

To some extent, contemporary drama is the heir of the neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s and 1970s. This time was that of the so-called performative turn, which pulled theatre away from representation and towards presentation. The subsequent development can be designated by various labels, such as postdramatic theatre, the aesthetics of the performative and, in the case of dramatic texts, the no longer dramatic theatre text, "In-Yer-Face" theatre, etc.

In Slovenia, a decisive turn from text to event took place towards the end of the 1960s. During this time, the first happenings and performance art pieces were taking place. In reviewing the performance *Pupilija, papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki* (*Pupillja, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks*), Veno Taufer went as far as to declare the death of literary theatre. At first glance, it would thus appear that contemporary playwriting is merely repeating earlier patterns. While contemporary playwriting may more radically formulate linguistic and aesthetic games, it deconstructs the dramatic form and thus radicalises the premises of the neo-avant-gardes; in the last two decades, we have been talking about a return to dramatic, post-postdramatic and dramatic drama, etc.

Through a comparative analysis of two of the more radical texts from Blaž Lukan's anthology *Generator:: za proizvodnjo poljubnega števila dramskih kompleksov* (*The Generator:: for Manufacturing Any Number of Drama Complexes*), namely Dušan Jovanović's *Sinopsis za happening Hlapci* (*Synopsis for The Happening of Lackeys*) and Rastko Močnik's *Generator, ki iz določenih enot in po preprostih pravilih proizvaja poljubno število dramskih kompleksov* (*A Generator that Produces Any Number of Drama Complexes from Given Units and According to Simple Rules*) as well as Simona Semenič's *mi, evropski mrliči* (*we, the european corpses*) and Varja Hrvatín's *Vse se je začelo z golažem iz zajčkov* (*It All Started with the Bunny Rabbit Goulash*), the paper shows that the neo-avant-garde is more about the question of theatrical performances and the form of the dramatic text, while contemporary drama is more about the search for authenticity and dramatic effects.

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**Keywords:** Dušan Jovanović, Rastko Močnik, Simona Semenič, Varja Hrvatín, Slovenian experimental theatre, Slovenian drama

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# Contemporary Drama and the Question of the Neo-avant-garde Legacy of the 1960s and 1970s

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

To some extent, contemporary drama is the heir of the neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s and 1970s. This period saw the so-called performative turn, which pulled theatre away from representation and towards presentation. As Barbara Orel notes about the development of performance art: “The path to performance art in Slovenia also went through the aesthetics of the performative, in which ritual forms of theatre and ritual-related artistic and social practices that bind all participants into a community played a major role” (“K zgodovini” 278). The subsequent development can be designated by various labels, e.g., postdramatic theatre (Lehmann), the aesthetics of the performative (Fischer-Lichte) and, in the case of dramatic texts, the no longer dramatic theatrical text (Poschmann), “In-Yer-Face” theatre (Sierz), etc.

In Slovenia, a decisive turn from text to event took place towards the end of the 1960s. During this time, the first happenings and performance art pieces were taking place. In reviewing the performance *Pupilija, papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki* (*Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks*), Veno Taufer went as far as to declare the death of literary theatre.

At first glance, it would thus appear that contemporary playwriting is merely repeating earlier patterns. While contemporary playwriting may more radically formulate linguistic and aesthetic games, it deconstructs the dramatic form and thus radicalises the premises of the neo-avant-gardes; in the last two decades, we have been talking about a return to dramatic (Toporišič “Dramska pisava”), post-postdramatic (Angel-Perez) and dramatic drama (Haas), etc.

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Thus, there are two questions that we have to ask here: What are the differences between the experimental texts of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary Slovenian drama? And what are their common features?

We will highlight these questions by analysing two of the more radical texts from Blaž Lukan's anthology *Generator:: za proizvodnjo poljubnega števila dramskih kompleksov* (*The Generator:: for Manufacturing Any Number of Drama Complexes*), namely Dušan Jovanović's *Sinopsis za happening Hlapci* (*Synopsis for The Happening of Lackeys*) and Rastko Močnik's *Generator, ki iz določenih enot in po preprostih pravilih proizvaja poljubno število dramskih kompleksov* (*A Generator that Produces Any Number of Drama Complexes from Given Units and According to Simple Rules*) and comparing them to Simona Semenič's *mi, evropski mrlič* (*we, the european corpses*) and Varja Hrvatin's *Vse se je začelo z golažem iz zajčkov* (*It All Started with the Bunny Rabbit Goulash*).

But before we analyse the selected texts, we need to consider the basic theoretical concepts that theatre studies and literary history use to describe the development of playwriting over the last 60 years.

