

Serbian Political Drama and Theater

¹Nenad Perić, ¹Jelena Perić and ²Dragan Tančić

¹University Union-Nikola Tesla, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

²Institute for Serbian Culture Pristina/Leposavic, 38218 Leposavic, Serbia

Abstract: Abstract: The history of contemporary Serbian theater is based on stone mark events, phenomena and periods. From the very beginning, politics has been present in the historical drama genre and over time, historical drama has almost completely transformed into a new form-political theater. Following the history of Serbian modern theater, we can conclude that it often dealt with politics, either in the form of criticism of current politics or in the form of national-historical moment which politics often used as a tool to strengthen the patriotic sentiments of the people. On the other hand, the politically engaged drama provided the basis for the study of Serbian society through criticism of government and politics.

Key words: Theater history • Political theater • History of Serbian theater • Criticism of the authorities • historical drama

INTRODUCTION

Serbian modern theater was conceived in the towns of Vojvodina during the 17th and 18th centuries, on the border of two empires: the Turkish and the Austro-Hungarian. Developing within general historical trends, Serbian theater has found reasons for its existence in the spirituality of its people. Serbian theater never sought to prove itself in relation to others or insist on superiority or identity. Serbian theater founded its expression in the authenticity of the its action. “The initiative to set up theatrical institutions was initiated by nationally aware individuals and associations, city municipalities and wealthy entrepreneurs. In those areas where the national body had a state-forming form, the care of raising the capital's theaters was largely taken over by the state.” [1].

The history of contemporary Serbian theater is based on mile stone events, phenomena and periods, which go down from the moment when the social consciousness has matured that theater is a social need that must organized and protected by institutions and society itself.

Features of Serbian Theater and 19th Century Political Drama: In the spirit of the enlightenment-patriotic aspirations of the epoch, when the Serbian drama began to emerge, it emerged as different carriers of opposing lines of dramatic action: “a legitimate ruler-usurper; hero (ascetic) - traitor; defender of honor, freedom - a foreign

enemy.” [2]. The favorite themes of Serbian playwrights had a dramatic structure with epic mechanisms by which legends preserved in the folk tradition built a whole repertoire of basic relations between the holders of the category of good and evil. History was also the subject of Jovan Sterija's first dramatic attempt- Innocence or Svetislav and Mileva, in 1827. In various aspects, it forms an essential thematic element of his dramatic oeuvre.

A key point in Steria's understanding of the role of the history in the theater is his critical attitude toward history and the nation, towards delusions in the romantic sense of national and historical.“ [3] Moved by the false patriotism that surrounded him, Steria, as a writer with a highly developed sense of moral responsibility, could not help but react to what he was looking at and abhorring in the tumultuous days of 1848/9. - the years of the European revolutions. He was also aware that for a sharp political comedy such as his Patriots, there were no adequate recipients at that moment, either among readers or viewers. The criticisms and messages that he wanted to convey would fail and so he kept Patriots in the manuscript version. Therefore, the play Patriots was set on stage fifty years after his death.

In the events around him, Sterija saw much of what was national and general, contemporary and historical and which was worthy of critical comment. At the time his Patriots were born, the conceptual drama as such did not yet exist, Bihner's Dante death was hidden from the public

eye and Brecht's political theater represented a distant future. He could not adequately portray Steria as publicly deplorable, but instead opted for what he knew; an ancient drama he knew and felt. Although written on the occasion of a certain historical moment, this dramatic work has evolved into a universal drama about false patriotism. Formed as a direct and bitter reaction to the meanness and misfortunes of the Serbian movement, Sterija's political comedy is based on specific events and type actions seen, but at the same time it alludes to many repeated situations and characters from the past and beyond.

Sterija's work is not only an appreciation of Aristophanes, Plautus and Molière, but a complete creation that over time has acquired historical objectivity, a source of purely personal thinking, which states and seeks continuous engagement, stage freedom and originality of expression. This is the basis of the theatrical aesthetics on which many forms and theatrical performances were built. On this basis the development of Serbian theater can be traced as well.

