

# **Performing identities: national theatres and re-construction of identities in Slovenia and SFR Yugoslavia**

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## **Abstract:**

In this text the author examines the role of national theatres in construction of identities in Slovenia and, rather sporadically, in other countries of the former Yugoslavia. This research question is contextualized in a historical overview, starting from first historical examples in a wider European context, followed by establishing of first national theatres in Zagreb, Novi Sad, Ljubljana and Belgrade in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing with national theatre reforms in the last century: introduction of a threefold system of state, regional and municipal national theatres after collapsing of the Habsburg Empire and establishing of the Kingdom of SHS, emerging of many new national theatres in SFR Yugoslavia after the WWII and the role imposed on national theatres by cultural politics of new national states after dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. This historical approach is combined with analysis of cultural, social and political position of national theatres in rather turbulent and nationalistic atmosphere dominated by exclusivist, radical political forces. Besides this critical reading of theatrical “identity politics” in newly established states, predominantly in Slovenia, some other aspects are briefly discussed, i.e. relations between national theatre and so-called ‘independent’ (or ‘non-institutional’) theatre, subsidies and other financial incentives of national theatres on several examples of national theatres in Slovenia and Croatia, etc.

## **Key words:**

national theatre, theatre history, cultural identity, national identity, Slovenia, Yugoslavia

## **Introduction**

Theatre is an eminent cultural institution and in that respect it is an important engine of (re)production of individual and collective identifications with certain cultural patterns. Cultural institutions and cultural patterns are historically determined phenomena; in other words, members of different societies are not likely to share the same understanding of their function and meaning. It seems that this presupposition holds true even for a historically more specific appearance of theatre, such as so called “national theatre”, not only in comparison between European and non-European traditions, but also within European societies themselves. Usually, emerging of national theatres in Europe is explained as a historical cultural phenomenon coinciding with other simultaneous social developments on at least three levels: with the enlightenment on the level of ideology, with emerging bourgeoisie providing its social and material background, and with political processes of establishing of national states.<sup>1</sup> In practical terms, national theatre is often identified with its visible components, such as monumental, usually old buildings, permanent ensembles of actors with an excellent training in diction, a meeting-point of national cultural, political and economic elites, etc. As pointed out by theatre theoretician and historiographer Marvin Carlson, “[t]he common image of a National Theatre is of a monumental edifice located in a national capital, authorized, privileged and supported by the government, and devoted wholly or largely to productions of the work of national dramatists”. Although “some National Theatres adhere closely to this ideal model”, says Carlson, “the vast majority depart from it in one way or another”.<sup>2</sup>

As there might be different views on the role and image of today’s national theatres in Europe, it might be also true for the way they developed over the last 200 years. Within theatre historiography, however, it is widely accepted general division on an early

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<sup>1</sup> Pušić 1998, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Carlson 2008, p. 21.

(aristocratic) period in 18<sup>th</sup> century and a more developed (nationalistic) phase in 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> First example of a proto-national type of European theatre was Comédie-Française established already in late 17<sup>th</sup> century (1680) in Paris. The theatre was founded by Louis XIV with a clear intention to stage drama plays written by French authors, such as Molière, Racine, and Corneille. Comédie-Française was a model for establishing other monarchical theatres in 18<sup>th</sup> century: the Burgtheater in Vienna (1741), the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen (1748), and the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (1788). All these theatre institutions still exist as important examples of national theatres in today's Europe. Second wave of emerging of national theatres came in 19<sup>th</sup> century in association with strengthening of nationalistic movements all around Europe. Institutions like the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen, the National Theatre in Helsinki, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, the National Theatre in Prague etc. arouse from this process. These two types are rather conceptual abstractions and some examples indicate various combinations, such as in the case of the Polish National Theatre: "In Poland the National Theatre followed *both* patterns: it was first created in 1765 under the Polish monarchy, but after Poland was carved up between Russia, Prussia and Austria, the Polish National Theatre took on the role of a National Theatre within an emerging nation, while Poles tried to regain their sovereignty."<sup>4</sup>

### **Paradox of the national theatre**

Another interesting exception, which deserves a bit closer insight, is the National Theatre in Hamburg. This theatre was established in 1767 in the Comödienhaus, a building with large audience for 1600 spectators. It was founded by Konrad Ackermann and Johann Friedrich Löwen and financially supported by rich merchants and bankers of the free trading city-state of Hamburg. An important supporter of the theatre was also the playwright and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing who contributed drama texts (his comedy *Minna von Barnhelm* was the most popular performance in the repertoire) and one hundred essays on theatre (today known as *Hamburg Dramaturgy*). This theatre

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<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Wilmer 2008, Carlson 2008, McConachie 2008, Kruger 2008, Tókei 2006, Sušec Michieli 2008a and 2008b.

