistic-reflexive – H. Sablić Tomić classifies memoirs as narrative texts, together with autobiography proper, journals and letters. Gerner's memoirs are mostly narrative, rarely entering the space of essayistic reflexivity. The typology of contemporary autobiographical prose is governed by dominant narrative procedures such as the narrator's participation in the plot, the relationship to the autobiographical subject and the category of time, and types of discourses.⁸ In terms of these, Gerner's books are closer to associative discourse, wherein narration is more often non-chronological, a result of reminiscences and based on her fragmentary self-representation. With reference to discourse types, Gerner's works are mostly polydiscursive autobiographical texts wherein the continuity of

⁵ SABLJIĆ TOMIĆ 2008: 85.

⁶ LEJEUNE 1989: 4

⁷ ZLATAR 1998; SABLJIĆ TOMIĆ 2002.

⁸ SABLJIĆ TOMIĆ 2002: 24.

narration is supplemented by biographical, journalistic and epistolary discourse. As to the typology of memoirs and their proposed division into personal, social and historical, Gerner's books are predominantly social memoirs, while elements of the other two types appear to a lesser degree. Memoirs differ from standard autobiographical prose in terms of content, the rhetorical nature of the text and the subject's identity.⁹ Gerner's memoirs provide information about the environment in the broadest sense of the word, as opposed to the subject in autobiographies proper, who is the centre of all perspectives. Furthermore, memoirs legitimise the impression of historiographic instead of fictionalised narration. With regard to the subject's identity, in Gerner's memoirs the subject is mostly oriented toward the theatrical and cultural dimensions, only occasionally attempting to represent the subject completely, thus approaching autobiography proper. Gerner has stressed on multiple occasions that she does not see herself as a writer and that she is only recording memories from the world of theatre to which she belonged. The first volume of *Hrvatska književna enciklopedija* [Croatian Literary Encyclopaedia] characterises Gerner as an actress and memoirist,¹⁰ while other editions by the Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography lists her as actress, with the titles of her previously published books listed at the end of the entry.

Even though she acquired her artistic education in Strozzi's Drama Studio at the Croatian National Theatre, Eliza Gerner is the only Croatian actress of her generation with a doctorate, moreover, a foreign one, although it was certified by the Croatian authorities. She recounts an interesting anecdote in her memoirs. In order to enrol in the Economics School in Zagreb, she had to submit a secondary school diploma and her father's tax return. After examining it, the clerk told her: "Miss, if I were you I would not go to college, because by the end of your studies you will have spent your entire dowry on tuition, given your father's tax returns," to which she replied, "You just go ahead and enrol me, and I'll marry for love."¹¹ She obtained her undergraduate degree and then doctorate in Budapest, and received a postdoctoral scholarship in Heidelberg, which is where she was when the Second World War broke out. When she returned to Sombor, she worked as a nurse in a Partisan hospital. After the war, she joined a community theatre, much to her family's disapproval. The post-war government refused to recognize her degree. Moreover, the issue of marriage and dowry began to dominate the discourse. By her own admission, having been enthralled with theatre, she sold almost all of her dowry by donating it to the theatre. She also lent the theatre pieces of furniture and her own clothes. Following her first performance in a professional theatre in Sombor in 1947, when she successfully played Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's

⁹ SABLJIĆ TOMIĆ 2002: 150.

¹⁰ MRDULJAŠ 2010: 588-589.

¹¹ GERNER 2011: 11.