## The Performative Turn and Its Consequences in Theatre and Dramatic Writing

As pointed out at the beginning, radical changes in art and its relationship to society occurred towards the end of the 1960s in the USA, Europe and Yugoslavia. In her seminal book, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte later referred to these changes with the term the aesthetics of the performative. She based this term on the performance by the Yugoslav artist Marina Abramović entitled *Lips of Thomas*, which she performed on 24 October 1975 at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck. The author describes the crucial point of this change as follows:

Such a performance eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories. It vehemently resists the demands of hermeneutic aesthetics, which aims at understanding the work of art. In this case, understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had while carrying them out and that were generated in the audience. In short, the transformation of the performance's participants was pivotal. (Fischer-Lichte 16)

In order to be able to describe such events and to attribute particular meanings to them, a different approach is needed, which Fischer-Lichte calls the aesthetics of the performative since traditional aesthetic theories of art are not able to consider the work of art after the performative turn. "However, they are unable to grasp its key aspect – the transformation from a work of art into an event" (Fischer-Lichte 23). These

conceptual pairings overlap and thus produce the effects of liminality, a threshold that transforms the participants or results in the emergence (contingent appearance) of effects or meanings.

Another author who has significantly conceptualised this development of theatre and theatre texts after the performative turn is Hans-Thies Lehmann with his book *Post-dramatic Theatre*. Lehmann also proceeds from the insight that theatre is, first and foremost, a matter of community. "Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating take place [...] The theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a 'text' even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience" (17). Thus, he emphasises the capacity of theatre to form a community. Then he puts into question the position of the text, which has traditionally been considered the source and measure of the success of a theatrical performance and the element that guaranteed the synthesis of theatrical signs.

In postdramatic theatre, this hierarchy shatters, and different performance elements become equal in status while their simultaneity and multiple meanings become emphasised. As Lehmann writes in the introduction to his book:

By alluding to the literary genre of the drama, the title "Postdramatic Theatre" signals the continuing association and exchange between theatre and text. Nevertheless, the discourse of theatre is at the centre of this book and the text therefore is considered only as one element, one layer, or as a "material" of the scenic creation, not as its master. (17)

Consequently, the postdramatic theatre produces different dramatic texts, which Gerda Poschmann designates as no longer dramatic theatre texts, "in which language appears not as the speech of characters – if there still are definable characters at all – but as an autonomous theatricality" (18). We can no longer speak about the elements of traditional drama theory, such as the dramatic person, the dramatic act, the creation of illusion ... (cf. Kralj), but rather about language which becomes autonomous and about language surfaces, as Elfriede Jelinek calls them, that create tension and reflect the contemporary world.

Another important aspect for us is Lehmann's view of the neo-avant-garde, which he considers to be the third stage in the development of postdramatic theatre, as this is the period to which the texts published in *The Generator* anthology belong as well. While Lehmann considers the neo-avant-garde primarily as the drama of the absurd and lyrical drama, he is aware that "the 1960s see the development of a new spirit of experimentation in all arts" (53), which culminates in the 1968 movement. He also mentions happenings and performance art and points out that "In 1969, Richard Schechner stages *Dionysius 69*, in which the spectators are invited to get into physical

contact with the players” (53). And this already takes us into the area of the postdramatic. For Lehmann, the defining characteristic of the postdramatic is precisely the position of the dramatic text. As he endeavours to discern the differences between epic theatre and the theatre of the absurd on the one hand and postdramatic theatre on the other, Lehmann writes:

Yet the step to postdramatic theatre is taken only when the theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it. Hence we cannot speak of a “continuation” of absurdist or epic theatre in the new theatre but must name the rupture: that epic, as much as absurdist theatre, though through different means, clings to the presentation of a fictive and simulated text-cosmos as a dominant, while postdramatic theatre no longer does so. (55)

Since the dramatic text becomes dethroned within the performance, this also puts into question the meaning of the whole, which is no longer coherent and is quite challenging to define. It becomes fluid and depends on the interpretation of the individual. Lehmann states, “The aim is no longer the wholeness of an aesthetic theatre composition of words, meaning, sound, gesture, etc., which as a holistic construct offers itself to perception. Instead, the theatre takes on a fragmentary and partial character” (57). And, as we shall see below, these are also the main characteristics of the dramatic texts under discussion. In them, the elements of drama are disappearing, and the text becomes disposable and directs the other aspects of theatrical performance. Meaning is lost or remains extremely open, which leads to fragmentation and arbitrariness of interpretation.

In the former Yugoslavia, this development of theatre and the arts in general, which emerged from the spirit of the 1968 student riots, aligned with the aspirations for complete freedom of creativity and the search for a new way of life. As Barbara Orel notes, this generation pursued “the imperative of a creative life, and maintained its radical stance in a free-thinking leftist spirit, resisting all forms of political, social, economic and cultural despotism” (“K zgodovini” 278, 279). The demand for freedom naturally pointed away from established modes of performance, away from hierarchical relations within performances and towards the formation of community.

