

# Historical Drama and Its Social Role in Slovenia under Communism

Gašper Troha

University of Ljubljana  
gasper.troha@guest.arnes.si

*The aim of this paper is to present and investigate the special social role played by Slovene historical drama from the 1960s to the 1980s. Although historical drama is usually viewed as a means of creating national and ideological myths, in this case it represented a means of formulating social criticism during a period of extreme ideological control in the arts.*

Key words: literature and ideology / sociology of literature / Slovene drama / 20th cent. / historical drama / social role / communism

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## Introduction

When one speaks of historical literary genres and their relations to political ideologies and national mythologies, two possibilities are usually considered. First, these genres can envisage a future social order; in doing so, they support and construct social utopias, the ideological background of a certain social group, which can, in the course of time, become reality. Second, by describing the past (especially mythical points in national history), they can try to legitimise the present social order. An interesting third option was developed in Slovene post-war literature; namely, in Slovene drama after 1955. Because Yugoslavia wanted to be seen as a socialist state with the highest degree of personal freedom, and artistic freedom was the easiest and the least harmful way to support this notion, theatre played a special social role in it. On the one hand, this dramatic literature strongly criticised the socialist order and the communist regime. On the other hand, however, it was precisely this criticism that helped the authorities gain public support for perpetual reforms, which only strengthened the position of the Communist Party. I illustrate this by comparing two plays: *Afera* (An Affair) by Primož Kozak and *Topla greda*

(*Hotbed*) by Marijan Rožanc. These plays were written and staged in the first half of the 1960s, when the temporary alliance between theatre and the communist authorities was first established. They represent two radical examples of this social balance between the theatre, the authorities, and the general public because *An Affair* was one of the most successful plays of the decade, whereas *Hotbed* was the only Yugoslav play to be banned by a court order.

This comparison shows how historical drama situated itself in a social discursive field – in other words, why was it so successful despite its social criticism. My hypothesis is that historical drama displaced its criticism into the past and into a remote place, thus making an ambiguous interpretation possible. It could be understood as support for the current political reforms or as a metaphor and criticism of the current social state. Because of this, it succeeded in successfully addressing both proponents and adversaries of the Yugoslav communist regime. I also analyse *The Return of Cortes*, a radio play by Andrej Hieng from the end of the 1960s, and *The Great Brilliant Waltz* by Drago Jančar from the 1980s in order to investigate the further development of historical drama and verify my hypothesis.

## ***An Affair***

*An Affair* deals with the very basic dilemma of communist revolution. Can the final emancipation of humankind be achieved through present-day terror and blind subordination to the party's leadership, or should it be built on a rigorous defence of one's own freedom? Although it was set in northern Italy after 1943, it was evident from the start that history is a camouflage for criticism of the contemporary social situation. As Vladimir Kralj noted in his review, this is an "almost historical play" that "represents a projection of certain problems of our time into a less binding past" (357). Both the audience and theatre professionals recognized a critical aspect of the play at its premiere on the small experimental stage Oder 57 (Stage 57), which was awarded a prize for the best performance at the *Festival Malib odrov* (Festival of Small Stages) in Sarajevo in 1961. Later that year, *An Affair* was restaged at the central and most important theatre in Slovenia: *Drama slovenskega narodnega gledališča v Ljubljani* (Drama of the Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana, or SNT), which meant a considerable increase in its popularity. The performance at Stage 57 was seen by 750 people, and the following performance at the SNT was seen by 6,968 (Bibič 77). The support of social criticism by theatre professionals as well as by the audience can be easily understood because the social paradise

prophesised by the communist regime failed to materialize in the post-war period. More surprising is that the play was fully supported by top officials in the Slovene government and Communist Party. Josip Vidmar, the most influential theatre critic of the 1960s, who had been a member of the Partisan leadership during the Second World War and was appointed to his position at the newspaper *Delo* by the party's leadership, wrote enthusiastic praise about the premiere of *An Affair* at SNT. He started by clearly stressing that the play takes place in northern Italy during the Second World War. Although he felt that its relevance exceeds this historical framework, he did not seem to think it had any connection to the current situation in Yugoslavia. He found the play to be "written with delicate feeling and aesthetic taste. It is a work with a very clear theme, a fine example of contemporary social problems, and furthermore very effective on stage" (22).

