

In the historiography of Slovenian theatre, a commonly acknowledged thesis claims that so-called drama societies (*dramatična društva*) were the most important factor in the gradual transition from dilettantism to the professionalisation of Slovenian theatre. In the history of Slovenian theatre, a parallel stream existed – workers' stages, which were established in many of Slovenian cities, especially after World War I. These amateur theatres were driven primarily by the idea of social emancipation since the establishing of professional and national theatres was not their priority. Some of them, in particular, the Workers' Stage (Delavski oder) in Ljubljana, were staging quality performances. The thesis of this article is that the quality of the Workers' Stage was made possible by the distinctive way of performing that Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak developed when they were running it and also because the Workers' Stage did not succumb to the temptation of entering the non-productive (and inevitably already lost) competition with Slovenian professional theatres.

Additionally, Brecht's idea about "the simplicity of acting" that ought to be "the alpha and the omega of proletarian acting" can help us explain the success of Workers' Stage. In his opinion, the actors who practise "proletarian acting" are amateurs; however, they are by no means dilettantes. The article presents findings on the repertory and performing arts' practices of the Workers' Stage in Ljubljana using Brecht's perspective of this conceptual and methodological differentiation; by analogy with his "estrangement effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*), we can call it the amateur effect of "proletarian acting".

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**Keywords:** Workers' Stage (Delavski oder), workers' theatre, amateur theatre, proletarian acting, Bratko Kreft, Ferdo Delak, Bertolt Brecht

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# The Workers' Stage (Delavski oder) and the Amateur Effect of "Proletarian Acting"

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## Introduction

Alongside a network of drama societies, out of which professional theatres in Slovenia would gradually emerge, workers' theatres presented a parallel stream in the development of Slovenian theatre in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These amateur stages, which were driven more by the idea of social emancipation than that of establishing professional and national theatres, have only been partially researched. We also see that Ferdo Delak's wish for the documentary contributions that he collected more than half a century ago in the publication *Delavski oder na Slovenskem* to be used "as firm material for the real history" (6) of this incredibly exciting and unique phenomenon in the history of Slovenian theatre, sadly, remains unrealised. By providing an overview of some of the most significant achievements of the Ljubljana Workers' Stage and presenting an analysis of the theatre's performance methods, this contribution aims to add at least a small stone in the perforated mosaic of the "real history" of workers' stages in Slovenia.<sup>1</sup> My inquiry proceeds from the premise that some of these stages, Ljubljana's Workers' Stage, in particular, were staging quality performances. I argue that this quality was possible for two reasons, one, because, when Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak were running it, the Workers' Stage developed a distinctive way of performing. And two, because it did not succumb to the temptation of entering the non-productive (and inevitably already lost) competition with Slovenian professional theatres.

## The foundation of the Workers' Stage

Workers' stages criss-crossed the Slovenian territory, especially in the 1920s and 1930s; however, not all of them were equally active or successful. Besides the Ljubljana Workers' Stage, which was undoubtedly the most significant one, there were especially active workers' theatres in Trieste, Jesenice and Trbovlje. Dušan

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Moravec also shared the view that the workers' stages were a remarkable and unique phenomenon in the context of amateur theatre creativity, especially the "main" Workers' Stage in Ljubljana. He devoted a few pages to the Ljubljana stage in his overview of the history of Slovenian theatre between the wars – but as an exception since the publication discussed only professional theatres. Moravec simply could not avoid mentioning the Workers' Stage, he claimed, because of its "endeavours to stage different, untested, contemporary performances, imbued with revolutionary ideas, or to present new stage interpretations of classical ones" (Slovensko gledališče 243). Besides, "the Workers' Stage quickened the cultural pulse of the city and even had some impact on the course taken by the National Theatre" (245).