Based on folk poetry and modeled on the Greeks and with the help of Shakespeare and Schiller, Laza Kostic, together with Djuro Jaksic, created romantic dramas. Kostic's tragedy *Pera Segedinac* is a historical drama inspired and spiced with politics. Kostic expressed the political context of the time of this tragedy through the political context of a moment in the past, which contained four basic political ideas: the national idea of Serbians, resistance, distrust and criticism. He successfully expressed these ideas through his dramatic text and by combining and conceiving them, „he avoided the intrusive politicization and schism between the actuality and humane content of the dramatic act, which had a negative effect on the quality of most of our historical dramas and tragedies of the nineteenth century.“ [3]. Texts based on our national history have been written and performed on the stages of national theaters for less than three centuries. The general prerequisite for the creation of a historical drama is related to the historical situation, more specifically to the political circumstances that determine or have determined the life of the nation at the time when historical drama is being written and performed. Hystorical drama isthe most sensitive drama form because it depends on its surroundings; social, political, literary and theatrical.” [4].

Since its premiere, *Pera Segedinac* has always been, inevitably, part of a broader theatrical and social context. In each performance of the drama, a new interaction began between the present political context within the piece itself and the political context in the current time.

Recognizing in the critical presentation of one of Serbian churc haeds Vicentije Jovanovic allusions to the behavior of the patriarch German Andjelic, Kostic's contemporaries began a lengthy controversy about his drama, the basic backbones of which were related to the day-political rather than the artistic dimension of the drama.

The setting of the drama was certainly to emphasize the analogies between the current circumstances in Vojvodina of that time and age and the appearance of *Pera Segedinac*. The political charge created by the prime minister in Novi Sad in 1882 was more than sufficient reason for the Austro-Hungarian authorities to present bans after the first play. We give this example to indicate that the case of bans in the history of Serbian theater is not an unknown, but something that has unfortunately been encountered by Serbian theater in the past centuries. Kostic's *Pera Segedinac* and for exmple Dragoljub Mihailovic's *When Pumpkins Bloomed* in the XX century, were innocent victims of the interplay of the political context that the authors were introducing and of the political contexts of the moments in which they were set or removed from the scene. Politics, which was the inspiration for the authors, has become an evil fate of these works in theater life.

In the late 70ies and early 80ies of the XIX century, a fierce battle was fought in Serbia between two ages: one that became extinct and the other that was about to take place. Fighting was fought on all lines and on all fronts: in politics, literature and in life in general. It was a period filled with strife and turmoil, all the phenomena that characterize such an era in the development of a nation and society. “Politics, in particular, had an epidemic character, an epidemic affecting an entire nation and it is no wonder that politics often went into literature as well.” [5].

It was also a time when theaters in Belgrade and Novi Sad were still ruled by „old“ poets and Steria was forgotten. So, in 1883 appeared a writer who would leave deep traces in Serbian comedy and the arts in general. It was Branislav Nusic, who, similar to Sterija, has ridiculed various abuses and upheavals in public and social life. Through Gogol, who was the writer of the entire youth at the time, Nusic wrote his first comedies: *Member of Parliament*, *Suspicious Face*, *Protection*. He introduced into his comedies an undesirable and dangerous topic of government, creating the material for his works from the bureaucratized and arrogant representatives of the state administration and the police. Nusic himself writes in the preface of the *Member of Parliament* that the comedy is „mockery of the political

struggle, elections and deputies of the government party“, which also highlights the political struggle during the elections and the elections in the form of political struggle. Nusic took the mayors, clerks, police informers, deputies, ministers and their ladies to the scene. He portrayed the comic periphery of government, but the government would increasingly lose that connotation and gain a tragic one. The struggle for power and the exploitation of power were the main sources and drivers of Nusic's comedy. The Serbian state, as it always does, began to intoxicate itself with power and instead of freedom as lawfulness, freedom as lawlessness often appeared.

XX Century: “Wars, uprisings, upheavals, occupations, marches and liberation have always been present in theater life of Belgrade. These milestones signified rebirth, the self-destruction, the endeavor to maintain continuity of action, or a small illusion in the past, along with anxiety and hope for what was to come.” [6]. Thus, the beginning of the XX century brought radical changes not only in Belgrade, but in the entire Serbian theater, both in repertoire and in interpretive and organizational terms. The very beginning of the XX century in Serbia was marked by the May coup in 1903, followed by the Annexation crisis, exhausting the First and Second Balkan Wars and finally the Great War. It is interesting that it was during these difficult and turbulent times that Serbian theater became an integral part of European dramatic modernism and at the same time the old dramatic forms (historical dramas, folk dramas and fun games) underwent a complete transformation leading to their renewal. The links with tradition were not broken with World War I, since only two seasons were needed to restore the destroyed scene and fill the acting troops. Almost spontaneously, a selection was made of works that have been performed for decades and whose success is linked to the development of national drama and theater. There followed the pieces that had the theme of the Great War and the first premiere that was played after the renovation of the National Theater was the work of Stevan Besevic *By the Sun*. This three-act national drama with a prologue was directed by Steva Todorovic and premiered on June 1919 [3].