<sup>4</sup> Wilmer 2008, pp. 9-10.

experiment lasted only two years but it had important consequences for further development of national theatres in Europe, especially of course in German speaking *Ländern*. Besides German plays, it had on its repertoire also French and English authors, but all of them were performed in German. An emblematic scene from Lessing's comedy is when a Frenchman asks Minna von Barnhelm to communicate in French (albeit in her own country) and she says: "Sir, in France I would try to speak it. But why should I do so here?"<sup>5</sup> Lessing's position was that German national theatre should stage not only plays in German language but, equally important, written by German authors. This request followed his standpoint that German theatre should develop its own style, not copying the French model of repertoire theatre – the one which was maintained by omnipresent Comédie-Française.

In the very last essay of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, he writes resignedly about a rather difficult mission of "getting the Germans a national theatre, while we Germans are not yet a nation".<sup>6</sup> This sentence is usually quoted in order to illustrate the situation in Lessing's Germany, when people were not yet (enough) acquainted with ideology of national unity and thus an attempt to establish a national theatre was not supported by a ruling ideology providing fertile ground for that type of theatre to flourish. One could say that Lessing's theatre was an early bird, a would-be national theatre without a nation.

Goethe and Schiller, two best known intellectuals among Lessing's followers, supported his ideas, many of them being embedded in their plays, such as in Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), *Egmont* (1788) and *Faust* (1808), as well as in several Schiller's

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<sup>5</sup> Lessing 2003, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> This sentence is frequently repeated in theatre histories but the rest of the paragraph where it appears is usually not quoted. It might be a symptom of an attempt to hide Lessing's extremely negative views not only of cultural taste that comes to Germany "from across the Rhine", but also his nasty criticism of everything associated with French people in general: "Wir sind noch immer die geschwornen Nachahmer alles Ausländischen, besonders noch immer die untertänigen Bewunderer der nie genug bewunderten Franzosen; alles was uns von jenseit dem Rheine kömmt, ist schön, reizend, allerliebste, göttlich; lieber verleugnen wir Gesicht und Gehör, als daß wir es anders finden sollten; lieber wollen wir Plumpheit für Ungezwungenheit, Frechheit für Grazie, Grimasse für Ausdruck, ein Geklingele von Reimen für Poesie, Geheule für Musik uns einreden lassen, als im geringsten an der Superiorität zweifeln, welche dieses liebenswürdige Volk, dieses erste Volk in der Welt, wie es sich selbst sehr bescheiden zu nennen pflegt, in allem, was gut und schön und erhaben und anständig ist, von dem gerechten Schicksale zu seinem Antehle erhalten hat." (*Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Hundert und erstes, zweites, drittes und viertes Stück, Den 19. April 1768) **[this quotation will be replaced by an existing English translation]**

dramas, from *The Brigands* (1781) to *Wilhelm Tell* (1804). Some 15 years after publishing of Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Friedrich Schiller was propagating an idea of national theatre as co-creator of a nation in a public speech later on published under the title "The Stage as a Moral Institution". According to Schiller, being one of the most influential engines for spreading out national sentiments, national theatre institution has a moral obligation to participate in co-creating German nation. In other words, to become a nation, Germans have to establish their national theatre – German nation is not predecessor of German national theatre but, quite to the opposite, national theatre is a forerunner of the nation. As we can see, Schiller tried to shed a more optimistic light on Lessing's rather pessimistic perception of the national theatre as a quixotic idea (a *gutherzigen Einfall*, as he says) in a social environment not yet constituted as a nation. In his romantic attitude, Schiller calls for unification of all artistic forces (poets, painters, etc.) in an attempt to found a national theatre as an indispensable attribute of the German nation: "If in all our plays there was one main stream, if our poets reached an agreement and created a firm union for this final purpose – if a strict selection led their work and their brushes dedicated themselves only to national matters – in one word, if we had a national stage, we would also become a nation."<sup>7</sup>

Lessing's lamentation about problems with national theatre without a nation was theoretically grasped by Zoja Skušek in her book *Theatre as a Form of Spectacular Function* (1980). "How to make theatre, which would grow up from a nation and would address itself to a nation, if that very nation doesn't exist yet," asks Skušek.<sup>8</sup> She explains that Lessing's statement is trapped in a paradox: national theatre without a nation is, according to Skušek, a "paradox of self-referentiality":

"The highest assignment and the meaning of the national theatre would be [according to Lessing] to make possible and to foster that which otherwise enables a national theatre to be 'prepared'. If that precondition is not fulfilled, there is no theatre; on the other hand, if there is no theatre, that precondition could not exist as well. The paradox of the national

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<sup>7</sup> Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet, 1784 (Schiller 2005, p. 106; English translation in: Wilmer 2008, p. 15).