After World War I, the workers' cultural and educational society Svoboda organised a theatre group as early as 1919. Its first breakthrough was the performance *Jakob Ruda*, which premièred on 23 April 1920 and turned into a mass workers' manifestation. Already on the following day, a violent clash between the gendarme and the workers broke out on the street Zaloška cesta; 13 people were killed, among them a 5-year-old girl, at least 30 were wounded. The brutal police repression happened when a group of protesters tried to enter the city centre to join demonstrations in support of the railway workers. Soon after the incident, monarchic repression took hold: in 1920, with the so-called "Obznana" decree (prohibiting all Communist political organisations), followed in 1921 by the State Protection Act. Although the authorities did not ban Svoboda, they hampered its operations.

In 1926, Bratko Kreft (then a 21-year-old student) published two articles in the magazine *Svoboda*, which are essential for the history of workers' stages in Slovenia: "Proletarian Stage" and "Repertoire of the Prolet-stage". His central thesis was that the proletariat must create its own type of theatre, a combative and socially engaged one. The first step to achieve this goal would be that the workers' stages stop staging bourgeois plays and instead created their own – until they can write such plays, they should present socially engaged drama. As possible examples, Kreft cites the dramatisation of *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* (The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights) by Ivan Cankar, *Golgotha* by Miroslav Krleža, *The Weavers* by Gerhardt Hauptmann, *The Machine* by Upton Sinclair, *The Machine Wreckers* by Ernst Toller and so on.

Kreft shortly set himself to realise these theoretical starting points in concrete terms. Already the following year, he announced (on behalf of the organisational committee) in the workers' press that, under the wings of the Workers' and Sports Society Svoboda, "a Workers' Stage will soon be founded in Ljubljana and will strive to foster dramatic art among the working people". This goal was considered a priority, since "the bourgeois stages and the National Theatre appear to be completely indifferent to modern proletarian drama", coupled with an urgency to keep up with other countries,

in which “workers’ theatres play an important role in the education of the proletariat”. He appealed “especially to young comrades to not hesitate and come join the Workers’ Stage in as large a number as possible” (Kreft, Delavski oder 4).

## Kreft’s period

By the end of 1927, Kreft took the lead to found and direct the Workers’ Stage. He initially wanted to call it Proletarian Stage but abandoned the name due to political pressures.<sup>2</sup> Molière’s *Scapin the Schemer*, the first performance directed by Kreft for the Workers’ Stage (premièring on 12 February 1928), was a “transitional” one. In terms of the repertoire, it was still within the horizon of the old “drama section” of the Ljubljana Svoboda (where it had already been staged before the founding of the Workers’ Stage). In terms of directorial approach, however, it was already marked by new, more modern methods. Kreft’s next staging proved to be one of the more notable performances of his early period, *The Crisis*, a social drama by Rudolf Golouh, which caused quite a stir before it even premièred (on 30 April 1928). Six days before the scheduled première, Svoboda received a decree from the Police Commissioner banning the performance. The ban provoked sharp criticism in the workers’ press: in addition to the ban itself, the date of the decree coincided with the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the police shooting on Zaloška cesta. Public protests ensued and, finally, the authorities yielded and permitted the Workers’ Stage to perform the play. The text was highly topical (a strike, workers’ increased social hardship amidst the crisis, workers’ disunity, etc.). What we see for the first time is the use of mass scenes: the performance reportedly included approximately 100 actors, members of the choir and musicians, among them, (in the role of the shareholder Couchard) the then 18-year-old student and later influential politician, Edvard Kardelj.<sup>3</sup> Even though the authorities only allowed the première and a reprise on 12 May to take place – banning the reprise in Maribor – *The Crisis* turned out to be a great success for the Workers’ Stage. The workers’ audience in the packed auditorium of the National Theatre easily identified with the play’s topic, which highlighted the existential threats faced by the workers during the growing economic and political turmoil in the country.<sup>4</sup> The performance was also a milestone in how socially engaged drama was staged, as Kreft perceptively decided to move the

2 The decision to name the theatre “workers’ stage” is explained by one of the actors and directors at the Ljubljana Workers’ Stage, Fran Petrè: “The word [proletarian] sounded proud and self-confident, coming from the workers’ mouths. But the authorities did not like it and as the pressures mounted, reluctance to use it in the press grew as well. In these circumstances, the milder expression *workers’ stage* therefore prevailed” (Petrè, *Proletarski odri* 14).