Pygmalion, her father warned her that the family had spent all their money on her education, and that she should leave for Zagreb to certify her degrees. There her former professor told her: “Do not dream, dear Eliza, of your diploma being certified, this is now the Theology Faculty.”¹² As much as it would be interesting to read what had gone through narrator’s mind following that sentence, such a reflection is missing. The next sentence begins a new paragraph on the author’s fascination with a recently published play by Krleža. Commemorating Gerner’s ninetieth birthday, Boris Senker pointed out that even the briefest biographies by Miletić, Gavella and Benešić included the information that they had doctorates: “It could, however, be said that many of them deemed their world torn to pieces, or at least the system of propriety and rectitude, when the first and last name of an actress was accompanied by a title, one that was reserved for the *great men* of the Croatian theatre and culture in general.”¹³ In 1959, when a three-act version of Krleža’s play *U agoniji* [In Agony] was being staged, Gerner spoke to the dramatist in favour of the older two-act version, to which he replied: “Dear Gerika, stick to your acting and your economics (because I studied economy) and do not interfere with literature.”¹⁴

However, Eliza Gerner did interfere with literature by writing memoirs. Ana Lederer compared her writing style to her style of communication with others. In her books, the author reveals herself as “unobtrusive, careful and discreet person,” while the reader has the impression that the narrator speaks from “a different, elegant and somewhat old-fashioned world of bourgeois way of life.”¹⁵

Her memoirs may satisfy the curiosity of those not wholly acquainted with theatrical events during narrator’s life and times, but they do so only partially – Gerner does not gossip, she writes discretely even about situations which were unfavourable to her and her family and friends. It seems that the narrator often withholds her comments, believing that the narrated events, and in many instances attached documents or excerpts from theatre reviews, speak for themselves, and it falls upon the reader to adopt a stance on them. The second characteristic of Gerner’s memoirs is her specific methodology which, with the inserted documentary materials, resembles theatrological reconstructions of a past theatrical act and the history of the Croatian acting scene. Additionally, Gerner’s memoirs are characterised by a measure of modesty which prevents the narrator from becoming the hero or the star of the writings; instead, she withdraws to the background to shine a light on others, which is particularly true of passages recounting her partnerships on and around the stage which were critical to the success of a play

¹² GERNER 1999: 118.

¹³ SENKER 2011: 11.

¹⁴ GERNER 1988: 168.

¹⁵ LEDERER 2006: 115.

and in everyday life. As much as she readily highlighted both her theatrical and non-theatrical successes, she does not hide her insecurities and failures, either. In both cases, she is diplomatic and tactful. Gerner's memoirs mostly deal with the theatre, but can still be categorised into several sets of motifs. The first book, *Osvrnuh se sjetno* [Looking Back Wistfully] heralds the thematisation of the actress's acting career and those of her numerous colleagues, a motif that Gerner concludes only in her last book titled *Tragom mojih scenskih ostvarenja* [Tracing my Stage Performances]. Her life prior to the onset of her acting career is described in greater detail in *U sjeni stoljeća koje odlazi* [In the Shadow of the Departing Century], which contains numerous comments on the status of women and female artists. A milestone of a sort, the book *Oteto zaboravu* [Snatched from Oblivion] deals with general issues from the theatrical and cultural life of Gerner's time, concurrently stressing two overarching themes: *Tito Strozzi – svjetla i sjene jednog životnog puta* [Tito Strozzi – The Lights and Shadows of a Life's Journey] and Miroslav and Bela Krleža (*Oproštaj s Gvozdom – razgovori s Krležom* [Saying Goodbye to Gvozd – Conversations with Krleža] and *Svjedoci Krležina odlaska* [Witnesses to Krleža's Departure]). *Kazalište kao sudbina* [Theatre as a Destiny] should be added to the group, as well, since Gerner devoted it to the portrayal of Croatian theatre actresses. While reading these it should be kept in mind that a number of events have been described in multiple memoirs by Gerner, so events and encounters are thus intertwined and retold, most likely due to Gerner's intention of ingrain them in the reader's memory. Cognizant of the subjectivity of official history and its narrative strategies, in her memoirs Gerner endeavours to "reinterpret history, or challenge old interpretations with new information."¹⁶ This particularly comes to light when she writes about the status of women and actresses, while the cataloguing of events and documents constitutes Gerner's attempt to retell bits of Croatian theatre history shunned in official accounts, bits which may shed a new and different light on her theatrical contemporaries.

