

Lesley Ann Wade, ed. and transl. *Slovene Theatre and Drama Post-Independence: Four Plays by Slovene Playwrights*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. 277 pp., \$63.95 (paper). ISBN: 0-8204-7582-3.

“I believe in alcoholism with a human face!” cries one of the characters in Dušan Jovanović’s play *The Boozski Clinic*, in a formulation that should have great resonance for Central European audiences that lived through the communist era. Indeed, this intriguing play is a kind of register for the themes that drive the other three well-chosen plays—by Drago Jančar, Draga Potočnjak, and Matjaž Zupančič—in Lesley Wade’s welcome anthology.

The first work presented is the most historical and political of the four; one could read Jančar’s “special institution” in *The Great Brilliant Waltz* as a metaphor for the social controls and reeducation efforts of any severe modern dictatorship. Jančar wrote this work in 1985; it is named after Chopin’s *Grande valse brillante* and it reflects the preoccupation of its author—and, arguably, much of Eastern European society at the time—with the Polish example of rebellion and retribution. (Jančar also wrote a well-known essay on Poland at the time of the Solidarity movement.) The action in the play centers on two processes. The first is the mutation of a new inmate, the historian Veber, into a Polish rebel about whom he is writing a book. The entire transformation of Veber is meant to underscore the similarities among Central European countries under foreign domination and to hint at the grim fate that can befall Slovene intellectuals-cum-reformers. Alas, to know history is to watch Poland; and watching Poland can conjure up doomed dissenters. The second process concerns the emergence of Volodja, a male nurse with a Russian name (no accident) as the boss of the entire institution. He stares down the Experts, who are themselves dangerous enough to carry out random amputations; Volodja also spouts a Stalinesque two-camp theory about the world. He is a kind of “Joe Six-Pack” who loves to say things like: “Me, yes. Me, who’s normal.” The closest thing to a compliment his frightened colleagues can give him when they need to curry favor is to aver that he is . . . truly . . . “self-taught.” We also meet other inmates, such as Emerik, the pianist; Doberman, a stutterer; Saul Paul, who spouts scripture (but lacks the revolutionary credentials attributed to the historical St. Paul by another famous Slovene intellectual, Slavoj Žižek); and Ljubica, a painter. However, it is Veber and Volodja that share the spotlight in the place marked with the mocking but eerie motto “Freedom sets free.”

Jovanović is another Slovene playwright with a long record of heavy-hitting plays and socio-political engagement. His play *The Boozski Clinic* occupies some of the same territory as *The Great Brilliant Waltz*. Instead of a psychiatric ward, we have a clinic set in an old bar in a rusty worker’s resort; and instead of a spectral Pole we have a visitor from

elsewhere in Eastern Europe appearing in the Slovenes' midst, this time a Polish(-Japanese-Mongolian-Russian) motivational speaker-cum-therapist named Janusz Boozski. His clinic exists to teach the Slovenes the virtues of fratricide and "bastard-killing." This mission only makes sense amidst the post-communist (or was that communist?) plagues of alcoholism and alienation besetting society and making it hunger for relief or rescue. Boozski shamelessly hawks his goods, such as the "Solidarity" and the "hot shit" (both virgin mixed drinks), which are consumed with the toast of "Kill your brother!" However, all is not well in the seemingly superficial landscape of free markets and self-proclaimed gurus; we learn the chilling origin of Boozski's personal mission and perceive it as a critique of all gnostic political ideologies:

In public I was actually an only child. However, papa and mama had another son in secret. This was my brother Alcohol. I was terribly jealous of my brother . . . Every evening I fervently begged God to take him to Him in heaven . . . That is why I decided to kill my dissembling brother: to let that monster evaporate from our family without a trace! (120)

