



Political Theatre on the Border between the Artistic and Social Field

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The paper studies the analysis of a number of performances with political connotations on Slovenian stages between 2006 and 2008. When doing so, it first considers the circumstances that enabled the resonance and encouraged a certain type of reception. It supports the thesis that a social situation with a recognisable centre of power is one of the conditions for the development of political theatre.

Further, the analysis studies the most prominent examples of the genre that can be found in both institutional theatres – stagings of Boris A. Novak's *The Lipizzaners Go to Strasbourg*, William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Matej Bor's *Turncoats* – as well as non-institutional theatre – *Slovene National Theatre* and *Janez Janša Project*. Using these examples, the paper recognises different strategies with which theatre responds to certain social reality and which go from the direct response with a new literary texts that get caught in current affairs (for example Novak's drama), through the actualisation of a historic classic – here the prominent name is the director Sebastijan Horvat with the stagings of Bor's *Turncoats* and Shakespeare's comedy – to documentary theatre which uses ready-made texts and stages them in an unusual collage (*Slovene National Theatre*). A *novum* is the project of renaming, *Janez Janša Project*, which in part creates its own social reality, becomes a media construct, while the artists themselves with their artistic activities likewise created new and new outlets and possible interpretations.

A colourful palette of strategies and their effects shows that political theatre today is in a difficult, but not impossible position. Even more, it emerges as an extremely strong theatre genre which can open debate and review the possibilities of social solutions.

В настоящата статия се изследва анализа на редица представления с политически оттенък на словенската сцена между 2006 и 2008 г. Най-напред се изхожда от обстоятелствата, които са направили възможен отгласа и са насърчили определен тип рефлексия. Защишава се тезата, че социална ситуация с разпознаваем властови център е едно от условията за развитието на политически театър.

Between 2006 and 2008 – the last two years of the mandate of Janez Janša's first government – the central Slovenian theatres witnessed an incredible surge of performances which either had explicit political goals or triggered a wide public debate and thus became a *res publica*, therefore a subject to a public debate and as such a sort of a political act. Critics and audience recognised them as such. Slavko Pezdir, in his review of the theatre events of 2007 with a telling title “The intrusion of the political”, writes: “Although, according to Patrice Pavis 'every theatre is necessarily also political', in 2007 there was a possibility to experience some unusually provocative and resounding performances on the Slovenian stages, which functioned politically also in the narrower sense of the word.” ([Pavis 1997](#): 15) Gregor Butala was another one who noticed the accentuated political implications of Sebastijan Horvat's performances. “With Cankar's *Romantic Souls*, and later with Bor's agitprop play *Turncoats* [Horvat] staged – not only artistically, but, by incorporating a direct political dimension, also from the 'non-theatre' point of view – overtly provocative performances” ([Butala 2007](#)). Rok Vevar finds the same. “When looking at the contents, form and artistic strategies we could say that we have recently seen the surge of either local or touring performances that (in different ways) tackle new political and/or economic ‘totalitarisation’ and occupation of the public.”



([Vevar 2008](#): 14) In the autumn of 2007, the premiere of Matej Bor's *Turncoats*, a partisan agitprop play which Sebastijan Horvat directed, brought the entire Linhart Hall of Cankarjev dom to their feet, something that happens extremely rarely. In addition to these two performances, there were some others that meandered the wide field of performing arts (for example *Slovene National Theatre* by Janez Janša)¹ or even transgressed it and put their own artistic nature under question (as in the case of renaming of *Janez Janša*, *Janez Janša*, *Janez Janša*, for which the actors still claim it is in fact a personal and not an artistic act).

To understand this development of the theatre and its reception, we have to move from the field of art, or more precisely, from the border between the field of art and the social field where complex relationships between the government, the governed and theatre take place, or – better – the wider field of performing arts as the one that comments on social events and therefore again receives from its viewers the status of a social forum. I say “again”, because the theatre used to be recognised as such a forum in the former Yugoslavia for a good thirty years, which sometimes more and sometimes less successfully created a general community (cf. [Troha 2005](#)).

Additionally, our time distance to the stagings requires us to rethink the strategies that the artists used, and their results. In other words, the question about the possibility of theatre for creation, commenting or at least supporting social changes has to be reexamined. Although the usual opinion seems to be that theatre doesn't cause social turnarounds, its role in some of the studied cases does appear to be deeper and more complex. Even more, artistic events established themselves as permanent parasites in other social fields and perpetuate themselves as such, while at the same time their results are becoming unpredictable and may even turn into their opposite.