Describing prevailing social circumstances at the time when she was growing up, Gerner ironically comments that marriage was a business transaction: "The merciless laws of capitalism have infiltrated the most intimate of human relations. Little care was accorded to emotions. The most fortuitous combination in marriage was the copulation of capital with capital. The financially inferior partner who was rejected in the combination could only become resigned, sigh or commit suicide."¹⁷ She has also described a marriage proposal by one of her suitors in her youth by stressing that in the eyes of parents, a young girl's success in school could not possibly measure up to the importance of a marriage proposal and marrying well: "In the past, men have been convinced of the success of their

¹⁶ FELDMAN 2004: 11.

¹⁷ GERNER 1999: 19.

marriage proposals, and marriage was the only existence available to women.”¹⁸ The situation was additionally complicated by the political circumstances of 1944, which brought her yet another marriage proposal, this time in a Partisan hospital where she was wooed by a physician from Banat, on the border with Romania: “I feel sorry for you. You are Swabians. The name Gerner can be nothing else. You and your father shall be thrown in a concentration camp; someone will have an eye on your property. I’m the only one who can save you by marrying you. Please, talk to your father, tell him it’s the only way out for you.’ I think his eyes were on our property.”¹⁹ The young Gerner, already a doctor of economics at the time, managed to reject this proposal, but not the workplace problems that resulted from her suitor’s wounded pride.

In light of the presented social and political relationships, her choice of the acting profession was even more complex, which is what can be gleaned from Gerner’s memoirs. Theatre was “futile toil,” acting was “total nonsense” as one had “to do something serious and earn money.”²⁰ In the 1950s, Eliza Gerner was a professional actress, and her memoirs dating back to that decade abound in anecdotes from the theatrical milieu. However, there are very few details about her personal life. She does not write about motherhood and the juggling of her professional and private lives. She mentions pregnancy only in passing, as it caused her to change her plans in the theatre. She keeps her private life and her relationship with her child away from the public eye. In a few places only she mentions that Krlježa treated her daughter gently, and kissed the “marquise’s” hand, although even in those passages she remained focused primarily on the theatre.

Gerner also devoted attention to the status of actresses in the theatre, stressing that the ratio of male and female roles in dramatic literature is unfavourable for women. Waiting for an appropriate role can lead to a loss of self-esteem and numerous crises, sometimes even to forsaking the profession entirely. Gerner finds the reasons for this in the unsuccessful adaptation of the acting profession from the youthful to an intermediate or a senior quality. Madelaine Renaud told her that being an actress means waiting and hoping forever. Securing a single important role for an actress is like winning a jackpot.²¹ Furthermore, on multiple occasions Gerner wrote that landing a role is much more difficult than learning a text by heart, because, as opposed to other professions, actors and actresses cannot improve their position through discipline, hard work or excellence. Be that as it may, the roles they play do leave a mark on actors and actresses: “The actors do not hand out calling cards to each other, they are legitimised by the roles

¹⁸ GERNER 1999: 32.

¹⁹ GERNER 1999: 105.

²⁰ GERNER 1988: 11.

²¹ GERNER 1995: 59.

they played or play.”²² Gerner filled the time between engagements with professional responsibilities pertaining to protocol, welcoming foreign actors working in Zagreb. She stresses that her political and social references made her unfit for duties in the theatre’s management. Research conducted in Croatia in 1979/1980 yielded the following ratios of professional artists in individual disciplines: in ballet, female dancers made up a third of the total number, half of the literary translators were women, while in the dramatic arts only a third of the performers were women. The research claimed that actresses were in a better position than, for example, architects, composers or writers, as there was a significantly lesser number of those. In time, the share of women increased from the average of one quarter to over thirty-six percent in 2003.²³ Jasenka Kodrnja stresses that “female artists” differ from “male artists through a *more pronounced dissatisfaction* with the circumstances of artistic work.”²⁴ This may be the result of the demands of the artistic profession and the demands of the traditional role of women, which is what transpires through Gerner’s memoirs.

