



Abstract

Peter Božič was a Slovenian playwright whose most important plays were written at the beginning of his career, between 1955 and 1961. This writing is strongly connected to the then-avant-garde theatre Oder 57 (Stage 57), which presented opposition to the then-prevailing style of socialist realism in Yugoslavia. Young dramatists, directors and actors sought new ways of expression, leaning on existentialist philosophy, Artaud's theatre and modernist literature.

However, when asked about the influences on his work, Božič replied: "When I was writing *Človek v šipi* (*Man in the Window* - his first play), I was leaning on my own life experience, not knowing that this form was in fact avant-garde theatre. Only later, when I first saw Ionesco on stage, did I realise, this is it." When he later explains the influence of Beckett and Ionesco on his plays, he admits that they were important to him in "the cultural sense. However, when it comes to my plays' content, the war had a much stronger influence. During the war, all my values were shattered to pieces."

How authentic was the development of the avant-garde theatre of Peter Božič on the European periphery? To what extent can it be compared to the works of Beckett and Ionesco?

The author analyses this relationship between the centre in France and the periphery in Slovenia by comparing the early plays of Peter Božič and the works of Beckett and Ionesco that Božič saw or read in Slovenia - *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* by Ionesco and *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* by Beckett.

Keywords: Peter Božič, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Theatre of the Absurd, avant-garde

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Peter Božič and the Question of the Authentic Theatrical Avant-Garde in Slovenia in the Second Half of the 20th Century

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Introduction

The second half of the 20th century was a period of intense cultural and artistic experimentation in Europe, marked by the rise of avant-garde movements that sought to challenge traditional forms and conventions.¹ In the context of Yugoslavia, which was navigating its unique path between Eastern and Western ideological influences, Slovenian theatre became a fertile ground for exploring new aesthetic and philosophical ideas. Among the key figures in this movement in Slovenia was Peter Božič, a playwright whose works from the late 1950s to the early 1960s played an important role in shaping the avant-garde theatre landscape in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. His plays were intrinsically linked to Oder 57 (Stage 57), a theatre group that emerged in Ljubljana as a counterpoint to the prevailing doctrine of socialist realism, which dominated the cultural scene under the influence of the ruling communist ideology.

Despite his clear alignment with the avant-garde, Božič's statements regarding his influences reveal a nuanced understanding of his own work. In reflecting on his first play, *Človek v šipi* (*Man in the Window*), Božič claimed that it was not initially conceived as a piece of avant-garde theatre but rather emerged from his personal life experiences. He noted that it was only after encountering the works of Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, in 1957 that he recognised a kinship between his approach and that of the European avant-garde. Furthermore, Božič acknowledged the cultural impact of Beckett and Ionesco on his work but emphasised that the thematic substance of his plays was more profoundly shaped by his experiences during World War II, which had a lasting impact on his worldview and shattered his sense of traditional values.

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This distinction highlights an important aspect of Božič's work: while the stylistic and formal elements of his plays might resonate with the broader avant-garde movement – characterised by absurdity, existential despair and a breakdown of conventional narrative structures – the content and thematic preoccupations are deeply personal and tied to the historical and cultural milieu of post-war Slovenia. Božič's avant-garde theatre thus seems to occupy a unique position on the European periphery, where it simultaneously engages with international avant-garde trends and responds to local sociopolitical realities.

By leaning on the research of Sascha Bru, Tyrus Miller and Tomaž Toporišič, the paper will address the following questions: How is Božič positioned in the European avant-garde movement? How did Božič's background and experiences influence the thematic focus of his plays? To what extent are his early plays authentic, and to what extent can we trace in them the influences of Beckett and Ionesco?

By comparing Božič's early plays with the plays of Beckett and Ionesco, this paper will provide a deeper understanding of Peter Božič's role in the development of avant-garde theatre in Slovenia and offer insights into the broader dynamics of cultural exchange and influence between the European centre and periphery during the mid-20th century.

Peter Božič and the Avant-Garde: Rebellion, Context and Influence

Peter Božič emerged as a significant voice of dissent against the cultural and artistic norms imposed by the Yugoslav socialist state. After World War II, Yugoslavia – under Josip Broz Tito – promoted a cultural narrative rooted in social and socialist realism, characterised by its optimistic portrayal of the future, the glorification of communist ideals and clear moral distinctions. Artistic productions were expected to align with this vision, focusing on heroic characters who embodied ideological purity and supported the communist cause. Deviations from this narrative were discouraged, creating a homogenised cultural environment that left little room for alternative viewpoints or aesthetic experimentation.