The play could also have been interpreted as a radical critique of current politics because it was shown a few months later at the biggest theatre festival in the former Yugoslavia, the *Sterijino pozorje* (Sterija Stage). *An Affair* was performed on 9 May 1962 by Ljubljana's SNT and, as the theatre critic and researcher Vasja Predan remembers, it stirred up quite some controversies among the Serbian members of the jury. They were against awarding Kozak the prize for the best play of the year, and Vladimir Kralj, a member of the jury from Slovenia, left the meeting in protest at such biased decision-making. Although Kozak did not receive the prize for the best play, *An Affair* won three other prizes (more than any other performance at the festival), which may indicate that it was actually the best performance at the festival. As Predan told me in an interview, the theatre judges at Pozorje were aware of the political background of their decision, and so they awarded Kozak the prize for best play six years later for his less inspired play *Kongres* (The Congress).

The restaging at the SNT was initiated by its artistic director and general manager Bojan Štih, who was a close friend of Boris Kraigher, the prime minister of Yugoslav Slovenia. Kraigher and his successor Stane Kavčič were the leaders of "liberalism" in Slovenia, a series of economic reforms that started at the beginning of the 1960s and yielded good results and a general increase in the standard of living, but at the same time pushed the political system to its limits, where radical changes seemed inevitable. The communist leadership saw this as a threat to its position, and so the conservative faction of the party took over once again and the liberals were forced to leave their positions and disappear from public life. This happened around 1970; however, similar events had suppressed a vivid experimental theatrical life five years earlier. This suppression was provoked by a dramatic feuilleton called *Hotbed*.

## ***Hotbed***

The play *Hotbed* by Marijan Rožanc was staged at Stage 57 on 31 May 1964. In the program Andrej Inkret stressed that the play represented a new form of popular theatre. Its “aim is to abolish the distance between the stage and the audience, thus creating a new social factor that will have a radically critical point of view on a social reality.” He described *Hotbed* as a topical propaganda play or dramatic feuilleton, and concluded that “the audience must actively participate in the performance. It must recognise the social conflict and take a stand. This stand represents the beginning of social action” (165–66).

Rožanc based his play on the article “Dileme našega kmetijstva” (The Dilemmas of Our Agriculture) by Jože Pučnik, a well-known dissident, who was imprisoned for the second time on 22 May, only one week before the premiere of *Hotbed*. This article was one of the pieces of incriminating evidence of his counterrevolutionary activity. However, it is interesting to see that Rožanc was somehow promoting the same ideas as the current Slovene government. These anticipated a transition from a totalitarian administration, in which everything was led and supervised from the centre (Communist Party leadership), towards a more democratic system of self-management, in which workers and citizens were supposed to manage the economy and state themselves. The character Stari (Old Man) is a conservative revolutionary that believes in total obedience and strictly follows the party’s instructions, although they do not yield the expected results at the agricultural cooperative he is running. Because he is obviously unable to make a righteous and prosperous society come true, he is replaced by his workers (the people), who will find their own solutions. The end of the play was intended to become a general debate on topical social issues – a forum in which both theatre and audience would merge into one and thus set an example of self-management in progress.

However, the performance never reached the end because its premiere was interrupted by workers from an agricultural cooperation from Grosuplje, who protested against the play. The demonstrations were organised by the director of the co-op, Jaka Perovšek, who was the brother of the Slovene minister of agriculture at that time, Janez Perovšek.

The interruption of the play resulted in a fierce polemic in the newspapers, later on in a political discussion in the Slovene parliament, and finally in a court decision to confiscate all existing copies of the play and to ban all further printing and public performance. In these polemics, one can detect a certain pattern in the negative responses to the play. They all perceive Rožanc and other members of his literary circle as people that do