“I entered the profession with a great deal of enthusiasm,” Gerner wrote in her first book, and continued: “In the beginning it was all ‘roses and sunshine,’ but, of course, it did not last long. Considerable self-control and self-discipline were required to stick with it to the end. Hundreds of times, I got ready to ‘flee’ and every time ‘surrendered’ like a coward.”²⁵ In her opinion, an actor is not a machine, able to perform equally well every time: “The acting game is susceptible to the audience’s responses, to our moods, emotions, even the physical condition of our bodies, and it can never be firmly fixed.”²⁶ In her first book, she is as enthused with theatre as she is intensively in love with Tito Strozzi, who agreed to perform with her in Sombor in 1947, playing Križovec in Krleža’s *U agoniji* [In Agony]: “Strozzi appeared as an assured and confident individual, while I felt inhibited, awkward and inferior. I observed him. I have never seen eyes so grey, grey as lead. He was elegant in his unkempt appearance, at times charming, laid-back and very youthful.”²⁷ Their love affair continued in the Drama Studio in Zagreb, which caused people to talk. At the time, the two theatre artists having a love affair was considered too liberal. Equally so, since actresses were interpreting female characters transgressing social conventions to a degree, insecure performances led to anxiety about reviews and thus consequently about securing the next role. In Gerner’s experience, the creative process was faster if the role she was given

²² GERNER 1995: 61.

²³ KODRNJA 2008: 117-118.

²⁴ KODRNJA 2008: 121.

²⁵ GERNER 1988: 19.

²⁶ GERNER 1988: 119.

²⁷ GERNER 1988: 13.

was close to her. If her psychological and physical features were contrary to the role she was given, she contemplated giving up. In 1951, she played Shaw's, as she wrote it, "unwomanly woman," Julia Craven, in *The Philanderer*: "The role was full of contradictions. To be simultaneously womanly and unwomanly, gentle and exalted, submissive and smug, meant going from one extreme to another."²⁸ This may be complemented by an event recounted in *Oproštaj s Gvozdom* [Saying Goodbye to Gvozd] can be added: "After the performance, I was dissatisfied and sad, even though an actor's subjective feeling may deceive us. 'We saw your performance,' Bela told me the first time we met afterward. 'I was distracted.' 'I hadn't noticed. And you know what Krleža told me? There is no doubt, Gerika is an actress.' Thinking it over, I could not discern whether it was a compliment, criticism or consolation."²⁹ Aware of the fleeting nature of the theatrical performance, Gerner devoted her last memoir to the roughly thirty roles that she had performed, focusing on documentary material: theatre reviews, official documents, letters, and cards and photographs which she must have deemed reliable witnesses to her acting career.

She did not describe her work on her roles in detail, instead writing about it only generally. She wrote that "an actor must fall in love with a character he or she is creating, be obsessed with it; it is only then that he or she will achieve vitality and sincerity."³⁰ She was therefore not one to study a text endlessly or record her voice on a tape recorder, instead contemplating the entrusted role constantly, believing that "sincerity, truthfulness and freshness are created on the spot, in dialogue with the partner first in rehearsals, and then during the performance when the spark lit between us jumps to light the audience as well."³¹ In her memoirs, she often gratefully spoke of her acting partners, who significantly contributed to the excellence of the acting process and the performance. When it comes to Gerner's acting partners, Strozzi has a privileged position in her memoirs, and it may seem that her entire memoirist output is devoted to him. She wrote very little about marriage and her personal relations with Strozzi, however professionally she adopted the position of a privileged, grateful and not even remotely equal partner whom Strozzi had introduced to high circles in worlds of theatre and culture. This is how she summarized his theatrical poetics: "Strozzi loved emotional intensity, picturesqueness, bright colours, restlessness and tension on the set. In a word, he loved temperamental, dynamic and exciting theatre."³²

²⁸ GERNER 1988: 60.