<sup>8</sup> Skušek-Močnik 1980, p. 26.

theatre is thus a paradox of self-referentiality: if one says that the theatre is heteronomous (i.e. it derives its existence not out of itself but out of something else, in that case of ‘moral character’ of a nation), it will appear that it is autonomous (i.e. it is precisely theatre which makes possible that ‘character’); in other words, if we say that the theatre is autonomous, we have to say at the same time that it is heteronomous.”<sup>9</sup>

An important point made by Zoja Skušek is that Lessing’s paradox of self-referentiality has nothing to do with logic; it could not be eliminated just by playing with syllogisms – this paradox is deeply embedded in the very practice of national and bourgeois theatre. We can add that this Skušek’s conclusion holds true also for Schiller’s statement (“if we had a national stage, we would also become a nation”): simple rotation of premises cannot solve the paradox. *Stricto sensu*, once the nation is established, the national theatre becomes obsolete (i.e. its historical role is fulfilled). Nevertheless, social reality shows different picture: although modern nations emerged many years ago, national theatres have been persisting from late 18<sup>th</sup> century till today. It is difficult to predict what will happen with national theatres in the years (or even centuries) to come as it is impossible to say when the ideological substratum of national theatres (i.e. nation and nationalism) will become obsolete. Nationalism is a persistent ideology, as skeptically stated by a theatre theoretician and historiographer Janelle Reinelt, who assigns certain inertia to its very existence: “Nationalism may outlast nations, if by this is meant the advocacy of the idea of the nation – an identification may outlast the objective reality of the referent, as when one still identifies with a neighborhood that no longer exists.”<sup>10</sup>

Although Reinelt’s hypothesis may look like an intuitive speculation, it opens up an important question: what was the role of national theatres in Easter European societies of the so-called ‘real socialism’? An important characteristic of bourgeois revolutions is the moment of *allgemeine Fraternisierung* provoked by the bourgeoisie as the general representative (*allgemeiner Repräsentant*) of the society – as elaborated by Marx in his early work *Zur Kritik der hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1843) on the example of French

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Reinelt 1999, p. 127.

revolution. Societies organized as nations are at the same time also class societies; this historical fact is usually masked by an ideological maneuver of misrepresentation of particular bourgeois class interests as so-called general national interests. National theatres – with rare exceptions – are usually co-creators of that masquerade. It is interesting, however, that despite of official proclamation of proletarian internationalism, proletarian revolutions preserved national stages as cultural institutions where national resentments were still maintained (although maybe not so obvious as it was the case before the October revolution).

### **Emerging of national theatres of South-Slavic nations**

Some hundred years after it was formulated in writings of Lessing and Schiller, the above mentioned paradox of self-referentiality has found rather late echo in a pamphlet written by Slovenian writer Josip Jurčič. The elements of his ‘formula’ were not completely the same as in Lessing’s and Schiller’s versions but the very logic of argumentation was quite similar. In his contribution, published in the journal *Slovenski narod* in 1868, Jurčič offered a patriotic *plaidoyer* for Slovenian national theatre. Precisely the national theatre, insists Jurčič, is a precondition for dramatic masterpieces to emerge: “Isn’t it so that the old Greeks made their theatres before they got Sophocles and Aristophanes? Isn’t it so that Germany had its theatres before Lessing, even before Chronegk and Gottsched? Isn’t it so that all these distinguished men came out of their time, national necessity, visible assignment, and existing theatre? (...) We shouldn’t hesitate to say directly to those people that in Ljubljana, main city of the province of Carniola, we need a Slovenian theatre due to political and national reasons.”<sup>11</sup>

As we can see quite clearly, Jurčič’s position is that – besides “national necessity” (*narodova potreba*), *Zeitgeist* and other ideological preconditions – the national theatre is an infrastructural fundament and a *sine qua non* of dramatic poetry with “national character” to flourish. An inherent paradox in his thesis, i.e. having the national theatre

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<sup>11</sup> Josip Jurčič: O naših dramatičnih zadevah, *Slovenski narod*, no. 74-75, 1868 (quoted in Pušić 1997, p. 103). Ludwig Chronegk was German actor, director and *Intendant* of the famous Meininger Hoftheater. Johann Christoph Gottsched was German author and critic.

with only rare examples of drama plays representing that same nation (its “national character”), is veiled by Jurčič’s ad hoc solution to patch up the repertoire with “German, French and English drama plays” as well as with “Slavic literature”.

This Jurčič’s apology of national theatre and drama will be better conceived if it is contextualized with other historical events which are important for the development of Slovenian national theatre. One year before, in 1867, *Dramatic Society* (Dramatično društvo) was established. This event is nowadays interpreted as the beginning of the Slovenian national theatre. And one year after, in 1869, the same *Dramatic Society* launched public competition for new plays written in Slovenian language.

