

What is lesbian theatre? Does this category even exist in Slovenia? How to conceptualise and perform it? This article investigates the reach of lesbian theatre in both the wider sociological view – as a phenomenon in the Slovenian society – as well as in the narrower theatre studies field. It reviews the conditions (the origin of the LGBTIQ rights movement) and continues with the spaces in which lesbian theatre hides. It presents the Monospolno gledališče (Monosexual Theatre) and other examples of theatre practices: comedy, institutional performances, international festivals and marginal cases of lesbian contents. It also proposes a model of how to research lesbianism in the Slovenian theatre and guidelines for the future of lesbian theatre.

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**Key words:** lesbian theatre, queer, homosexuality, sociology of theatre, Monospolno gledališče (Monosexual Theatre), lesbians, *Tatovi podob* [Image Snatchers]

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# On Lesbian Theatre in Slovenia

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No sub-culture could accept those legislated privileges.  
(Sue-Ellen Case, "Post-political feminism")

Lesbianism in Slovenian theatre is a topic that appears to have no history at all, just a sliver of an ephemeral present, and perhaps a future. This article is thus the first in our territory that will try to conceptualise, define and delineate lesbian theatre as well as discuss to what extent and how lesbian theatre is present in Slovenia. The article will consider the notion of lesbian theatre both in the wider sociological sense – as a phenomenon in (Slovenian) society – as well as in the narrower scope of theatre research. The notion of lesbian theatre often overlaps with the label queer or LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersexual and queer persons) theatre, so I will use the two latter names as synonyms, unless I explicitly state why the difference between the expressions is important.

Lesbianism is of course a non-theatre expression referring to a lesbian, an expression which was adopted and adapted from contemporary European languages. As the *Slovenski etimološki slovar* [Etymological Dictionary of the Slovenian Language] states, such a name is "also new in other languages and stems from the name of the Greek island Lesbos, where the Greek poet Sappho, allegedly a lesbian, lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C." (accessed via the linguistic web portal *Fran.si* in July 2017). In this study, I understand lesbian theatre as an umbrella tag for a spectrum of performative practices with lesbian themes, presenting emotional, sexual, physical, romantic, spiritual affection of women (or a single woman) towards (a) person(s) of the same sex. This type of theatre can be staged in solo performances, drag king performances, drag queen performances, vampire-queen, fetishist, music performances, stand-up comedy, clown shows, contemporary dance, as well as in reinterpretations of classical drama theatre, in contemporary plays or in other queer practices. All these are described by Tatjana Greif in perhaps the most comprehensive overview of lesbian theatre art and activity written in Slovenian language thus far, entitled "Queer kulturne delavke". Theatre created by lesbians can also be called lesbian theatre, while thematically and in its contents it is often linked to the negative connotations of non-femininity, invisibility, oppression (compare also Sisley).

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## From historic beginnings to contemporary human rights activism

The term lesbian theatre would not exist without the word “lesbian”. I will sum up the beginnings with the help of the research into lesbian literature and the entries in theatre encyclopaedias (see, for example Tratnik, *Lezbična zgodba*; Banhan 640–41); Kennedy 731–33). We can only talk about the social category of “lesbian” from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, parallel to the rise of sexology and psychoanalysis. The term “homosexuality”, a sexual orientation different from heterosexuality, was invented in 1868. It was then that the distinct question of sexual orientation appeared separately from (female) gender questions (Tratnik, *Lezbična* 6). Before that time, lesbian theatre history searched for texts and characters that could be read as homoerotic. In fact, even after persons started to be called or described as “sexual inverts”, “the third gender”, “Sapphists”, etc., a detailed, in-between-the-lines reading of texts was still necessary, because (self-)censorship was at work, which at times did not allow describing or naming such excessive sexual behaviour. The infamous 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall was banned in the United Kingdom (yet not in France and the USA), although, for example, the author never uses the word lesbian (Tratnik, *Lezbična* 8; Sinifield 72). Lesbian literature (mostly prose) has been written by very different authors,<sup>1</sup> but they all had in common the negative reflection of attitudes towards lesbianism. The images of lesbians who appear in early literary works are more or less stereotypical characters of Amazons, vampires or monsters, teachers, male lesbians, female students, deceived innocent girls, athletes, alcoholics, aristocrats (qtd. in Tratnik, *Lezbična* 7). Like literature, lesbian theatre was only established in its incarnation of today in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, that does not mean there were no lesbians in theatre before that. In England, for example, the key figures of feminist theatre at the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century were undoubtedly lesbian, for example, Edith Craig, the daughter of the actress Ellen Terry and the sister of the theatre reformer E. G. Craig. But when the feminist movement in Europe withered in the years after World War I, the same happened to the female theatre and the possibilities for lesbian drama. At the end of the 1920s and the 1930s, the first works appeared where lesbian characters are clearly distinguishable, but they were all “burdened” with psychoanalytical and sexological images (compare Sinifield). The first phases of the true lesbian theatre of protest in the late 1960s and early 1970s aimed its revolt against such negative images of lesbian predators, hysteria, forced or unsuccessful/failed heterosexuality and the manhood complex.

Lesbian theatre in the true meaning of the word is thus a part of the Western experimental theatre practices that arose together with the new social movements

<sup>1</sup> The original Slovenian article uses the female form throughout the paper as a generic non-marked grammatical gender. Early lesbian literature was written by both women and men.

of the 1960s and the 1970s. The contemporary lesbian theatre does not exist without the lesbian movement or the movement for human (or we can say – political) rights of lesbians and their public recognition. In this endeavour the lesbian movement on the one hand links to the feminist movement and on the other to the gay liberation movement.