As Peter Božič remembers in 1985:

The centre of action is a character-subject who is positive in a moral and ethical sense as well as a member of the progressive social class. His/her opposition is the world, a group of characters or an object. This relationship between subject and object (hero and its entourage) is defined through ideology, which is the ultimate truth. Thus, the hero always wins this conflict between him or herself and his/her entourage. ("Razvoj" 12)²

Božič's early plays *Zasilni izhod* (*Fire Exit*), *Križišče* (*The Crossroads*) and *Vojaka Jošta ni* (*There Is No Soldier Jošt*), written between 1957 and 1961, stand in stark contrast

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Slovenian sources are by the author of this article.

to this uniformity. His writing rejected the glorification of the future and the simplistic moral binaries prevalent in socialist realist art. Instead, his works explored themes of disillusionment and existential angst and used a fragmented form.

Božič explains this form in the play *The Lesson* by Eugène Ionesco:

In *The Lesson*, such a unifying idea and protagonist do not exist, so the vertical composition simply vanishes. The conflict exists on the same level between two equal protagonists (the Professor and the Pupil) and not between the personification of the ideology and the characters that have not yet grasped the importance of the Idea. ("Razvoj" 16)

This divergence from the official artistic doctrine can be traced back to Božič's personal experiences during the war, particularly his displacement to Dresden, Germany, and the harrowing exposure to bombings and civilian suffering at the age of 13. Later on, his education was interrupted after high school because of his writing in the school magazine that opposed the ruling ideology. These experiences shattered his previously held values and influenced his view of the world, prompting him to adopt a rebellious and often schizophrenic stance in his artistic expression. For Božič, the world was not one of clear ideological victories but rather a space marked by absurd, moral ambiguity, chaos and uncertainty.

Connections to the European Avant-Garde: Conscious and Unconscious Influences

Although Božič claimed that his early work was primarily shaped by his life experiences rather than direct artistic influences, it is evident that his plays resonate with the broader currents of the European avant-garde. Božič's theatrical style exhibits affinities with existentialist thought and the Theatre of the Absurd, aligning him with the likes of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. He explicitly acknowledged the impact of Ionesco's *The Lesson* on his play *There Is No Soldier Jošt*, indicating that he was not entirely isolated from the influence of European avant-garde movements. Furthermore, his dramatic works echo the existential despair and absurdity found in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Božič's engagement with these themes, however, is rooted in his unique historical and cultural context of the Central European periphery and also by living on the social margin.

Božič's rebellion against the conformist tendencies of Yugoslav socialist realism positions him within the avant-garde tradition, particularly in his efforts to break free from prescribed ideological narratives and explore more personal and fragmented modes of expression. However, unlike the purely autopoietic (self-creating and self-referential) approach that some avant-garde movements pursued,

Božič's theatre was deeply connected to the sociopolitical realities of his time. His plays did not seek to create a new autonomous world divorced from the constraints of reality. Instead, they sought to challenge and critique the prevailing social and political order with a different and more complex image of reality.

To further understand Božič's position within the avant-garde, we can draw on Sascha Bru's theoretical insights from his chapter "Revolution Reconsidered: The Three Avant-Garde Traditions" in the book *The European Avant-Garde – A Hundred Years Later*. Bru argues that the historical avant-garde was revolutionary not merely because of its stylistic innovations but because of its active engagement with history. According to Bru, the avant-garde discovered that art could serve as a space where the fabric of history – past, present and future – could be rewired aesthetically. This perspective frames the avant-garde as a dialectical force capable of making its own history, much like the revolutionary subject in Marxist thought.

Maybe the historical avant-garde was the first formation to actually discover that art was also the place where the very fabric of history, past, present and future, potentially could be rewired aesthetically, and the first to claim the right to be the revolutionary *subject* of its own history. And perhaps only by seeing the avant-garde *dialectically* as a force making its own history, that is, recalling the Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, by recognising it does not make its history as it pleases (purely autopoietically, that is), will we come to see it as the truly revolutionary *social* agent it was and maybe still is today. (Bru 40)

Applying Bru's theory to Božič's work, we can view Božič's early plays as part of this revolutionary avant-garde tradition. His dramas not only deviated from the formal and thematic constraints of socialist realism but also challenged the teleological vision of history promoted by the Yugoslav state. By presenting a world without clear heroes, where existential despair and absurdity took centre stage, Božič rewired the narrative of his contemporary society. His plays reflected a fragmented post-war reality that stood in opposition to the official narrative of progress and ideological purity. In this sense, Božič's theatre can be seen as an avant-garde practice that sought to reclaim from the state the right to interpret reality, placing the complexities and contradictions of individual human experience at the forefront of his artistic exploration.

