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Abstract

The issue of the ecological catastrophe into which global society is sliding is a very urgent one that contemporary theatre cannot avoid. At the same time, it is an issue seemingly so complex that it cannot be fully understood, and there are still fewer clear solutions to it. The paper analyses two approaches that follow the general sense of the tragic or serious and the comic. The first example is the production *Fever* (première 12 October 2021 (Ljubljana), 24 September 2021 (Graz), a co-production of the Slovenian Mladinsko Theatre, steirischer herbst '21 and Maska Ljubljana, directed by Žiga Divjak). This post-dramatic theatre production tackles the subject with extensive documentary material. The second one is Matjaž Zupančič's play *This Game Will Be Over*, which the author subtitled as a *Lehrstück*. A huge meteor is approaching the Earth and will destroy all life on the planet. The play's characters react differently to the approaching danger, thus showing their character traits. Above all, the whole story is highly comical, as the usual social masks fall away in this extreme situation. The discussion shows that both examples activate the reader/spectator. However, Zupančič's text, with its comic quality, brings about a comic catharsis, which releases the feeling of hopelessness about the situation in which we find ourselves.

Keywords: ecological catastrophe, comedy, political theatre, Žiga Divjak, Matjaž Zupančič

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The Social-Critical Potential of Comedy and the Issue of Ecological Catastrophe

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Summary¹

The issue of the ecological catastrophe into which global society is sliding is a very urgent one that contemporary theatre cannot avoid. At the same time, it is an issue seemingly so complex that it cannot be fully understood, and there are still fewer clear solutions to it. Contemporary theatre tackles this issue in different ways, such as involving the audience and showing the catastrophic state of affairs with documentary material and the use of ritualistic approaches (see *Climatic Dances* by Amanda Piña) or using fiction to transmit the message that we need to change our approach to the environment and natural resources as soon as possible. The paper analyses two theatrical texts that follow both paths mentioned.

The first example is the production *Fever* (première 12 October 2021 (Ljubljana), 24 September 2021 (Graz), co-production of the Slovenian Mladinsko Theatre, steirischer herbst '21, Maska Ljubljana, directed by Žiga Divjak), which is a post-dramatic theatre performance that tackles the subject with extensive documentary material. Furthermore, it is a piece that uses a serious or even tragic tone in its expression. It manipulates the viewer not only on a mental but also on the emotional and physiological levels in order to put through its message that we need to do something now and that the capitalist system and the minority of rich people bear the major part of the responsibility for the present state of affairs.

The second one is Matjaž Zupančič's play *This Game Will Be Over*, which the author subtitled as a *Lehrstück*. It is an example of a fiction, a theatre play, that puts forward a story about the end of the world to investigate possible reactions and solutions to the problem. A huge meteor is approaching Earth and will destroy all life on the planet. The play's characters react differently to the approaching danger, thus showing their

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character traits. The play is highly comic, as the usual social masks fall away in this extreme situation, and several absurd situations arise.

The discussion shows that both examples activate the reader/spectator. Žiga Divjak presents documentary material, supplementing it with the actors' personal stories, thus creating a sense of community and raising the spectator's agitation to the point where one feels the need to take action. In this climatic moment, the performance suggests that we are not all equally responsible for climate change and that any kind of revolt is relevant. However, sabotaging the infrastructure (i.e., powerlines, pipelines) seems an impossible task, thus the spectator stays alone with an uneasy feeling of helplessness.

Zupančič's text, with its comic quality, takes a different approach. It distances itself from the theme of ecocide, transforming it into a fictitious situation of an imminent catastrophe, the impact of a large meteor on Earth. The absurd situations culminate in a utopian image of a world without wars and conflicts. The latter also becomes a matter of parody, and the final *danse macabre* perpetuates the situation. The comic nature helps the reader/spectator to accept what is happening and builds his/her resilience. It involves the reader/spectator and gives an impression that it is a matter of personal choice to make a decision and act in whatever way. It is precisely this choice that matters as it draws oneself from the apathy. Whether it is enough to prevent the catastrophe is another question.