We'll use five case studies to contemplate this, and their scope will go from traditional theatre performances in central institutional theatres – *Lipizzaners Go to Strasbourg* by Boris A. Novak (19 Oct. 2006, MGL, directed by Zvone Šedlbauer), *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare (18 Sept. 2008, MGL, directed by Sebastijan Horvat) – through performances in which the non-government scene, traditionally the place of revolt and searching for alternatives, was involved – *Turncoats/Teachers and students* (4 Oct. 2007, MT Ptuj, Cankarjev dom and E. P. I. center, directed by Sebastijan Horvat) and *Slovene National Theatre* (28 Oct. 2007, Maska, directed by Janez Janša, who was also the author of the concept) – to the project that eludes definition and transits several artistic and even social fields – let's call it, as Blaž Lukan does, *Janez Janša Project* (July 2007), which later obtained several artistic bypasses in the fields of stage, visual and film art.

In order to be able to define the field of our research more clearly, let's sketch at the very beginning three theses we'll then test using the above examples and through them try to think the hybrid field in which they are placed.

1. Political theatre, which we here understand as a wide label for socially engaged and/or socially resounding artistic phenomena with their performative dimension emphasised – we shall define the term more precisely in continuation – as a rule takes expanding the limits of freedom as its basic goal; however, we usually forget the implicit pre-supposition contained in this general definition: that the freedom of individual or collective must be at least partially limited for such kind of artistic events to be even possible. This is of course not so much about the sociological or historic issues one could test empirically, but rather about the social climate, because the latter regulates both, artistic production and its reception.
2. The contemporary parliamentary democracy, in which we live in the Republic of Slovenia is in principle a totally open social system, based on the freedom of individual and defending it as one of its fundamentals. It is, therefore, at least declaratively completely inclusive, which poses a following problem to critical art. If the centres of power are blurred, it is difficult to find contradiction, which is the essence of political theatre. Siegfried Melchinger closes his historic overview of political theatre with the following thesis:

theatre [...] presupposes contradiction (as contradiction or as criticism) when it becomes



political. It is from this core that the presentation develops; and this isn't the Chinese method in Brecht; neither can it be a *happening* if the basic relationship is correctly defined. The contradiction is a constant between Aeschylus and the theatre of the cultural revolution, between Sartre, when he was still writing for theatre, and Brecht who spent half his life writing politics as theatre. Politics in theatre: a depicted contradiction in which characters act, but also live it and reason it. ([Melchinger 2000](#): 460)

In today's world this belief still seems fundamental, but because of the complexity of social relationships and inclarities/ multiplicities of the centres of power also extremely problematic. Political theatre prospers primarily in times when these centres of power appear more tangible, even personified, or it demands new strategies. In all cases, these are artistic hybrids that traverse social fields both in the sense of searching for subject matter and in the exploiting the responses.

3. Transformations of the audience and the actors in theatre and wider in performance arts are temporary, as a number of researchers have convincingly shown (cf. Fischer-Lichte, Reinelt, Melchinger), and at the same time dependent on the general social climate. For this reason, every artistic event must foresee the emergent nature of reception it can only partially plan for; it can, however, later accept the game and continue to manipulate it, thus creating certain political effects. Here we are again in overlapping of social spaces in which contemporary engaged performances work and which they must take into an account.

But before we focus on concrete examples, we have to briefly sketch what we understand by political theatre and its hybrid nature.

Hybridity of Political Theatre

The title itself is deceptive, as in this research we understand theatre in its widest sense as a performing art which includes different interventions and happenings that are close to other arts. Furthermore, the definition of political theatre is also problematic. For Gero von Wilpert, in his *Dictionary of Literature (Sachwörterbuch der Literatur)*, the definition is primarily based on the artists' objective. To him, political theatre is thus "stage performances that place ideological theses and political agitation for or against current circumstances before the artistic value [...], non-political texts that are politicised through adaptation and inscenation bring into the theatre the desire to improve circumstances or encourage discussion and agitate for their theme" ([Wilpert 2001](#): 622–3).

Patrice Pavis has a similar opinion, because the common characteristic of different genres of political theatre is the will "for a particular theory, social belief, philosophical project to triumph. Aesthetics is thus subordinate to political struggle until the dissolution of theatre form in the ideological debate" ([Pavis 1997](#): 547). But it is true that Pavis, in the beginning of his definition, establishes the other extreme that the term political theatre covers. "If we understand political in its etymological sense, we will agree that any theatre is necessarily also political, because it writes protagonists into a city (polis) or a particular group." (ibid.)