The sufferings and the battles of Serbian people in the First World War were inextricably linked to notions of the national as well as the personalities of the political scene and history of the Kingdom of Serbia at that time. „From the moment when a series of dates and personalities are placed in a certain chronological

arrangement and linked by a description of their phenomena or relations by cause and effect analysis, reality gives way to an individual view of the same reality we call history [4]. The audience wanted to see again on stage and relive something that was still very much present in personal and collective memory, something that will become clearer as a historical fracture only in the next war, in another cataclysm that will soon cross over the same space.” [3].

After the Second World War, which lasted for four years on the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the Partizan movement had its own national and combat theater. After the war, under the general atmosphere of a revolutionary transformation, the then Yugoslav theater underwent a period of highly engaged theater. Attributes such as “bourgeois” and “boulevard” were given to previous forms of theater, with that he intended to devalue a number of pieces and works that were successfully played before the war. Socialist self-government changed social conditions. Political drama and theater began to rely heavily on currents of life and absorb the essence of a particular socio-historical moment, its essential contradictions and possible resolutions. “Cultural policy in the field of theatrical creativity, in the early days of reconstruction, rested on the directives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, in which party leadership advocated activities that would meet the objective needs arising from the backwardness and legacy of the past.” [7]. All cultural activities, including theater, were put in motion with the aim of educating the rich cultural life in the spirit of the socialist principle, but also ideologically eliminating the rest of the old relations. Party evaluations of political order and social life were fully applied and it was believed that for the advancement of the theater arts in new living conditions, it was necessary to revise the entire previously known theater repertoire. There were many dilemmas about performing and actualizing the world classics and the selections were dogmatic and utterly politicized. Many classics were offended that they have no actuality and therefore should not be shown often. The selection of desirable pieces was dominated by social themes. Critical realism of the Russian classics was especially favored, while the most restrictive was towards famous playwrights of German and Italian literature since those two nations attacked and occupied Yugoslavia in the last war. Many pieces that were sublime and grand for other nations in their distinctly artistic structures were negated in the name of ideological purity. Realism and social literature have been determined to form the basis of

the repertoire policy of the new theater, in order to connect the broad masses with their scenes, all with the ultimate goal of withdrawing from the backwardness and moving towards new and desired ideals. The principle of political actualization of heritage was even more pernicious in the work of domestic authors of earlier generations.

The theater was forced to give up everything that was strictly national and it referred to literature until the 40ies. All theaters in Serbia were instructed to organize an ideological work with the actors in order to implement the commitment to socialist realism and Soviet models as zealously as possible. However, it should be emphasized that theater artists never fully accepted this literal translation of ideological guidelines into the politics of theatrical development, but believed that true theater could be defended against various abuses, precisely through the reaffirmation of the attitude towards freedom of creativity and expression without prejudice. In the early fifties, through the work of classical writers, there was a breakthrough of dogmatic restrictions and efforts to perform the most interesting works of contemporary world writers. Administrative conduct and direction of administrative policy were broken and unilateralism regarding the choice of forms was rejected.

The most productive years of theater life in Serbia are those of the sixties and seventies of the XX century. The plays created at that time determined the meaning of the entire drama. In many respects, they have opened up contemporary theater to new values. There was a growing awareness that affirmation could only be obtained through ambitious projects based on original texts, original directorial settings and rich acting creativity. After turning away from the state-party monopoly characteristic of the classic form of real socialism, the relationship between theater and government developed within a self-government that encouraged criticism and participation of all members of society, but only when that criticism was depoliticized, ie. when criticism of the plays performed was indirect. In the power-theater-people relationship, theater was able to choose between becoming a black sheep (which happened in the case of Dragoslav Mihailovic's play *When Pumpkins Bloomed*) and creating an image of the ultimate totalitarian power, some other hidden Master.

Mihailovic's *Pumpkins*, directed by Boro Draskovic, is the only play that has become not only a theater act but also a social event. The consequences of this repression were various. It has proven that it is much easier to play

certain avant-garde forms than to break down conservative understandings and constraints in interpreting the freedom of creativity and determining what it considers to be a social interest in the form of art.