This, however, was not exclusively a Slovenian phenomenon but a broader Yugoslav one. Branislav Jakovljević, for example, in his detailed study of the relationship between the development of performance art and Yugoslav socialism, also detects the spontaneous emergence of the student movement in 1968, which was, however, soon neutralised. Self-management was presented as a social form that allowed for extreme individual freedom, thus fulfilling the demands of students. Nonetheless, it was always a bit problematic. This is how Jakovljević analyses Raša Todosijević’s performance piece entitled *Decision as Art*, first performed in August 1973 at the Richard Demarc Gallery in Edinburgh. Mere months later, he performed it at the Student Cultural

Centre in Belgrade at the exhibition *Information II*, where the performance took on completely different connotations. As his partner, Marinela Koželj sits impassively on a chair placed upstage right, the artist, stripped to the waist, first applies white paint to four small ficus plants positioned along the front edge of the stage. He covers his naked torso with salt, picks a live carp from a tank and places it on the floor. As the fish wriggles about the stage, he begins swallowing large quantities of water. The artist and the fish suffer in unison: the carp slowly suffocates on dry land, and Todosijević gulps water until he throws up, then drinks again. This “game” goes on until the carp dies. The performer paints one of his ears white and then faces the audience, holding a small battery-operated flashlight in his extended right arm. He holds it until the battery dies or until he can no longer hold up his arm (cf. 142).

Although the British monarchy is far from the absolutism of the 18th century, its ideological, political and theological background imbued the first performance of Todosijević’s *Decision as Art* with a note of noble and emphatically anti-democratic *art of decision-making*. However, when reprised in the post-revolutionary society of Yugoslavia, the same performance brought a whole new set of questions to the foreground. “[...] whereas the former was commercial, the latter was not; and while the former was fully integrated within the network of art institutions, the latter was an expression and continuation of the communal spirit of Belgrade’s June ‘68” (Jakovljević 144).

In the United Kingdom, this functioned as a commentary on capitalist social relations in the monarchy. In Yugoslavia, it was seen as a government reckoning with the students after the 1968 movement. Therefore, such artistic explorations of artists were also a commentary on the freedom of expression and the individual’s right to choose their lifestyle, thus indirectly presenting social commentary.

At first glance, Marina Abramović’s performance appears to be more explicit. “When, in the early evening of 20 April 1974, Marina Abramović stepped into a burning five-pointed star, having first clipped her finger- and toenails and cut some of her hair and thrown them into the flames, she entered into an intersection of art and politics, conceptualism and ideology, that was unique to post- 1968 Yugoslavia” (Jakovljević 177).

Marina Abramović pointed out the connection between power and art much more explicitly. She would repeat this gesture on later occasions (e.g., using the five-pointed star in her piece *Lips of Thomas*). However, this act cannot be read as a symbol of government violence or the extinguishing of fiery revolutionary ideals. “The situation in Yugoslavia was much more complex, and it might be more appropriate to read the five points of this burning structure as a constellation of mutually opposed forces at work in Yugoslavia at that time” (Jakovljević 179). I make a similar point in my study of Slovenian drama and theatre between 1945 and 1990 when I demonstrate the delicate balance between the largely conflicting tendencies of artists, authorities and

audiences that allowed for the flourishing of Slovenian playwriting and theatre after 1960 (Cf. Troha, *Ujetniki*). A discussion on the relationship between art and power under socialism is beyond the scope of our present purpose, so let us here merely summarise the realisation that art, with its aesthetic breakthroughs and explorations in the former Yugoslavia, also achieved political impact.

## Contemporary Dramatic Writing between Postdramatic and Dramatic

After 1990, precisely due to the abovementioned position of alternative culture, which in the 1980s transitioned from the margins to the centre, theatre in general, and experimental art in particular, faced a challenge. As Barbara Orel so aptly formulates it: “How to preserve and maintain the identity of the alternative when it no longer speaks from the structural place of the marginal since the distinction between the centre and the margin has been abolished in principle?” (“K zgodovini” 320).

The answer to this question was to search for new conceptual and aesthetic starting points that could provide an alternative to the independent state’s new cultural and political conditions. After 2000, we can see this alternative emerge in the radicalisation of postdramatic theatre and later in its coexistence with a return to the dramatic form.

Since we have already described postdramatic theatre and the no longer dramatic theatre text, let us now look at the latest tendencies in dramatic writing, which become mixed with postdramatic or more traditionally dramatic elements, depending on individual authors.

Birgit Haas notes that, after a long postdramatic period, contemporary German drama has begun reintroducing some dramatic elements. She writes about the playwright Dea Loher:

Despite the defamiliarized *Verfremdungseffekt*, however, she neither subscribes to the postmodern decentering of the subject nor to the end of the metanarratives. Instead, Loher draws on Walter Benjamin’s revolutionary Marxist aesthetic that he established in order to retain a human element in the arts, a human element that would resist the technical innovations of his time (Haas 74, 75).

Loher is not, however, implying a return to realism but rather to the creation of radically fragmentary texts that bear the mark of the postdramatic, as she

deliberately causes a feeling of uncertainty, mainly due to the mixture of private and public political discourses. [...] her work is a creative and productive revival of the Brechtian theatre in the context of the post-postmodern age, an age in which human



beings have again reclaimed the theatrical space. [...] Loher's theatre is a theatre of empowerment, a politically engaged theatre that does not leave the bewildered spectator in front of a destroyed history. (Haas 85)

Tomaz Toporišič reaches similar insights when analysing dramatic writing after the postdramatic. In doing so, he notes that in different ways the authors Anja Hilling, Milena Marković and Simona Semenič reach beyond the no longer dramatic theatre writing. Thus, he detects the inability to communicate and the deconstruction of the body and voice in Anja Hilling's plays, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the representation of reality in Simona Semenič's plays, and the contamination with the lyrical and the epic in Milena Marković's works. Let us look at his description of the structure of Simona Semenič's dramatic works, which will be of particular interest to us later on:

She persistently reworks the dialogic form in conjunction with a variety of textual strategies: from stage directions to descriptions that are closer to novels and prose, to the narrative, essayistic, theoretical and other techniques, reminding the audience that what they are reading or watching is no longer a real dialogue. However, in doing so, she produces distinctly dramatic effects that Haas would probably call "dramatic drama". ("Dramska pisava" 114)

Élisabeth Angel-Perez reaches similar conclusions. Namely, that postdramatic theatre, through the deconstruction of drama, actually creates a new fiction, thus returning to the elements it was originally deconstructing. As Angel-Perez writes at the end of her article "Back to Verbal Theatre: Post-Post-Dramatic Theatres from Crimp to Crouch":

The author on the stage delineates a new sort of lyrical subject, half way between theatre and performance and, albeit on the mode of autobiography [author's note: here, she is referring to Tim Crouch's play *The Author*], relegitimizes fiction at the heart of post-dramatic theatre and therefore somehow recreates the drama. (30)

Interestingly, Angel-Perez establishes a link here between theatre and performance art, that is, between the experimental practices of the 1960s and 1970s and contemporary theatre, which re-creates the fictional world of drama, and thus external reference, precisely through the intrusion of reality.

In her article "Après le postdramatique: narration et fiction entre écriture de plateau et théâtre néo-dramatique", Anne Monfort approaches this problem from a different angle. To her, stage writing means the whole sign system of a performance, in which text is only one of the elements and does not precede the others. Thus, while performances may contain a text, it is constantly mixed with the reality of the stage performance itself. Examples of this can be seen in actors breaking the fourth wall or narrating about the depicted world, ellipsis, condensation, etc. All of this, of course, represents an intrusion of the narrative into the theatrical. On the other hand, there

is neo-dramatic theatre, where we can find dramatic characters and action. They are, however, highly fragmentary and constantly play with the duality of fiction and reality in the theatre. As Monfort writes: “This text [Author note: Ulrike Syha’s *Private Life*] is a typical example of neo-dramatic theatre in which there is still action, even if only fragmentary, through persons or characters, or even if playing with the ambiguity of the person and the actor” (151).

As we can see, Anne Monfort also notes that contemporary theatre is about questioning the relationship between reality and fiction, which draws its origins from performance art and postdramatic theatre. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that in these texts and performances, both authors discover the re-establishment of dramatic elements, such as dramatic characters and dramatic action, even if they are mostly highly fragmentary. In addition, Monfort emphasises another principal feature, which we have already described when discussing the aesthetics of the performative. This feature refers to the involvement of the spectator and their active role. As Monfort writes in the conclusion of her article, “As a response to an increasingly fictionalised and dramatised world, contemporary forms of theatre are rethinking the question of the real and the fictional, leaving the spectator free to imagine the drama that does not occur on the stage” (158).

A theatre text, therefore, is not only the material that the creative team arbitrarily changes in their performance. It is also a completely open structure that invites the spectator/reader to think and create their own interpretation or story.

Let us now turn to the rather radical thesis that Blaž Lukan formulated concerning the youngest generation of Slovenian playwrights, specifically Varja Hrvatin, who will be particularly interesting to us later. As Lukan writes, such a text “contains no stage directions, its line of dialogue is also completely indistinct, while at the same time, in such writing, there is no hint of direction whatsoever about its performance” (115). Nevertheless, such texts produce strong dramatic effects and require active participation on the part of the reader or spectator, and therefore undoubtedly feel like dramatic, or rather stage or theatre texts. This also goes for the play *It All Started with the Bunny Rabbit Goulash*, which we analyse below and which anticipates several different readings. The author directs the reader/spectator to either create their own story according to their own opinions and attitudes from the suggested sections or to read the text from beginning to end. But this is not merely a game in the postmodernist sense; through the scenes, the playwright tells her own story of searching for her identity, coping with anorexia, her fears, etc. At the end of his article, Lukan nevertheless takes a risk and suggests how to read and perform such drama: “The liberated creative euphoria of a contemporary playwright expects an appropriate response from the contemporary director and their crew” (118).

From the presented theoretical starting points, we can thus conclude that the modernism of the 1960s and 1970s meant, above all, the deconstruction of the dramatic form, the intrusion of reality into the theatrical performance, and the involvement of the spectators/readers, i.e., the creation of a community. This legacy can also be noted in the period following the postdramatic when the otherwise fragmentary structure once again produces dramatic effects and displays some elements of drama (e.g., dramatic characters and action). Below, we try to detect potential parallels between the experimental texts from the modernist period and contemporary Slovenian drama by comparing specific texts.

### **Synopsis for *The Happening of Lackeys and we, the european corpses***

The first two texts we will deal with in detail are *Synopsis for The Happening of Lackeys*, published in the journal *Problemi Katalog* as part of the repertoire plan for the 1968/69 season of the small stage of the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana. The production was planned as part of the *Original Slovenian Texts* section, with Žarko Petan (director), Dušan Jovanović (author) and Andrej Inkret (dramaturg) listed as authors. The production was never carried out, but Dušan Jovanović directed Ivan Cankar's *Hlapci* (Lackeys) at the Ljubljana City Theatre in the 1980/81 season (cf. *The Generator* 356).