Thematically, it was requested that drama plays should deal with national history or everyday life of the nation or Slavic nations in general. This limitation of author’s imagination by rather strict thematic framework was openly criticized by Josip Stritar:

“Wouldn’t it be better to let everybody to choose the topic on his own? After all, everybody has to know on his own what he is able to cope with. No matter how simple it is, a good, strong, healthy play is still better than an arrogant, pretentious, high drama, if it is empty, without flesh and blood, anemic; and we are afraid that precisely that kind of texts could be expected, as we know from our own experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, this Stritar’s diagnosis was correct: first play which was qualified for the national dramatic canon (and was as such accepted also by Stritar) is Jurčič’s *Tugomer*, first published in 1876. Due to theatre censorship it was staged only in 1919; it was in fact an inauguration event of the Slovenian national theatre in the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (*Kraljevina SHS*). Roots of national theatres of all these three constitutive nations of the Kingdom are from 1860es: Croatian national theatre was established in Zagreb in 1860, a year later in Novi Sad, and in 1869 in Belgrade.

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<sup>12</sup> Stritar 1981, p. 28.

As we can read in funding documents, all these South-Slavic national theatres were grounded on similar principles of raising national consciousness, moral education, glorification of national history etc. For instance, the decision of founding the Serbian National Theatre was made on the meeting of the Serbian Reading-room, held in Novi Sad in July 1861, “in purpose to raise the theatre art in our people, to strengthen and forever support her existence and development, to give a new impulse to the national drama and literature, to establish a school and a nursery to those sons and daughters of our nation, who wish to dedicate themselves to this noble skill, to raise the theatre practice, by the efforts and experience of skilled, educated and delighted men of ours, to such height and perfection, from which the theatre will become the school of moral, the example and form of good taste, the carrier of education and learning, the wake up call of national consciousness, the guardian of national spirit and language, the mirror of splendid and sad past and the messenger of our fortune.”<sup>13</sup>

As elaborated by theatre historian Barbara Pušić, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian theatre – as many other theatres of non-German nations in the Habsburg monarchy – was “an important substitute for political activity, statehood, and educational system. It also served as a space for linguistic, cultural, and national identification and an area of distinction from dominant neighboring cultures, particularly German and Italian.”<sup>14</sup> Being part of many different supra-national state structures until the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Slovenian nationalism was always related to culture, especially Slovenian language and printed culture.<sup>15</sup> According to the same author, the type of nationalistic ideology prevailing among Slovenes in the last two centuries is cultural nationalism: “The thinking that culture is the basis, aim, justification, and main purpose of national existence was predominant in the public from the beginning of the nationalist movement at the end of the eighteenth century right up until the day Slovenia became independent. Within this there was the gradual emergence of the ideological phenomenon that the ‘nation’ is the central, fundamental, exclusive, and key bearer of cultural production.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> English translation at: [www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Opera-of-Srpsko-Narodno-Pozoriste](http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Opera-of-Srpsko-Narodno-Pozoriste)

<sup>14</sup> Pušić 2004, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> First book in Slovenian appeared in 1550 and the first newspaper was published in 1797.

<sup>16</sup> Pušić 2004, pp. 65–66.

## National theatres in ‘old’ and ‘new’ Yugoslavia

Until the end of the First World War and the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy, Slovenian theatre production was marginalized in comparison to German speaking theatres which were generously supported by not numerous but economically quite powerful German population. After the founding of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, however, this situation was radically changed: German theatres in Ljubljana and Maribor were closed and their buildings were taken over by two professional Slovenian national theatres. In Slovenian cultural circles it was celebrated as the final fulfillment of “dreams about national theatre”, as it was reported by the journal *Slovenski narod*.<sup>17</sup> In 1919 the Council of Ministries of the Kingdom SHS proclaimed a profound theatre reform. National theatres were arranged in three categories: 1. national theatres (Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana); 2. subsidized regional theatres (Skopje, Novi Sad, Sarajevo, Split, Osijek); 3. municipal and traveling theatres (Niš, Kragujevac, Varaždin, Maribor). In the period of old Yugoslav kingdom (1918–1941) Slovenian cultural politics, including national theatre, was a battlefield of two main political antagonists: Catholic and liberal political options.

After the Second World War, the socialist Yugoslavia was established as a federal state consisting of six federal republics (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia) and two autonomous regions (Vojvodina and Kosovo). Official political slogan of the ruling communist party was “brotherhood and unity” of all Yugoslav nations. Despite of some ideas to construct a unified Yugoslav nation, it remained a utopian project.<sup>18</sup> Federal entities had their national cultural institutions, including national theatres. They performed in official languages of their respective

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<sup>17</sup> “The dreams of our people are coming true... The dream about a national theatre – the temple, the culmination and the focal point of our culture!” Ivan Prijatelj: Narodno gledališče, *Slovenski narod*, September 28, 1918 (quoted in: Pušić 2004, p. 67).