In the 70ies and 80ies, instead of obedience, a radically new literature was formed, expressing the need for relief from all restrictions. Thanks to the legacy we have already discussed and the new plays by Aleksandar Popovic, Slobodan Selenic, Borislav Mihailovic-Mihiz, Jovan Radulovic, Dusan Kovacevic, modern drama literature has been created. The themes that dominated were the individual's attitude towards himself and the freedom to live in a society recognizable by everything that determines the personal and coexistence. In an interview he gave to the *Sarajevo Gazette*, Dusan Kovacevic pointed out that his drama *The Marathon Runners* is an honorary circle, a result of a reluctance that the politicians of the time were run by the elderly and that the gravediggers are representatives of a class that the young man does not want to belong to. He also wanted to highlight the position and role of the intellectual in the modern world, characterized as totalitarian. Such literature elevated contemporary Serbian theater from pamphlet to original and engaged art, which exerted a significant influence on the formation of the knowledge of the importance of individual freedoms and liberation from dogmatic restrictions. Politics could have been one of the possible components of theatrical expression, but it could not impose one-sided interpretations and a priori views on theatrical art. The thesis that history is written by winners is problematized by history itself, whose flows show that it is not always possible to identify the winner, to which Brecht's thought that "the winners of tomorrow are winners" could follow.

As the Berlin Wall collapses, theater offered the audience a simplified picture of the past, explaining the „true truth” of our past. After the socialist pieces, there was a time when the domestic drama, in the language of allegory, expressed deep doubt about the then official version of historical truth. The theater was tasked with reinterpreting and rehabilitating history. It revealed the true image of the prison and the cruel labor camp of Goli Otok, described the communist government's showdown with the peasants of Vojvodina and offered a different picture of some historical figures. Slobodan Selenic points out that „the duty of the writer is not to praise his people. It is his duty to point out the darkened parts of the national spectacle and to speak the right thing about them.” [8].

CONCLUSION

Just as politics was and remains the object of theater, so theater was and is a form of politics. Following the history of Serbian modern theater, we can conclude that it often dealt with politics, either in the form of criticism of current politics or in the form of national-historical moment which politics often used as a tool to strengthen the patriotic sentiments of the people.

Political theater sometimes tells us much more than history books. Although most political pieces at the level of comparison and allusions critique government and politics, society and / or certain socio-political phenomena to avoid censorship or prohibition, they can give a very good analysis of a society, its main determinants, as well as its historical moment.

Misunderstandings between authorities and artists have always been and will be. It is something that is inevitable and that will not and cannot be changed. The art is there to criticize, point out mistakes and refine, broaden perspectives and break taboos, while politics and power motivate and drive their prohibitions and disputes, enabling ever more creativity. Political theater has the task of criticizing, reprimanding and fighting for freedom of thought and speech, despite the taboos and prohibitions that oppose it. It must point out from history the mistakes of the people and its rulers (politics) and draw lessons for the present and the future. "The hidden future is our present present and that present has its hidden future." [9].

REFERENCES

1. Jelena Perić, 2018. Osnivanje narodnog pozorišta i prva izvedena predstava u novootvorenom zdanju, *Teatron*, časopis za pozorišnu umetnost (jesen/zima 2018.) 184/185.
2. Zorica Nestorović, 2007. *Bogovi, carevi i ljudi*, Čigoja štampa, Beograd, 2007.
3. Marta Frajnd, *Istorija u drami-drama u istoriji*, Prometej and Sterijino pozorje, 1996. Institut za književnost i umetnost, Novi Sad - Beograd.
4. Jelena Perić, 2015. Dve Mihizove dramatizacije Ćosićevog Vremena smrti, *Teatron*, časopis za pozorišnu umetnost (proleće/leto 2015.) 170/171
5. Branislav Nušić, 1931. *Sabrana dela (knjiga VII, predgovor Sumnjivom licu)*, Geca Kon, Beograd 1931.
6. Petar Volk, 1978. *Pozorišni život Beograda (1944-1974)*, Muzej pozorišne umetnosti SR Srbije, Beograd, 1978.
7. Petar Volk, 1990. *Pozorišni život u Srbiji (1945. - 1986.)*, FDU Institut, Beograd 1990.
8. Slobodan Selenić, 2008. intervju dat Feliksu Pašiću 1994.godine u: *Ludus*, decembar 2008, broj 148.
9. Jovan Ćirilov, 1990. *Ruženje naroda u tri drame*, pogovor u: *Drame Slobodan Selenić*, Beograd 1990.