In Slovenia, the beginning of the organised gay and lesbian movement can be traced to 1984 when the MAGNUS Festival: Homosexuality and Culture was organised in Ljubljana. In 1987, a lesbian section at ŠKUC was established, *Lezbična Lilit* (Lesbian Lilith), today abbreviated as ŠKUC LL, which was the first lesbian group in Slovenia. This emanated from the female group *Lilit* (est. 1985), which in turn started within the women’s section of the Sociological Society that had begun a year earlier (for a more detailed history, see Jalušič).

The gay and lesbian movement was at the same time at the front line of the new social movements and of the Ljubljana sub-culture scene. New media, video, and the explosion of the visual were at the centre of attention of the art scene in the 1980s and 1990s. Gay themes were thus addressed by, for example, the multi-media group or videoband *Borghesia*, created in 1984, with its predecessors in *Teater Performance* (which put on its first and only performance in 1980) or *Theatre FV 112/15*.<sup>2</sup> For *Borghesia*, Marina Gržinić believes that in 1982 and 1983 it also performed works with lesbian themes (“Intervju” 72–73). At that time, lesbians could also find approximates of their performative subjectivity in the rare female theatre groups (see Barbara Orel’s study “Ženska perspektiva”) or in theatre with gay themes.

Since the beginning of the movement, the activists who fought for the materialisation of legal and other equalities have prepared the cultural and artistic performative part that has taken place in lesbian or gay spaces. The places have changed; perhaps the best-known space was the Ljubljana *Roza disko* (Pink Disco, which also changed locations) and it was only with the squatting of the *Metelkova* complex in the autumn of 1993 that the gay and lesbian activists received a permanent space, in the building *Lovci*. This is not the only place where homosexuals assemble, but it is the only one that still exists today, in 2017. Gay and lesbian public parties continue often to be accompanied by events that could be labelled as amateur lesbian (or gay or queer) theatre: performances, drag shows, video installations and ambiental performances with gay, lesbian or queer topics. A part of these activities is documented in the book *Lezbična sekcija LL: kronologija 1987–2012 s predzgodovino* [The Lesbian Section LL: Chronology 1987–2012 with a Prehistory] by Tatjana Greif and Nataša Velikonja. More contemporary events are occasionally documented in the magazine (or web portal) *Narobe*, which also

<sup>2</sup> For the context and more about related theatre practices see B. Orel’s study “K zgodovini performansa”.

publishes reviews of broader theatre activity in Slovenia.

In many aspects, 2017 was a key year for the LGBTIQ movement in Slovenia, as the *Zakon o partnerski zvezi* (ZPZ, Civil Union Act) came into effect, which legalises the same rights and duties for same-sex couples as the (heterosexual) spouses or common law partners have, except for marriage on the nominal level (civil partnership instead of marriage), the joint adoption of children (not allowed, but unilateral adoption is) and reproduction procedures using assisted reproductive techniques. The ZPZ passed on 21 April 2016 and is a result of years-long work in the field – more concretely, of two failed attempts to change the old Family Code (ZZZZDR) or to implement a new Family Code in Slovenia (it was finally instituted on 21 March 2017 – yet in it, a marriage remains described as a “life-long community of a husband and a wife”). In other words, gays and lesbians in Slovenia have, legally speaking, almost caught up with the people assumed to be heterosexually oriented. Of course, this does not mean that relevant topics for theatre have been exhausted. It rather seems that the very LGBTIQ topics have been poorly represented so far and that Slovenia is lagging behind in this field.

I will study this hypothesis in the following sections.

## Spaces for lesbian theatre

As I have mentioned above, the LGBTIQ social-political movement and LGBTIQ artistic movement share their beginnings: the Magnus Festival was thus an event that was important for the wider society as well as for art. In all these years, among the most visible activists for the rights of LGBTIQ persons have been several artists, who generally do not work in theatre. The most prominent ones are literary writers, for example, Suzana Tratnik, Brane Mozetič, Nataša Velikonja, Urška Sterle and others. Lesbian theatre has therefore been a non-theorised category until now, which through this paper I attempt to establish as visible and potent.

Slovenian lesbian theatre can be found in very different spaces, and in the continuation I will try to locate as many as possible. I will not chart them out chronologically, but will follow the logic of wider recognition and the place within the category of lesbian theatre. First, I will introduce the Monospolno gledališče (MSG, Monosexual Theatre) that found its seat in Ljubljana, followed by comedy, which seems to reach the widest audience, and then describe some other places where lesbian theatre is created for very specific audiences. Then I will move on to the mainstream theatre, the one that is primarily financed directly by the Ministry of Culture and the municipalities and, by the virtue of that, has a special importance

in dealing with lesbianism. Because Slovenia lacks autochthonous performing of the themes of minority sexual practices, I shall also mention international festivals and their contributions. Before I delve into theorising such practices, I will mention some marginal cases of the studied topic.