<sup>18</sup> Yugoslavians as a nation appeared for the first time in 1961 census. The highest number of inhabitants declared themselves as Yugoslavians in 1991 census – more than 1.200.000 or 5,4% of the whole population in SFRY. After dissolution of SFRY, only a small number of inhabitants of newly established states declared themselves as Yugoslavians: 80.721 in Serbia-Montenegro (2002 census) and only 127 in Croatia (2001 census).

republics, in two autonomous regions also in Hungarian and Albanian. It was, of course, very fruitful situation for writing new drama plays in national languages. Statistical data for Slovenia speak for themselves: from 1867 (foundation of *Dramatic Society*) until the end of Second World War (almost 80 years) approximately 220 new Slovenian plays were staged in Slovenian theatres;<sup>19</sup> on the other hand, from 1945 till 1985 (i.e. in only 40 years of its existence as a federal republic within Yugoslav federation) approximately 420 new Slovenian plays were shown on professional stages in Slovenia.<sup>20</sup> As far as foreign authors are concerned, only in first several years after WW II plays by Soviet authors were staged in Slovenian theatres on regular basis while after Tito's separation from Stalin (1948) Anglophone and Francophone dramatists have been regular "ingredients" in repertoires of Slovenian theatres.<sup>21</sup> This constellation is particularly visible in the repertoires of the main Slovenian national theatre (SNG Drama, Ljubljana) from the 1952/3 to the 1962/3 seasons: 31% of plays staged in that period in SNG Drama were by authors writing in English and only 7% of the authors writing in Russian.<sup>22</sup>

Until 1954 as many as 18 new national theatres were established all around Yugoslavia: 8 in Serbia (of which 4 in Vojvodina and 1 in Kosovo), 7 in Macedonia, 2 in Croatia, and 1 in Montenegro. At that time total number of professional theatre companies in Yugoslavia was 59 (including 5 companies with semi-professional status).<sup>23</sup> The number of national theatres was constantly increasing and in 1990 there were as many as 35

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<sup>19</sup> Until the end of WWI professional theatre productions were mainly based on the texts written by German dramatists – 40% of all works staged until 1918 (Pušić 2004, p. 87). Even the first secular play performed in Slovenian language was a rewriting of Josef Richter's *Die Feldmühle*. In fact, it was not an isolated phenomenon – also in other countries of the Habsburg empire first secular performances in national languages were mainly adaptations and rewritings of foreign plays: in Polish it was adaptation of Molière's *Les Fâcheux*, in Czech adaptation of J. C. Krüger's *Herzog Michel*, in Hungarian rewriting of Gottsched's *Agis*, etc. (Pušić 1998, p. 83–84.)

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lukan 1998, pp. 65–66.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Kalan 1990. In his essay "On Contemporary Foreign Authors in Slovenian Theatres", Filip Kalan pays special attention to Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Jean Anouilh, Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre.

<sup>22</sup> Sušec Michieli 2008c, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth mentioning that in late 1950s/early 1960s in Yugoslavia on 280.000 inhabitants came one professional theatre company; the same ratio in USSR was 1:400.000 and in USA 1:850.000. (Kalan 1962, p. 3)

national theatres in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>24</sup> This trend of establishing new national theatres persists even in 21<sup>st</sup> century; for instance, in Slovenian city Nova Gorica, the theatre previously known as *Primorsko dramsko gledališče* (Primorska Drama Theatre)<sup>25</sup> was renamed in *Slovensko narodno gledališče Nova Gorica* (Slovenian National Theatre Nova Gorica) in 2003.<sup>26</sup> It is significant that this symbolical shift of the theatre in Nova Gorica from one among regional theatres to the third Slovenian national theatre (and, *nota bene*, first new national theatre in Slovenia after 1918) occurred only half a year before Slovenia entered the European Union and the border between Slovenia and Italy was symbolically removed precisely between Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy).<sup>27</sup>

### **Slovenian national theatre after 1991**

In the years preceding the collapse of federal Yugoslavia, and due to various reasons, prevailing political atmosphere in Slovenia pooled the country away from community of Yugoslav nations. Political and cultural elites, especially their most extreme nationalistic parts, stimulated secessionist tendencies. The soil was prepared and fertile thanks to extremely aggressive Milošević's nationalism and a controversial role played by federal army. In a certain moment, even economic sphere started to behave in the manner of "national economies", preaching "national interests" and introducing protectionism in trading with companies from other federal republics. As a consequence of radicalization of inter-republic relations on the political and economic level, national and cultural stereotypes gradually spoiled the public sphere. Graffiti like "Burek? Nein, danke!" and similar hate speech statements became regular part of daily life in Slovenia in late 1980s. Interestingly enough, as stated by Slovenian theatre historiographer Barbara Sušec

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<sup>24</sup> At that time 90 permanent theatres were officially registered in Yugoslavia. It means that almost one third of all professional theatres had in their names the word "national".

<sup>25</sup> Primorska is one of the regions in Slovenia.

<sup>26</sup> In the last two decades (i.e. in the first 20 years of Slovenia as a sovereign country), three new municipal theatres were established: in Ptuj, Koper and Novo Mesto. Several commercial theatres were also opened towards the end of the 1990s.