Mia Janžeković, a member of Oder 57 and an actor in all three early plays by Božič, remembers that no one really understood the plays. However, the actors felt the importance of the production and were intuitively drawn to the plays.

Božič was almost completely misunderstood. The closest to him were the actors, who did not approach the texts rationally but through some other channels [...] The starting point of Peter's plays was death. He was utterly marked by his experience of the

bombardment of Dresden. He was very close to knowing what life meant. The audience was not interested in such writing. The halls were empty, but we were not discouraged. The reviews were horrible. (Janžeković qtd in Jesenko 349)

Tyrus Miller's perspective on the avant-garde, as articulated in his chapter "Anaphorizing Histories: On the Entanglement of Paleo-, Neo-, and Tardo-Avant-Gardes", provides another useful lens for analysing Božič's work. Miller suggests that the avant-garde is characterised by both repetition and innovation, implying that the narrative of the avant-garde is not linear but instead operates as an anaphora, that is, a rhetorical figure that involves the repetition of certain forms or ideas in new contexts. Miller argues that the avant-garde cannot be understood solely as a progressive movement. Instead, it must be seen in relation to the broader sociopolitical contexts that shape its development. This approach recognises that avant-garde practices are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded in specific historical and cultural circumstances.

The paintings implied, as well, that the historical rhythms of the Cold War Western and Eastern artworlds were divergent, because of the influence of the different socio-political contexts in which they developed. Any claim to a normative status for a progressive avant-garde narrative such as was put forward by Clement Greenberg would have to be relativized in light of the variable geo-political shaping of art-historical time. (Miller 59)

Applying Miller's theory to Božič's theatre highlights the interplay between innovation and the sociopolitical context in shaping his avant-garde expression. Božič's plays, while innovative in their rejection of socialist realism and their embrace of existential and absurdist themes, were also deeply informed by the specific historical conditions of WWII and post-war Yugoslavia. His avant-garde was not an isolated quest for artistic innovation but was rooted in a critical response to the sociopolitical environment in which he found himself.

Combining the insights of Bru and Miller allows for a more nuanced understanding of Peter Božič's role within the avant-garde movement. Bru's emphasis on the avant-garde as a revolutionary force that actively engages with history aligns with Božič's approach to theatre as a form of sociopolitical critique. Božič's plays do not merely reject the stylistic conventions of socialist realism; they challenge the ideological foundations of the Yugoslav state by presenting an alternative narrative of the post-war experience. Miller's thesis helps us understand the relationship between the centre and the periphery, where specific circumstances of the environment, as well as the personal experiences of the author, are taken into account.

Božič, in Comparison to Beckett and Ionesco

Samuel Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* share a striking thematic and stylistic resonance with the early plays of Slovenian playwright Peter Božič, despite Božič's later denial of Beckett's influence.

As I do admit an influence of Ionesco's *The Lesson*, the only Ionesco play I knew at the time, on my play *There Is No Soldier Jošt*, there has been no influence on writing my two one-act plays. I was not interested in dramatic literature. Furthermore, at the time, we did not know much about writing for theatre, especially not the contemporary one. The lid of our Yugoslavian pot was slowly lifting, but I was not among the people who got a chance to look out of it. (Božič qtd. in Petan 49)

Although it is unlikely that Božič had seen or read Beckett's work prior to his own creations (*The Fire Exit* and *The Crossroads* were written in 1957, and *There Is No Soldier Jošt* in 1961), both writers convey a similarly bleak worldview characterised by a profound sense of pessimism and existential void. This commonality reflects their broader philosophical engagement with themes of meaninglessness, the passage of time and the interdependence of human relationships.