It is a happening that joins spectators and actors into a community while aiming to arouse strong, mostly negative emotions such as fear, discomfort and anxiety. It starts by entering an event that resembles a ritual. The title of this part is *The Elevator of Terror*, through which the audience eventually leaves the event. During the ride in the elevator, the lights go out and "various screams, electronic sounds, silence, rapid breathing and concrete music are heard in the dark. The elevator is stuck for a while, while loudspeakers warn passengers to keep calm and hold their nerves, as they will need them" (Jovanović 76). A party – an exhibition of paintings, sculptures, photographs – is going on in the foyer and smoking room. Somebody is selling sausages and hotdogs, a shoemaker and hairdresser are offering their services – and again, loud music and noise. A feeling of discomfort intensifies in the auditorium, where the spectators are locked inside, the lights are switched off, and they start hearing knocking from the outside and calls to let in the actors.

Next follows Jerman's speech in the tavern from Act Four of Cankar's *Lackeys*, which is commented on by simultaneous projections of "youth work brigades/ roads/ businesses/ labour successes [...]" (Jovanović 78). It is followed by the parish priest's reply that times have turned and the people have made their choice, accompanied by pro-

jections of hippie life and police repression. The text is thus constantly relativised. At the same time, it is also updated with the immediate present.

The action becomes a bit lighter with the appearance of a reciter and a dancer, accompanied by projections of a sunny landscape and abstract compositions. This intermezzo is followed by the arrival of Jerman and the tavern scene from Act Four of Cankar's *Lackeys*. Everything in this scene, however, is exaggerated to the grotesque. "The costumes are a mixture of pyjamas, nightgowns, professional clothes and nudity [...] The men appear in strange poses. [...] One of them is sitting on a huge bedpan, dominating the scene with a megaphone in hand and straining. This is supposed to be a speaker's podium" (79).

The assembled crowd holds a kind of self-management meeting, during which they play board games, and Jerman starts multiplying until there are six of them. Each new Jerman interprets the same passages from Cankar's play differently, thus creating a kind of polemic. "The polemic between the five Jermans begins in a lively and vigorous manner. They speak all the lines. A great noise, in which gradually the words are no longer distinguishable" (81).

Then it is back to more simple action, with commercials and bar announcements playing over the loudspeakers, accompanied by projections of circus acts. In the end, an actor recites a poem about Robespierre through a megaphone, and the six Jermans can be heard singing a song about the lackeys over the loudspeakers.

After the loudspeakers announce the end of the happening, the audience leaves in the elevator of terror again.

Jovanović's happening is an emblematic example of a theatrical event following the performative turn. Based on a self-referential feedback loop between performers and participants, it evokes strong, mostly unpleasant emotions in the audience while creating a sense of community already with the ritual entrance and exit, and even through physical confinement to the auditorium (with locked doors), a meeting at which "all the problems that concern the people present in the tavern, as well as all the other citizens, are confronted" (Jovanović 79). All meaning is constantly relativised – contradictory projections accompany both Jerman's and the Priest's lines – often, their speeches cannot be heard at all, etc. The meaning of the words is thus hollow, and their interpretation is left to each spectator without any reassurance that their interpretation is in line with the experience and interpretation of the others. And it is even less clear what message the creative team is trying to convey.

Simona Semenič wrote her play *we, the european corpses* in 2015, and it was first staged at the Mladinsko Theatre in 2016 (directed by Sebastijan Horvat, première 5 June 2016). It is a text full of readily recognisable postdramatic features – the action

is highly fragmented, the text is often not entirely written out, and it is up to the performance team to supplement it. The author is all the time narrating from the point of view of the spectator/reader. The characters appear more like wholesome functions than fully psychologically articulated persons. Nevertheless, the whole is extremely tense and dramatic as well as politically engaged.

On one side, there is the character of the master of ceremony (emcee), a kind of political agitator who keeps telling us that we are swimming in shit and that we need to do something about it. His public position is complemented by a group of plumbers who are trying to resolve the issue of the actual leakage of faeces that is drowning the theatre auditorium, as well as Jolanda, who is keeping track of the action on stage as a kind of a snitch, and Milena, who is wandering around looking all pretty and trying to charm us. On the other side, there are intimate stories that serve as a contrast to the social situation and a relativisation of public action. They mostly appear very static. This is the case with Lojzka (Alojzija Bizjak), who is the first one to come on stage and is just waiting for the whole duration of the performance. In the end, it turns out that she is actually waiting for the character death. The partisan Milica, who is in hospice care, is similarly passive, unable even to speak, while her tragic story of domestic violence is related to us by the author. Next comes the couple “jakob and andreja/ or/ jakob and silvo/ or/ nina and andreja/ or silvo and nina” (Semenič 8). They represent the image of a couple of lovers slowly strolling towards the ramp, holding hands. Their opposites can be seen in “jožica, 88, and milan, 91”, who are also a couple of lovers. They, however, represent the image of carnality and pleasure. “we’re watching and can’t really decide whether we’re comfortable with this/it’s nice when two people are kissing/ but to watch jožica, 88, and milan, 91, make out evokes mixed emotions in us” (Semenič 9).