<sup>27</sup> Paris Peace Treaty created a new border between SFR Yugoslavia and Italy, leaving Gorica (Gorizia), the traditional regional centre of the Soča and Vipava Valleys, outside the borders of Yugoslavia. Due to these geo-political reasons, a completely new town called Nova Gorica (New Gorizia) was built on the Slovenian (Yugoslav) side of the border after 1948.

Michieli, “cultural and national relationships were a taboo subject in theatres, so the shift away from South Slavic culture was not the same as that from German culture that occurred in Slovenia before WWI, when political and national conflicts were generally thematised, and openly so. In former Yugoslavia the conflicts were transferred (at least within theatre) to another, concealed, structural level.”<sup>28</sup> What Sušec Michieli calls “structural level” of conflict or at least “the shift away from South Slavic culture” is traceable in “hard data”, as clearly demonstrated by the same author:

“Analysis of a customary repertoire in Slovene professional theatres during the post-war years showed that the annual programme included 25 % to 40 % of Slovene plays, 5 % to 10 % of Yugoslav plays, while slightly more than one half of the programme was composed of foreign plays. By contrast, theatre analysis in the 1980s and 1990s shows radical changes within the programming strategy and reveals an interesting analogy among the political, economic, and cultural systems. (...) The political shift away from Yugoslavia led to the rejection of plays by authors from other Yugoslav republics. This shift was especially conspicuous within the SNG Drama Ljubljana, when during the decade leading up to Slovenia’s sovereignty, only one play by a Yugoslav author was staged.”<sup>29</sup>

In fact, by abandoning Yugoslav drama production from their programs artistic directors of Slovenian professional theatres were practicing the same “protectionist” politics towards other federal republics as it was carried out by sales managers in Slovenian (and not only Slovenian) companies, and on the political level promoting by political elites and various national “associations of writers”. On the other hand, it is plausible “that this radical break with the Yugoslav cultural space occurred only within the institutional theatrical system, and not also within alternative, independent theatre and popular culture”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sušec Michieli 2008c, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 40–41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 41. I can add to this Sušec Michieli’s assessment my own observation from May 2002 when I sent the following letter to Ana Vujanović, my colleague from Belgrade (it was later on quoted in her book *Razarajući označitelji/e performansa*, 2004, p. 236–237): “Nedavno su sa mnogo pompa, medijskih panegirika i orgijastičkih apoteoza popraćene razmjene gostovanja slovenskih i srpsko-crnogorskih teatar.

## National theatre as a useful object of revisionist theatre historiography

It is a notorious fact that all European national theatres have specific and unique histories. On the other hand, there are also some obvious similarities among them, such as very strong emphasis on performing in national languages, staging traditional repertoire and plays by national dramatists, supporting of rather than opposing to ruling ideology (or ideology of the ruling class), substantial financial revenues from public budgets, respectable building representing economic and political power of national bourgeoisie etc.

All these elements can be traced in the history of Slovenian national theatre from its early manifestations in 19<sup>th</sup> century up to recent developments in early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nowadays defending and building of the nation are not any more its main functions, although the national theatre it is still an important engine of constructing national and cultural identities. This operation is often highly problematic in terms of supporting political fantasies through one-sided selection of historical facts. For instance, in the period 1892–1914 “as much as half the entire acting company in Ljubljana was composed of Czech, Croatian, and Serbian actors, although in studies it is normally only the Slovenians that

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Slovenski mediji su izvještavali o frenetičkim aplauzima i delirantnom prijemu predstava ljubljanske Drame SNG na gostovanju u Beogradu, a ništa lošije nije prošao niti Atelje 212 na upravo okončanoj višednevnoj slovenskoj turneji. Međudržavne razmjene umjetničkih produkata nisu nužno loša stvar, osobito ako u takve elitističke selekcije zalutaju i poneke umjetnički uvjerljive predstave. U ovom slučaju je međutim za nezavisnog promatrača bio zanimljiviji izvan-umjetnički, kulturno-politički aspekt tog teatarskog i medijskog cirkusa. Simptomatično je da su i novinari, i kritičari, i političari, i producenti, pa i sami umjetnici u svojim javnim istupima naglašavali kako je to prva umjetnička razmjena nakon što su deset godina bile obustavljene kulturne veze između tih republika ex-Yu. Ta mesijanska uloga ljubljanske Drame i beogradskog Ateljea 212 je naravno čista mistifikacija, koja umjetničku produkciju svodi, reducira, kastrira na državno i institucionalno reprezentativnu umjetnost. Gostovanja nezavisnih, alternativnih umjetnika iz Slovenije u srpsko-crnogorskoj federaciji i obrnuto, nikada niti nisu bila prekinuta, čak ni u vrijeme embarga. Silom prilika, njihov se intenzitet smanjio, njihova je prisutnost u medijima bila znatno manja, privukli su i manje gledalaca, ali je prava drskost i ignoranstvo tvrditi da su se nedavnim gostovanjima beogradskog i ljubljanskog teatra ‘obnovile kulturne veze’ između dviju novostvorenih država. Istina, države možda i jesu nove, ali je očito mentala struktura u glavama njihovih najisturenijih kulturnih emisara ostala ista: umjetnički etatizam i ignoriranje svega što se ne može ukalupiti u reprezentativni model vladajuće estetike.” **[have to be translated into English]**