3 Golouh remembers that, besides Kardelj, two other soon-to-be-politicians performed in the staging – Boris Kidrič and France Kimovec (Golouh, *Pol stoletja* 363).

4 The severity of political instability in the then Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes is best described by the fact that between 1921 and 1928 as many as 25 changes of government took place, which means that the average lifespan of a government was a mere four months.

performing focus to impressive mass scenes and reinforce their theatricality with the inclusion of a workers' band and a choir.

In the following year, Kreft was planning to direct Toller's *The Machine Wreckers*. His plans, however, were interrupted by King Alexander's declaration of a royal dictatorship (the so-called 6 January Dictatorship), which further strengthened censorship. Thus, the performance was banned just before the première.<sup>5</sup> He, therefore, tried with a play he thought would be easier to get through the censorship: Bataille's dramatisation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, which met a favourable response from the audience and the critics alike. Premiering on 1 December 1929 at the Chamber of Labour on Miklošičeva cesta (today's site of the Slovenian Cinematheque), the performance also featured a début appearance by Sava Sever. At the beginning of the following year, the Workers' Stage repertoire was extended by Gogol's *Marriage*, directed by Fran Petrè, with sculptor, painter and illustrator Nikolaj Pirnat appearing in the role of the groom Podkolyosin. In April, Kreft directed Raynal's *The Unknown Warrior* (under the title *A Ballad of War and Love*), and appeared in an acting role as well, alongside Sava Sever (among many others). The latter was Kreft's last performance at the Workers' Stage because he decided to accept the position of theatre director at the Opera in Ljubljana.

## Delak's period

The Workers' Stage navigated its way through the particularly difficult period of the 6 January Dictatorship (until September 1931) without significant achievements, more importantly, it maintained operational continuity. This continuity was also helped by the introduction of the workers' cultural-educational evenings, hybrid educational, cultural and art events, consisting of lectures, vocal performances and recitations. Several plays were also staged, among them, Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (which premiered on 29 November 1931 in Varaždin in the frame of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Varaždin Svoboda Society and was directed by Fran Petrè) and Cankar's *Jakob Ruda* (3 January 1932, directed by Jože Kranjec).

The year 1932 proved to be an important milestone in the history of the Workers' Stage. Namely, in that year, Ferdo Delak directed several performances, which – after the initial breakthrough achieved by Kreft – finally put the Workers' Stage on the map of the Slovenian theatrical avant-garde. As a sort of “warm-up”, Delak directed two cultural-educational workers' evenings in March and April. On 23 May, the Workers' Stage premiered the groundbreaking and now famous staging of Delak's dramatisation of *The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights* by Ivan Cankar. That Delak would

<sup>5</sup> The première was planned for 11 May 1929, the request to rent the Opera was already approved by the National Theatre's management, the dress rehearsal was held, but the police banned the première (comp. Moravec, *Od viharnika* 189).

want to write his own dramatisation was expected, since he was not satisfied with the one prepared by Milan Skrbinšek for the play's first staging in Maribor in 1922.<sup>6</sup> Delak had thought about writing the dramatisation and staging *Yerney* already as a student at the Novo mesto Grammar School (although at the time he did not yet entertain an unfavourable opinion of Skrbinšek's dramatisation). Later, in 1930, while directing in two workers' theatres in Vienna, he nearly realised his ambition.<sup>7</sup> He finally succeeded at the Ljubljana Workers' Stage. And succeed he did, in more ways than one!