The action intensifies towards the end when the auditorium is threatened by vast amounts of shit pouring out of the sewers. The group of plumbers is trying to stop it but to no avail. The one to blame for this is a motherfucking stingy Jewish git who refused to authorise replacing the pipes, so now the actors and the audience find themselves not merely in metaphorical shit the emcee talks about at the beginning but also in actual shit.

The ending ends in a double punchline: “politics is a whore from a brothel, milica the partisan would say in the end [...] but milica the partisan will never again/never again get her words in edgeways” and “sun, breeze, sea/ freedom” (Semenič 39, 40). Thus, politics turns out to be a mess and a whore, while its opposite is represented by the image of nature, which perhaps stands for freedom.

Simona Semenič radicalises the starting points we have encountered in Jovanović’s text. Her text is wholly oriented towards its receiver and their experience. The text is

narrated by a narrator whom the readers identify as the author herself but who, at the same time, appears to be one of the readers/spectators:

the fourth line is truly long /we're fidgeting in our chairs already/because we're tired/  
bloody hell how we're tired of this agit-prop/we prefer to glance towards milena/mile-  
na is truly beautiful/ truly beautiful. (Semenič 6, 7)

The noise here is no longer produced by the loud music and various recorded sounds; rather, it is actualised at the level of the text as the rapid exchange of discourses, for which the reader has to identify their points of enunciation, i.e., their *dramatis personae*.

it is true that we're in shit, but at least we're swimming/this is how you should be  
looking at it/at least we're swimming  
often told enough that this way, things will lead us nowhere  
what things  
things/ things, like/society/social structure/state structure/garden structure/gar-  
dens/i haven't yet/i haven't yet  
to enter the united states of america, i don't need a visa/ i need the esta form, what-  
ever that's supposed to be  
beyond what, dammit?  
milena leaves. (Semenič 11)

The above quotation is just an excerpt to illustrate the structure of the whole text. At first glance, it may appear to be a series of diverse speeches, not related by any causal logic but rather by absurd coincidence. However, this pell-mell of lines, stage directions and reflections on the action nevertheless produce the sense of *dramatis personae* we have already discussed. In short, it is possible to reduce this cacophony of voices to some identifiable representatives of the discourse, situated within a more extensive, conflicting structure in which the action is happening simultaneously. The latter interferes with the receiver's reception since they have to attribute to individual events specific meanings in the grand scheme of what is happening.

The text is aware that it is merely one element of the performance and will be extensively reworked, rewritten, crossed out, etc., by the creative team. Thus it remains open and disposable at all times. For example, the lines of the emcee, who appears to be the play's central character, are mostly not written out at all since he is given the most time and space on stage.

a theatrical effect  
and only then he started  
the opening line  
a pause, in which the in-between begins, the in-between between the opening and clos-

ing lines

the second line

the second line is

an expression of affection/a stance of a greeting/something trifling in content, in fact, but in a civilised society of utmost importance in communication among adults/to maintain a level of sophistication/a formal thing, indispensable in the transfer of demands and wishes/an expression of affection/a stance of a greeting (Semenič 3).

The emcee himself can be anyone: “perhaps the emcee /or the mobilizer/ a male character that can also be played by a woman [...] perhaps it’s better that he’s played by a woman/a maternal figure/ soft, rounded, warm/ with peace in her voice/ peace/ and passion” (4).

The lines spoken on stage are no longer essential. The lines of the partisan Milica, which tell a shocking story of domestic violence and violence against women, cannot be spoken since Milica can no longer speak. The author here performs another hollowing out of the word. In a dictionary-like manner the text defines words to make them empty, e.g., to jerk off, which refers to the emcee’s agitation and the loving couple:

to jerk/ one/ to jerk off: to masturbate./ france jerks off four times a day/two/to make spasmodic motions:/my legs jerked from fatigue/ three/to make and serve (ice-cream sodas, for example) at a soda fountain./why don’t you go outside and jerk yourself a soda?/four/to jerk around: to take unfair advantage of, deceive, or manipulate/ 20 euros for parking? don’t try to jerk around with me! (Semenič 7, 8)

A different approach is to play around with a word which otherwise fits the context: “is like tofu compared to/beefsteak/rump steak/skirt steak/sirloin/ top loin/flank/ is like tofu compared to beefsteak/jerking off compared to sex is like tofu compared to beefsteak” (Semenič 11, 12).

Simona Semenič thus combines many procedures of neo-avant-garde theatre and postdramatic writing, such as fragmentation, simultaneous action, hollowing out of words, the disponibility of the text and thus its dethronement, while at the same time, it is possible to detect in *we, the european corpses* the outlines of the dramatis personae who are in conflicting relationships with each other. These make up recognisable actions or at least contrasts and culminate in a conclusion that is not entirely explicit but can nevertheless be identified as a call for freedom, intimacy and turning away from political projects.