are dealt with and not the ‘foreigners’”.<sup>31</sup> Neglecting of non-Slovenian actors in the ensemble of the main national theatre in Ljubljana is further explained by an observation that “for historians, the borders of the national theatre coincided with the borders of the ethnic Slovenian lands rather than state borders, with another equally important factor being the language of performance. Accordingly, theatre activities in Trieste (Italy), which is home to a Slovenian ethnic minority, were invariably included in Slovenian theatre history, even though the city is located across the state border. On the other hand the Jugoslovensko Narodno pozorište (Yugoslav National Theatre),<sup>32</sup> which operated in Belgrade and performed in Serbian, was always treated only as a part of Serbian, and not Slovenian, Croatian, or Bosnian theatre history.”<sup>33</sup>

After 1991 national theatre historiography is not immune to general revisionist tendencies to rewrite Slovenian history of the socialist period. It manifests itself in selective memory of the recent past, neglecting or even erasing federal context of production and regular collaboration of theatres across the federal republics’ boundaries – “as if the Slovenians had never had anything in common with the Balkans”. As it is further elaborated by the same author, “there appeared the tendency for Slovenian theatre and culture to be tied to the traditions that existed prior to the founding of Yugoslavia. In the 1990s the notion of ‘Central Europe’ became fashionable, and this supposedly revived the importance of links with the nations of the former Habsburg monarchy.”<sup>34</sup>

### **National theatres are main users of public cultural budgets**

In Slovenia public funds for culture are distributed among public institutions and private organizations (mainly NGOs) in ratio 90% : 10% which is comparable to majority of

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<sup>31</sup> Pušić 2004, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> This is obviously a *lapsus linguae*: real name of the theatre is Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište (Yugoslav Drama Theatre). The word “drama” in the name of the theatre is important due to the fact that JDP put an immense emphasis precisely on literary classics. JDP was founded in 1947 with the aim of attracting actors, directors, and dramatists from all over the socialist Yugoslavia, and with an ambition to create the Yugoslav counterpart to the Moscow Art Theatre. Its Yugoslav character was programmatically inaugurated by staging *The King of Betainov*, a play by Slovenian dramatist Ivan Cankar, as an opening performance of the new theatre (April 3, 1948, director: Bojan Stupica).

<sup>33</sup> Pušić 2004, p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

other European countries. Although public cultural institutions are relatively well subsidized, they are now expected to earn more from their own activities. In the socialist system, for instance, public funds amounted to approximately 85 % of total revenues of Slovenian theatres, while today this amount decreased to approximately 75%.<sup>35</sup>

As far as national theatres are concerned, in Slovenia they are financed predominantly from the national budget. A bit less than 50 % of all funds devoted for public theatres go to three national theatres (Ljubljana, Maribor, Nova Gorica), while another half is distributed among 8 regional and city theatres. If compared with the whole national budget for cultural public institutions, these three national theatres receive almost 10 % of that budget.<sup>36</sup>

One might say that these figures are even quite balanced, especially if we compare them to some more extreme examples such as, for instance, national theatres in Croatia. Croatian national theatre in Zagreb has a special status: its founders are the state and the city of Zagreb, both of them contributing approximately half of theatre's revenues from public sources. Other national theatres (in Osijek, Rijeka and Split) are financed predominantly from city budgets, while Croatian Ministry of Culture contributes less than 10% of the funds they receive from city budgets. In this system of financing national theatres are main users of funds for culture in local public budgets: in 2008 Croatian National Theatre in Split received 42% of the city budget for culture and Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka spent almost 50% of the city's cultural budget in the same year. Hard data<sup>37</sup> are maybe blind for some subtly details, but in this case it is quite obvious that national theatres still play an important, maybe even central role, in cultural systems of major Croatian cities. It is worth mention that in 1994 the national theatre in Rijeka changed its name from National Theatre into Croatian National Theatre. Renaming of the theatre provoked some critical responses from the ensemble of Italian

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<sup>35</sup> Sušec Michieli 2008c, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> These data are for 2008. Detailed figures are available at the webpage of the Ministry of Culture: [http://www.mk.gov.si/fileadmin/mk.gov.si/pageuploads/Ministrstvo/Razpisi/neposredni\\_inv/ODLOCBEJZ\\_2008.pdf](http://www.mk.gov.si/fileadmin/mk.gov.si/pageuploads/Ministrstvo/Razpisi/neposredni_inv/ODLOCBEJZ_2008.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Sources: Službeni glasnik grada Splita, no. 40/2008 and Prijedlog godišnjeg izvještaja o izvršenju Proračuna grada Rijeke za 2008. godinu.