Both Beckett and Božič engage with a sense of existential emptiness that permeates their characters' lives. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for the arrival of the mysterious Godot, who never comes, embodying the futility of human hope and the absence of inherent meaning in life. Similarly, in *Endgame*, the characters Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell exist in a static, decaying environment where time seems to drag on without purpose or resolution. This setting underlines the bleakness of their existence, where the action is minimal, and the dialogue revolves around repetitive routines and memories of a better past.

Božič's plays, like Beckett's, are also steeped in a sense of despair and futility. *The Fire Exit* depicts a ragpicker, a salesman and a young lady who are trapped in an underground shelter and seeking a way out. The salesman and the lady believe that the ragpicker knows the way out, and they try to convince or force him to lead them. He, however, is trying to explain to them that there is no point in escaping as there is no meaning in this world. In the end, it turns out it was just a drill, but the characters seem to have stepped into another reality. The second play, *The Crossroads* (they were first performed as a double bill on 15 May 1961 by Oder 57), is thematically connected to *The Fire Exit*. The salesman sends an invitation to the lady and the ragpicker to come to the crossroads on an anniversary of the events in the shelter. Here, the situation reminds us of the one in *Waiting for Godot*. The salesman is convinced that the ragpicker ruined his life. They exchanged dogs in the shelter. As he remembers:

In those crucial days, we exchanged dogs. I gave him something concrete that barks and cannot bite much, as it is as old and powerless as me but nevertheless exists, which felt to be just enough for itself. He left me with something indefinite, something that might not even be a dog at all. If it reminds me of a dog, it is only because it is as aggressive as a cold, black animal. (Božič, *The Crossroads* 8)

The ragpicker gave the salesman a sense of a void, an existential emptiness that he could not stand and could not get rid of. He is waiting for the ragpicker to come and exchange the dogs again so he can have his life of illusion back. However, in the end, the stranger comes and, similarly to The Boy in *Godot*, announces that the ragpicker is not coming.

The salesman: Who are you? What are you doing here? I haven't called anybody ... That means, I have called someone ..., but you were definitely not invited. I am expecting only the ragpicker.

The stranger: He is not coming!

The salesman: What are you talking about? Get lost. There is nothing for you here.

The stranger: This is no nonsense. I am here to tell you that the ragpicker is not coming. He cannot come here. Never! [...] If you would like to see him again, you have to find him yourself. (Božič, *The Crossroads* 33)

However, Vladimir and Estragon seem to find a kind of a solution in being together. As Michael Y. Bennett argues in his book *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, it is this idea of togetherness that represents the solution. Beckett's play is thus not only a depiction of the modern world of emptiness but also a parable of how to live in this world with neither values nor moral compass.

"Let's go" contrasts with the first spoken line of the play, "Nothing to be done." It is almost as if the two tramps have learned throughout the course of the two days how much they need each other and that their lives are meaningful because of this relationship. The two constantly "go on" because they always "resume the struggle," but most importantly, Didi and Gogo *go on together*. (Bennett 51, emphasis in original)

Božič offers a similar solution, as the salesman has to find the ragpicker, but he has to do it alone. This shared vision of a void – an absence of purpose or fulfilment – connects the works of both playwrights, suggesting a universal human condition that transcends specific cultural or temporal contexts.

Beckett and Božič both experiment with the form and structure of their plays, deliberately breaking away from traditional narrative and dramatic conventions to emphasise the emptiness and absurdity of their characters' lives. The plot is essentially non-existent; the play revolves around the act of waiting, with dialogue that loops back on itself and repetitive actions. The characters are confined to closed spaces,

symbolising both their physical and existential entrapment. This lack of conventional progression underscores the static nature of the characters' existence.

Both playwrights' characters similarly lack depth in the traditional sense. They represent archetypes or existential conditions rather than fully fleshed-out individuals. This lack of clear identity reinforces the themes of alienation and the absence of intrinsic meaning. Like Beckett, Božič's focus is not on character development in the conventional sense but on the portrayal of a universal human experience of emptiness and disillusionment (for further analyses, see my chapter "Peter Božič and his Role in Affirmation of the Theatre of the Absurd in Slovenia" and the chapter by Tomaž Toporišič in the book *Before the World Began*).