Delak's key dramaturgical innovation was the use of the so-called "speaking choir", which represented the bailiff Yerney, while this collective actor was juxtaposed with a single actor, who interpreted his antagonists. With this simple, but remarkably effective conceptual shift, Delak aligned Cankar's parable with its gist: if in the literary text, Yerney functions as an allegory of all servants, in Delak's stage version he becomes a tangible representation of multiplied bodies, of a *multitude* (in the jargon of the *operaismo* political theory) of disenfranchised seekers of justice. With this dramaturgical and directorial manoeuvre, he raised the individualistic running around in circles from Pontius to Pilate to the level of collective action, which is also not guaranteed to be effective, but at least hypothetically opens up the possibility of success. Hence the open epilogue in Delak's version, where Yerney is not burned at the stake but instead invites Yerney's other bailiffs to follow his path: "who has the pipe should light it; there's plenty of firewood". On the antagonist side, a reverse dramaturgical gesture is used, as Yerney's different opponents (the young Sitar, Mayor, Judge, Priest) are interpreted by a single actor. This metaphorical condensation of the antagonist in one body with multiple faces (without using masks, which was characteristic for ancient Greek theatre) is a personification of the gentlefolk, of the ruling class, which is, although consisting of numerous components, held together by the same connective tissue – capital. And where there is capital, there is necessarily the capitalist, who is effectively a historical figure, since he takes on different personifications as the capitalist mode of production evolves, but is ultimately not a *person*, but a social *relation*. The capitalist is, therefore, a mere personification of the capital's effect – of the exchange of "objectified labour as exchange value for living labour as use value" (Marx 98). Based on responses in the then press, Delak did not succumb to the temptation to flatten this multi-headed figure into a caricatured anthropomorphic monster (which would reduce the complexity of the relation to mere agitprop) but instead portrayed Yerney's opponent as an ordinary person, who

6 As we can read in his short contribution to *Tank* magazine about the second staging of Skrbinšek's dramatisation, which took place on 15 October 1927 in the National Theatre Drama Ljubljana, Delak maintained that Skrbinšek's dramatisation stripped *Yerney* of "all its effectiveness, that the director's approach was neither realistic or stylised" and also, that since the actors "were miscast, this evening was destined to fail" (Delak, makroskop 111).

7 As Dušan Moravec reports in his book *Iskanje in delo Ferda Delaka*: "He indeed adapted the text with the intention [to stage it] there and was already rehearsing with the ensemble of the proletarian amateur theatre "Theater der Roten Hilfe". Apparently, the dress rehearsal was held at the Volkstheater, but the police intervened and stopped the première" (73).

stands out as special simply because he occupies the dominant, privileged position in the social structure. This relation, which can, in general terms, be defined as social distance, was depicted – again with a(n aesthetically) simple intervention – with the physical distance between the choir of servants, positioned lower in the performing space, and the opponent(s), positioned high up (on a pedestal). Delak's lucid and fresh reading of Cankar's *Yerney* and his accurate transposition of the dramaturgical concept into the three-dimensional space of the theatre was perfectly complemented by projections of exceptional drawings by Ljubo Ravnika, simple scenography (stage platforms and red curtains) and, as importantly, well-considered casting, which allowed all members of the amateur ensemble, in their individual and collective roles, to be at their very best and contribute to the performance's success. The audience was thrilled (so much so, that the whole building of the Ljubljana Opera, in which *Yerney* was staged, supposedly "rang with applause"<sup>8</sup>), the critics praised the performance in the press. Two more performances were held in Ljubljana and four performances in Celje, Zagreb, Maribor (2000 spectators!) and Ptuj.