We encounter a similar definition in Melchinger's overview. For him, the majority of theatre creation is political theatre, because it actually represents all critical theatre – be it critical to the existing system or its opponents – which thematically depends on the relationship between the governing and the governed. "In critical antitheses which we can deduce from this relationship – rulers and their subjects, the upstairs and the downstairs, the powerful and the powerless, the exploiters and the exploited – the tension is expressed that time and again renders this fundamental relationship topically dramatised and makes it a theme of theatre." ([Melchinger 2000](#): 13)

Today it turned out that we have to understand political theatre on a much wider scale, as it is often not based on the dramatisation of the mentioned relationship, but rather on the provocation, supra-identification, completely random consequences etc. The example that Janelle Reinelt describes in the chapter "Theatre and Politics: Encountering Badiou" from the book *Public Performances*. Here it



concerns a completely random statement of a country singer of the group Dixie Chicks who claimed, during their UK tour which coincided with the preparations for the military intervention in Iraq, that she's ashamed that the president of the USA² is from Texas and her group is synonymous with Texas. Her statement caused heated responses in both camps, one side praised her and the other started quite a pogrom against her. The political charge of the event was not in fact planned, it was established by chance (the statement was printed by *The Guardian*), and retrospectively. Contemporary political theatre, as we will understand it in this study, is thus far wider and depends not only on the production and its goals, but is established precisely on the border between the artistic and social field that determines its reception. In the case of Dixie Chicks it was at first a shock and later a retraction, even an attempt of an apology which had no effect whatsoever, so the singers decided to continue to play the game and started to act openly against the government and its goals. It was thus a politisation and manipulation of the original response which ascribed the connotation of a political gesture to the entire event (cf. [Reinelt 2006](#): 130-33).

Let us now return to another characteristic of political theatre, the one which seems to be essential to us and which Pavis mentions in the broadest definition. One of the fundamental consequences of political theatre as we understand it here is that it creates community. In other words, it speaks to the part of the population that goes beyond the immediate theatre audience, and by that becomes a social forum. Dušan Jovanović reflects on the question of the political or socially relevant theatre today:

It depends on what we consider socially relevant. If by that we mean events and processes that can fatally influence economic-political relationships in the society, then the answer to this question is negative. In this sense, theatre is powerless. But I am convinced that theatre is important, expressive and precious, regardless of what is its 'revolutionary' potential. And regardless of how notorious, scandalous or provocative it is. [...] Today, we no longer have a formula how to create a community: a performance that would attract and connect all the spectators into a single pulsating body that responds, thinks and feels as one person. It seems there no longer exists a political or moral stance that would bind all, because the community as a whole no longer exists. The last such community existed in the time of the independence plebiscite, when the entire national community decided for Slovenia's independence. Once we achieved that, it dissolved, and therefore theatre can no longer contain the entirety of the audience. Something similar to what happened in connection with *Topla Greda* [Greenhouse], *Osvoboditev Skopja* [The Liberation of Skopje], or *Karamazovi* is no longer possible. ([Jovanović 2009](#): 151)

Jovanović's response in the interview attempts to describe the change of the social position of the Slovenian theatre after 1991, which, as we have already seen in our opening theses, places a problem of the object of criticism and unity of interests before this form. But it seems that it was precisely during the studied period that a broader collective was at least partially created. Jovanović also talks about one of the examples we will analyse in the continuation.

Turncoats premiered just before parliamentary elections, which brought us another round of cultural struggle between the 'left' and the 'right', scions of the white and the red. In this context, the performance was programmed as some sort of a nostalgic political feuilleton, which was to encourage the left option and give it wings for the final clash with the right. Regardless of the fact that I found the performance endearing, it is a fact that this was a more or less overt political propaganda, which split the audience into two hostile camps of citizens rather than uniting them into a community. The community that the Greek classical drama knew is a utopia today. ([Jovanović 2009](#): 152)

Political theatre as we understand it in this paper is established in a hybrid space between the artistic and the social field, regardless of whether this position was planned or not. Even more, it can even be a declaratively apolitical, or even non-artistic event, which has a wider social resonance. It builds a community that goes beyond the participants of the event and thus grows into a political



forum. Theatre itself of course doesn't have the power to influence the economic-political relationships, as Jovanović has already explained, but it can integrate itself into wider social events and offer a space for debate and testing possibilities.

Such theatre can search for answers brought by the current social and moral crisis, which is getting global proportions.

Lipizzaners Go to Strasbourg

Let us begin with the most resounding examples of performances that were staged in the most important theatres and used traditional performing strategies. This a priori guaranteed more response and more spectators. The first such example was the performance of the tragicomedy *Lipizzaners Go to Strasbourg* by Boris A. Novak. It was staged in the season 2006/07, more precisely, on 19 Oct. 2006 at the Ljubljana City Theatre and was directed by Zvone Šedlbauer. In that season it had enviable 32 reprises and 9.846 spectators. This put it on the 21st place among all the performances in the season.