### Monospolno gledališče (MSG, Monosexual Theatre)

In the spirit of alternative theatre, the MSG was established in 2000 at the Autonomous Cultural Zone Metelkova mesto (Metelkova City) and has remained the best example of the Slovenian lesbian theatre to this day. Its protagonists were Irena Duša and Nataša Jereb. The duo first worked at Metelkova as a part of Teater Gromki. Monospolno gledališče – an expression coined by Miha Zadnikar – was created on the initiative of the newly established festival Red Dawns that asked the women of Teater Gromki (which included Jana Menger in addition to the already mentioned protagonists) if they were prepared to create a short comic skit. Irena and Nataša prepared one, and based on the audience reaction decided to develop it into a longer performance. In July 2000, Irena Duša and Nataša Jereb prepared the theatre piece *Ne bom več krvavela* [I'll Bleed No More], which the website succinctly describes as:<sup>3</sup>

a lesbian family tragicomedy [which] wittily mirrors the typical conjugal shenanigans of an average family. Following a strictly realistic procedure it achieves flat out surreal effects. The first true hit of Teater Gromki.

Monospolno gledališče (MSG) also prepared *Debbie da dol Dallas* [Debbie Does Dallas] (2001) and two performances that were produced by ŠKUC-LL: *Tega ti nisem jaz povedala* [You didn't hear this from me] (15 May 2002) and *Rdeči cmeri* [Red Wussies] (8 December 2014). In each of the performances, the story is based on two characters. In the first, *I'll Bleed No More*, the two un-named characters are two lovers in the process of breaking up. The next, *Debbie Does Dallas*, returns to the beginning of their newly-emerging relationship. Here, the protagonists get names, and this happens following the deliberation of how to appropriately translate the title of the porn film. Nataša becomes Debbie, Irena is named after the city of Dallas. Their third performance, *You didn't hear this from me* wades into the world of pop-psychology groups, which Debbie and Dallas often encounter throughout their relationship and their life. Genre-wise, it is still a comedy and each performance includes improvisation, space-wise, it happens among the audience and with the audience. In contents, Debbie and Dallas are inspired, among others, by the radical feminist and lesbian Valerie Solanas. In 2014, after a thirteen-year gap, they performed *Red Wussies* at the Lesbian Quarter Festival, created specifically for the festival.

3. [www.ljudmila.org/gromki/gledalisce.html](http://www.ljudmila.org/gromki/gledalisce.html)

Monospolno gledališče was very popular at Metelkova in the beginning of the millennium. The group also toured to student clubs and other small stages all over Slovenia. Unfortunately, the precise number of performances has not been recorded, because the Repertory, or the Slovenian Theatre Yearbook (of professional production) registered only the first performance of Teater Gromki, in which Goran Medjugorac performed together with Irena Duša and Nataša Jereb, but not the performances by Monospolno gledališče: neither the artists nor anyone else from the Teater Gromki ever bothered with this kind of bureaucracy. At the same time, this was a case of a marginal production, that could not be firmly placed within the professional sphere. This is corroborated with the fact that *Debbie does Dallas* was selected in 2001 to the Linhart Encounter of amateur theatre groups. Monospolno gledališče was thus an urban concept theatre that operated on DIY, “do it yourself”, principles (compare Ana Duša and Kraigher). Before the MSG, Irena Duša was a seasoned member of improv league and a member of Teater Gromki, and Nataša Jereb a contemporary dancer. In Monospolno gledališče the word ruled, but the already mentioned improvisation and cooperation with the audience were vital. Another characteristic was that they did not write down their texts, because for Irena it was more important to know what you want to say and not which words are appropriate now (“Interview”). Their work method was far removed from the drama theatre, with its classical hierarchical division into director, text, performers. Jereb and Duša created their performances together as a whole, they were the authors of the rehearsal process, production and post-production, marketing, scenography, costumes, etc. This kind of creativity was characteristic for female and lesbian groups elsewhere in the world, too.

What else is lesbian in Monospolno gledališče, in addition to the themes, low-budget format based on the DIY principle, and the production within a lesbian organisation of their final performances? There are two traits that stand out. First, the fact that their appearance left a mark on the lesbian scene, which led to the other trait: they became a part of the activism for the rights of homosexual persons. Irena Duša performed in 2001 at the event *Obvoznica mimo nestrpnosti* (By-pass road past intolerance), that is, the first Pride Parade in Ljubljana, and they performed as Debbie and Dallas at the second Pride Parade in 2002. On 27 January 2004, Irena Duša also participated in the action *Gifts for the SLS*, which was recorded in the media (including a photo, see, for example, Modic, compare also Velikonja and Greif 246). A group of activists took a basket of fennels to the seat of the Slovenian People’s Party (SLS), a coalition member who did not want to support the bill of *Zakon o istospolni partnerski skupnosti* (Civil Union Act) and had thus blocked the reading of the bill in parliament. The participants were Mitja Blažič and Irena Duša in the traditional national costume and the LGBTIQ activists Tatjana Greif and Miha Lobnik as those conveying the verbal message.

Monospolno gledališče thus did not originate from lesbian activism or lesbian practices, but it quickly became a part of the lesbian scene, which brought along stigmatisation. Nataša answered the question in the daily newspaper *Dnevnik* that they “got this label later, we only deal with relationships between people in the text,” and Irena stated “we wanted to show a lesbian couple that doesn’t differ in anything from any other couple” and that “lesbianism was not the only noteworthy issue in any of our shows” (Duša et al. “Nihče”). At the same time, they emphasised a pile of topics relating to the life of lesbians: from the fact that the audience was most interested if they were lesbians in their personal life, to their perception of the environment in which we live. Irena illustrated this with an example: “Before Nataša and I started working on these performances, we thought that the society in which we lived was more tolerant than it disclosed itself to be. After we met and started to hang out with lesbians, we realised what immense problems they really face.” Nataša also pointed out that: “We could be even more provocative, because Debbie and Dallas are less vulnerable than ‘actual’ lesbians. When someone attacks the latter, it can break them, but nobody can hurt Debbie and Dallas.”