When writing *There Is No Soldier Jošt* Peter Božič was influenced by a performance of *The Lesson* by Eugène Ionesco (opening night on 31 March 1958, Oder 57, directed by Žarko Petan). Božič writes that "very rarely did a play cause such a radical leap forward in the development of Slovenian theatre as did the performance of *The Lesson* by Eugène Ionesco, produced by Oder 57 and directed by Žarko Petan" ("Razvoj" 15). He continues to explain the reason for this:

It is thus a complete change in approaching the content. The main Idea is no longer an ethical ideal and the ultimate truth, as it was in the mainstream theatre of the time. One must sacrifice his/her life for the idea, but this time (in Ionesco's play), someone else's life and not in the name of the Idea. The idea is only a means for the Professor to satisfy his personal needs. ("Razvoj" 15)

The characters are no longer judged according to their ability to align their lives to the main idea but rather are portrayed as people who use the idea in order to satisfy their personal needs. This radically different approach to the contents that was also mirrored in the fragmented form – where plot, characters and dialogue fall apart, are interchangeable and repetitive – was a starting point for Božič when he was writing his last early play.

Furthermore, he wanted to radicalise the presentation of void and emptiness. In 1985, Božič writes: "The basic difference between Ionesco's play and *There Is No Soldier Jošt* can be found in the fact that Ionesco uses the Idea in already mentioned way, while Božič dismisses it altogether. [...] The Idea is simply absent from this play. Instead, there are a number of relationships between the characters that do not differ in any way, not even in the sense that the characters would be conscious of their own motivations" ("Razvoj" 17). The latter was achieved by a special formal principle of action, namely by using a *mise en abyme*.

Actions are repetitive and interchangeable – the carpenter Jošt is being proclaimed dead and a hero, but he is alive and protesting against it; the Master kills his servant

every day, but he is still alive, etc. Božič approaches the theme of heroism, the central theme of the mainstream playwriting at the time, with irony. He represents it as a hollow form, as the society proclaims Jošt as a hero in order to address its own conflicts. The characters seem to be completely interchangeable and thus have no identity. The dialogue is meaningless and falls apart:

The Master: Shut up, let me think this over. Carpenter Jošt will come and tell me whether the dreams of this servant are real, and if they are, what can be done. Then, the servant will go to the city to arrange a visit, and the visit will be something else entirely. And the maid will then go to the pharmacy and bring a cream for the eyes.

The Mistress: And I will surely die of hunger.

The Master: And I will stop being a fake after midnight. (Božič, *There Is No Soldier* 17)

Although it seems to be very close to the banal lessons and themes of the Professor in Ionesco's play, it is even more radical in its absence of meaning, which was the result of Božič's wish to write a play that would mirror his personal disillusionment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Peter Božič's three early plays reflect a complex interplay between the local sociopolitical and cultural frameworks and the broader European avant-garde movements. This interplay is similar to the one analysed by Tomaž Toporišič in the case of the retro-avant-garde in Slovenia:

They [historical avant-gardes] eclectically assimilated some "foreign" ideas into their own cultural frameworks and added specific features. Similar procedures were at work during the period of the 1980s and 1990s with the eclectic retro-avant-garde artistic characteristics of the postmodern politicised art like *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK) and its collectives Irwin, Laibach and the Sisters Scipion Nasice. ("Trieste" 33)

Božič's theatre, much like Beckett's and Ionesco's, embodies a deep sense of existential despair and moral ambiguity. However, his work is not a mere imitation of the European avant-garde but a distinctive response to the historical and cultural milieu of post-war Slovenia. The thematic content of Božič's plays is deeply rooted in his personal experiences, which had a profound impact on his worldview, driving him to question traditional values and the ideological narratives propagated by the Yugoslav state. This connection to his personal history differentiates Božič's work from that of his Western counterparts, making it uniquely Slovenian and particularly relevant within the specific sociopolitical context of Yugoslavia.

Furthermore, the comparison of Božič's plays with those of Beckett and Ionesco shows that his theatre is distinguished by its direct engagement with the sociopolitical issues

of his time. His works do not merely echo the stylistic innovations of the European avant-garde; they actively participate in a dialogue with the historical and cultural realities of Slovenia, making his contributions to the avant-garde both contextually grounded and innovative.

In summary, Peter Božič's early plays represent a significant and unique chapter in the development of avant-garde theatre in Slovenia. His works are a testament to the power of theatre as a medium for sociopolitical critique and cultural expression, blending personal experience with broader existential and absurdist themes. Božič's legacy within the avant-garde movement is one of rebellion, context and influence, positioning him as a critical figure in the history of Slovenian and European theatre.

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