The enormous success of *Yerney* gave an additional impetus to the Workers' Stage and especially to its energetic director. It can be gathered from the dates of the premières in 1932 that Delak refused to rest on his laurels and applied himself to work with even greater zeal: on 9 October, there was the première of *Švejk* by Čapek (he again adapted the play and changed the title to *The Good Soldier Švejk Intervenes in the Great War*), on 23 October, *Birds Without Nests* by Karl Schönherr, on 13 November, *Magda* by Alojzij Remec and on 20 November, *Možina's Career* by Angelo Cerkevnik.<sup>9</sup> None of these performances repeated the spectacular success of *Yerney*, although *Švejk* did come close, with three sold-out performances at the Chamber of Labour and an enthusiastic response from the audience. At the beginning of the following year, Delak co-created with his wife and dancer Katja Delak another successful performance at the Workers' Stage – they adapted Oton Župančič's poems for children and engaged the young actors of the newly established Svoboda Children's Stage to create a performance for children entitled *Ciciban*, which had its première on 1 February at the National Theatre Drama Ljubljana and after three performances in Ljubljana was also performed in Maribor, Kranj and other Slovenian towns. The costumes for the performance were designed by the indispensable Ljubo Ravnika, who also collaborated with Delak in his next confrontation with Cankar, the staging of *Hlapci* (The Serfs), which took place (because of Delak's travels abroad, his engagement directing *The Tenth Brother* in Maribor and working as an editor for Radio Ljubljana) as late as 15 October 1934 and

<sup>8</sup> If Nikolaj Pirnat is to be trusted with his testimony in the newspaper *Jutro*, which stated that "the theatre was fully packed and the audience responded with thunderous applause, stomping their feet and cheering" (Pirnat 3).

<sup>9</sup> In 1932, Delak was at the peak of his creativity: besides directing performances for the Workers' Stage and acting as leader of its "speaking choir", he directed the feature film *Triglavske strmine* (The Slopes of Triglav) (première on 16 August) as well as four performances at the Ljubljana Opera, etc.

for which Ravnikar created drawings that were projected as slides. However, Delak's attempt of a new reading of Cankar's *Serfs* – marked by considerable interventions in the text, which tended to simplify the complexity of the play and therefore reduced its thematic potential – did not quite make the same impression as *Yerney* from the beginning of his collaboration with the Workers' Stage. *The Serfs* was also his last performance directed for the Workers' Stage – Delak thus started and finished his collaboration with this unique amateur theatre by staging Cankar. His departure also meant the end of the most fruitful and important period in the history of the Ljubljana Workers' Stage, as the monarchic repression, which continued to increase through the second half of the 1930s, substantially weakened and, in the end, drastically decimated the theatre's ensemble. In the last years of its existence, the performances at the Workers' Stage were extremely scarce, and after 1938, all activities were suspended.<sup>10</sup>

## Performance as a manifestation of workers' resistance

Theatre experts recognised the Workers' Stage as a unique artistic phenomenon already during its existence, and this assessment has gone unaltered even from the appropriate historical distance.<sup>11</sup> The Workers' Stage has namely succeeded to create a unique, recognisable poetics, it attracted a wide audience and was also important in strengthening the third stream in the development of Slovenian theatre. At least for a period of time, it namely persisted alongside considerable competition from clerical and liberal stages; in Ljubljana, these were the Catholic People's Stage and the slightly more liberal-leaning Šentjakob Theatre.<sup>12</sup> We can see that the stages have their counterparts in the then Slovenian political spectrum, which was split between the liberals, the clericals and the socialists (and the communists as the more radical left). This division was also mirrored in the political orientation of the then media, which made no attempts at hiding its political sympathies and routinely reported in line with its political and ideological views. Its theatre critics and reporters were not immune to these ideological temptations as well, and only a few of them managed to

10 In the changed socio-political climate following World War II, there was an attempt to revive the theatre's activity (1956–1960, initiated by Dušan Tomše), but I will limit my consideration of this period to a brief mention in a footnote, since this contribution deals primarily with the period when the Workers' Stage was run by Krefl and Delak. One of more recent publications that examine the post-war period of the Workers' Stage is *Rob v središču* (The Edge in the Centre) (133–142) by Primož Jesenko.

11 Dušan Moravec's final thoughts about the Workers' Stage from his book *Slovensko gledališče od vojne do vojne* (Slovenian Theatre Between the Wars) can serve as a typical example: "In general, the endeavours of the Workers' Stage, in Krefl's as well as Delak's period, can be described not only as a revolutionary novelty, but as artistic actions that decisively contributed to our theatre culture" (329).