Monospolno gledališče probably did not have a lot of influence on the mainstream production in Slovenian city and national theatre houses, but it is very similar to smaller comedy productions that settled around that time in mostly commercial venues. For this reason, I will first introduce this aspect of lesbian theatre practices in the next section.

## Comedy and autochthonous spaces

Humour can serve as a good protective shield, but also as a sharp political tool, as it gives a voice to the marked communities (compare Wilson 237). The stand-up genre works very well for that and right now in 2017 at least two women in Slovenia are using lesbian elements in their comedy production. Since 2006, Martina Ipša has been including her own lesbian identity and themes in her act and thus takes care for visibility in this dominantly male discipline. In this, Ipša is joined by the actress, stand-up comedian and puppet animator Lucija Čirović.

Urška Sterle, an activist and a writer, also uses a mix of stand-up comedy and solo performance, but her acts are mostly aimed for the queer population and usually take place in autochthonous places of LGBTIQ subcultures.

A related genre is improvisation theatre. Improv theatre in Slovenia started as a genre in the 1990s and continues to be widespread and popular: it is organised into ŠILA (School Improvisation League), the Goli oder (Naked Stage) Festival and

independent improv group, for example, Teater Narobov. Perhaps because as a genre, improvisation is young, it effortlessly incorporates contemporary themes, which lesbian identities are. This form is very popular among lesbians – they participate both as spectators and as creators. The trap of this theatre is that lesbians can easily be presented as stereotypical and negative. Some years ago there was an active queer group called “V peto gre rado” (Fifth time lucky) which also performed at the Lesbian Quarter Festival. A characteristic of such activity is, that it is – on the financial level – considered amateur, and thus appears sporadically. In their book *Lezbična sekcija LL: kronologija 1987–2012*, Tatjana Greif and Nataša Velikonja write about the events in autochthonous LGBTIQ places in which professional and amateur events take place: for example, the club scene in K4, Roza disko from 1990s onwards, etc. They mention the performances by the Ana Monro Theatre, Svetlana Makarovič, Katja Levstik, and LGBT stage performers Wild Girlz, Amazonas, Golden Eye, and the events at the Metelkova from 1993 onwards, etc. For all the described versions of comedy, it holds true that they are not a principal source of one’s earnings – the only exception to this is perhaps the comedian Martina Ipša. The performances within student activities of the University of Ljubljana are created in a similar manner, for example, the performance *Skrito: spol* [Hidden: Gender] based on the text of Kate Bornstein, a transsexual performer who was a harbinger of the queer movement, (KD Fantazija, FDV, 2005/06) or in the LGBTIQ clubs Monokel and Tiffany, the home of Cabaret Tiffany, a queer theatre collective.

## Institutional production of lesbian theatre in Slovenia

Of all the types of theatre production, professional production has the largest reach, and it can be accessed in over 15 institutions in Slovenia that are primarily intended for theatre. These institutions are financially supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia and the local municipalities. The presence of lesbianism on the city and national stages is important for several reasons. The most important two are the visibility and accessibility that permanent professional theatre spaces allow for, along with their marketing departments and annual subscription system. Performances created in these theatres also have, in addition to a certain amount of audience, a guaranteed critical reflection, media introduction and, thus, a wider reach. They are accessible for research and historisation, and theatres employ people with media (and general) recognition. These performances also have the most chance to reflect a wider Slovenian (and world) social reality, as their target audience is quite wide. The very fact that the performances are aimed at different segments can place the themes into other frames, allowing for comparisons and

contextualisation into different spaces, for example, national, micro and macro-political, economic ... Larger theatre houses publish programmes to go with their productions, in which valid reflections on lesbianism in general can be found, often written by lesbian activists (see, for example, the theatre programmes for productions listed in Table 1).

But how to even detect lesbian theatre? The *Slovenian Theatre Yearbook* (SGL) is intended to record the professional theatre production, and is also easily accessible at the portal *sigledal.org*. But the yearbook does not allow to search the performances based on a theme, unlike a bibliographic service or the joint catalogue of Slovenian libraries COBISS+. The latter offers fewer than five hits for entries using the keywords such as lesbians, theatre, lesbian theatre (in summer 2017). As in the search for other lesbian art, I use foreign sources and oral sources that write about lesbian playwrights and other theatre artists or plays and performances with lesbian (or other queer) themes. This can of course always be found in related themes, such as women in theatre or LGBTIQ art in general. Hence my records can also be incomplete and may thus only serve as a representative sample.

