

Slobodan Unkovski, director

Theatre as a Relationship

Interviewed by Ana Stojanoska

According to the data collected within the project *Macedonian-Slovenian Theatre Relations (from 1990 until the Present)*, the Macedonian director Slobodan Unkovski has directed five plays in four Slovenian theatres in the period of our interest: *Peer Gynt* by Ibsen, produced by SNT Drama Ljubljana (1991), *The Misanthrope* by Molière, produced by SNT Drama Ljubljana (2000), *As You Like It* by Shakespeare, produced by Ljubljana City Theatre (2001), *The Fourth Sister* by Głowacki, produced by SNT Drama Ljubljana (2002) and *The Green Bird* by Gozzi, produced by SNT Nova Gorica (2005). He has directed in Slovenia in 1983, too: *Top Secret* by Dušan Jovanović in the Slovene Permanent Theatre in Trieste. Apart from his work with the Slovenian theatres, his relationship with the Slovene theatre is also important, mainly through directing several important Slovenian playwrights like Dušan Jovanović and Rudi Šeligo.

For that purpose, this interview is conceived as a theoretical and aesthetic presentation of the work of Slobodan Unkovski as a director and his personal understanding of the Slovenian theatre.

The Slovenian theatre and your interest in it, when did you start, why and is there a specific play or an ensemble to blame for that?

I met Slovenian theatre when I started attending festivals, and that was during my studies, practically as early as 1971. The Slovenian theatre had distinguished itself in many ways then: the acting, the equipment, other elements. And then, I was also a selector in Sarajevo (for the MESS festival), I travelled and watched Slovenian plays. And, finally, I was with Milena Zupančič in a jury in Zagreb, at the Gavella Evenings, so I also met her. Then I collaborated with Dušan Jovanović when we worked on and I directed *The Liberation of Skopje* in Skopje. Finally, I have been working with Meta Hočevar since 1978. The collaboration with Meta Hočevar started in Zenica, and the play was *Legend* by Miroslav Krleža. The Mladinsko, of course, I watched their plays in Belgrade. Later I also learnt about it through Ljubiša Ristić's work. And my first play there in the 1990s was *Peer Gynt* in SNT Drama Ljubljana. The work on the play had started, then fell apart because Radko Polič quit, and he was supposed to play *Peer Gynt*. Then I took Igor Samobor, a young actor then, and we started working

on it even during the spring. During the summer he completed his other obligations and came very ready in September, so we made a play that was remembered there as something significant and good. After that I worked in several theatres. I mean, mainly in Drama, once in the Ljubljana City Theatre, also in Nova Gorica, and I also had negotiations with other theatres, but nothing came through. I had some projects that I didn't complete, like Vinko Möderndorfer's *Europe*, I was supposed to work on. Before that, there was an initiative by one famous writer, I can't remember his name now, but Lado Kralj brought me the text, after we came with my performance *Proud Flash* or *Hamlet* in Ljubljana, can't remember exactly, at the airport, before I got on the airplane, they gave me a text they wanted me to direct, but I didn't like it and I didn't work on it. I mean, I've often been in the company of the actors and playwrights from Slovenia, I directed Rudi Šeligo in Sarajevo, Dušan Jovanović in Skopje and Trieste, so I was constantly in touch with the Slovenian theatre, with dramatic texts, with authors, playwrights, actors, etc.

You mention Dušan Jovanović. Is there something specific about him as a playwright that provoked you to direct his work?

I liked that he treated political issues in a subtle way, that he opened some questions that were closed before that. For example, in *Karamazovs*, also in the other plays. Because those were the 1980s, the period when political theatre became dominant. He and Ljubiša Ristić were the most prominent. I caught that wave directing *Croatian Faust* by Slobodan Šnajder in Belgrade, in a way expressing my aesthetics, but it was absolutely political, dramatically important to work on. *The Liberation of Skopje* is the best that has come out of him, I directed that, and I think he is an exceptional playwright and a director, very specific, some may like him a lot, some may not.

What are the main aesthetic features of the Slovenian theatre? More precisely, can we define *Slovenian theatre* as a category with its own special type of aesthetics and poetics?

Slovenian theatre is not a simple term, so to say. In the former Yugoslavia, we knew the most talked about Slovenian plays, those that were aesthetically different, minimalistic in many aspects, with a certain type and way of acting. But in Slovenia, there is an abundance of plays that are conventional. Just as in German or other theatres, they are not unimportant, they are important for the audience, people come to see them, whether they be tasteful or not, but they work. They have always had the need to examine new directions. To make further steps. Whether it is in the theme, the nudity, the inclusion of animals in the plays, etc., they have always