The formal structure is characterised by the fragmentary nature of the text and simultaneous lines of action, which undoubtedly represents the legacy of postdramatic writing, but also a decisive irruption of lyricisation (the narrator tells us the entire text from her own personal position, commenting on her intimate perception of what

is going on on stage) and episatation (the text is heavily infused with narration, which allows for its fragmentary nature and simultaneous action). Thus we can discern a strong legacy of performance texts of the modernist period in Simona Semenič's work. At the same time, she also reaches beyond them and develops them in a way that re-establishes the very elements of drama that she has deconstructed.

### ***A Generator that Produces Any Number of Dramatic Complexes from Given Units and According to Simple Rules and It All Started with the Bunny Rabbit Goulash***

In 1970, in issue 85 of the journal *Problemi*, Rastko Močnik published two texts that, however, form a unit. *A Generator* is a series of combinations of spaces, people, stances, voices and movements that follow specific rules. These rules were published in a different section of the journal entitled *Drama*. This was a conceptual explication of *A Generator*, which derived from an analysis of the dramatic text, which is characterised by an exact definition of the spoken dimension of the performance. In contrast, other elements (phonic values of the performance, the characters' stances and movements) are much more loosely defined. Contrary to that, Močnik's *Drama* defines the phonic and kinetic dimensions very precisely while retaining the freedom or rather the contingent nature of each performance, as the starting situations are determined by the luck of the draw, and the subsequent development depends on the possible combinations of various elements (Cf. Močnik 101). The author goes on to define the units and rules of the dramatic text, and it is interesting to note that the text does not feature among its units which instead consist of other means of expression by the performers or other elements of the performance (spaces, people, stances, voices and movements). These are combined according to specific rules, but above all, they alternate in predefined series. Thus, the "sequence of attitudes is: a-b-c-d-e-a... [...] the directions of movement through the spaces are: a) clockwise: I-II-III-IV-I-..., b) counter-clockwise" (Močnik 102). Thus, what we are dealing with is a kind of complex game that can produce any number of combinations of its essential elements and, therefore, also any number of dramatic complexes, as the author calls them. The latter is limited by "impossible combinations", which we would get if any of the series got interrupted or could not be continued properly. In this case, the movement through space would be interrupted, and the combination would be repeated in the same space and continued with the following combination in the same space. At the end of *Drama*, Močnik writes down the instructions: "Start: the starting combinations and the direction of movement from each space are determined by draw; end: the game is over when four impossible combinations happen at the same time, and thus all four people stop at the same time" (102).



The text is explicitly performance-oriented and moves away from the text. There is no text, as the dramatic complexes are composed of other performance elements. The closest thing to discourse is the six voices which, however, represent pre-linguistic elements. The action is simultaneous, performed by four people in four spaces. The individual spectator constructs meaning according to their own reception and experience of the performance, which can only evoke certain impressions, but in no way suggest potential meanings. Thus, at first sight, the text could be said to belong to the postdramatic tradition, however, with not so much emphasis on the creation of community. Moreover, it would appear that chance, and the luck of the draw is crucial to its structure, which excludes the rational subject. In this sense, the text is firmly rooted in modernism with its ideas about the stream of consciousness, automatic writing, etc.

*It All Started with the Bunny Rabbit Goulash* is a play written in 2019 and first staged at the Nova pošta (The New Post Office) of the Mladinsko Theatre in the same year (directed by Eva Kokalj, produced by KUD Krik and JSKD in coproduction with The New Post Office). In 2020, Varja won the Young Playwright Award for this text at the 50<sup>th</sup> Week of Slovenian Drama. Her text also begins with some instructions for use, i.e., a “Prologue, which is a very long footnote”. Here one can read:

1. If you consider yourself to be more of a rational person, who prefers the rational, is prone to analysis and makes decisions based on what promises the biggest payoff, then go for *OPTION A*. [...]
2. If you consider yourself to be more of an emotional person, who is quick to be overwhelmed by emotion, is prone to daydreaming and makes decisions based on momentary disposition, go for *OPTION B*. [...]
3. If, however, you are one of the more impulsive people, who like to get involved in unusual, random situations, act spontaneously and rely on making decisions on the spur of the moment, without any expectations, I recommend *OPTION C*. (Hrvatín 947)

What *A Generator* and *It All Started* have in common is how the text can be used. The reader/spectator discovers it according to particular choices. The whole represents a game through which meaning is created. But in Varja’s case, this game is no longer a matter of chance and is not separated from the receiver. On the contrary, the main players are, as the author writes: “the playwright and the reader + the other players waiting in silence on the side bench” (Hrvatín 945). It is no longer a matter of chance and automatic writing but rather a consequence of the receiver’s choice. What is more, this choice fundamentally determines them. The author uses the discourse from lifestyle magazines or self-help books, which offer advice adapted to the individual’s psychological makeup. If we are more of a rational type, we should go for option A, etc. Thus, by making their choice, the receiver also psychologically defines themselves, i.e., they choose according to what they want to be like or how they want to perceive themselves. These choices are repeated throughout the text, except that now

they are no longer linked to the psychological profile of the receiver alone but also to their desire for which direction to follow: "IF YOU WANT ME TO STUDY SOMETHING USEFUL, turn to page 971" (Hrvatín 969), or to their life experience: "IF YOU EVER CHEATED ON YOUR BOYFRIEND OR GIRLFRIEND, turn to page 970" (Hrvatín 968).