²⁹ GERNER 1993: 25.

³⁰ GERNER 1999: 126.

³¹ GERNER 1999: 126-127.

³² GERNER 1988: 124.

She began publishing memoirs in the years after Strozzi's death. However, it often seems that, even when writing about herself, Gerner actually wants to write about Strozzi, to stress his invaluable and previously inadequately appraised share in the history of Croatian theatre. He was "indisputably the most versatile personality ever to have worked in Croatian theatre."³³ He received academic recognition in theatre studies in 2003 when Ana Lederer published *Redatelj Tito Strozzi* [Theatre Director Tito Strozzi], wherein Lederer catalogued and analysed Strozzi's artistic work for the first time. In addition to Ivo Raić and Branko Gavella, Tito Strozzi's oeuvre marked the first half of the 20th century in Croatia and his heterogeneous theatre engagements resulted from "the understanding of theatre as a total life project, which is the root of Strozzi's poetic fibre."³⁴ Gerner has only published a book officially devoted to Strozzi in 2004, as illustrated by its title. In addition to sketching the history of the Strozzi family in her texts, she attempted to compile an artistic profile of Strozzi's theatre activities. Contrary to her otherwise deliberate style, she employed an exclamation mark in the preface: "I would like to demystify the 'Strozzi case'! To rehabilitate the man who was unjustly and groundlessly marginalised, rejected, slandered, ignored, with even a sort of conspiracy created around him."³⁵ The change in the political system allowed her to document the work of the Court of Honour, which in 1945 suspended a number of theatre artists, Tito Strozzi, Gerner's husband, among them. His career became a target of numerous Communist Party bodies which attempted to diminish his importance and value, which prompted Gerner to not only write memoirs, but also reevaluate Strozzi's theatrical oeuvre years later. Her memoirs are, therefore, a type of deconstruction – and not necessarily a gender-biased one, of the world of the Firsts and their generalisations which have anticipated, marginalised or disqualified the world of the Seconds.³⁶ Strozzi's bust was installed in the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb in 1983, while in 1992, commemorating the hundredth anniversary of his birth, a conference dedicated to Strozzi was held. In 1993, the Tito Strozzi Award was established by the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb for best performance of the season.

Both of Eliza Gerner's husbands, Tito Strozzi and Milan Arko, were childhood friends of writer Miroslav Krleža. As adults, their relationships exhibited different levels of familiarity. As an eleven-year-old boy, Krleža wrote a play entitled *Posljednji plemići Gotali* [The Last of the Gotal Noblemen] which was performed in the Strozzi home and directed by the young Tito. Gerner's memoirs reflect an awe for Krleža, whom she held in high esteem and whose plays she adored. In a number of her books, she discusses – providing letters as evidence – disagreements between Strozzi and

³³ BATUŠIĆ 1978.

³⁴ LEDERER 2003: 549.

³⁵ GERNER 2004: 12.

³⁶ KODRNJA 2008: 39.