not work, live on grants, and get up late in the morning. Such texts see the demonstrating workers as representatives of the majority of the Slovene population, which is hardworking and respects the achievements of the national liberation struggle and socialist revolution. The same pattern was repeated in the parliament, where the member of parliament Janez Švajncar said that “lately an individual (e.g., Marjan Rožanc) is receiving public attention he doesn’t deserve. If there are individuals or groups that want to ruin what we’ve accomplished, we have to stop them” (Taufert 252). In a commentary on the verdict, even the judges stated that they “banned the play because they believe it represented a false and alarming description of our time and attacks institutional principles” (Taufert 253). Although the attack on *Hotbed* was probably among the fiercest attacks – if not actually the fiercest – on a theatre production in the former Yugoslavia, it had practically no consequences for the author. It was clearly a shock for all theatre professionals to see that the authorities had not given up their Stalinist methods completely. That is, they had not renounced repressive measures in regulating art, although Rožanc was permitted to go on publishing his work and was actually placed on probation for two years in 1967 because of his prose. The same goes for other authors of his literary circle. Although Stage 57 was closed soon after the turmoil surrounding *Hotbed*, its most prominent authors continued to write plays and these were also successfully staged at mainstream theatres. One of those authors was also Primož Kozak, who wrote another two plays after 1964 (*Kongres* and *Legenda o svetem Čhe*) and was quite successful with both of them in Slovenia and throughout Yugoslavia.

## **Historical Drama in The Social Context of the Former Yugoslavia**

In order to understand the success of Slovene historical drama despite its social criticism, two questions must be answered. First, what enabled Slovene theatre to criticise the social system without serious consequences even when certain plays met strong disapproval from authorities? Second, what is the difference between *An Affair* and *Hotbed* that provoked such opposite reactions from the authorities and the audience?

As already noted, the attacks on *Hotbed* show a common pattern. They characterise artists – specifically, a group of critical artists that collaborated with Stage 57 – as an unproductive social group that lives off grants; namely, other people’s money. These arguments are made up of two successive operations, which were described by Slavoj Žižek in *Logika antisemitizma* (*The Logic of Anti-Semitism*, 46–52). The role of anti-Semitism was to cover

up the potential conflicts of the capitalist system, which was accomplished by the invention of a common enemy (i.e., the Jews). Capitalist society has changed social relations and production completely. The relationship between a feudal master and his subjects, which presupposed fatherly concern of the former and total subordination and respect of the latter, has been replaced by exploitation and profit. In the same way, the aim of production has changed from satisfying one's needs to accumulating capital.

However, to cover up this insensible and cruel nature of capitalism and to persuade the exploited masses to accept the current social reality, anti-Semitism came up with an ideological mystification. First, it divided capital into unproductive (financial) and productive capital (labour resources and products), and then personified them. The relation between productive capital and the workforce appeared as an inevitable relation of any productive process. Unproductive capital, however, has been represented as an intruder that collects the products of work without any right to do so. There is probably no need to add that productive capital was assigned to Germans and unproductive capital to Jews.

Žižek finds a similar ideological operation in Yugoslav self-management of the 1970s and 1980s. The Communist Party propagated the utopian unity of society, which would finally materialize when socialism fully established itself. This of course never happened, although in government and party discourse it remained constantly within reach. This perpetual belief in the possibility of a just social order was made possible by a similar operation to the one Žižek described with anti-Semitism. In order to cover up the inability to overcome social divisions, the Communist Party offered the "unproductive" social groups that live off other peoples' money to the public (i.e., the productive social group) as a surrogate object for its dissatisfaction.

The same pattern was used, as already shown, in the attack on *Hotbed*. However, it was only the play and the theatre (Stage 57) that suffered the consequences, and not the author. Furthermore, some socio-critical plays (e.g. *An Affair*) were very successful and were supported by the government itself.

This leads to the second question: What is the difference between *An Affair* and *Hotbed*? The most obvious one, of course, is the fact that Kozak's play is a historical drama whereas Rožanc's play is not. What does this mean for the ideological operation described? In fact, it changes everything. *An Affair*, being a historical play, can be interpreted in two different ways. The first interpretation leads to the conclusion that Kozak wished to present conflicts that happened in a certain period of time in Italy and can also be understood as general existentialist problems. The second interpretation, however, reveals the author's socio-critical point, which is that the Communist

Party failed to fulfil its promises; that it has to reconsider its path and put the personal freedom of an individual before its political agenda.

