

# Politics + Poetics = Ethics: Two Plays by Simona Semenič

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In the period after World War II, Slovenian drama developed three separate types of commentary on contemporary society: the drama of the absurd, the poetic drama and the political drama. While the latter fairly quickly ran its course – although it made a short comeback during the 1980s and 1990s –, the poetic drama and the drama of the absurd have persisted without interruptions until today.

The dramatic production of the middle generation (M. Zupančič, V. Möderndorfer, D. Potočnjak) has focused clearly and in a rather engaged way, regardless of the form of dramatic writing – poetic, political or absurd –, on the social problems of today's world: globalisation, tycoons, the disintegration of the middle class, governance through invoking threats from the outside or unemployment, etc. What is more, their reflection on contemporary society brought to the fore the individual and one's character, especially one's egoism, greed, envy and violence.

However, contemporary Slovenian drama has been able to create a new expressive form, a really unusual mixture of an imaginatively political and formally poetic drama with an ethical core, content that is neither concretely pragmatic nor spiced with the absurd, and a high, but specific, poetic form. Two plays by Simona Semenič (1975) fall into this category: *sophia or while i almost ask for more or a parable of the ruler and the wisdom* (below: *sophia*) and *seven cooks, four soldiers and three sophias*. Although this new form partially indeed grows out of the drama of the absurd, it manages to integrate the poetic with the political in an unprecedented way, which allows the texts to speak on several levels simultaneously – the political content with all its genuinely ethical undertones acquires new metaphoric, symbolic, even allegorical dimensions.

In 2011, Simona Semenič wrote *sophia or while i almost ask for more or a parable of the ruler and the wisdom*, which presents her viewpoint on the actual value parameters of power and its mis/ab/use. Regardless of its concrete message, the play can be described as one of Semenič's most symbolic (but not absurd) works until

then. The author uses a specific narrative modus, which allows the dialogue to slip into narration, from here to beyond, with which she effectively erases all the usual temporal and spatial boundaries. This erasure produces a blurred watercolour effect, as in painting, and, for drama, an unusual ubiquity, inexhaustibility and universality of the message. The play is namely written in a gentle, almost fairy tale-like poetic way, in which even the most heinous violence is somewhat removed, blurred, as if it were unburdened of the real cruelty and shrouded in the mist of either temporal or spatial distance. As a fairy tale from the past, the narrative pours into space and time and assumes the character of an elusive and indeterminate eternity as simultaneous presence of all three segments of time: the past, the present and the future.

Besides the language, the weaving of the text is also fairy tale-like – namely, the seamless permeability between dialogue and didascalia, which, at least on paper, give an impression of mere accompanying text. Simona Semenič's "didascalia" are meant to be spoken, but from "aside", as if they were not present onstage. Used in this way, they function as a kind of voice of reason, similar to the chorus in especially early Greek drama, in which the action is stopped so that the chorus can express its thoughts and judgement of the protagonists' conduct. Moreover, the eternal return of the same is precisely that systemic feature of ancient Greek drama of which Simona Semenič's play is so unusually reminiscent.

However, it is not only the form that provides the fairy tale-like softness – it is also the content. The play *sophia* is a true parable of political power and presents an intriguing ethical prolegomenon to its abuse. In this way, Simona Semenič provokes in the spectator a feeling of having been captured – as if between millstones – in the insoluble relations of the principles of power, that is, the relations between those who rule and the ruled. Because humans are caught in a continuous loop of insoluble inscriptions made by power, this play is merciless in its denunciation of human's distress as a manipulated, coerced subject. Its political message is as follows: wisdom, which is a prerequisite for ethics, is always within reach, but only if one is willing to live – and ultimately be sacrificed – for an idea.

The play *seven cooks, four soldiers and three sophias* (2015) seems to be a logical continuation of the author's play from 2011. The three Sophias (Sophia Magdalena Scholl, Sophia Lvovna Perovskaya and Marie-Sophie Germain) from different time periods come together in a symbol. There are dialogues that seamlessly pass from lines to didascalia and back here as well, removed and distant as in fairy tales, except that in *seven cooks* the two levels are not separated from one another graphically (with italics). The dialogue takes place predominantly between the cooks and is intersected by the Sophias' lines and, preferably, the cooks' comments about the Sophias' conduct. The cooks are the actual group subject, the engine of the play. From the beginning to the end,

they hold the action firmly in their hands, assisted occasionally by four soldiers.

Little by little, their short lines create an atmosphere that is, in view of the play's war theme, reminiscent of Brecht's *Mother Courage*: similarly as Brecht's protagonist, the cooks are actually not the subject but the object of war: they are subjected to the grand war machine that is sending thousands of soldiers to death and are equally without any real influence over its course or outcome. They are, however, very diligent in maintaining the flawless functioning of this horrific machinery, despite a touch of quiet resignation in their chests. This text, too, is distinguished by its specificity – a palimpsest duality of writing that enables an x-ray result is self-evident: on the one hand, the reality of physical persons, who are, on the other, symbols of their historical existence. The cooks, regardless of the fact that they are part of the play, give an impression of an outside commentator; a part of the audience, so to speak, who thinks out loud, talks and gossips about the events. Similarly as in Brecht, although in a less individualised way, the play *seven cooks* brings to attention the questions of politics, war, executions of women, with which it puts ethics above everything else. The myopic filter of the narrative – as in *sophia* – has the effect of a blurred eternity here as well.

With both plays, Simona Semenič has managed to create a genre of a political expression unusual for Slovenian drama, in which the problematics of sociality, that is, the *polis* in ancient Greek understanding – not of politics *sensu stricto* –, gleams through the expression and the language, which until now in our space have belonged principally to poetic drama, although they have not been entirely unfamiliar in the drama of the absurd as well.

The dramatist has conceived her own idiosyncratic, poetic-political language, which she constitutes also by erasing the spectator's rational certainty in what's been said.

Understanding Simona Semenič's stories in this way also enables a different exegesis of her texts. Both texts seem to be independent of reality, which positions them above time and above facts, transforming them at once also into universal, super-temporal impressionist paintings of interpersonal relationships, with the protagonists presented either as allegories (Sophia and three daughters) or concretisations of specific (positive) human qualities and values (three Sophias).

An unusual integration of the poetic content and poetic form with the social in its most concrete results in a universalisation of the performed problem and its rise to the level of a human principle, which is also why the plays by Simona Semenič cannot be read merely as concrete experiences but always also as symbolic panoramic images of the human character and relationships, as mythological portraits of contemporary social relationships.