The genesis of the play is the consequence of Novak's long engagement in the efforts to recognise the lipizzaners as Slovenian cultural heritage and the preservation of their status within the Lipica Stud Farm. Although the ideas about the change of their position, or the so-called touristic and economic development of Lipica, appeared earlier as well, they always had to face the Lipica Stud Farm Act from 1996, which prohibited such interventions. The trigger for Novak to finish the tragicomedy he had started to write earlier was the controversial change of this Act, when

the voting machine of the ruling coalition, in the political bonanza just before the summer break in July 2006, changed this 'antiquated law' and 'adjusted it to reality'. The acquisition of history and the state reached its peak here: a 425-year old cultural monument and a herd of lipizzaners in its historic cradle should go down the drain just so a bunch of politician in Kras could play golf at tax-payers' expense! ([Novak 2008](#): 611)

The politics thus provides the topic of the performance and the context in which this topic is placed, and the opponent becomes a more or less clear object; it is personified by "the voting machine of the government coalition", which at the time accepted many changes in the personnel field (the so-called personnel tsunami), tried to revise history etc.

Although the author's artistic ambition goes beyond the mere actuality of the text, because "tragicomedy *Lipizzaners go to Strasbourg* poses a question of the fate of natural and cultural heritage in our time, or, in other words, a question what is the fate of the fragile beauty in the world where Money is the brutal ruler" ([Novak 2008](#): 604), the structure itself is based on the knowledge of the actual context.

The analysis of the actant model shows that it is about lipizzaners as a collective subject, which wants to retain its status of natural and cultural heritage and survive in Lipica. In this, they are aided by a series of historic personalities, from Karl II Habsburg, who founded the stables to Josip Broz Tito, while their opposition in the text and the performance is a single person: a lawyer Filibert Volk (Volk meaning "wolf" in Slovenian, so *nomen est omen*?!), who represents the government of the Republic of Slovenia – which in the end even promotes him to become a minister for welfare and development. The author thus legitimately counts on the knowledge about the current affairs, in other words, the knowledge about the actual endangerment of lipizzaners, caused by the government elite and with its open end calls on the spectator to take sides. At first sight, we could place text in the vicinity of the Attic tragedy, or more precisely, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, as the European Court of Human Rights functions as some sort of Areopagus from the *Eumenides*, which is to decide on a great crime, but it soon turns out that Novak took a different strategy. His is the case of Brechtian epic theatre, which forces the spectator into thinking and taking sides through humour and intellectual debate (hence the genre label "tragicomedy"). Zvone Šedlbauer's directing of the



baptismal performance followed this concept, and the author himself had this to say about it: "Following the Brechtian dramaturgy of the text he created a witty and bitter, engaged and communicative performance which was warmly received by the audience." (Novak 2008: 612)

The staging of Novak's tragicomedy triggered a wide public debate. Andraž Gombač wrote in the *Primorske novice*: "It's been a long while since a topical, engaged and sharp performance like *Lipizzaners go to Strasbourg* smashed into the Slovenian theatre." (Gombač 2006:19) But it was this political point and the actuality of the performance that lead some critics to doubt its artistic value (cf. Bogataj and Butala "Zategnjene").

Turncoats and Measure for Measure

Political theatre doesn't emanate from direct initiatives alone; it can also politicise or re-politicise plays from history. An example for such strategy are the studied performances directed by Sebastijan Horvat; the director first reached for a partisan agitprop piece, and later for a classical Shakespeare comedy whose theme – the question of effectiveness of laws and their applicability for all the members of the society – makes it spot on as a commentary on the contemporary society, shaken by corruption, class division etc., but got additional political charge due to the social events at the time of its premiere.

Let us go step by step and look into the *Turncoats* phenomenon first. The premiere was in October 2007 at Cankarjev dom, and the performance was co-produced by Ptuj City Theatre, Cankarjev dom and E.P.I. Center. The staging of one of the most popular partisan agitprop pieces raised a number of doubts before the premiere, because the time distance takes away the text's actuality, but the effect of Horvat's performance in Cankarjev dom was simply unbelievable.

FOTO

Horvat's directorial concept sharpened the ideological positions of Bor's text even further, and the actors followed with their acting. So very soon after the beginning the audience got the entire ideological picture of the world on stage. On the extremely positive pole, there were partisans and the activists of the OF (Liberation front), played with great zeal and dedication by Tjaša Železnik (Vida) Primož Pirnat (Dr. Mrož) and Kristijan Ostanek (Mihol). There was more depth in the characters of Rutar and Rutarica (his wife), who doubt the idea at times and choose a different side each in the course of the play. Rutar (Gojmir Lešnjak) is shown to be a steadfast supporter of the NOB (national liberation struggle), while Rutarica, played by Nataša Matjašec, fearing for her family and her farm, yields and goes to fetch the Germans. The most negative character remains Ferlež (played by Aljoša Ternovšek), who is driven to the edge: his love and greed even make him rape his betrothed, Vida.

Sebastijan Horvat didn't see *Turncoats* as a mere script he should actualise in terms of contents, but more as a score with which he built an emotionally charged theatre event. The division of the stage into three parts, which allowed simultaneous action, showed the spectators the relationships between the characters in the very exposition, and these relationships became even tenser in the course of the performance. The polarisation was supported by lights and sound, which pushed the emotional tension to the edge of melodramatic. No wonder that the director had to prolong Bor's ending, which presupposes the complete supremacy of the partisans and hope for the bright future in a non-conflict society, into a general massacre carried out by an invisible machine gun. Everybody dies and it is totally irrelevant who pulled the trigger. Tjaša Železnik's final monologue only underlined the author's point.