been provocative and different, and brave, I must say. For example, some companies, like Mladinsko or Glej in a certain phase, others also had specific aesthetics and we knew what to expect from that theatre. SNT Drama had serious production, serious set design, they had high quality actors with whom it was always a pleasure to work. They were actually constantly positioned between a strictness and sharpness in their attitude and expression, with a masterful interpretation of poetry, of the unreachable, and that mix has always been exciting. It is not possible to say that there were no great influences from the German theatre, I think that they had that influence even in the internal organisation, the production plan, in the dramatists and their role, in the equipment, in the design. It was easy for them to travel to Munich, to Vienna and other cities, while it was complicated for us even to get there. So, when we started to compete within Yugoslavia, for example, with our Drama Theatre Skopje, it was always a pleasure to beat the Slovenians at Sterijino pozorje festival, while at MESS we had equal success. But we competed mainly with them, less then with Belgrade. They were the measuring stick. Those festivals were our favourite for the competition with them. And we had success. They have many interesting playwrights with different themes from ours. So, excuse me if I forget some names, let's start with Cankar, then from Hieng, Šeligo, Jovanović, Jančar, and all the way to the younger generation, they opened different themes. Those themes were under the influence of the European trends, of the English dramaturgy and other things, there are certainly more appropriate studies, but it was always interesting for us to see a different way of thinking, like some other ... not civilisation, far from that, but another way ... if the emotional was the rule with us, they were ruled by the rational. That's why it was interesting for me to work there and for them, because I had the mix from those two worlds and it gave a special quality to the product we came up with at the end. It was a theatre of other possibilities, other budgets, other everything. The same was in Yugoslavia. So, it was real theatre. "*Hrepenenje*" ["longing"] was the synonym for a Slovenian play for us (*laughs*).

Which theatre is the most modern or most avant-garde in Slovenia and why?

I'm more oriented to certain institutions, so to say, to big theatres. SNT Drama Ljubljana was in many aspects an avant-garde theatre for me. Also, Glej, Mladinsko and some other companies I can't remember now, they have also had significant influence. But I can't make the judgment here. Not everything that looks avant-garde is actually avant-garde. Sometimes avant-garde-ness is packed in a very seemingly simple form, which doesn't have to be blood, sweat, skin, water, feathers, foam, penises or bare asses, etc. It can also be packed more plainly and to open important aesthetic new directions. So, I can't judge, I haven't thought about it like that.

Is there a theatre in Slovenia that you consider similar/same to your poetics? Five plays directed in Slovenia in four different theatres. How do you consider your collaboration with the Slovenian theatres and theatre artists?

I don't know how to answer that, since my poetics, my way of thinking exists always, of course, but it gets modified according to the ensemble, to the location, to the text, the situation, etc. I feel SNT Drama the closest, personally, maybe because I've worked on a couple of plays there. That is a theatre in which I could work forever. Theatre in the real sense of the word. My first contract in Slovenia was with Mladinsko, to work on *Class Enemy* by Nigel Williams there, and then it turned out I couldn't go, so I suggested that my assistant-to-be (Vito Taufer) direct it. And he did. Mladinsko somehow recognised me and called me first. After that, SNT called. The experience in Nova Gorica was also very interesting to me. It's a very interesting ensemble closed in a made-up city. It is a made-up town, a made-up casino, a made-up mountain, only the wine is real and the border, it is a non-existent city, there's nothing to do there but drink, gamble and make theatre. It is important as an event. And as a theatre, as an applied structure, as looking for things, as an exploration, it was always SNT for me. I directed a play in Mestno [Ljubljana City Theatre], by Shakespeare, we connected and we didn't connect, as I would like to work. Ljubljana City Theatre has to secure and earn a huge chunk of their budget by themselves. Everybody does, but they have to the most. It can also be seen by the repertoire, by the things they produce for the audience. It is hard with that way of work, it is an effort to keep the quality. But I am talking about a period in the past. I don't claim to know the situation now. So, to answer your question, SNT Drama, the plays I like to watch, I like to work there, it is exciting, interesting, uncertain as everywhere, and I had the great fortune to work with Jernej Šugman, a couple of plays, but he passed away too early. I had the fortune to work with some of their excellent actresses like Nataša Barbara Gračner, with Polona Juh, with which we met in *Peer Gynt*, and many others, too many to list them now. Except with Silva Čušin, she remains my unfulfilled wish, I really like her.

Ibsen, Głowacki, Jovanović, Shakespeare, Molière as a choice of playwrights you directed in Slovenian theatres. Why that choice and is it connected with the environment in which you direct? Is there a difference in the choice of plays for the Slovenian audience and for the others?

No, there is no difference. It is connected to my field of research and what interests me. We didn't mention Carlo Gozzi with *The Green Bird* in Nova Gorica. A philosophical renaissance comedy. The Slovenian theatres have dramaturgs, and before the start of a season, they very often came to me with suggestions and I have accepted them or not. So, the choice of play was a result of my interests at the time, or their interests, of repertoire structure for that year, their direction, what they discovered in the

contemporary theatre and so on. I think that in SNT Drama, *Peer Gynt*, *The Fourth Sister* and *The Misanthrope* were their suggestions.

