

Everything We Have Been Afraid to Ask about Politicality and the Castration of the (Post-) Dramatic

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Introduction to the thematic block

The thematic block *The Castration of the Political and Contemporary Slovenian Theatre* has grown from the questions we asked at a one-day academic symposium organised by the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana, the Slovenian Theatre Institute and *Amfiteater – Journal of Performing Arts Theory* in November 2017, in an attempt to discuss the ways in which the new manifestations of the political in theatre are less and less dramatic and more and more post-dramatic. Such manifestations are transforming into post-dramatic performance art, which is establishing a new form of politicality that places at the centre a “theatre discourse, which results in considering the texts only as an element, a layer and ‘material’ for the stage creation, not as its sovereign” (Lehmann). But the politicality of the post-dramatic theatre is apolitical (castrated) if its performing strategies – despite the direct address to the audience – remain outside a joint rethinking of the key societal questions. The researchers Lev Kreft, Blaž Lukan, Aldo Milohnič, Barbara Orel, Gašper Troha, Krištof Jacek Kozak, Tomaž Toporišič and Nenad Jelesijević, who took part in the dynamic and invigorating public rethinking of the political and of its castration (which attracted numerous – theoretical and practical, reflexive and creative – participants to the Slovenian Theatre Institute), have at the invitation of *Amfiteater* developed their discussion points into research papers. These papers, now in different ways, but as comprehensively, concretely and bindingly as possible, answer the fundamental questions formulated at the symposium: Are we living in a world in which the castration of the political is complete, while the power of the individual (regardless of gender), theatre and culture has been stripped away, as have been the sources of power? What is the situation of the political in the contemporary theatre in Slovenia?

The questions posed about contemporary theatre and its politicality are thus:

1. In the time of “liquid modernity” (Zygmunt Bauman), how does theatre behave as the once “privileged form of spectacle function” (Zoja Skušek)?

2. Are we living in a world in which the castration of the political is complete, while the power of an individual (regardless of gender), theatre and culture has been stripped away, as have been the sources of power?
3. Are we living in a world in which capital as an abstract (but extremely active) authority gives confirmations exclusively to those that reproduce and increase it?
4. In what way is contemporary Slovenian theatre exposed to symbolic castration due to which it cannot convincingly answer the question entrusted to it by its symbolic mandate: how to be and how to act politically in the globalised world of liquid modernity?
5. How much and why is the gap increasing between what we call “political theatre” and the “politics of theatre” and what can such art achieve? Why is it that political art cannot close this gap?
6. The active participation of the spectator, a frequent method of the contemporary political theatre, is supposed to contribute to its greater criticalness. But at the same time, the question arises, is this (en)acted subversiveness just a concession to the spectator to fulfil her or his engagement in theatre and indulge in political passivity in everyday life?
7. What is then the situation of the political in the contemporary theatre in Slovenia?

The thematic block of the journal provides different responses and opens various questions. In his introductory discussion with the witty title “The Castration of the Political, and Then the Police”, Lev Kreft finds that the castration of the political as the dispossession of power and pleasure does not mean that those without power cannot find pleasure in castrating the police, apart from rare historical occasions in fiction, particularly theatrical fiction. Hegel’s *Doppelsatz* “What is actual is rational and what is rational is actual” in theatre shows how it is possible to perform reason as actual without referring to reality. Theatre in Kreft’s interpretation, originating in Hegel, is consequently only actual when it is rational and not when it is real. In today’s moment as well, aesthetic modernism still produces self-sufficient artworks which violate the fundamental bond between performing arts and the audience regarding the actuality of fiction, which is a product of the relationship between them. The problem of the contemporary performing of the political, concludes Kreft, is in the very inability of contemporary theatre to stage the actuality of reason using the tools of representation.