As expected, we do not find a lot of production that could be characterised as lesbian on Slovenian stages. The pre-history of the lesbian theatre probably consists of the staging of Sartre's *No Exit* (Huis clos, translated into Slovenian as *Zaprta vrata*, literally meaning closed doors), in which Ines, one of the protagonists, is brought to hell by her lesbian desire. In Slovenia, the first performance of this play was in 1958 at the Knights' Hall in Križanke, at the Ad Hoc theatre, directed by Draga Ahačič. The *Slovenian Theatre Yearbook* records ten stagings of this play until today (also with the title *Za zaprtimi vrati*, meaning behind closed doors). But here, I will leave *No Exit* and the pre-history – full of (self-)censorship – be and focus on the time following the beginning of the activist movement. This is the time in which lesbianism has already found its place in public, but rarely in theatre. For the purposes of this article, I will also leave out the stagings and texts that in this time that show lesbians as marginal and merely as negative stereotypes.

The table below lists several performances that are worth looking at from the point of view of lesbian themes or lesbian authors.

**Table 1.** An attempt of the chronology of lesbian production in Slovenian theatre institutions.

<b>Season</b>	<b>Production</b>	<b>Work</b>
1985/86	Ljubljana City Theatre	R. M. Fassbinder: <i>The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant</i>
1995/96	Cankarjev dom, City of Women	U. Cetinski: <i>Alma</i>
1999/00	SNT Drama, Small Stage	E. Atkins: <i>Vita &amp; Virginia</i>
2000/01	Prešeren Theatre Kranj	P. Vogel: <i>How I Learned to Drive</i>
2001/02	ŠKUC	S. Tratnik: <i>My Name is Damjan</i>
2003/04	Ptuj City Theatre	P. Vogel: <i>The Baltimore Waltz</i>
2008/09	Imaginarni Institute / Cankarjev dom / City of Women	J. Shepard: <i>Commencing</i>
2008/09	SNT Drama, Small Stage	D. Mamet: <i>Boston Marriage</i>
2008/09	Ptuj City Theatre	P. Vogel: <i>And Baby Makes Seven</i>
2010/11	SNT Drama, Small Stage	D. Mamet: <i>November</i>
2013/14	Ptuj City Theatre	P. Vogel: <i>The Oldest Profession</i>
2015/16	Ljubljana Puppet Theatre	<i>Lesbos. An Erotic Fragment</i>
2015/16	SNG Nova Gorica, Ptuj City Theatre, Mini teater Ljubljana	R. M. Fassbinder: <i>The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant</i>
2017/18	Ljubljana City Theatre	Jonathan Larson: <i>Rent</i>

*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* by R. M. Fassbinder can be seen on world stages as a theatre play, film or opera and was first performed in 1985 at the Ljubljana City Theatre (MGL). Still being performed is the SNG Nova Gorica production from the season 2015/16, in which a lesbian relationship develops (and ends) between a successful fashion designer Petra von Kant (played by Helena Peršuh) and the young Karin (played by Arna Hadžialjević).

*Alma*, a monodrama written by Uršula Cetinski on the basis of the material about Alma Karlin and performed by Polona Vetrih, was performed at the first City of Women festival.<sup>4</sup> Truth be told, *Alma* managed to eschew, despite the widespread publicity

<sup>4</sup> At the round table "Women in Theatre" the festival also hosted the American theorist and lesbian Sue-Ellen Case (see publications in the bibliography section of this paper and the thematic issue of the *Maska* journal for the report on the round table, vol. 6, no.1/3, winter 1995/96).

that the festival received, any direct lesbian label. The life of Alma Karlin (1889–1950) was only becoming recognisable for the wider audience and it was this performance that contributed to the inclusion of this incredible woman into the Slovenian canon. The fact is that Alma Karlin lived with her friend Thea Gammelin for twenty years, but in the presentation and in the reception of the monodrama, the closest it came to the hints of lesbianism was the explanation that she was an intimate friend. I am thus listing the monodrama on the list of lesbian drama as a poorly researched case of (self-)censorship (compare Tratnik, “Alma”).

Twelve years after the beginning of the organised lesbian movement in Slovenia, in 1999, the SNT Drama staged on its Small Stage *Vita & Virginia*, a drama made from the letters and journal entries of Virginia Woolf (played by Silva Čušin) and Vita Sackville-West (played by Saša Pavček), her lover.

Slovenian theatres also performed four works of the American playwright and lesbian Paula Vogel, written between 1984 and 1997, of which only one, however, deals with an explicitly lesbian thematic, *And Baby Makes Seven* from 1984. In the season 2009/2010 the Ptuj City Theatre staged a comedy in which two lesbians and their gay friend are waiting for the birth of their baby, but before that, they have to get rid of their imaginary children. The performance had 11 reprises, two of them on tour. The theatre in Ptuj also staged *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Oldest Profession*, while *How I Learned to Drive*, which deals with incest, was staged in Kranj (about P. Vogel see also Dolan 50–51).

A very important work is a play by the Slovenian lesbian activist and artist Suzana Tratnik. The monodrama *Ime mi je Damjan* [My Name is Damjan], which the author adapted from her novel of the same name from 2001, was first staged by the young actress Neva Jana Flajs in May 2002. The protagonist Damjan speaks about his adventures in a therapy group, but leaves open how to file the identity of the speaker. During his speech, Damjan reveals that he used to have a female name, that his family and acquaintances have problems with his identity, and that he also has a girlfriend and goes to Pink Disco. The monodrama can all the time be read within the lesbian context. It was also staged at the lesbian club Monokel, where the audience sat in a circle together with Damjan, so Damjan could directly address also lesbians and other people from the social margins.