Sketching out the social role of Slovene drama, it can be observed that exactly this polyvalent nature of plays (e.g., *An Affair*) enabled the emergence of a balance between different tendencies and aims of the theatre, authorities, and general public. Theatre was able to provide the authorities with a common enemy that belonged to the realm of fiction. By displacing the action of plays to a remote time and place, it created the common enemy, a phantasm that did not have to be suppressed, and therefore the authorities practically did not have to use repressive measures. Theatrical social criticism supported governmental reforms and sustained the utopian conviction that the prophesied social unity could be achieved. At the same time, it created an image of a highly repressive totalitarian regime, which was easily identified with the other communist regimes in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Thus the Yugoslav audience was reconfirmed in its belief that it lived in a socialist country with the highest degree of personal freedom, which was even further reinforced by the fact that critical plays were staged at mainstream theatres and were recognised throughout Yugoslavia.

Although it might seem that the theatre was manipulated or used for the political purposes, this is actually far from the truth. I want to stress that the theatre, authorities, and general public entered this balance with quite opposite motives, and also believed they had gained more than they had lost. In reality, the authorities gained a common enemy and thus the broad support of public opinion for their reforms because they managed to address their supporters as well as their opposition. Slovene playwrights gained a chance to have their plays staged in mainstream theatres, to reach a broader audience, and to achieve great resonance because they represented the “cultural opposition”, a surrogate for political opposition. On the one hand, the general public supported the government and its reforms; on the other hand, it played a role in the opposition through participation as an audience for critical theatre works.

## **Historical Drama in the 1970s and 1980s**

Further development of Slovene historical drama verifies this model of social relations between the factors mentioned above. I start with an analysis of the radio play *The Return of Cortes*, which was written in 1967 and shows a pattern regarding content and form similar to that in other historical plays by Andrej Hieng. In fact, Hieng was one of the few authors that carried on the genre in the 1970s. His plays are set even further away in time and space. *The Return of Cortes* is a part of a trilogy about the



Spanish slaughter of the indigenous inhabitants of South America in the 16th century and his other plays are set in an unspecified place in medieval Europe. Therefore interpretations that perceive these plays as commentaries on specific historical or general existentialist problems seem to have been even more emphasized.

According to its author, *The Return of Cortes* speaks “about men disinherited by time, men for whom the present in terms of actual, intensive living does not exist, and who are left only with their past or future” (Hieng 16). However, the story tells about Don Francisco, a former soldier of General Cortes, who is back in Spain and receives no reward for his slaughter of American Indians. Don Francisco, together with Cortes and some other comrades, was an idealist that spilled enormous amounts of blood in hopes of creating a new world for Christ. Unfortunately, as it turns out in the end, it was all for gold and the profit of others. All this violence cannot be justified, and it only leads to silent hatred of the survivors. Don Francisco does not want to accept this and he is waiting for Cortes to return, because he is sure he will gather his soldiers once again to go back to America and correct their mistakes. At the end of the play, Don Francisco and Cortes do meet face to face and in their conversation it becomes evident that all the violence and battles yielded little or no result, that the soldiers and even Cortes have not been rewarded for their sacrifices; even more, they are forgotten and represent a nuisance to the present elite.

CORTES: And would you swear I am the same man you knew fifteen years ago?

DON FRANCISCO: The same one!

CORTES: My poor boy! – I’m not. Now Cortes means very little or nothing. But this may not be so important. It may not be important that I too have suffered injustices. It may not be important that I’m now living at the end of the world I have conquered, where completely unknown new men crawl and interfere and rule. It may not be important that I meet people that look at me in astonishment and then whisper – he has been . . . and so on . . . All these things may not be important...

DON FRANCISCO: They are!

CORTES: I am indeed a has-been and am no longer: At least not the same man. (Hieng 36)

*The Return of Cortes* can also be interpreted as a presentation of the radical disillusionment with the Partisan movement and communist revolution that followed the Second World War. The slaughters of Indians can be easily connected to divisions during the war and killings of counterrevolutionaries after it. The injustices that Cortes and Don Francisco have to endure are similar to those of some prominent members of the Partisan movement that later became dissidents – Edvard Kocbek and Milovan