And on that topic, the choice of a play, is it always yours or does it happen that an ensemble, or the theatre manager, or the playwright, asks you to stage a play?

When the dramaturgy department is strong, when there are three or four serious dramaturgs, who know languages, some of them hard to work with, some wonderful, competent, then you have faith in their suggestions.

And it is very interesting for me. Since the working period is agreed upon much in advance, I have enough time to see if the play works for me and what I can do with it. So, the choice is usually from both sides. They have also offered me new texts that I haven't heard about, because they read a lot of plays, that's their job. They translate from German and English, from other languages, and they make a proposal for the repertoire.

Slovenian drama and your interest in it?

I am terribly sorry I have never worked on Cankar. I think I'm a director for Cankar, that his texts are for me. And the offer to work on *Europe* by Vinko Möderndorfer, a text based on Cankar, was in a way a natural choice. It is a contemporary view on the Slovenian situation. And I've worked on Šeligo with great pleasure. Dušan Jovanović, I mentioned that. Anyway, I also liked Hieng's plays. There were many new Slovenian texts coming to me for a time, but I didn't work so often in order to answer to all those proposals.

For me, Slovenian drama is very interesting. It is exotic for me in a way. It is not banal, but thematically exotic. There are myths that a dragged for a long time, we are not aware of them so much here, but there are legends and myths, and practically, like I was given German texts to direct in Germany two or three times, so they can see my view on their inheritance, I found the same thing in the Slovenian texts I directed, there was a different, another aspect. I think that was useful for me, as well as for the authors and the audience.

Theatre reviews in Slovenia, what is your relation and opinion about the reviews written about your plays?

I don't have any special memory of a review of my plays. Not only in Slovenia, but haven't relied on reviews anywhere. Not that I underestimate them, they just don't help me. Even if they are the best or worst, they don't help me, I've gotten to my own

understanding and that's what's guiding me. It is not a haughty attitude, just a complex process of mine that is always something more than the content of some written text. And it is always a simplification for me or, very often, a general lack of recognition of dramatically different directions. However, one cannot be angry at that, because that's just the way things are. Because the transfer, the contact and the understanding were equal to the possibilities of the author, of their knowledge of theatre and whether they are a failed director or actor, whether they are a failed writer, or they are a real critic, a professional. I have always liked a good review, of course. It was important to me to see what will *Delo* say, or *Dnevnik*, what will *Primorske novice* say, but mainly I leave the same or the next day after the premiere, so when the review comes out, they post it to me, so it doesn't influence me.

Do you treat the plays in Slovenia and Macedonia differently (choice of play, working process, ensemble)?

No. It doesn't matter whether I direct in Slovenia, Germany, America or Macedonia, I always want to make the process and the play at a level that is mine, to articulate myself, otherwise I wouldn't have a play.

Are there differences in the production conditions (for example, the financial budgets for the plays, the technical conditions for working in a theatre, the support of the management, promotion, etc.) between the Macedonian and the Slovenian theatres where you have directed? If there are, how would you describe them?

Of course, there are differences, like there are differences between Slovenia and Germany. Or Germany and America. There are differences all the time. Over here the theatres try to indulge me when I work. To the maximum possible within the state given budget. That's the difference. For example, *Einstein's Dreams* in Belgrade I think costs 120,000 to 150,000 euros, or *The Marriage and Divorce of Figaro* at the National Theatre Belgrade certainly costs 150,000 euros, not so much for a complicated project like that. In Skopje, if they give you 30,000 euros they think they gave the maximum. There is no understanding that some projects should get much more. Not for a larger fee for me, but for a better production in every aspect. The list of my collaborators in Slovenia or in Belgrade or in Skopje differs a lot. When you see the bill of fare, there is a great difference. The poster in Belgrade is done by Mirko Ilić, who is a renowned graphic designer. Here [in Macedonia], I don't know if there's going to be a poster at all. The catalogue here is with one or two pages, it should be a special occasion for more than that, and even then, the content is questionable.

Do you see any unexploited possibilities for collaboration between the Slovenian and the Macedonian theatres and do you maybe have any suggestions for intensifying the collaboration?

I haven't thought about that. It's a part of the cultural politics. I haven't done that for years. So, I don't have a clear proposal. I think that exchanging plays and touring is always exciting, and that's a lot. I am sorry that some of our plays have not played there, but now it is a question whether the Macedonian theatre has any plays to send there at all.

Macedonian-Slovenian theatre connections, what is your take on this syntagma? Can we talk about a relationship between our and the Slovenian theatre?

At an individual level, I, Aco Popovski and a couple of other people who have worked there, yes, certainly. On the other hand, I don't see a dramatically significant other collaboration. I don't recognise it, I haven't seen it, I don't know of it. It is more of an idea than a collaboration.

Translated by Aleksandar Zafirovski