12 National theatres can conditionally be grouped with the latter. While they did develop from amateur drama societies, once they were transformed into professional theatres, they became a different story, considering that production conditions differ substantially in amateur theatres; comparisons are therefore only provisional and made with great methodological reservations.



rise to the level of more objective, less ideologically charged forms of argumentation. Reviews and critical analyses of the performances of the Kreft-Delak period reveal that there were more examples of this latter, not so ideologically coloured reporting in the liberal and clerical press (in contrast with the expected enthusiasm in the socialist and workers' outlets), which supports the thesis that the Workers' Stage was achieving high standards of artistic practice.

Throughout its existence, the Workers' Stage, of course, had to adapt to the political circumstances to be able to continue its activities but did so only to the extent necessary. Choosing the word "workers'" instead of the word "proletarian" for the name of the theatre was one such compromise; often, repertory policies had to be "watered down" to avoid censorship and gain acceptance for the theatre's performances (a few were nevertheless banned), etc. But then again, the Workers' Stage never hid its political affiliations; for everyone involved, each performance was also a political manifestation of the workers' resistance and was understood as part of a general struggle for a more just society. Because of this, the authorities kept a close eye on the theatre's activities and repeatedly resorted to censorship despite the compromises it had made.

The ensemble also included actors working as employees, occasionally also young intellectuals and cultural workers, some of whom have already been mentioned (Fran Petre, Nikolaj Pirnat, Edvard Kardelj, Boris Kidrič, France Kimovec, etc. and, of course, actress Sava Sever and theatre directors and makers Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak), but the majority of the ensemble were workers who were involved in theatre as amateur actors. Bratko Kreft tailored his directing approach and mode of performing to these circumstances and, of course, learned from workers' theatres from abroad. Later, Ferdo Delak continued this approach.

## Repertory policies, collective acting and the speaking choir

What is characteristic of this method? To start with, a well-thought-through repertory policies, which was roughly outlined by Bratko Kreft (in the mentioned article "Repertoire of the Prolet-Stage") before the Workers' Stage was even founded. Selecting socially and politically engaged texts, which thematised the poverty-stricken urban proletariat and the destitute rural population<sup>13</sup> (for example, *The Crisis*, *The*

<sup>13</sup> Just how difficult and miserable the workers' lives were during the great economic crisis (which broke out precisely when Kreft established the Workers' Stage and continued throughout Delak's time with the theatre), is vividly described by Golouh in his memoirs: "Because of over-production, which was a natural consequence of economic rivalry between capitalist groups and of adverse social circumstances, hundreds of thousands of workers suddenly faced unemployment and suffered extreme misery. The Slovenian industry was especially affected; the factories initially reduced the number of working days, which was soon followed by massive lay-offs. The workers resisted, protested – but they could not go on strike, because there was a surplus stock of goods and the companies were in no hurry to resume production. Those were

*Bailiff Yerney*, etc.), was important for attracting the workers' audience, but it also additionally motivated the amateur actors to identify with their theatre and engage in the creation process. Except in the last period (after Delak's departure), getting actors for the ensemble was never a problem for the Workers' Stage.

Another important characteristic of this method was collective acting. Both Kreft and Delak often relied on mass scenes, which soon became the Workers' Stage "trademark". The idea of collective acting was a sensible decision, as it contributed to the success of this amateur theatre in a three-fold way: first, it reduced the focus on individual actors, i.e., it shifted the performative burden from the individual to the collective (which seemed much more suited to amateur actors); second, it strengthened participation, as the majority of productions included mass scenes and thus required a large ensemble; and third, collective acting, of course, contributed also to the consolidation of a community, it worked on a community-building and ideologically cohesive level in a two-fold way: it established, on the one hand, close symbolic connections between everyone involved in the productions (the makers) and, on the other, more immediate connections between the theatre and the audience (compared with the choir in ancient Greek theatre, the participants in Passion plays, etc.).

