

# What has Happened to the Political in Theatre? The Case of Oliver Frljić

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By examining some of Oliver Frljić's most provocative performances that have been staged in Slovenia and across Europe, as well as staged in different contexts both in and outside of Europe, this article thematises the special tactics of this representative of radical theatre who uses provocation by repetition to achieve his goals. This special strategy brings his actors-performers to the point where, using their own life experiences and the vivisection of their own contradictory attitudes to the world, they generate an intimate answer to the questions of what is political today and in what way the political is castrated in contemporary society. With his performances, Frljić creates profound feelings of uneasiness in the spectators, which in turn trigger questions about the borders and the meaning of radical and political theatre. At the same time, they reveal the borders of the political acceptability of the use of hate speech in art. The theatre frame of Frljić's staging laboratory presents stories from different parts of the world, but his primary interest remains the peripheral sphere of the European cultural and political semiosphere: the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, followed by the war in Croatia and Bosnia and the genocide in Srebrenica. In the recent years, the focus of that interest has expanded to include the crisis of the post-refugee neo-Catholic and neoliberal Europe here and now, with all the newly composed Orientalisms. By researching the semiotics of Frljić's particular theatre machines and reactions to them, the discussion tries to answer the following questions: can today's performance practices produce a special form of social criticism? Can they speak relevantly about ethical dilemmas of neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, and open questions about the refugee crisis, new political borders inside Europe, new forms of Orientalism, neo-Catholicism and neo-colonialisms?

In their Artaudian-Brechtian form, Frljić's performances are also extremely politically incorrect. In them, he talks about the wars that have bloodied the soil of former Yugoslavia with the passion, directedness and shamelessness that reminds one of, for example, Jan Fabre. When creating performances with Frljić, his actors and collaborators perform the Artaudian ritual of repetition: in the contemporary version of the Artaudian theatre of cruelty, they are time and again dying and rising from the

dead. In the performance *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!* (2010), they wrap their torsos and the corpses of their fellow actors in the flags of the new countries that have been created in the region of former Yugoslavia and in the flag of the Mladinsko Theatre – a theatre that used to unite the Yugoslav cultures and was some kind of trademark of “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*”, also the slogan of the erstwhile socialist self-managing federation – in an absurd antinationalist fashion catwalk, which quickly turns into a confrontation and the slaughter of those who think differently. In the performance *Our Violence and Your Violence* (2016), which was relentlessly and mercilessly criticised at various European festivals for being politically incorrect, inappropriate, outdated and so on, they dealt with the very hot topic of migrations and European identity. This helps Frljić expose the fact that the neo-Orientalist discourse has recently been on the rise in Europe, and this discourse understands the (often Muslim) migrants as barbaric “anti-citizens”. In the time when the refugee question has attained the status of a “deluge” in the biblical sense, he mixes political incorrectness with drastic physical theatre that plays with stereotypes of representation and reality shows. Frljić obviously does not want to use the normative theatre language to criticise this very reality, as the theatre language is already the materialisation of its ideology. His performances undoubtedly contribute significantly in opening up the problems of nationalisms, Orientalisms and neoliberalisms of today’s postdemocratic societies. At the same time, they clearly show the fact that theatre is still a medium exclusive to a certain social class, which is economically and socially so privileged that it can understand and afford it. For this reason, radical theatre must change the theatre discourse and show in what way “normal” theatre language replicates social inequality and repression.