

# Brutalism in Contemporary Slovenian Theatre

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In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, architects developed a method of construction that purposely left visible the reinforced concrete structure. This style, which they named “brutalism” followed Le Corbusier’s idea that the point of architecture is to “establish emotional relationships by means of raw materials (*matières brutes*)”. The characteristic of the brutalist approach in architecture is the use of raw concrete (*béton brut*) in, as Charles Jencks says, a “ruthlessly direct way”, that is, using construction materials and objects “as they are”. Originating from this label of an architectural style, the author of this article lays out a hypothesis that we can detect the paradigm of the brutalist use of “raw materials” onstage in contemporary Slovenian theatre, which does not mean bringing raw, unrefined or everyday objects into the scenographic structure of the set, but rather, an explicit presentation of the anatomy of social relationships in contemporary Europe, particularly Slovenia: psychological and physical violence, asymmetrical power relations, structural violence of the neoliberal system, increasing intolerance, etc. The author shows through the selected, paradigmatic performances how these social relationships manifest in contemporary Slovenian theatre, and also places this paradigm into the wider artistic and political context.

The question originating from the brutalist paradigm in contemporary Slovenian theatre is whether such a documentarist approach (*facti bruti*) and the presentation of various forms of violence onstage cause – in addition to the aesthetic – other effects as well? In other words: what is the estrangement effect of this theatre supposed to be, and what is its politicality? Political theatre is a concept that, on the one hand, has opened a new epistemological field in the theory of performing arts, and on the other, is a field intersected with traps that originate in its inherent contradictoriness. Theatre sets have never been, and cannot be, revolutionary barricades, but this does not mean, of course, that the artists are necessarily and by definition “salon revolutionaries”. Today’s artists who are working in democratic countries can call upon constitutionally guaranteed rights and liberties in their work, which is undoubtedly a huge civilisational achievement, but as long as there exists a wider unfreedom, all the particular freedoms, including the freedom of artistic expression

are simply dust in the eyes, and often, unfortunately, a handy excuse for oppressing the society as a whole.

Brutalist architecture deliberately leaves exposed reinforced concrete elements in order to disclose the method of the fundamental construction of the building. The estrangement effect of the Brechtian theatre also originates in the de-construction of the illusionism of the artistic medium, and at the same time strives to make visible the spontaneous ideology hiding in everyday automatisms. The brutalist approaches in the five analysed performances reveal social relationships “as they are” and at the same time open a perspective from which we can see them as unusual and destructive. In *Ubu the King*, we follow the consequences of the restoration of capitalism in the period of transition, where the only thing left of the former bourgeois manners is the grotesque vulgarity of the petty bourgeois parvenu; *The Triple Life of Antigone* confronts us with the fundamental doubt of the basic question by using Brecht’s estrangement effect from his learning plays (*Lehrstücke*), in *The Republic of Slovenia*, the estrangement already comes from the bizarre fact that the brutal banality of the illegal arms trade must be dealt with in theatre, because the Slovenian legal system has failed; *Our Violence and Your Violence* destroys taboos of the European politics towards the Middle East that is drenched in Orientalism and neo-colonialism; while *Manifest K* reveals the illusion that art can eschew the exploitative destructiveness of capitalist social relationships. All the mentioned performances could be categorised as “engaged” art, which addresses the audience as a community of critically thinking individuals. This strategy can also be very risky, because it can become a concession to the audience who carry out their engagement in theatre and yet can remain passive in everyday life. But this does not mean that contemporary artists should therefore give in to conformism and defeatism; they cannot assume anything but an engaged stance and encourage the audience to critical reception, unless they want their art to be reduced to mere decoration. As the brutalist paradigm in the contemporary Slovenian theatre clearly shows, the Brechtian estrangement effect is still one of the possible strategies, if it is adapted for the current social circumstances.