In December 2008, a chamber play for two actresses premièred, in which one of the characters is a lesbian. Produced by the Imaginarni Institute, the play *Commencing* by the lesbian author Jane Shepard was performed by two members of the SNT Drama Ljubljana. The motivation for this performance was in a way similar to the reasons for the establishment of the Monospolno gledališče. The actresses, otherwise members of the SNT Drama Ljubljana, were searching for a text with two complex

female characters. The play takes place in a city flat where Arlin (Petra Govc) comes to pick up her blind date, Kelli (Iva Babić), who does not know that she is about to go on a date with a woman. In this one-act play the protagonists open many topics in the forceful beginning: lesbianism, alcohol, intoxication in general, loneliness, sex, herpes and HIV ... It ends with the possibility that this was a rough beginning of a friendship.

*The Boston Marriage* is a chamber comedy by the popular American playwright David Mamet. The première was in March 2009 on the Small Stage of the SNT Drama Ljubljana, and in it, lesbian wishes and lifestyles powerfully and wittily unfold between Anna (played by Silva Čušin) and Claire (played by Nataša Barbara Gračner).

In *November*, another comedy by David Mamet, also on the Small Stage of SNT Drama Ljubljana, Alida Bevk plays Clarice Bernstein, a speech writer for the American president, a lesbian (thus listed in the dramatis personae) who in the first place wants to marry her partner and who has also adopted a child from China. She is thus a lesbian who plays by the rules of the American democracy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and strives, in accordance with the neoliberal values, for equality in the right to marry.

In the performance *Lesbos. An Erotic Fragment*, which was created within the project BiTeater by young theatre artists, Barbara Ribnikar and Tajda Podobnik play through erotic relationships created from the poetry by the Greek poet Sappho.

The freshest staging, however, is that of *Rent*, a musical from the first half of the 1990s, which comes from the New York off-Broadway scene. The lesbian relationship is between the lawyer Joanne Jefferson (played by Ana Dolinar Horvat) and performer Maureen Johnson (played by Lena Hribar).

### Guest productions of lesbian theatre and international festivals

The overview of the Slovenian professional production from 1985 to 2017 shows such a small incidence of lesbian production that it is not possible to make meaningful conclusions about any kind of influence on the Slovenian theatre or events in the society in general. Unlike the groups in the USA or the UK, Slovenian lesbian theatre has yet to become professionalised – the only exception to this is the enterprise of the stand-up comedian Martina Ipša, which leans more towards pop culture than theatre art.

Therefore, it is all the more important to remind of the place in which lesbian theatre appears often, rather on the productions of Slovenian artists. Lesbians or creators of lesbian arts from outside of Slovenia have found their more or less permanent

space only within two international festivals that take place in our country: the City of Women and Red Dawns. Although, the lesbian performance artist Annie Sprinkle appeared at the Beauty Extreme festival in Cankarjev dom in 1997.

In 2013, Lois Weaver, one of the pioneers of the American lesbian theatre (compare, for example Dolan 30–35), appeared at the international festival City of Women. The performance, also called a show, with the title *What Tammy Found Out ... About Being a Femme*, was a typically lesbian one: first-person, autobiographical (and at the same time, of course, also fictional), with a story about the disclosure or acceptance of a lesbian identity. Similar topics are also the focus of Ursula Martinez, who appeared at the City of Women a year later with her event *My Stories, Your Emails*, as well as the burlesque workshop and performance within the Slovenian techno-burlesque *Image Snatchers* (Emanat).

### Borderline cases of lesbian contents

This chart could also easily include five performed plays by the British playwright Sarah Kane: *4.48 Psychosis*, *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, *Craves*, *Phaedra's Love*/*4.48 Psychosis*. The plays were staged at the Small Stage of the SNT Drama Ljubljana and the Mladinsko Theatre between 2001 and 2009, and also at the Exodus Festival. Lesbianism in Sarah Kane is linked primarily to the author's private life. Her plays, only staged in Slovenia after her death, are imbued with sexuality, but this sexuality is somewhat post-identity already, a little queer.

Marginal lesbian images can also be observed in *The House of Bernarda Alba* (Mladinsko Theatre, 1999/2000), *Remembrance of Things Past (In Search of Lost Time)* (SNT Drama Ljubljana 2003/04), *Nine Easy Pieces* (PreGlej, 2007), *Malfi* (Mladinsko Theatre, 2007), *The Young Flesh* (Mladinsko Theatre, 2007/08), *Hitchcock* (Mladinsko Theatre 2016/17), etc. In most cases, the image includes a kiss or some physical expression of affection between two actresses or a travesty where a woman plays a man or vice versa, or lesbianism is inscenated with the help of the soundscape, like, for example in *Paracelsus and Frankenstein* (a co-production by Muzeum and Cankarjev dom, 1998/99) where the initiation scene of the four secretaries is accompanied by the song "Don't Smoke in Bed" by the lesbian singer k. d. lang (Jež, "Srce").