This point was the decisive moment of the performance: it rounded the event, created union between the stage and the auditorium and made a lot more from the *Turncoats* than a simple reprise of a play of average quality. In the midst of a full house, the members of the Partizanski pevski zbor (Partisan Choir) stood up and started singing *Domovina naša je svobodna* [Our homeland is free]³. The piled up energy was suddenly released and the audience was not entirely sure whether it is the end of the show, or simply an encore, but when the stage was lit and the actors came to the



front, the audience themselves started getting up and even singing with the choir.

It thus seems that Sebastijan Horvat brought us exactly where he wanted us to be: into a situation when the audience felt the lack of solidarity and sense for community that sorely and critically marked the reality of the time. It was only later that it became clear that what happened was in fact a polarisation to the left and right, liberal and conservative (“cleric”), or those who accept the values of the national liberation struggle and those who renounce its importance and demand revision of history. Horvat seemingly didn’t take sides, he just wanted for the audience to become aware of that.

Turncoats detected the social climate extremely precisely, the frustration of the liberal society body with the arrogance of the authorities at the time (cf. [Pišek 2007](#)). Besides that, it was about the fact that mandate of Janez Janša’s government was nearing the end and the electoral body was further polarised. What shocked was that *Turncoats* often managed to get full theatre houses on their feet. They succeeded in creating a unified community that left no space for objections, which also came to light during the discussion after the premiere. The voices that wanted to relativise the criticism of the revision of history were hushed immediately.

This call to action and taking sides was noted in the reviews of the performance, with some discomfort. Slavko Pezdir stated that “obviously Slovenian drama and theatre will continue to contribute actively to the preserving, renewing and continuing the traditional cultural struggle in Slovenia” (“Ko odrska”, [Pezdir 2007](#): 13). Ignacija J. Fridl wrote that the performance of *Turncoats* “demanded of the spectators to take sides in a most provocative way, not only towards the partisan fight and its ideology, but also a decision about the role, power and ideology of contemporary theatre” ([Fridl 2007](#): 17). Amelia Kraigher considered the nature of the community that the premiere created. “This is why I can understand critic Rok Vevar, who said in the discussion after the premiere that he’s always afraid of the pronouncedly single-meaning performances.” ([Kraigher 2007](#):12)

After this successful realisation of the agitprop drama, Horvat took on Shakespeare's comedy *Measure for Measure* at the Ljubljana City Theatre (premiere 18 Sept. 2008). The premiere was set into the time of the electoral campaign leading up to parliamentary elections (21 September 2008), which brought the left option to power again. Shakespeare's comedy, which deals with equality before law and analyses the functioning of the authorities, was again carefully chosen, and got additional political charge from the Finnish State Television YLE, which broadcast a programme on the Patria Affair about the purchase of 8-wheeled AMVs for the Slovenian army, a deal in which the Finnish company Patria was said to have bribed some of the key public servants in Slovenia, and Janez Janša's name appeared amongst them.

Horvat thus primarily emphasised the fact that the authorities themselves do not follow the laws they impose on others at any price. He built upon this situation, already written in Shakespeare's text, with direct allusion to the government of Janez Janša.

The direct allusion to this is a letter J that they doodle, and this doodling goes on one's nerves, just as Janša went on some people's nerves, or at least undermines our attention, just as Janša undermined it. Letter J likewise appears in documents linked to the 'Patria Affair' where it is being insinuated and proved that it represents our ex-prime minister Janez Janša. ([Bunderla 2012](#))

Slavko Pezdir also wrote that *Measure for Measure* was a “prolific start to a new performative step on the path of evaluating the responsiveness and power of contemporary Slovenian theatre,” and later added: “[t]he performance accentuates its political provocativeness most directly with the topical upper case J that the Jailor 'on duty' at a suitable musical background (with his back to the auditorium) draws on an empty piece of paper.” ([Pezdir 2008](#): 10)

Horvat stages an adaptation, appropriate for time and place, with many unmissable allusions, commentaries, underlinings of actual events, and the fact – it is about a political thing, after



all [...] – that the premiere was a couple of days before the elections, worked strongly in his favour. ([Golob 2008](#): 14)

The performance *Measure for Measure* didn't get the same response that the *Turncoats* did. The reasons for that can be found in the fact that Janša's government, previously a clear object of criticism, fell. For this reason it probably functioned more like a commentary of a past situation and a message to the new authorities to change the method of governing. But it is true that the performance did resonate, as it took 23rd place in the season 2008/2009 in number of spectators (7836) and almost repeated the success of the *Lipizzaners*.

