



Abstract

The article examines the role of nonhuman actors in 20th- and 21st-century Slovenian drama. It traces how their function shifts from symbolic figures to autonomous agents within dramatic action. The discussion is framed by the contemporary "nonhuman turn", which shifts scholarly focus away from an exclusively human-centred worldview and towards animals, environments and material processes. Through a comparative reading of three plays – Dane Zajc's *Children of the River*, Gregor Strniša's *The Dryad* and Neža Lučka Peterlin's *The Lamb* – the author demonstrates how theatre gradually redefines the relationship between humans and nature. In Zajc's play, nonhuman figures embody an unattainable ideal of primordial unity, reflecting existential loss and nihilism. In Strniša's drama, the titular tree spirit, the Dryad, functions as a catalyst, revealing the clash between the materialistic world and the transcendent dimension of imagination. Peterlin's contemporary play moves further by dismantling anthropocentrism: animals and natural processes appear as independent agents rather than metaphors for human experience. The article concludes that Slovenian drama evolves from using nature as a symbolic background to recognising nonhuman entities as co-creators of dramatic reality, opening new possibilities for ecological and theatrical thinking.

Keywords: nonhuman actors, Slovenian drama, Dane Zajc, Gregor Strniša, Neža Lučka Peterlin, ecocriticism

Gašper Troha holds a PhD from the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. His research interests include the sociology of literature, especially contemporary world drama and Slovenian drama and theatre. He is a researcher at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television, University of Ljubljana and the managing director at the Slovenian Theatre Institute. He has published in numerous national and international scientific journals. Together with Vanesa Matajc and Gregor Pompe, he co-authored *History and Its Literary Genres* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008). He is also the editor and author of *Literarni modernizem v »svinčenih« letih* (*Literary Modernism in the "Leaden" Years*, Študentska založba, 2008) and *Lojze Kovačič: življenje in delo* (*Lojze Kovačič: Life and Work*, Študentska založba, 2009). He is the author of the monographs *Ujetniki svobode* (*Prisoners of Freedom*, Aristej, 2015) and *Slovenska dramatika in tuji vplivi po letu 2000* (*Slovenian Drama and Foreign Influences after 2000*, Beletrina, 2024).

Gašper Troha

Slovenian Theatre Institute and the Academy of Theatre, Film, Radio and Television,
University of Ljubljana

The article explores how nonhuman actors function in Slovenian drama and how their roles have evolved from symbolic representations of human concerns to autonomous agents shaping dramatic worlds. Starting from the theoretical framework of the “nonhuman turn”, which challenges anthropocentric thinking in contemporary humanities, the author examines how theatre can represent animals, natural forces and environments without reducing them to metaphors for human psychology or social relations.

The study focuses on three plays from different periods, revealing a gradual transformation of dramatic perspective. Dane Zajc’s *Children of the River* (1960s) presents nonhuman protagonists, Day and River, as embodiments of a lost primordial unity. Although they stand at the centre of the play, they still function allegorically, reflecting existential despair and the impossibility of restoring meaning in a nihilistic modern world. Nature thus serves primarily as a philosophical mirror of human experience.

Gregor Strniša’s *The Dryad* (1970s) represents a transitional stage. The titular tree spirit does not merely symbolise transcendence but acts as a catalyst, exposing the tension between bourgeois materialism and imaginative, cosmic awareness. Characters capable of recognising the Dryad gain insight into a broader reality but are simultaneously marginalised by society. Here, the nonhuman figure becomes an active mediator rather than a passive symbol, although it still ultimately signals possibilities for human self-realisation.

A major shift occurs in Neža Lučka Peterlin’s contemporary play *The Lamb* (2025). The drama deliberately abandons anthropocentric hierarchy and attempts to approach perspectives of animals, plants and ecological processes. Scenes shift among human, animal and environmental viewpoints, blurring distinctions between predator and victim, between human and nonhuman. Death, decay and regeneration are shown as cyclical processes encompassing all beings equally. Nonhuman actors no longer function as metaphors or catalysts but become full participants in dramatic

reality. The world continues regardless of human presence, emphasising ecological interconnectedness rather than human dominance.

The author connects these developments to broader cultural and ecological changes, including awareness of the climate crisis and new theoretical paradigms in the environmental humanities. Literature and theatre are presented as crucial cultural spaces where alternative relationships between humans and nonhumans can be imagined and emotionally experienced.

The analysis ultimately demonstrates a historical progression: from nature as an allegorical background, through nature as a mediator of transcendence, to nature and animals as equal agents in dramatic structures. Contemporary Slovenian drama thus contributes to ecological thought by redefining theatre as a space where human and nonhuman worlds coexist on shared ontological ground.