In his article “The Powerlessness of the Political. The Power of Acting”, Blaž Lukan studies the political and castration, or rather the possibility of eschewing the latter, using the performance *Powerlessness* directed by Primož Ekart as a case study. He starts with the assumption that the performance belongs only conditionally to the field of political theatre, as its emphasis is on the presentation of an individual human fate. He researches how to penetrate the field of the real or the political using the tools of fiction; in doing so, he uses some of the newer approaches to the field of the performative and the role of the political in it (Read, Pavis, Lavender). As an example of this new understanding of the political in theatre, he analyses in detail a short excerpt from the performance, in which the performer stages performative chaos and with practically uncontrollable speed, a “historic” process of both the development of the individual personality and the evolution of the community unfolds in front of the audience. In Lukan’s opinion, the performance thus becomes an act of the political, which does not need additional politicisation. The performative staging of powerlessness paradoxically professes a new power of acting that can establish itself as the power of new political action; which at the same time makes it possible to survive the state of radical insecurity in which we find ourselves in today’s historic moment.

Barbara Orel observes political castration through the prism of reception and perception in her article “Towards the Politics of Perception: A Turn in the Understanding of the Politicality of Performing Arts”. She draws attention to the turn in the understanding of the politicality of performing arts which has occurred in the last couple of decades. A characteristic of this turn is the production of politicality which has moved from the paradigm of presentation to the forms of perception. It is no longer so essential how the creators present a political gesture onstage, important is the spectator’s role in co-creating the performed world. From this Barthesian position of the birth of the reader and the emphasis on the third paradigm, Orel develops the particular paradigm of the “politics of perception” which she defines on the basis of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s assertion that watching is a creative act. At the same time, Orel uses Hans-Thies Lehmann’s emphasis on the importance of a visible connection between the spectator’s perception and the production of one’s own experience. She examines the turn towards the politics of perception from the point of view of addressing the audience in theatre in the last decades in the context of Slovenian theatre. She focuses on the installation for one spectator, *Camillo – Memo 4.0: The Cabinet of Memories*, directed in 1998 by Emil Hrvatin, in which the locus of theatre is moved to the spectator’s body. She states that theatre that bets on the politics of perception offers its audience a first-class aesthetic, political and ethical experience, and at the same time demands of them a particular kind of emancipation and responsibility, not only within the coordinates of the performed world, but also

in the spaces of everyday life. To illustrate and confirm this thesis, she analyses the performance *25.671* directed by Oliver Frljić and performed by Prešeren Theatre Kranj (2013).

Tomaž Toporišič also focuses on special kinds of politicality and castration in the opus of Oliver Frljić; to be precise, in some of Frljić's most provocative performances that have been shown in the Slovenian and European context (*Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!, Our Violence and Your Violence*). Toporišič analyses in detail the special tactics of this radical theatre representative, who uses provocation with repetition to reach his goal. This special strategy brings actors-performers to generate, from their own life experience and the vivisection of their own ambivalent attitude towards the world, an intimate response to the question about what is political today and in what way we castrate the political in the society. With his performances, Frljić creates strong feelings of discomfort in the spectators, which trigger them to question the borders and meaning of radical and political theatre. At the same time, his performances also appear at the borders of political acceptability regarding the use of hate speech in art. Helped by the research of semiotics of Frljić's special theatre machines and the responses to them, the article tries to answer the questions: Can today's performative practices produce a specific form of social criticism? Can they speak relevantly about the ethical dilemmas of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism, and open the questions about the refugee crisis, the new political borders inside Europe, new forms of Orientalism, neo-Catholicism and neo-colonialisms? To what extent, either successfully or unsuccessfully, does this kind of political incorrectness use some of the most banal mechanisms of visual culture as a tool to criticise the jargon of authenticity of the post-transitional "multi-speed Europe"?

