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Two Models Presenting the ‘Political’ in Contemporary Serbian Drama¹

Abstract: The paper discusses the concept of the 'political' in a drama text in relation to the characteristics of the drama genre. As an illustration, two dramas are taken which treat historically close, but quite different periods in the recent Serbian history: the period immediately after the Second World War and the present time. The first is a drama by Slobodan Selenic (1933-1996) *No 7 Kosancicev venac* and the second is a drama by Ugljesa Sajtinac (1971) *Huddersfield*. The authors use different methods for analyzing political connotations, so that these texts are taken as examples of two possible models of treating the 'political' in the literary and artistic work.

Key words: drama discourse, the 'political', engaged literature, temporal and poetical distance

1. Prologue

From its inception, theatre has been closely connected with political reality. The main task of this paper is to try to discover how a specific dramatic text, as an independent literary phenomenon, treats political issues and which poetic models and literary procedures are used by the authors for their artistic representation.

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Slobodan Selenic's drama *No 7 Kosancicev venac*,² published in 1982 is set in the time of the country's reconstruction after the Second World War. It treats the political in retrospect, but from a point of view which does not attempt to hide its tendentiousness and patriotic bias of the times in which it is set. It is committed literature which was, up to a point, required by the literary climate of the 1980s even if this climate was not as harsh on the Yugoslav writers as the imperatives of Socialist Realism were on Soviet writers of that time.

The second drama examined in the context of the representation of the political is Ugljesa Sajtinac's *Huddersfiel*,³ written in 2001. It is set at the end of the twentieth century and written from a point of view in the present.

2. We can change everything!

Selenic's drama *No 7 Kosancicev venac* treats the events in the postwar Belgrade, in the first years after the liberation from the German occupation. The characters who interact in the drama are polarized, representing divergent opinions on the war and reconstruction. One pole is occupied by Vladan Hadzislavkovic,⁴ a Belgrade intellectual, educated in the pre-war period who is writing a study of Cromwell and in whose house at No 7 Kosancicev venac moves "a new world" forms itself. The other pole is occupied by "comrades" from the war which had just finished, new residents in the metropolis of Belgrade, who have brought their habits and customs from the regions where they grew up. The two most intriguing characters, from the standpoint of the dramatic plot, are Vladan and Istref. Istref is a young Albanian man, from

² The title of the drama is a well-know street in the old city part of Belgrade, with allusions to the times of the Turks; Kosanchich Crescent, as its translation would read, is paved with cobble stones which are several hundred years old and which become a sort of metaphor for the palimpsest of history on which Belgrade and its inhabitants live. Vladan Hadzislavkovic, the main protagonist of the drama, lives in this street at No 7. The play *No 7 Kosancicev venac* had its premiere in the theatre "Atelje 212" in 1982. The play is based on Selenic's novel titled *Frends* (written in 1980). Because of popularity of this drama, this novel will be published in next editions under the title *Frends from No 7 Kosancicev venac*.

³ The play *Huddersfield* was adapted for the screen in 2007 by director Ivan Zivkovic.

⁴ In the Christian tradition, *hadziluk* was a pilgrimage that included visiting Christian holy sites. The man (and it was for men only) who accomplished a pilgrimage, had the right to add the honorary prefix *Hadzi-* to his surname. Such families were very respected in the community.

Kosovo and Metohija, with whom Vladan establishes a specific relationship, a mixture of friendship and pygmalion interdependence.⁵ From the point of view of the political background, to the forefront comes the relationship between Vladan and Punisa Mircetic, a man from Montenegro. The character of Punisa Mircetic is a prism through which Selenic's dramatic piece transforms itself from the comical into the satirical. The egoism of the New Class (identified famously by Milovan Djilas – another man from Montenegro), which had come to power after WWII, characterizes all the characters in this drama, but in the case of Punisa, it is most pronounced. Selenic writes very directly and without metaphors about events in the unusual household of Hadzislavkovic, which then directly influence the social conditions in postwar Serbia, described in the play. The new tenants at No 7, led by Punisa, a typical representative of the Montenegrin mentality described in Serbian literature, read the partisan propaganda materials, they "equally" share the living space, as well as firewood and everything else that the Local Council ("rejonsko"⁶) allocated to them. At one point they discuss excerpts from Lenin's work *Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*. The discussion acquires a grotesque meaning when Vasilija, Punisa's wife, asks whether it "is true what people say, that there are people on Marx"⁷ (Selenic 2003: 36). Because "all languages are equal", Istvan says something in Hungarian, which apart from him and Milena no one else understands. It is enough that Milena confirms that Istvan did not swear, but discussed, so that others would agree with his opinion. Vladan at first interrupted their meetings, speaking partly in English, partly in Serbian. His discourse reflected an educated man whom most simple co-tenants did not understand at all. As one of the tenants said: "I do not understand this guy even when he speaks Serbian." The highlight of the loyalty to the people and the Communist Party is reflected in the demonstrations against the bourgeoisie, in

⁵ In the novel *Friends from No 7 Kosancicev venac* Selenic used these two characters to indicate a complex civilization clash of civilizations – the 'modern' world of a Europeanized, urbanized middle class and the patriarchal world of the Balkan 'outback', dating back to the Ottoman occupation of the Balkan region from the 14th – 19th century. However, this relationship is not the one most prominently treated in the play.