The third procedure used by the Worker's Stage, which was perhaps the biggest step forward in their way of performing, was Delak's introduction of the so-called "speaking choir". Of course, this was not the theatre's original invention, as the origins of the speaking choir date back to the time of World War I and the Russian October Revolution, where it was called *teatr čteca* (reader's theatre), but it was very popular also on German workers' stages, where it was called *Sprechchor*. Since both leading directors of the Workers' Stage were well-informed of the developments in the then left-wing theatres abroad (Kreft particularly of the avant-garde tendencies in the theatre of the Russian Revolution and Delak of workers' theatres in Austria and Germany, including Piscator's Proletarian Theatre), they both introduced different elements from these performing practices in their projects for the Workers' Stage, adapting them to the domestic environment. Delak was already in charge of the speaking choir, which he founded upon returning from abroad and which initially performed at workers' cultural-educational evenings; he now just needed to include it

black days for the working class people, who wandered Slovenian towns with empty pockets, starving; no one was paying attention, not even the state" (Pol stoletja 300). He goes on to give a shattering account from a reporter with *Svoboda* newspaper from Zagorje ob Savi, who writes about lay-offs in the mining industry: "There is no bread, no clothes. The valley is full of the living dead, who roam around like ghosts..." (Ibid. 300). Certain parts of the Kingdom were affected even more, as, for example, Herzegovina, where people suffered not only because of the economic crisis but also because of severe drought, which destroyed all crops, so that the population was literally eating grass and starving to death. The gravity of the situation can be illustrated with a short article entitled "Peasant commits suicide: Could not stand to watch his children starve", which I came across in the *Jutro* newspaper (29 April 1928): "Extreme shortages reported from Kukovica, Herzegovina. A 50-year-old peasant, Božo Školjič, who unfortunately had no harvest at all this year due to severe drought, committed suicide by hanging himself in the stable. He has left behind four children and a note saying that he has taken his life because he could no longer watch his children slowly starve to death" (5).

in his performing concept as brilliantly, as spectacularly as he did in *The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights*.

The speaking choir was so well-received that in the “golden days” two such choirs existed in the frame of the Workers’ Stage; the other one was run by Mile Klopčič (Petrè 45). Klopčič was also an outspoken advocate for the foundation of speaking choirs in the frame of workers’ education societies and theatres. In 1929, he published a series of articles about the phenomenon in *Svoboda* magazine. His main source of reference for the articles was *Praxis des Sprechchors* by Karl Vogt, which was published in the same year by the Berlin-based publishing house Der Sturm (the same house that Ferdo Delak, then the editor of *Tank* magazine, was in contact with a few years before).

Let us look at some highlights from these articles about the speaking (or as Klopčič called it, recitation) choir: “The principle of the rec. choir is: collectivism. A mass speaking to a mass; doing so, the audience forget they are the audience and feel that they themselves are speaking” (“O recitacijskem zboru” 32). The speaking choir is at the same time also a movement choir: “The choir performs on the stage, moving around and reciting the text, which the poet has written virtually as a collective drama. This is a movement recitation choir” (“Še o recitacijskem zboru” 232). Who can become a member of the speaking choir? “Whoever finds joy in it” (232). Does a speaking choir require a conductor? “Not at all. [...] Recitation choir is not a monumental declamation group, the latest aesthetic attraction, it is not the sum of the voices” (233). What does the speaking choir do? “The choir documents the experience of the masses. [...] The facts speak their harsh truth. [...] Recitation should be delivered in a dramatic manner. Not epic, not lyrical. [...] The mere requirement that recitation be dramatic justifies the movements of the choir. [...] Every voice must be a prolongation of the body, of the gesture. Voice and gesture should arise from a relaxed body, unobstructed” (233). Why is it important that the speaking choir can move around? “Movement creates space. If the groups converge, the space is narrowed; if they move apart, the space is given volume” (234). Klopčič closes his third article by concluding that the first two “described the essence and the development of the recitation choir from the self-declimation to the movement-declimation choir” (“Iz režijske knjige” 264) and illustrates his point with an excerpt from a text for a speaking choir by Vogt *The War*.