The political charge of both performances thus again happened on the border between the artistic and political field, and Horvat successfully took advantage of the then pertinent political situation and the discontent of the public with certain government moves. Although the transformations of the audience were merely temporary, it seems that both performances became a part of discussion about actual questions and thus re-established theatre as a political forum where the voice of the civil society makes itself heard.

Slovene National Theatre

A documentary performance *Slovene National Theatre* was the fourth event in the *Program!* project that Janez Janša (at the time still called Emil Hrvatin) started in 2006. It is the inscenation of the Slovenian nation around the case of the expulsion, or deportation of a Roma family in Ambrus. Janša took the statements of the local residents, police, government representatives and the then-president Janez Drnovšek and made them – modelling the Greek choir with the direct address to the audience – into a collage performed by four performers (Dražen Dragojević, Aleksandra Balmazović, Barbara Kukovec and Matjaž Pikalo).

We demand of the competent authorities in our country that Roma move to a more appropriate location for safety any ecology reasons ... Bravo, true, bravo ... if we are a country under the rule of law, the rights must be equal for all, the civilians and the Roma. If I, for example, pay taxes, Roma must also ... By all means civilise him, give him chances, but if he doesn't respect the rights, he must also be punished from time to time ... Let's vote about this ... Gypsies, Gypsies ... Devil's gang, you're protecting Gypsies ... Kill. Kill ... My children lived in fear, not yours ... 35 years I've been paying, for every police officer I've been paying pension and day care, and he'll use the truncheon on me ... to the barricades, all of us ... Roška, Roška, Roška ... Buuuuuuu ... Municipal decrees are valid ... Military apartments are empty ... Let them go to the refugees ... We're not social services ... They rape their own children ... Tomorrow morning they'll pack their things and leave this community ... When o'er earth's habitations ... Within 40 days the government will find a legal solution for their settlement. ([Štefancič 2008](#): 310, 11)

Janša's performance is thus Slovenian national theatre in the true meaning of the world, as it shows how the “nation happened” in Ambrus, while at the same time it uses the collision of the artistic and the social or realistic field to create the performativity with which he has, in Lukan's words, “performatively”, (suicidally, so to speak) demounted the state, whose (totalitarian) synonym he is” ([Lukan 2007](#): 23). This collision occurs on two levels. First on the level of presenting the documentary materials, because the performers appear in the role of some sort of a Greek choir, which – in a classical tragedy – traditionally ethically assessed and explained the events, but their lines, as we saw above, are full of vulgarity and hate speech that the then government sanctioned when it sided with the local population and deported the Roma family Strojan. The second tension is created by Janša in his role of the fifth performer who is the only one moving around the space, chanting a single word: “Gyp-pos”. With this and with the screening of symbols of the Slovenian nation he creates a contrast between the image that we like to have about ourselves – the image of diligent, peace-loving and tolerant people – and the smouldering hatred that was revealed in all its



horror during the events in Ambrus.

Janša's action was immediately recognised as eminent political theatre. Not only does Lukan in his review call it one of the most intriguing stage events in Slovenia, but concludes his text with the following thought:

“The stage dimension of this more than paradigmatic and eminently political 'performance' is complemented by the performing frame, created by a long-term, mantra-like chanting of a single symptomatic name by Janez Janša himself, who just before the end joins the choir and places himself into a series of screened key points of Slovenehood (Triglav, National and University Library etc.) from where ceaselessly, insupportably the same refrain is heard 'Gypos, Gypos, Gypos ...': so we hear what we may have missed, so we do not forget what we should never forget.« ([Lukan 2007](#): 23)

Slovene National Theatre is thus not merely the presentation of the current national character, but also the social corrective or a forum which gives civil society room for discussion. The performance was presented several times in Ljubljana and abroad, and in 2010 a radio drama (produced by Radio Slovenia) was created based on the documentary recordings and the recordings of the play, and the script was nominated for the Grum Award. Thus Janša's project is also becoming a reminder of one of the key roles that Slovenian theatre had since its beginnings (or an acknowledgement of it): since the 19th century it has been linked to either the confirmation or the criticism of social projects.

