

## EVALD FLISAR'S SLOVENE/ENGLISH PLAYS

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The poet, prose writer, and dramatist Evald Flisar was born in 1945, just before the end of the Second World War, in a small Prekmurje village, Gerlinci, near Cankova. He finished high school at Murska Sobota and then entered Ljubljana University, where he passed through several departments before finally settling on comparative literature. Two years later he decided to become a freelance writer and left the university. Flisar began publishing already as a student and contributed to the journals *Mlada pota*, *Naši razgledi*, *Dialogi*, *Problemi*, and *Sodobnost*. For a year he edited a satirical page of the student paper *Tribuna*. In 1966 he published his first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Symphonia poetica*. This was followed by a pamphlet, *Kristusov samomor* (*Christ's Suicide* 1967) and a novel, *Mrgolenje prahu* (*A Swarm of Dust* 1968). The latter was hailed by critics and readers alike. In 1969 he published an experimental novel with the title *Umiranje v ogledalu* (*Dying in the Mirror*).

Flisar left Slovenia and lived in Vienna for a couple of months, where he began writing plays, before moving to London. His radio play *Sodniška zgradba* (*The Courthouse* 1969) was awarded First Prize by Radio Ljubljana. Having thus realized that his only true medium of expression was drama, he began studying dramaturgy in London. His second radio play, *Vojaki ob koncu vojne* (*Soldiers by the End of the War* 1970) was awarded Second Prize by Radio Ljubljana. He then wrote a play in English, *Upsetting the Status Quo* (*Rušenje ravnotežja*), which was broadcast on British TV. His radio plays have aired in Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. In 1972 he published his first full-length drama in Slovene, *Kostanjeva krona* (*A Chesnut Crown*), a poetic drama on the theme of incest.

In the 1960s and 1970s Slovene drama was dominated by plays with socio-political content. Evald Flisar's dramas were different; their author turned away from overt social criticism to more intimate themes, their main concern being the intricate web of human relationships. Flisar's dramas can be described as psychological, conversational pieces. Dialog is the driving force of his plays.

Starting in the 1970s Flisar travelled extensively. He has visited more than fifty countries on five continents. To finance his journeys, he has worked at a variety of jobs, ranging from driving subway trains in Australia to editing an encyclopedia of science and technology in London; on the other hand, this was a period of relative creative "silence" during which he worked hard, studied, and matured both personally and as a writer. He continued to publish his serialized travelogues, which were immensely popular with readers, in the Maribor weekly *7D*. There is no doubt that Flisar revived the genre in Slovene letters and gave it deeper meaning. He published his first book-length travelogue, *Tisoč in ena pot (A Thousand and One Paths)*, in 1980; in it he described his travels through southwestern Asia. With this work he enriched and in many ways expanded the genre, for his travels were of a double nature: discovering the unknown world as well as discovering his own true self. Flisar remained faithful to this concept in his later travelogue, *Južno od severa (South of North)* 1981, set in the western part of central Africa. In 1984 a collection of short stories, *Lov na lovca in druge zgodbe (Hunt the Hunter and Other Stories)* appeared, and in 1992 he published yet another travelogue, *Popotnik v kraljestvu senc (Travels in Shadowlands)*. *Potovanje predaleč (Travelling too Far)* appeared in 1999.

The novels *Čarovnikov vajenec (The Magus and I)*, also translated by the author as *The Fool Became Wise* 1986) and *Noro življenje (Crazy Life)* 1989) have not as yet appeared in English, although the author has translated both. The travelogue *Južno od severa* (translated by the author as *Disenchanted Ulysses*) has been translated into Hungarian as well. Flisar's plays include, apart from the ones already mentioned, his bilingual editons *Jutri bo lepše / Tomorrow* (1992), *Kaj pa Leonardo? / What about Leonardo?* (1992), *Tristan in Izolda / Tristan and Iseult* (1994), followed the same year by *Stric iz Amerike / Uncle from America* and another (unpublished) radio play, *Naglavisvet / Topsy-turvy*. His most recent dramas are *Iztrohnjeno srce (A Putrefied Heart)* 1995), *Temna stran svetlobe (The Dark Side of Light)* 1996), and *Angleško poletje* (1997). In 1994 Flisar was awarded the Prešeren Fund Prize for his plays *Tomorrow* and *What about Leonardo?* as well as the Grum award for the best play of the year.