Likewise, I have not included the so-called radical theatre performance *#pornographia* (Mini teater Ljubljana, 2015/16) based on the motives of the film *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (*La vie d'Adèle*, 2013), although this performance seemingly meets the basic criteria for lesbian theatre. It is performed by two actresses (at the time, still students at UL AGRFT), and the contents are adapted from the film made famous by explicit

scenes of lesbian sexuality, which the performance follows. So what is the problem with including it into the lesbian theatre? In my study, which attempts to affirm the notion of lesbian theatre, *#pornographia* can only serve as an example of the “anti-lesbian theatre”; namely, the theatre in which we could include pseudo-lesbian iconography, which is the chief ingredient of the heterosexual male pornography (compare Wilson 240), and all those images of lesbianism that merely reproduce the negative stereotypes of lesbians (for example, D. Jovanović’s play *Exhibitionist*, winner of the Grum Award for the best new Slovenian play in 2002). In *#pornographia*, the problem is also that the narration of the story is flattened into a somewhat quasi-Freudian logic that these are two girls without fathers (which is not the case in the film, for example), whose relationship ends with the vindictive departure into the audience by one of the actresses after the sexual act (compare also Bobnič). But of course that does not necessarily mean that the staging as a whole is not at moments simulative of lesbian desires.

## Theorising lesbianism in performing

The reader who has thus far learnt about the presented aspects and cases of lesbian performance has most likely noticed that in my paper I have consistently been using a perhaps antiquated term, namely the category of lesbianism. The research of lesbianism is supposed to be surpassed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for example, by using the word queer – an umbrella label for non-binary and non-hierarchical notions of minority sexuality, but also intersectional study of gender topics. Hence, I must first state that I always treat lesbianism intersectionally, that is, in its relationship to other identities – in our territory mostly in relation to sexual and class identity, but also national, race, age and others. I would like to resolve the tension between the essentialist notion of *lesbianism* and the label *queer* as more fluid with two theses with which Sara Werner opens her book *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (qtd. in Sikes 229). Werner warns that queer theory, by focusing on deconstructing sexual categories and explaining the early political-sexual endeavours as essentialist, overlooked the historic effects of these interventions. Further, Werner believes that this historic oblivion coincided with the present-day alliance of the LGBT activism and neoliberal politics, which is in sharp opposition with the early feminist and lesbian/gay activists (compare also Case, *Feminist*). In other words, when I speak about lesbianism in theatre today and in the past, I see the activist potential congruent with the queer theory that can oppose identity policies, reject assimilation and normalisation, oppose the concepts of normality and be critical not only of heteronormativity, but also of wars, family, same-sex marriage and assimilatory policies of lesbian and gay movements. On the other hand, I cannot neglect the endeavours for “normalisation” of lesbianism and minority sexual identities, endeavours that have as a consequence

actual changes in legislation and general societal attitudes. The theatre offers space to all these themes and the study of each individual performance within a wider social context of the given moment is essential.

When describing the theatre-lesbian history in Slovenia, I have already offered several thematic frames of how to think and perform lesbianism within the Slovenian contemporary stage arts. Of course, the theory can be approached from different directions, from the already mentioned queer and feminist theories to deconstruction, social constructivism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, etc. There are no limitations here, and yet lesbianism as a minority sexual practice had certain characteristics that cannot be overlooked. To begin with, it is essential to distinguish between the images that strengthen prejudice against the LGBTIQ persons and reinforce heteronormativity from the images that present queer persons as full citizens of the world. I suggest that, similar to the post-colonial approach, in staging queer topics, we check 1) the examples in performances (or texts) in which sexual orientation (as well as class, race, nationality, etc.) have a power over others, or construct the Other in order to keep the power; 2) where in the performances we see double consciousness often present in LGBTIQ persons who can on the one side adopt the dominant (that is, heteronormative) culture and at the same time want to retain their own culture; 3) where in performing – if at all – we see resistance to the dominant heteronormative ideology and what are the consequences of such resistance.

On the level of the theatre medium, queer performances usually reject the exclusively realistic methods of performing, as these reinforce the mainstream ideologies which suppress homosexuality and transsexuality. Hence, lesbian performances try to develop new practices in form as well – and thus search for opportunities to enrich the theatre mainstream. If in foreign literature it is possible to read that LGBTIQ performances are key to the reformation of Anglo-American contemporary theatre practices (see, for example, Walsh) the same cannot yet be said for the Slovenian landscape, which remains predominantly patriarchal (see, for example, Šorli and Dobovšek). In this light, it seems that male (homo)sexuality is more visible,<sup>5</sup> yet the influences of queer practices have slowly penetrated the main Slovenian theatre houses: in the season 2016/17 the SNT Drama successfully, in a transvestite manner, cast three actresses (Barbara Cerar, Silva Čušin and Tina Vrbnjak) as the three main characters in the performance *Merlin or Wasteland* on the main stage, but unfortunately the entire performance was not a success; similarly, and with a more comprehensive

5 Compared to the lesbian drama theatre, gay authors or gay themes have found their place on the institutional and alternative stages much earlier. To illustrate this, here are some earliest performances from the beginning of gay and lesbian theatre in Slovenia, with our stages, of course, having staged Shakespeare (travesties), Lorca, Genet, T. Williams, etc.: M. Sherman: *Bent* (Glej, 1983), W. M. Hoffmann: *As Is* (Drama SNT Maribor, 1986), J. Orton: *What the Butler Saw* (PDG, 1986), and Genet's *The Balcony* (SMG, 1988) and *The Maids* (Koreodrama, 1989) ... The reasons for greater visibility of gay themes are to be searched for in two directions: the generally greater presence of male writers and in the HIV/AIDS epidemics that affected the gay community in the Western world and was at the time popular theatre material. Gay theatre in Slovenia is undoubtedly a topic deserving more research (compare also student texts by Iza Strehar and Jaka Smerkolj).