Krleža regarding the casting of *Glembajevi* [The Glembays] in 1960, when their friendship of fifty years ended. The political authorities proclaimed Strozzi unfit, and his poetics were proclaimed outdated. Gerner believed that to be the reason why he was prevented from commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his artistic career in Zagreb's Croatian National Theatre in 1970 (the ceremony was held in Komedijska Theatre instead). In her memoirs, Gerner paints Krleža as a consistent, upright and incorruptible, gallant and cordial host, but a somewhat erratic collaborator. In her first house call to the Krležas in 1950, Gerner was impressed with the design of their home: "It was Bela's inspired *mise en scene* and directing with which she seduced both Krleža and her guests. Krleža, as a host, sat beside me and gave me his unwavering attention: he offered me food, poured drinks... It seemed to me, though, that he was too interested in my stories from the theatre."³⁷ She, however, finds excuse for this: he was preoccupied with the launching of the Institute of Lexicography. Later married to Milan Arko, the co-author of her second memoir about the Krležas, and the composer of Krleža's *Gumbelium*, Gerner was a frequent visitor at Gvozd.³⁸ This affectionate friendship continued until Krleža's death. Gerner describes the Krležas' hospitality, and often provides fragments of their conversations from memory. When Gerner asked Krleža which Zagreb lady Baroness Castelli was modelled after, he nervously replied: "I wrote a psychological drama, not a panopticon (...) From 1945 to the present day, unfortunately, the characters from the Glembay cycle have been viewed as reprobates, criminals and murderers. Remember that I did not fight the Zagreb gentlemen there either, I fought against vice and human stupidity. If only we had such a bourgeoisie, as high as the Glembays were; we would have inherited an enviable literary civilisation, while this way, we haven't really."³⁹ The association with the Krležas continued. Bela Krleža gave Gerner the impetus to commemorate her anniversary in 1980 and, as usual, took care of the flowers and gifts.

Judging by Gerner's memoirs, Bela Krleža repeatedly talked about the instability of the acting profession and stated her rule: "Do not put all your eggs in the theatre basket." The two actresses performed together multiple times on stage, and met privately even more often, but their personalities could hardly be more different. Gerner describes events from rehearsals or performances that testify to Bela's privileged status, which was the result of social circumstances. She adds that this privileged position was a double edged sword since, Bela Krleža could choose roles, but she sometimes chose the wrong one; she would be given texts considered for the repertoire to read; she would choose materials for costumes and influence set design.

³⁷ GERNER 1993: 24.

³⁸ GERNER – ARKO 2002.

³⁹ GERNER 1993: 50.

Gerner commemorated the actresses of the Zagreb theatre in her memoir *Kazalište kao sudbina* [The Theatre as Destiny] which contains seven comprehensive portraits of actresses. Aware of the merciless brevity of the female acting career, Gerner begins by stressing that the book is yet another way to save these extraordinary theatre artists from oblivion. In addition to Marija Ružika-Strozzi, to whom Gerner was related, Eliza Gerner often performed together with the remaining six actresses, which makes each portrait Gerner's tribute to an individual actress: Mila Dimitrijević, Ela Haffner Gjermanović, Bela Krleža, Vika Podgorska, Božena Kraljeva and Ervina Dragman. Writing their professional biographies therein and relying on documentary evidence, Eliza Gerner, an unobtrusive and discerning participant in those events, inserts her own memories and thus becomes another valuable source. She reveals lesser known facts from the biographies of the chosen actresses, and supplements them with details from their personal lives, thus illustrating the fateful connection of those actresses with theatre.⁴⁰ Moreover, it seems that the theatre and personal destiny are so intertwined in their biographies that it is difficult to discern when the intimate ends and the public begins. In her memoirs, Gerner not only ensured that these actresses are not forgotten, but also that they are appreciated not only as monuments to the theatrical past or people without private lives.

Eliza Gerner mostly performed in the latter half of the 20th century, and she published her memoirs in the three decades at the turn of the 20th into 21st century. Her books, like other books by Croatian writers of the time, are not classical autobiographies which chronologically follow events in the narrator's life in first personal singular. Instead they are representations of autobiographical prose. Gerner's books were published at the turn of the century, a period characterised by evaluation of past times. On the other hand, those books are Gerner's summaries at the turn of the century, of the political changes and her own professional, and to a degree, personal journey through life. The need for first person narration by Eliza Gerner is the result of a twofold nostalgia which can be felt in contemporary Croatian prose at the end of the 20th century – “collective or curable” and “personal or incurable” nostalgia.⁴¹ Collective or curable nostalgia is an expression of the belief that following the fall of communism it is possible and necessary to regain and reformulate one's identity. That is evident primarily in Gerner's chronologically organised books (such as *Osvrnuh se sjetno* [Looking Back Wistfully], *U sjeni stoljeća koje odlazi* [In the Shadow of the Departing Century], *Tito Strozzi, Oproštaj s Gvozdom* [Saying Goodbye to Gvozd] and *Svjedoci Krležina odlaska* [Witnesses to Krleža's Departure]). In these, Gerner narrates her professional life's journey, as well as that of her husband Tito Strozzi and of Miroslav and Bela Krleža. On

