

Understanding the Castration of the Political Using Rok Vilčnik's Play *People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili* as a Case Study

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The winner of the competition for the 2016 Slavko Grum Award for the Best Slovenian Play, organised by the Prešeren Theatre Kranj and awarded every year at the Week of Slovenian Drama, was the play *People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili* by Rok Vilčnik rokgre. The jury explanation of the award defined the play as a drama of the absurd and compared it to Milan Jesih's *The Bitter Fruits of Justice*. In short, this play is, at first sight, a political drama. It presents some kind of totalitarian society where everybody is the same, everybody is a Sakeshvili and everybody has boundless faith in the great leader Sakeshvili who has, or perhaps has not just died.

The text was first performed on 27 January 2017 on the Small Stage of the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana, directed by Luka Martin Škof. The press releases and the theatre programme introduced it as an eminently political piece. The creators went as far as trying to create an external reference of the Sakeshvili Circus. They set up a Facebook page for the circus, where they published photos, reports from fictive tours, the history of the circus, etc. Despite that, the performance failed completely as a political provocation or political theatre. What took place onstage was some sort of a circus with which the audience did not know what to do.

Here, a bigger question arises about the political theatre in our time. How to stage and write political theatre? Is the latter truly sentenced to being castrated? What is missing from *Sakeshvili* and could we perhaps understand that as the answer to the question about the castration of the political in theatre in general?

The article focuses on the analysis of the text and its meaning potential. The discussion reveals that the text's message is realised on an abstract level, when we understand it as a commentary on branding and the image of today's capitalist system. The author himself emphasised this trait in every interview he gave upon receiving the award, and also at the baptismal performance.

It seems that the performance, on the other hand, bets on the radicalisation of the comical effects, as it further emphasises the absurdity of the situation, and does the same with the costume and make-up. This is why the spectators cannot, in reception, detach from the reality shown onstage, and direct themselves on a more abstract level where the critique of today's system could probably be established, but remains on the level of what is shown. The world of Sakeshvili is understood as the representation of extreme totalitarianism, which draws most of its parallels with the Stalinism of the first half of the 20th century. The performance thus functions as a farce, which touches the spectator very slightly, although the acting creations are honed to perfection.

At first sight, it seems that we could blame the failed performance as the cause for the castration of the political, as it failed to retain the open meaning structure of the text and to tie the work to the here and now. This is of course true, but the question is what would happen if the theatre decided on a different staging frame. It had to answer itself the question who or what is the thing that represses the Sakeshviliis, what restrains them and denies them their individuality. Any kind of answer is, of course, to a point the reduction of the potential Vilčnik's text has, but is essential if the text should be staged. At the same time, is this paradox also a difficulty of the contemporary Slovenian theatre which tries to provoke in certain performances and question our set norms and convictions (directors like Sebastijan Horvat and Oliver Frljić come to mind), but it seems we do not get beyond opening questions. The criticism is pointed at the social system, capitalism, in which the faces change far too quickly to become the target of the spectator's displeasure. They become empty functions that seem eternal and unchangeable. We will most likely have to be content with the fact that theatre is no longer a political forum, that it was, in fact, castrated by its own anatomy or the relations with other social systems. We thus do not castrate *People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili* – precisely in the case when we read it as an apolitical play, as a text which opens general existentialist problems. Which, like its author, doubts about everything. As Rok Vilčnik says: "The unanswered questions are piling up, and I find it harder and harder to ignore ignorance." And it is opening the questions and questioning the spectator's convictions that we can use as a foundation to building drama and theatre as a political gesture.