Drama, which is one of three ensembles working together under the same roof (two other ensembles being Croatian Drama and Opera and Ballet), but their remarks were ignored by the authorities.

### **National theatre vs. ‘independent theatre’**

Researchers of the tendencies in Slovenian theatre after 1991 are almost unison in their assessment that the main line of division is not that much based on the difference between national and non-national theatre as it is based on the difference between ‘institutional’ vs. ‘non-institutional’ (or ‘independent’) theatre. This division is very obvious if we compare the two categories on the level of material conditions they work in: national and city theatres have permanent ensembles, they are highly subsidized from public funds, they have their own infrastructure (halls, equipment...), their collaborators are mainly employed as permanent staff, etc. while, on the other hand, independent theatre companies lack all these incentives. Receiving less than 10% of the public funds for culture, lacking their own infrastructure, etc., these ‘independent’ companies nevertheless ‘dependent’ on good will of public financiers and cultural institutions.

These differences, however, are not traceable only on the material level: they are visible also on the level of those elements which are traditionally assigned to national theatre. It is one of the findings which came out of an ad hoc research made by the Slovenian theatre journal *Maska* in 1999.<sup>38</sup> A statistical analysis of annual programs of Slovenian theatres from 1986 up to 1998 has shown that, for instance, the number of plays originally written in Slovenian and staged in that period was almost the same in both types of theatres: in national/city theatres as well as in independent companies it was approximately one third of all plays originally written in Slovenian. In some years even half of the plays staged by independent companies were written by Slovenian authors. This surprising finding led one of the researchers to the conclusion that “stagings of domestic authors, otherwise typical for repertoire theatres, have obviously migrated to the

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. special issue on Slovenian theatre in 1990s, *Maska*, Ljubljana, vol. VIII, no. 5-6/1999.

non-institutional production”.<sup>39</sup> Besides this, in the 1990s the number of plays by Slovenian authors has increased for more than one fourth (there were more English and Austrian plays as well), while Croatian and Serbian dramatists were less represented as in the 1980s (the same with German, American and Russian authors). The number of foreign collaborators in 1990s (including those coming from other republics of the former Yugoslavia) has decreased for nearly 100% if compared with the figures from 1980s.

According to Blaž Lukan, one of the researchers from the Maska project, their findings didn't confirm the hypothesis that political changes in 1991 (independent state, new economic system and political regime, etc.), should have a significant influence to Slovenian theatre. There were some changes but nevertheless, according to Lukan, nothing really dramatic had occurred: “After the channels of exchange with other republics of ex-Yu were closed, two things could have been expected: firstly, an autonomous theatre space delineated by the state borders (with extensions to Trieste and Carinthia) would be more clearly defined, and secondly, new channels would be opened to the North and North-West, i.e. to the territories with well developed theatre and conjuncture market. In a way both happened, although not in that extension as it was expected. Instead, Slovenian theatre space has been more explicitly divided in two poles: institutional theatre and non-institutional theatre production.”<sup>40</sup>

One of the biggest changes in the Slovenian theatre of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is that the national theatre still possesses an immense strong position within the system of state cultural policy while, on the other hand, its real influence on different cultural identifications (including national identity) is rather limited. On the other hand, national theatre is still an important symbol of supposed identification with traditional culture and national *ressentiment*. It was made visible in an ironic manner by the project called *Slovenian National Theatre*, an independent production dealing with expulsion of all the members of a Roma family from their home in a Slovenian village, committed by a large group of inhabitants of the same village. This nationalistic action was represented in the

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<sup>39</sup> Orel 1999, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Lukan 1999, p. 17.

performance by using the technique of so called documentary theatre, with all brutal details of the event as well as direct political connotations. On the symbolical level, the title of the performance functions as a metonymic displacement (*Verschiebung*); this discursive operation appropriates the notion of the national theatre and uses it precisely in its historical, traditional meaning: as representation of a nation.<sup>41</sup>

In that context, the thesis proposed Zoja Skušek some 30 years ago is still relevant: “The sole existence of national theatres, an important position they still occupy, as well as the paradox that avant-garde theatres have to define their own position precisely in opposition to big national theatre institutions, make us believe that, when talking about contemporary theatre, we have to confront ourselves with ideology and practice of the national theatre.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “... the most important characteristic [of the national theatre] in its entire history is that the national dominant decides on fundamental questions of theatre as well as on general constellation: the theatre represents, stages, symbolizes and confirms the Slovenian nation”. (Kreft 1999, p. 30)

<sup>42</sup> Skušek-Močnik 1980, p. 26.

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