Already at first glance, the conceptual framework of this remarkable workers’ theatre machine – at once a speaking and a movement choir – reveals a surprisingly modern understanding of corporeality on stage, as well as the idea of spatial organisation in which stage props are no longer absolutely necessary, because there are speaking-moving choir bodies onstage instead, by way of which space is created (condensed or expanded), and last but not least, the interplay of speech and movement, which is another important dimension of the speaking choir, can be seen as a reflection of

Brecht's *gestus*, an important conceptual tool of his theory of theatre, in which voice and gesture are inextricably bound into an effect of corporeal expressivity. The eloquence of the choir's multiplied bodies is undoubtedly one of the more important contributions of amateur workers' theatre to experimental theatre practices of the past century.

## The amateur effect of proletarian acting

By employing these specific performance strategies, the Workers' Stage produced an effect, which can – by analogy with Brecht's estrangement effect – be called the amateur effect of proletarian acting. In his text "Six Chronicles on Amateur Theatre", Brecht namely argued for a conceptual differentiation between amateurism and dilettantism.<sup>14</sup> He regarded amateurism as a positive notion, while dilettantism for him meant a bad version of amateurism, one that cannot develop its own mode of artistic expression, in other words, one that cannot overcome a mere mimicking of art professionals (comp. Brecht, *Dijalektika* 92). At first glance, this may be reminiscent of Stanislavski's *System*, wherefrom the very first lesson acting beginners are taught how to put behind them "naïve, dilettante sort of acting" (Stanislavski 43), overburdened with acting habits and clichés. The similarity is accidental rather than systemic. Stanislavski does not distinguish between dilettantism and amateurism, while Brecht makes a clear conceptual difference between the two.

The main characteristic of amateur (i.e., "proletarian") actors is "the simplicity of the acting", which according to Brecht is, "the alpha and omega of proletarian dramatic art" (Brecht, "Nekaj o proletarskih igralcih" 324). If we follow Brecht's line of argument, then the simplicity of their acting has nothing in common with the mimicking of dilettante actors. The actors practising "proletarian acting", says Brecht, are capable of speaking, in a simple way accessible to all, about the complex and baffling relationships among the people of our time.

Amateur art (in the Brechtian sense) is not a bad version of professional artistic practices; it is not about mimicking the elite culture as an ideological ideal of the dilettante actor, musician or painter. On the contrary, the amateur artist insists on the specificity of his own position, has an affirmative attitude towards it, takes it as a potential structural advantage and always makes a conscious effort to remain outside the horizon of professional elitism.

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<sup>14</sup> In one of his commentaries for the publication of Brecht's selected writings on theatre *Dijalektika u teatru*, Darko Suvin states that Brecht was planning to write a complex text with this title, but completed only the first part ("Is It Worth Speaking About Amateur Theatre") and an outline for the remaining five parts – the second part would supposedly be devoted to the difference between an amateur and a dilettante (comp. Suvin in Brecht, *Dijalektika* 92; comp. also Milohnić, 25–26 and ed. comment in Brecht, *Grosse kommentierte* 1084–1085).

Brecht's conceptual and methodological differentiation between amateurism and dilettantism can thus be of help in explaining the success of the Workers' Stage in the time when Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak were running it. In this period, the Workers' Stage namely developed its own – distinctive and recognisable – way of performing and did not succumb to the temptation of entering the non-productive (and inevitably already lost) competition with Slovenian professional theatres. It did exactly what Brecht recommended to a group of amateur actors in Sweden a few years later (1939): "An amateur must find his own art" (*Dijalektika* 92). The Workers' Stage was seeking its own art and, under the leadership of two young, but knowledgeable and talented theatre directors, Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak, also found it. It was successful because it never sought to *reproduce* the manner of performing that prevailed in the then professional bourgeois theatre, but instead insisted on *producing* its own style and thus attained the maximum of what an amateur workers' theatre can achieve: the effect of proletarian acting.

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