⁴⁰ LEDERER 2001: 208.

⁴¹ ORAIĆ TOLIĆ 2005: 197.

the other hand, there was “a personal or incurable nostalgia” for the irretrievably lost forms of life and identity which is most visible in the books *Oteto zaboravu* [Snatched from Oblivion], *Kazalište kao sudbina* [Witnesses to Krleža’s Departure] and *Tragom mojih scenskih ostvarenja* [Tracing my Stage Performances].

The key words in the titles and texts of Gerner’s memoirs are wistfulness, oblivion, light and shadows, terms close to the theatrical arts, as well as the culture of remembrance. Referring to Jan Assmann’s division of communicative and cultural memory,⁴² Gerner’s memoirs can be classified among the works of collective memory from the recent past of the contemporaries still living. Judging by the published books, it seems that Gerner became increasingly aware of the passage of time and the mechanism of oblivion, probably also due to the immediate experience of transitory nature of the theatrical performance. Gerner’s attempts to snatch from oblivion certain events or actions of people from theatrical life are written as an invitation to question and explore, in greater detail and with greater consideration, the history of Croatian theatre. Eliza Gerner informally and meticulously documents about numerous unknown details, sometimes repeating them in subsequent books, definitely aware of their absence in cultural memory. This is precisely why Gerner’s memoirs are a call to Croatian culture to remember.

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⁴² ASSMANN 2005.

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Glumica kao spisateljica – Eliza Gerner

Prva hrvatska glumica koja je objavila svoje memoare je Eliza Gerner (Sombor, 1920. – Zagreb, 2013), a brojem od osam objavljenih memoarskih knjiga nadmašuje svoje kolegice i kolege iz kazališnog svijeta. Sredinom 20. stoljeća počela se baviti glumom, a krajem stoljeća počela je pisati memoare. Za Elizetu Gerner može se reći da je imala dvije važne karijere – glumačku i spisateljsku. Eliza Gerner stekla je diplomu i doktorat znanosti iz ekonomije, a tek potom posvetila se glumačkom poslu. U zagrebačkom je Hrvatskom narodnom kazalištu nastupala od 1950. do odlaska u mirovinu 1982, a potom se posvetila pisanju memoara. U prvom se dijelu rada detektiraju obilježja autobiografske proze kojoj pripadaju memoari E. Gerner (socijalni memoari, polidiskurzivnost, fragmentarnost, akronološko pripovijedanje). U drugom dijelu rada analiziraju se autoričin stil i

memoarima obuhvaćeni tematski blokovi (glumičin umjetnički rad, život i rad Tita Strozija, druženje s Belom i Miroslavom Krležom te portreti hrvatskih glumica). Autorica se u knjigama osvrta na položaj žene i glumice u hrvatskom društvu druge polovice 20. stoljeća kao i na djelokrug svestranoga kazališnog umjetnika Tita Strozija. Zamijenivši ekonomiju kazalištem, a kazalište pisanjem, Eliza Gerner memoarima je dopunila te djelomice i reinterpretirala povijest hrvatskoga kazališta, a njezine su knjige prilog kulturnom pamćenju.

Ključne riječi: Eliza Gerner; hrvatsko kazalište; autobiografska proza; memoari; kulturno pamćenje

Keywords: Eliza Gerner; Croatian theatre; autobiographic prose; memoirs; cultural memory

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