⁶ "Rejonsko" was one level in the hierarchy of the socialist state system.

⁷ She is thinking of the Planet Mars.

the "spitting" at enemies of the people and shouting patriotic slogans. All these activities are led by the comrade Punisa:

MARA: I agree with comrade Lambro, and specifically with the notion that comrade Punisa is the most famous protester on our street.

VASILIIJA: On the street? What street? However there is no such protester in the whole region. There is nobody who is able to shout a slogan and to sing a song like my Punisa!

MIRCETIC: Let it go, woman!

VASILIIJA: What do you mean "let it go", the black Punisa! Are you not, like anybody else, from 23 October to 18 November every day, you did not miss any day, you spat on the war criminals who were tried in the military court of the First Corps?

MIRCETIC: When they were lead into the courtroom, three guards have had to hold me down not to tear them apart. Well, let it go, for God's sake.

VASILIIJA: But, I won't let it go, for my children!

MILENA: But, you do not have any children.

VASILIIJA: No, I do not, but I will! Punisa, my Punisa, have you forgotten that you were the head of the column which has held a plebiscite on the Tito-Subasic's agreement?

MIRCETIC: And how can I forget, you woman, when I was then noticed by them and that they brought me out onto the stage, as the man from the people, to shake hands, representing the people, with comrades Radoje Mirkovic, Milos Moskovljevic, and with comrade Vaso Cubrilovic and finally –

with comrade Rata Dugonjic personally.⁸ No, let it go, woman, never mind...

MARA: What is – is, my companions agreed that Mircetic and Krsman from Number 20 are the best street protesters in our organization...

VASILIIJA: There she goes again – the street...

MIRCETIC: Which Krsman, stop saying nonsense, for God's sake! Even kids know that nobody can spit at the war criminal like Punisa Mircetic!

MARA: I am not saying, you spit, but Krsman spits as well.

MIRCETIC: He spits, he is a good comrade, I am not saying, he does not try, but he can't beat me. It may look as if I am praising myself⁹ (Selenić 2003: 23-24)

While this cannot be rendered easily in translation, in the original the tenants of No 7 Kosancicev venac are represented as people coming to the capital Belgrade from regional and provincial parts of the country, bringing with them their dialects, mentality and traditions, the origins of which are in the villages of outback Serbia and, in this case, from the remote and culturally frozen region of Montenegro. These people, who pay tribute to the new ideology, at the same time remain loyal to their tribal God whom they mention whenever they speak with passion and whenever the new social constraints of an atheistic regime are relaxed.

Ultimately, all of Selenic's characters are determined by the concrete social conditions and the political situation of the newly created state. In the polarization of characters which is established at the outset of the play, one group enjoys prosperity (the New Class), while the other group is subject to

⁸ These are historical figures from the Second World War and The Yugoslav Communist Party, people who largely determined the political life of postwar Yugoslavia.

⁹ It is not possible to translate the Montenegro dialect that has a lot of humorous connotations for Serbian native speakers. This translation is mine.

decay as a class. This 'class struggle' is represented through a tragicomic lens. The decline of the former elite (represented by the pre-war educated Vladan) reaches its peak in Vladan's giving in to his basic human urge which comes to expression in his revengeful slaughter of animals in the piggery built in his backyard. This is his reaction to the powerlessness he has been reduced to in confrontation with rudeness of the newcomers. The contrast between the groups engaged in this 'class war' comes to a climax in the political cartoon through which one of the groups is portrayed. Selenic chooses Vladan's opponents, representatives of the lowest layer of the New Class, by the education and by personal, human qualities the meaning of this previous sentence is not clear! The young Albanian Istref stands out from this circle.