Dilas being the most obvious cases. The final recognition of the play – that there is no justice in this world, that the social utopia will never come true, and that all the violence was thus in vain – expresses the final disillusionment of the socialist project, which struck Hieng's generation after the ban of *Hotbed*. Because the liberal faction inside the Communist Party was losing its power and the conservative one was regaining its position – the final turn occurred in 1972, but it had begun several years before – ideological control in the theatre and arts became stricter. Consequently, such profound disillusionment with the socialist project could only have been expressed in the genre of historical drama, which displaced its action even further into a distant place and time. This verifies the hypothesis that in Slovene dramatic literature the genre of historical drama was a means for expressing social criticism without meeting opposition from authorities, especially because the historical dramas by Andrej Hieng – which were mainly written in the 1970s, a period of intense ideological pressure – displaced their action even further back in order to be successful. “*The Return of Cortes* received the first RTV prize in Ljubljana in 1967. During Week XII of the Yugoslav Radio Play at Ohrid in 1968, his *Return* was pronounced the best work as a whole by the official jury and the jury of critics, and the author was awarded first prize for his text” (Hieng 16).

The last play discussed in this paper is *The Great Brilliant Waltz* by Drago Jančar. It was staged in 1985 at the SNT in Ljubljana and Maribor (the biggest theatres in Slovenia) and also published the same year. It was quite popular, seen by 7,670 people in Ljubljana (the most popular domestic play of the year) and 1,930 in Maribor. After the death of the legendary leader of former Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, in 1980, ideological control over the arts lessened its grip. It was almost impossible to ban a production because the Yugoslav republics started to compete among themselves in keeping up appearances of liberalism. It was thus very common that a theatre production or a book that had been banned in one part of the country was soon after published in another republic and became an absolute hit.

*The Great Brilliant Waltz* is particularly interesting for this paper because it actually shows the social mechanism behind the success of historical dramas revealed in these analyses, although its primary goal is to show that the current authorities are totalitarian and that they exercise their power by using repressive measures against marginalised groups that are being produced by the system itself. The play takes place in a mental institution called “Freedom Liberates” – an allusion to the Nazi slogan above the entrances to the concentration camps – where new people are brought in every Monday. Jančar presents the story of Simon Veber, a historian that is researching the life of the 19th-century Polish rebel Sewerin Drohojowski. Drohojowski was

a real person that Emil Korytko described in one of his letters during his stay in Slovenia. Veber starts to identify with his subject of research, but still manages to retain his own identity. However, when he enters the institution it soon becomes clear that he is not there to rid himself of his fixation, but to identify with Drohojowski completely; in other words, to become Drochojowski, a rebel that must be contained and kept under surveillance, which is the role of the psychiatric institution he is in. Veber refuses to play the game until the nurse Volodja takes control of the institution by force.

DOCTOR: I'm afraid of you, Volodja.

VOLODJA: Well, that's how it should be, Doctor, because from now on I will be running this Institute (125).

Because Drochojowski was injured and probably had to have his leg amputated, Volodja actually amputates Simon's leg and thus finally transforms him into Drohojowski.

DOCTOR: You are not Drohojowski. You are Simon, the historian, Simon Veber.

SIMON: Oh, no, no, no.

IJUBICA: Simon.

SIMON: Just let me dig myself out of this ditch. Let me get to Krakow. And then we can start again. We can start right here Rajko. Where's Rajko? He'll begin. He's a quiet man who knows how to laugh at tyranny in the face. Just let me get out of here onto the edge of the road...(127–28)

Although the primary message of this play is that current society is totalitarian, it is also interesting to see that Volodja, an emblematic character of the ruling elite, gains his power by forcing the potentially dissident intellectual Simon into a distant historical context. This is precisely what happened to Slovene dramatic literature; to be more precise, to the part of it that expressed its social criticism in the genre of historical drama.

## Conclusion

Slovene historical drama between 1955 and 1990 played a specific social role. Because of its displacement of action, it stimulated different interpretations and thus became a means of severe social criticism on the one hand and a way to legitimise the domination of the communist elites on the other. This was possible because of a delicate balance between the theatre, the authorities, and the general public, in which every factor entered with different motivations and gained different, even opposite,

benefits. However, because these coexisted, historical dramas prospered throughout the entire period. This coexistence was made possible by the fact that historical dramas stimulated ambiguous interpretations and could serve different purposes.

When playwrights crossed this line and became too direct in their criticism, their plays usually faced severe consequences (the destiny of *Hotbed*), so one cannot say that Slovene drama after 1955 did not belong to the dissident literature of Eastern Europe. This research serves to deconstruct the commonly accepted notion, from the end of the 1980s, that writers and intellectuals played a decisive role in the downfall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

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