The bulk of the play comprises excerpts from the author's autobiography, as indicated by many details, such as her father Emil Hrvatín changing his name to Janez Janša, her choice to study dramaturgy at the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film and Television ... Besides these external details, which suggest a turnkey reading of the play, Varja continuously reveals her inner experience and psychological development that unfolded through feelings of guilt and alienation throughout her childhood, her later struggles with anorexia, her search for a partner, etc.

How do this structure and content fit the postdramatic or even neo-dramatic paradigm? The text remains perfectly disposable. We can read it in different ways and thus create the author's story by ourselves. The latter thus manifests itself as a fictional story. However, one that is nevertheless based on facts, which gives it imbues it with a great deal of authenticity. A recipient actively co-creates their own experience, which is, in fact, entirely personal and unrepeatable. The choice depends on their mood at the moment, the way they see themselves, the resulting decisions they have to make and the feeling that, in any case, they will miss something, for every choice entails the loss of all other possibilities. For Lehmann, it is precisely this different perception – this different view – that essentially defines the postdramatic. Also, the connection between the performer/author and the receiver constantly maintained through direct addressing and choices, fundamentally defines the theatrical event as understood by Erika Fischer-Lichte. However, *It All Started* is also about the intrusion of the narrative into the dramatic text. Even though the text was awarded the Best Young Playwright Award in 2020 and was successfully staged the year before, Blaž Lukan points out several dilemmas from the beginning of his analysis: 1) How to analyse a new drama that is outside all frameworks and definitions? 2) How to read this drama? And 3) Who is the one reading it at all? (cf. "Tega teksta" 99, 100). He proceeds from the intuition that this is a piece of new writing, which "sometimes appears to be genuinely new, but then again as something already seen and reflected long ago - especially in modernist drama and postdrama" ("Tega teksta" 97).

As we have determined, the play combines postdramatic tradition and strong episatation and lyricisation. On the one hand, the intrusion of the narrator, in this concrete case, this is the playwright herself, who narrates her life, no longer has the function of episatation, of breaking the fourth wall in the sense of Szondi's notion; instead, the narrative introduces the lyrical subject. Rather than producing an alienating effect, the episatation has the opposite effect of creating a connection between the playwright and

the spectator, both co-creating the author's intimate story or, rather, one of its possible interpretations. Although we could speak of an identifiable dramatic character (the narrator/author) and dramatic action (scenes from her life, which are structured by the reader's choices and have a predetermined structure or structures), these two elements of the play are used in a distinctly postdramatic way, based on the event, fragmentation and the active role of the receiver. Thus, Varja Hrvatin displays a strong influence of the postdramatic, which she combines with the equally strong intrusion of episation and lyricisation, thus creating distinctly dramatic effects.

## Conclusion

At this point, we can try to answer our two starting questions. What are the similarities and differences between the analysed texts?

The similarities are apparent. All of the plays endeavour to create an unrepeatable theatrical event that requires the active participation of the receiver (be it the reader or spectator). To this end, they manipulate the receiver's emotions (e.g., creating discomfort, anxiety, confusion) and introduce simultaneous activities and fragmented action, thus requiring the receiver to choose their own event and, of course, their own interpretation. All of this places these texts clearly into the domain of the postdramatic. In this vein, we can confirm that the influence of experimental texts from the neo-avant-garde period is still strongly present in contemporary Slovenian drama.

However, there are also some crucial differences between the two generations. If Jovanović and Močnik are primarily concerned with the destruction of theatrical performance and the dethronement of the dramatic text with all consequences that this leads to, the position of Simona Semenič and Varja Hrvatin is fundamentally different. In the intervening period, theatre already returned to the spoken word and became a social forum in the 1980s, then turned away from the word again and moved in the direction of physical theatre and contemporary dance (the 1990s), and finally returned to the text once more (after 2000). In short, the tension between text and stage is no longer the focal point of playwriting; instead, this relationship becomes disposable, just like the elements of traditional drama (e.g., dramatic characters and action) and the process of episation and lyricisation. Semenič and Hrvatin use all of these in new ways to maximise the receiver's involvement. Above all, the experience of the spectator/reader becomes the focal point of this writing. In Semenič's work, this is constantly reflected upon, as the author/narrator appears to be telling the story from the spectator's point of view. Varja emphasises the spectator's experience by constantly calling upon them to make a choice bound to the spectator, their psychological profile and their life experiences. Thus, we are witnessing a forceful

intrusion of the narrative combined with spectacle (diegesis and mimesis, as Anne Monfort notes) and a strong sense of intimacy and authenticity. The authors draw us into their own world, their own worldview, which seems to emanate from the lyrical subject, and, ultimately, also from the receiver themselves, as we become co-creators of the performance and its meanings. And it is precisely this interplay that creates a high degree of drama and appeals to today's readers/spectators.

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