The important fact for us here is that Janša's intervention was placed on the border between the artistic field and reality, where we located contemporary political theatre between 2006 and 2008. In his analysis for *Maska*, the performing arts journal, Tomaž Toporišič compares it to Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*, which is a case of classical theatre representation and contemporary media transmission which is represented by repeating media reports of an event. This creates a particular event which bets on spectators' emotions, because

both [Janša and Bernhard, author's note] try to put spectators in a position of uncertainty, discomfort. They presuppose and try to achieve that the performance, or the staging of the text produce a specific collapse of the opposites. The performers should parallelly, simultaneously and intensively live the performance like an aesthetic, social and political process, in which they battle the institutions of power. In this fight the usual opposites are lost: subject versus object, presence versus representation, art versus social reality, and the dichotomies seems as if they evaporated. ([Toporišič 2008](#): 54)

As Toporišič finds at the end of his analysis, such events build upon the oscillation between the reality and the artistic field: “if the mediatised performance derives authority from its reference to the living or real, now the living derives the authority from its reference to the mediatised, which in turn derives its authority from its reference to the living etc.” (ibid 55). In this way, *Slovene National Theatre* links itself to a wider phenomenon, which we can observe in contemporary European theatre, as S. E. Wilmer shows in his study when he analyses some cases of performances that take on the so-called raw life or *homo sacer* as Giorgio Agamben calls it. It is about the status of asylum seekers, or people who have no nationality and the basic human rights pertinent to it, which in today's world are guaranteed by the nation state. This problem, of course, goes beyond our debate, so we will leave it aside. What seems important for us is a fact that Wilmer places Janša's intervention into the international contexts where he finds parallels to it in certain performances of the Dublin theatre Calypso, Schliengensie's action *Bitte liebt Österreich* and others. He could do that because Janša himself internationalised the performance when he presented it successfully in Vienna (28 and 29 April 2009) and thus proved that this political theatre deals with wider political topics, which do originate in particular circumstances and events, but show the structure of the global society (cf. [Wilmer 2008](#)).



Janez Janša Project

The final example is the most enigmatic and hybrid of them all, as in its beginning it wasn't even clear if it was an artistic project or not. In July 2007, three artists – Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi in Žiga Kariž – renamed themselves Janez Janša, took the name of the two times Slovenian prime minister and joined the Slovene Democratic Party, of which Janša is the president. Although they claimed that it was a personal decision which they refused to comment, the event got extreme media coverage. Even more, it was, in fact, created and is still developed in the media.

Interesting headlines started appearing, for example “Janez Janša Got Married”, “Janša Dances in Vienna”, etc., however, more serious analyses of the possible connotations these renaming might have also came out. The event caught on the general feeling that Janez Janša's first mandate was simply a well controlled voting machine which expanded its influence into all the pores of public life – a number of managers were notoriously replaced, as well as editors at Slovenian public television RTV Slovenija, the *Delo* newspaper ... *Janez Janša Project* thus triggered numerous speculations about how the government – which, by the way, was the one that adopted a liberal law that doesn't set any limits to changing a name, as one doesn't even need to state the reason to do so – will respond. What was supposed to have started as a completely private decision or an attempt to expose the weakness of the administrative system that is based on the ability to differentiate one individual from another, nevertheless it is the system, the law on changing names, that allows the collapse of itself ([Lukan 2008](#): 149), grew into a political debate about the state the society was in.

The very first opinion columns (Tanja Lesničar Pučko in *Dnevnik* and Peter Kolšek in *Delo*) understood the project as a work of art, and the idea appeared that the subversiveness of the project was that it formed a series from the name Janez Janša and thus hollowed it and took away its power which seemed excessive (Krečič 182). Many media explanations of the phenomenon followed, described in detail by Jela Krečič in her contribution to the catalogue of *NAME: readymade*, artistic productions that dealt with possible implications of this act: exhibition *NAME: readymade* (first opened at the festival Steierische Herbst in October 2008), a documentary performance *The More of Us There Are, the Faster We Will Reach Our Goal: Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša*, which premiered on 12 Oct 2011 in Rijeka, and a documentary film *I am Janez Janša*, which was first screened at the Festival of Slovenian Film (September 2012). Media response to the original event has thus been perpetuated for six years and provokes new and new responses.

Of course the present analysis cannot concentrate on all this complexity, so we shall limit ourselves to the part that touches our principal theme, the question in what kind of a hybrid space this project exists, what strategy it uses and what are its political implications.

Although it seemed at first that there might be administrative interventions or at least some backstage attempts to prevent the event from happening, the renaming came to be without a great shock. It was as if only media and intellectuals could be bothered, or the audience who found in this a possibility to express its discontent – for example, the opinion column by Boris Dežulović “Is Janez Janša an Idiot?” (Krečič 186). The unusual decisions only surfaced, paradoxically, in 2012, when Janez Janša returned to power. In the middle of post-production of the documentary *I Am Janez Janša* the director of Viba Film cancelled cooperation; immediately after that Maska Institute, the producer of the performance *The More of Us There Are, the Faster We Will Reach Our Goal: Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša* received a demand from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport to show a detailed content and finance report of the project for review.

In his analysis, which was probably the first scientific rethinking about the renaming, Blaž Lukan finds that its subversiveness is in creating a series which destabilises the social position of a name and consequently Janez Janša, the premier of the Republic of Slovenia. Here we're thus not dealing with the direct confrontation with the authority, but with an implementation of an artistic procedure (readymade, series), into reality, with which the latter is hollowed and loses its meaning (cf. [Lukan 2008a](#)).