The term "political" is, therefore, in Selenic's drama, elaborated on the thematic plane and on the plane of characters' actions. An historical time is described from the certain temporal distance. Selenic's books, novels and dramas are all socially engaged.¹⁰

3. We can't change anything!

The drama by Ugljesa Sajtinac, *Huddersfield*, treats another historical time and its social and political conditions. Sajtinac has no opportunity to establish a temporal distance from the topic of his text, but he establishes a kind of poetic distance that allows us to look at the text as an independent literary phenomenon. Sajtinac's characters live in our time and represent three generations. Each generation experiences the same reality in his or her own way. The core of the drama consists of the lives of Rasha, Doole, Igor and Ivan, thirty-year-old men, who, because of political events in Serbia and former Yugoslavia, have failed to achieve, personally and professionally. They remember how they envisioned their future while they were children and are

¹⁰ He wrote about this in his Ph.D. thesis *An engagement in the dramatic form*. (IP "Prosveta", Belgrade, 2003)

aware of the hopelessness in which they live in the present. Instead of having families and successful careers, they are looking for a way to escape from their reality, each in his own way. Rasha, a would-be professor of literature, elects an ironic and cynical attitude towards everything that is happening. Ivan is a hospitalized psychiatric patient, in whose life the hospital or his psychotic condition replace reality through medicines and art so is he an artist as well? This makes a whole difference to the way you should interpret his 'madness'. Igor has spent ten years in England, while Doole has convinced himself that he is happy when doing his delivery rounds during which he retells fictional love affairs to elderly ladies. Huddersfield, a small town in England where Igor lived, in the conversation of the four friends becomes a metaphor of escape from everyday life. At the opposite end of the specific chart of characters (at the beginning of the drama, the author presents graphically the relationships among his characters) are Rasha's father and Millie. Millie is Rasha's sixteen-year-old lover, who runs away from school, smoking grass. She is a representative of the new generation who has never experienced a different life which might have been better. It is for this reason that they cannot even imagine or want a better future. They are content with current events, which are far below a decent life. Rasha's father is a sixty-year-old man, who is always drunk and who is slowly selling off his household. He knows what a good life is because he and his family once had such a life, but, at the same time, he is mature enough not to believe that it will return. Stripped down and described in the raw, he is the symbol of the crumbling of the family and of the squandering of the heritage of the past.

The political reality, even when directly mentioned or alluded to (for example, the NATO bombing or specific names of politicians), remains a subtext, the background against which the main story unfolds. The destinies of the characters are actually the result of specific events, the outcomes of which are dramatized rather than the events themselves. The historical credibility of the characters is established through language, through the way in which they

express themselves. The language gives the characters of Sajtinac's drama a documentary character. Dialogues are full of swearing, which is mostly, dramatically justified.

Sajtinac's characters do not really act. The whole drama takes place in Rasha's apartment, in his living room to be precise. The selection of venues is a function of capturing the hopelessness of life in which the characters find themselves. Similarly, almost every replica contains an expression of hopelessness, expressed as indifference and a blasé attitude to the surrounding reality. For example, Rasha's ironic caricature of Doole's belief that we "shall be English, we shall be the West, we shall be able to plan" is directly confronting the characters with the hopeless reality and reminding them of the absurdity of their everyday life. However, the idea of hopelessness is best realized in Rasha's brief retelling of *Hamlet*, a play which Millie has to prepare for school and which she, of course, does not want to read.

It is no coincidence that *Hamlet* is "introduced" in the story. Sajtinac needed Shakespeare in order to portray, in a few replicas, the discrepancy between normality and authentic meaning (represented by the artistic value of *Hamlet*) and the meaninglessness of failed lives. *Hamlet*'s character is broken through the distorted mirror of Rasha's and Millie's reality consisting of drugs, hallucinations and all that makes up their decadent milieu.

Ivan' God (in Rasha's interpretation) is actually a God of an entire "lost" generation. He, ironically, as Ivan observes, "has a name: Haloperidol", a medicine that corrects psychosis. Paradoxically, Ivan, who at first sight looks quite different from his peers, becomes a metaphor for the destiny of each of them. Ivan's madness is just a variant of the situation in which they all find themselves. Sajtinac implicitly raises a question that Borislav Pekic raised in the novel *Rabies*: who is mad, and who is just sick? Rasha, in the explanation of *Hamlet*'s character, does not even mention "madness" as a term. Only in contact

with Ivan, Rasha can achieve and demonstrate the unspoiled, repressed part of him-self. Ivan gives him his poem about a snail who was "damned lonely" at his home and that becomes a symbol of loneliness in which they all find themselves. The play ends with the friends just talking about a song and about Ivan's sculpture "Mother – Fatherland". The two men are preparing tea and laugh. The last scene almost resembles an idyllic scene of normal life and, because of that, it seems the more grotesque and sad.

4. Epilogue

Selenic and Sajtinac take concrete social and political events as subtexts for their plays, but each author's texts takes up a different dialogue with the subtext. The 'political' in Selenic's text is 'visible', and the reader/ spectator has the illusion of heroes who actively influence their own destinies and the destinies of those who they interact with. In Sajtinac' drama, on the contrary, we witness consequences of the historical period, while the protagonists have no illusion of an ability to change anything whatsoever. Hopelessness is the only way of living. The sole sufferer in *No 7 Kosancicev venac* is Vladan Hadzislavkovic (or his class, the old bourgeoisie). As for Sajtinac – everyone is a loser.

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