Aldo Milohnić in his article "Brutalism in Contemporary Slovenian Theatre" links the political in the contemporary theatre to the concept behind the architectural style known as "brutalism". With the help of this imported term, he reflects on the paradigm of the brutalist use of raw materials in contemporary Slovenian theatre, which in his opinion allows for a clear presentation of the anatomy of the actual social relationships: psychological and physical violence, asymmetrical power relations, structural violence of the neoliberal system, increasing intolerance, and the rise of neo-fascism, etc. Milohnić uses the lens of brutalism to analyse the performances *Ubu the King*, *The Triple Life of Antigone*, *The Republic of Slovenia*, *Our Violence and Your Violence* and *Manifest K* to show how social relationships are manifested in contemporary Slovenian theatre. To conclude, he links brutalism with the wider artistic and political context of contemporary Slovenian society and asks a provocative Brechtian question: What is the estrangement effect of this theatre supposed to be and what is its politicality?

Krištof Jacek Kozak tackles the castration in contemporary Slovenian political theatre through his presentation and analysis of the theme of Europe in contemporary drama from the political, economic and spiritual perspective as well as other aspects. As examples of such politicising, he lists the textual corpora and stagings of texts by three leading contemporary Slovenian playwrights: Matjaž Zupančič, Vinko Möderndorfer and Simona Semenič. The author presents a thesis about the inability of the political, activist theatre to accept the hand offered by the political drama text and become an engine of potential social changes. As an example, he analyses in detail the text by the Prešeren Fund award-winning playwright Simona Semenič, *we, the european corpses*, and particularly its staging prepared by Sebastijan Horvat at the Mladinsko Theatre. Kozak finds that theatre in this case remains within its own limits and despite denouncing the artistic, perpetuates exactly that: it remains merely artistic.

In his article "Understanding the Castration of the Political Using Rok Vilčnik's Play *People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili*", Gašper Troha examines this Slavko Grum award-winning play and its staging in the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana. Using a targeted analysis of the text and the baptismal performance, he tries to find the answers to a series of questions: Is the castration of the political that happened to the baptismal performance in fact the castration of the political power of the contemporary Slovenian political theatre, or would a different reading and staging of the text represent a successful, provocative and impactful political drama? To Troha, Vilčnik's play is an example of an extremely open text, which he understands as a special questioning of the pattern of the contemporary world. We must certainly not read this literally as a commentary on the historical totalitarian systems, as the text is a political piece only if we stage it as an apolitical text that deals with the very repository of contemporary existence.

Nenad Jelesijević's "Waiting for the Political. Towards Protagonism in Performance" concludes the thematic block. Dealing primarily with the Deleuzian and Rancièrian theoretisations of the castration and the political in contemporary theatre and performance, it introduces the thesis that in the case of the insusceptibility of the strategy of performing for the common, we cannot speak of the truly political. This can also be seen in the continuous new attempts to activate the spectator, to turn her or him into an active participant of the event. But such participation in itself does not mean politicality. In fact, the principle of neutralisation of criticism is inscribed into the very system of production. The key problem of a contemporary theatre and performance art is the separation of the performers from the spectators, which is only the manifestation of the classification as a basic procedure of the spectacle economy of cultural industry. When we speak about the political in the performative and vice versa, we think of the relationships between all the actors in the space-time of the

performance. The empowerment in contemporary performing practices can only be realised if the efficient starting points are provided for the co-creation of a *situation* rather than a presentation. Only in it and through it can a space of political speaking be truly developed in the artwork itself, in the zone of pleasure.

Of course, neither the thematic block as a whole nor in part brings final answers, and the authors, as a rule, neither want nor strive for them. Nevertheless, the articles open a number of questions, originating from the fact that the engagement and politicality of Slovenian theatre have once more intensified in the last two decades, which conceptually links theatre's own artistic practices to political activism. As if the theatre once again started to be acutely aware that it is an "apparatus for the construction of truths" (Badiou), which, on the one hand brings ethical responsibility, and on the other, the awareness of political power which is written into the performing processes. All the reflections clearly show that contemporary Slovenian theatre is aware of its social function, but at the same time, its realistic political scope is questionable, as the satisfaction of the need for criticism can also be a generator of a merely seeming politicality which has no actual, material effect of social changes. And it is here that the field of the castration of the political in contemporary Slovenian theatre sets off at the end of the second decade of the third millennium.

Translated by Barbara Skubic