In our opinion, given the continuing development of the events – the public image and the popularity of the premier kept decreasing until the parliamentary elections in 2008, but it persistently grew afterwards (in 2012, Janez Janša again became the Prime Minister, although he is a party in several



criminal procedures) – we could continue to think this structure of supra-identification and its consequences further. The question appears, namely, how is it possible that Janez Janša as a politician weathers all the affairs and suspicion of corruption, clientelism etc. Does the hollowing of his name have the opposite effect?

Let us first think about the structure of the renaming project itself. It seems that its indeterminacy is essential for it, so that it can appear as an empty gesture without broader connotations – this is where insisting that it was a personal act and not responding to the outcomes or speculations come from. It is this empty gesture that irritates and forces us to ascribe it the meaning, which is why every journalist who writes about the project at the same time creates it and builds upon it. This is probably the source of the unbelievable longevity and topicality – it's been alive for six years and it doesn't look like it will stop sprouting new dimensions, although Žiga Kariž decided to revert to his old name. Of course, the consequence of this is the possibility of it being understood as potentially dangerous and stopped, which may have happened in the case of suspending cooperation of Viba Film and a revision for one of its outlets.

But we have to nevertheless admit that the proper name turned out to be less problematic than it seemed at first. Could we risk a daring statement that it is the hollowing of the name that retains Janez Janša on the political parquet? A multitude of Janez Janšas creates confusion as to who is who. It creates a number of identities for which it at first seemed they would take away the power of the original one, but now we can speculate that it was this multitude of identities that enabled the original Janez Janša to have the public understand his acts as acts of a series of identities from which he can distance himself should the need arise. Maybe it was Janez Janša who controlled the sale of the arms to Croatia, headed the government at the times of the affairs Ambrus, Patria, blocked the pension reform and austerity measures of the previous government, but the ideological mystification can lean precisely on this division. We thus have a Janez Janša who is a protector of the nation, liberator and a man of the people – a politician who retains the paternalistic attitude to his electoral body – and on the other hand a politician who is ascribed all these affairs. But these very affairs are shown as fiction, conspiracy, construct, which is the fundamental premise of the artistic field, from which the analysed project of renaming comes.

The strategy of the *Janez Janša Project* is thus extraordinarily successful precisely because of its indeterminacy and its placement on the border between the artistic and social field, where it uses media as the main medium of its existence, as many social frustrations can get caught in it. At the same time it is probably also true that ideology of politics uses a similar strategy, so it can, as some sort of a boomerang, also become a mean to consolidate the image of Janez Janša, the politician.

Conclusion

Let us now return to the starting theses and consider them in the regard of the analysed concrete cases. The studied examples clearly show that the political theatre increased in the last two years of Janez Janša's government mandate (2006–2008), because he, with his personnel changes and arrogant method of governing, which Novak calls “voting machine”, created the sense of limitations to freedom of speech. The civil society had limited possibilities to express its protests in public life, so theatre once again became a public forum in which topical problems were discussed or current affairs were analysed on stage. Due to the general discontent the audience responded quickly and these performances were amongst the more successful in the seasons when they were produced, and they also resonated in media and wider public.

The object of criticism in this period became more defined and focused on Janez Janša, because it seemed that all the decisions came from one centre, unlike during the period of liberal governments, when the centres of power were at least seemingly heterogeneous.

The consequences of these performances were as a rule short-lived, although we cannot say that they were distinctly actualist art. Maybe because of their association to the current events, it was this facet of them that was recognised, while other facets will be accentuated during eventual subsequent stagings. The oscillation from these theses can be seen in particular in the *Slovene*



National Theatre and *Janez Janša Project*. Both managed to expand their effect to a longer period and abroad. The latter is even more interesting for the genre of political theatre, because its open/empty structure enables its own development almost *ad infinitum*. At the same time we have to admit that due to this openness such effects are emergent and cannot be controlled. The project can function as a criticism and the affirmation of the same personality.

What is then political theatre to do today? Do we need it at all? It seems that for it, the most important realisation is that it has to place its activity to the border between the artistic and social field, and that the most open strategies turn out to be the most effective. It is in them that different social groups – those that question the current events – can recognise themselves. As a rule, theatre takes no sides in such cases, because it understands that its activity is limited, but it may trigger debate and questions the reality as we know it. If we want to find new ways of and manners of coexistence, it is precisely this theatre that is extremely necessary.

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- [1.](#) A director Emil Hrvatin who renamed himself Janez Janša – then prime minister of Slovenia – together with two other artists. The project is discussed further on in this article.
- [2.](#) George W. Bush
- [3.](#) During the premiere, the emotional charge was so great that the members of Partizanski pevski zbor (Partisan Choir) started their entrance before Tjaša Železnik managed to deliver her monologue and thus even changed the rehearsed ending of the performance.

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