This cure for social and personal pain—fratricide—requires not real blood but money, and it does not even have a cost in terms of behavior because the clients are still allowed, or even encouraged, to "act drunk" from time to time. As the mechanics of the clinic are being exposed, we also see both sides of the growing socioeconomic divide in Jesenice: poor factory workers with foamy Persil (a detergent) in their urine and hard-bitten bourgeois lords dripping with scorn for the Slovene work ethic and culture. If ideologues are in general quacks, then apologists of capitalism are nothing but drug-dealers. Indeed, the system as a whole is faced with compelling evidence of corruption: Mr. Dollar arranges to get major corporate kickbacks from Zinc Giant to manufacture helmets for alcoholics. These helmets will help keep an "at risk" population group safe and will win him, in addition, political capital with those most conscientious of political activists, the Greens. The transition gripping the country is leading to a ludicrous dead end.

Draga Potočnjak's drama *The Noise Animals Make Is Unbearable* has the keenest emotional impact of any of these works. This is because many of the victims of the violence it portrays are children and because it is the most concretely topical. In the opening scene the residents of a Bosnian village are massacred by Serbian paramilitaries; nineteen members of one extended family are killed—all of them save Armin, a young boy, and his grandmother Azra. Later, in exile in Western Europe (presumably in Slovenia), she takes Armin to a psychiatrist in an effort to get the boy to talk. The half-hearted help she receives foreshadows the lukewarm reception the pair gets in general, but it does not prepare us for the

crescendo of neglect and outright brutality that is coming. The confines of a shabby boarding house and eventually an institution alternate with flashbacks (tinted with a “blue and orange feeling of infinity”) in which Armin recalls life with his siblings and parents. Finally Azra dies in her bed, and Armin nearly does, as well, on the floor in their room; when policemen arrive, he flees and is then exposed to an increasingly hostile life on the streets. The teenaged Armin finally dies in a clinic, the victim of repeated rapes by a male nurse. The play avoids formulaic culpability and speculation on the fate of the entire family in the afterlife, and it is extremely effective at raising questions about the treatment of immigrants and asylum-seekers and, to borrow the language of the preceding play, our complicity in fratricide.

Zupančič’s *The Corridor* is more understated than the first three works but it holds a special terror of its own. The characters and their names and actions are characteristic of no particular country—they are everybody, everywhere. “Big Brother,” the media spectacle or “game” being enacted here, has indeed, sadly, gone global, but the fact that we are once again in a confined space with human lab rats being poked and prodded by outside forces makes this piece fit flawlessly into the Central European topography being established by Wade in her anthology. When the show’s impresario, Max, announces that “this is life,” the reader is faced with a bleak truth: we live in a stew of consumer fetishes and pandemic technological change. The show is, of course, set up to profit from average people’s weaknesses and foibles, and we the reader-viewers are treated to the usual forgettable fare of sex, plots, insults, breakdowns, and tearful departures. However, Zupančič ably works this contemporary television fare into a subtle expose of corporate manipulation of individual citizens (a.k.a. the “zeros”). We are implicated even more than the television audience because the play actually takes place in the one portion of the set that is off-camera (or is it?), the eponymous corridor. In addition, we come to learn that the putative competition, with its seeming willfulness and anarchy, is not freedom but a hollow exercise: it turns out that there is a plot after all, forged to maximize the pleasure of the viewers and the proceeds going to the sponsor, Complex Trade. By the end, even violence is permitted, and we are forced to witness one woman felling another by repeated blows to the head with an iron bar.

The immediate analytical task facing the reviewer of this anthology is the following: how is one to explain the frequency of clinics, sanatoria, and asylums as settings for recent Slovene dramatic works? Of course, it may be a function of the selection criteria for individual publication projects; preference on the part of translators, editors, and publishers may not represent a statistical trend. However, this predominance of theme is certainly noticeable from these shores, at the very least in this collection and the recent volume of works from Evald Flisar, and of course it is not uncommon in the literature of other countries as well. Its actual meaning or

function varies from play to play, but unpacking the metaphor of the sanatorium can help us take the current temperature of Slovene art and society, at least in general terms. If one wants to argue that these institutional metaphors might have special relevance to Slovenia or any other country, with its specific demographic and geopolitical realities of the post-Tito, post-Yugoslav, and post-communist era, then the following considerations would seem worthy of discussion:

1. In a jaded (and bruised) post-ideological world, are politicians and priests alike discredited as guides or problem-solvers? Moreover, with parents and police officers making unexciting or unfashionable literary fare, to whom can one better turn than psychiatrists (or others of their ilk exploring our emotions under their aegis of supposed objectivity)? They plumb the depths of social ills and individual misery, and they offer what limited solutions and comfort there are.
2. Is the whole world crazy and are the four walls (more or less) of a clinic simply a convenient mechanism, a dramatic convention, for focusing our attention on the Petri dish of a subset of human relationships?
3. Do Slovenes consider their society to be a hothouse of experimentation, a crossroads of arriving, evolving, and commingling political, economic, and demographic fronts, an especially exposed tip of the planet (to paraphrase Jack London) smacked by an unusual number of inimical forces and pinioning individuals in a hostile environment that wrecks them? If so, then there is unprecedented human carnage to assess, or mend, or perhaps portentous intellectual developments to track.

This very worthy book is freighted with only minor shortcomings. The number of typographical errors and stylistic infelicities is average by today's standards. (The translator's use of colloquialisms, profanity, and Anglicisms is pointedly not what this reviewer wishes to criticize here because they are marks of authenticity in the originals and their translations; indeed the mention of this and the other minor errors below is not meant for the author at all but rather for the publisher—a cleaner text is not impossible to produce.) The layout and typesetting of the plays do not aid comprehension and navigation because there are few breaks and the use of all capitals and different font sizes is limited. The title is also clunky and does not aid understanding of the book's contents. Finally, for readers that only have access to these translations and not the originals, it would be helpful to know, via footnotes or the introductions, whether some characters' names have been translated or are given in English in the original; for example, Dollar or Boozski.

The very substantial introduction is a major strong point of this book, and the translations are very readable. We should be glad that this book is on the market and we should hope for more work by Wade. Perhaps this volume will enable more Slovene plays to be considered for production in the Anglophone world.

Slovene literature seems to be riding something of a wave of translations at the moment. This is cause for rejoicing. The year 2009 has seen the publication of Jančar's *The Prophecy and Other Stories* (Northwestern University Press), translated and edited by Andrew Wachtel, as well as *Martin Kačur* by Ivan Cankar (Central European University Press), translated by this reviewer. The Slovene Writers' Association/Društvo slovenskih pisateljev (www.drustvo-dsp.si) has also considerably stepped up its English-language publishing and is bringing out several translated works of poetry and prose per year, and there are new books by Potočnjak and Evald Flisar. We also have recent studies of Ivan Cankar by Irena Avsenik Nabergoj and Louis Adamič by Dan Shiffman.

Thematic similarities among these powerful plays make this collection into strong medicine. The differences in form and style provide excellent fodder for literary investigation. Although no scene is more moving than the torturous death of the boy Amir, and no precept more chilling than "Der Mord macht frei," the mission statement of the Boozski Clinic, it is left to Jančar to put the salient question into the clinical language of the historian (by means of an unwittingly honest functionary of the ideological machine):

Look at all the things that people have cut off. Or have cut out. The Aztecs, for example, they cut the heart out of a living person and put it on an altar . . . Ransom for the gods. What's one human heart compared with the spiritual healing of a human community? (71)

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Janja Žitnik Serafin. *Večkulturna Slovenija*. (= *Migracije* 15). Ljubljana: Inštitut za slovensko izseljenstvo ZRC SAZU. 314 pp., €14.00 [= \$19.60] (paper). ISBN 978-961-254-074-6.

Večkulturna Slovenija presents its multidisciplinary scholarly audience with fundamental challenges and questions about the history and future of Slovene literature published in Slovenia and beyond its borders by people writing not only in Slovene. Žitnik Serafin extends her own comprehensive research on Slovene émigré literature, most notably her contributions to *Slovenska izseljenska književnost I-III* (1999), and duly acknowledges