concept *Hitchcock*, at the Mladinsko Theatre plays with gender roles. In the main Slovenian national and municipal institutions we can thus expect lesbianism (or related queer tactics) when this is a motivation for (female) acting excellence and creativity, but not necessarily planned with a thought to alter the view of sex(uality) in Slovenian society (*Hitchcock* does try to comment on the very patriarchal ideology and is thus more socially engaged than most Slovenian productions). On the other hand, in the non-institutional Slovenian production, where the conceptual way of creation is dominant, we can find fresh and contemporary images of lesbianism in the techno burlesque *Image Snatchers* (Emanat 2013). The techno burlesque, produced by Emanat Institute led by Maja Delak has been persisting for five consecutive years, and it creates its skits as a reaction to the daily social climate. It has its home – like the Monospolno gledališče before it – at Metelkova in Teater Gromki. In 2014, the performance was selected to the accompanying programme of the 44<sup>th</sup> Week of Slovenian Drama (selector Gregor Butala), and the production can be described as professional, because – despite the low ticket prices – it is performed by an established team of performers (and Emanat is financially supported also by the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Ljubljana). *Image Snatchers* non-compromisingly deals with physicality, widening the horizons of performing practices and thus enriches the very theatre art. Because it is socially relevant and impressively well-crafted and creative, it creates new images constantly. Zala Dobovšek called *Image Snatchers* “an isle of freshness in the ocean of sameness” where we can understand the ocean to be the remaining theatre production in Slovenia, while its intersectional queer modus is the one that most of the Slovenian theatre will not operate with (“Tehnoburleska” 164). Lesbianism is undoubtedly one of those themes, so the skit “The Time of my Life” belongs to the undisputed peaks of lesbian performing here. In it, the (really) pregnant performers (Urška Vohar and Nataša Živkovič) together with other snatchers parody the finale of the film *Dirty Dancing* (1987) in a precise and superb performance in the moment when in Slovenia the initiative to change the legislation to expand marriage to same-sex persons and thus legally equalise same-sex couples with couples of different sexes was (again) taking place.

## Directions for the future of lesbian theatre

For LGBTIQ persons, theatre has always been at the same time a haven in which it is possible to face one’s own minority sexuality, yet often primarily a place of censorship. In this paper I have presented the foundations of lesbian performing, but there are still many contents that I have not studied that must at least be outlined. It is necessary to point out that in Slovenia, lesbianism is still risky, as no woman in a position of power in public theatre institutions is associated with lesbianism. Not only are there not any managers, directors or actors working in Slovenian theatre houses

who identify as lesbians, we only extremely rarely hear about the *closeted* ones.<sup>6</sup> This further complicates the thesis championed by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, the editors of the monograph *Queer Dramaturgies*. They suggest that contemporary queer dramaturgies are among other things inseparably tied to the identity of the creators, who thus identify as queer (13). According to their interpretation, this is the main difference from the gay theatre, where the staging of homosexual characters seeks empathy from the mainstream audience – we can also call this “domesticated” queer (16). If we follow this thesis in Slovenia, we’ll be able to watch queer theatre for a long time merely in the poor production conditions of the non-institutional scene and occasionally some queer enthusiasts in some LGBTIQ place. But it should not be like this. There are several themes that deserve wider treatment – from the pronouncedly lesbian ones: a ban on artificial insemination in conception and the connected referendum from 2001, the need for a “normalisation” of lesbians for political goals, to identities that are even more minority than lesbians, for example, transsexual, to underpaying women, which of course is a lesbian problem, too. In the Slovenian society we can also expect the (thus far) invisible stories of mothers who have lost custody of their children after adopting a new, lesbian identity, while the stories of coming out to family or in the work place also seem eternal. Likewise taboo are the topics of lesbian sexual pleasure (see Case, *Feminist*). These are particularly problematic because they reject the possibility of a lesbian view in early feminist theories, claiming that it only reproduces heterosexual dynamics (Wilson 231–36). In other words, a lesbian is often, “both her body and her gender, preordained to the role that has no reference to ‘the real’” (Greif, “Queer” 50). Here, in Slovenia we are expecting a productive challenge, namely a (potential) production at the Ljubljana City Theatre of Simona Semenič’s latest play *this apple, made of gold* (2016, nominated for the Grum Award), which among other things includes scenes of lesbian sex.

To finish, let me define the main functions of lesbian theatre. This should provide and allow the sensation of belonging for minority, queer sexualities, but also address the controversial aspects of its own ideological formations (for example, transsexuality, attitude towards family life, polygamy, etc.) Lesbian theatre should be political in its contents and in its modes of production – this means inclusive and democratic in the noblest meaning of the word. This way, it can also serve those living in Slovenia as a model for the development of democracy, for the development of contemporary theatre in which gender and sexuality will no longer be determined categories.

*Translated by Barbara Skubic*

<sup>6</sup> Unlike the male colleagues, where several artists are either out or their homosexuality is a “public secret”, I do not know of a single *ikea* among women. Here I must of course explain two slang expressions (see [www.kulturnicenterq.org/lgbtqslavar/](http://www.kulturnicenterq.org/lgbtqslavar/)): *to be in the closet* means “to hide one’s non-heterosexual sexual orientation or sexual identity”, while *ikea* is a name for a “closeted lesbian” (thus named after the furniture company that also produces closets), the Croatian expression is simply *ormaruša*. My knowledge of the Slovenian theatre scene of course cannot be complete, but I have been asking people for several years to gain the appropriate information.

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