A number of Flisar's plays have been staged, beginning with *Kostanjeva krona*, which was first performed by the Prešernovo gledališče in Kranj in 1989. The play was directed by Srečo Špik. In the

same year *Nimfa umre* was produced in Maribor. The opening night at the Drama SNG Maribor was 12 May 1989; the director was Marjan Bevk. Flisar's drama *Poslednja nedolžnost*, directed by Sladjana Vujovič, premiered at the the Slovensko komorno gledališče (The Slovene Chamber Theater) on 19 December 1996.

### I.

*Jutri bo lepše* was published together with its English version in one book.<sup>1</sup> Separating the English and Slovene versions of the play are photos taken during rehearsals for the first Slovene production. The radio version of *Tomorrow* was first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 31 August 1980, produced and directed by Brian Miller. The first Slovene stage performance took place at Vodnikova domačija in Ljubljana in a production by The Slovene Chamber Theater. The play was directed by Evald Flisar himself on 17 November 1992. *Tomorrow* was first presented by Mania Productions at the Barons Court Theatre in London in a successful production that ran for a month. A new version of Flisar's tragi-comedy was staged in 1996 by Prešernovo gledališče in Kranj, directed by Matija Logar. The fact that the play in its Slovene version was first staged almost simultaneously with *Kaj pa Leonardo?* was purely coincidental. It had been prepared already in 1991, just before the outbreak of war in Slovenia, which interrupted production.

In an interview a few days before the opening nights of both his plays, Flisar explained the genesis of *Jutri bo lepše*: The play deals with a theme that had been bothering him for twenty years. First he wrote a short story, then a short radio play in Slovene, followed by a longer radio play in English as already mentioned above. The stage play is based on this, last version.<sup>2</sup>

The superficially simple content of the play is replete with "subtext": Aleksei Ivanovich Mishkin, the newly appointed judge, arrives at a remote Siberian courthouse inside the Arctic Circle at the

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<sup>1</sup> *Jutri bo lepše / Tomorrow*. (Ljubljana: Ganeš; London: Goldhawk, 1992). The two texts were separated by Vili Ravnjak's essay, "Zakaj imajo sloni velika ušesa?" ("Why do elephants have large ears?" [not translated into English]) and Leigh Johnson's short essay, "In the Whiteness of Snow," which was translated as "Črne pike v belini snega."

<sup>2</sup> Vesna Jurca, "Smeh in solze na odru (ki je lahko "ves svet"): ob Leonardu še *Jutri bo lepše / Evald Flisar*" *Delo* 8 October 1992: 13.

turn of the century. There are only three residents there—the judges Nikolai Nikolaevich Rembrandt, Ivan Alekseevich Nijinski, and Ivan Petrovich Yessenin. The fourth one, the Supreme Judge, is mysteriously absent, and the last person, the caretaker Nikita, seems a marginal figure who never appears on the stage either, but he is in any case unable to speak. Mishkin is shocked to discover that there is no work to be done and that the other three judges seem to be quite happy about it. In order to escape the emptiness of their snowed-in existence they indulge in hobbies: Rembrandt paints, Nijinski dances, and Yessenin writes poetry and philosophizes. Mishkin is expected to acclimate himself in the same manner but he stubbornly refuses to do so. He aims to establish “order,” some kind of a semblance of real life, and he wants to impress upon the others the importance of tomorrow, the future. No matter how hard he tries, the others do not take him seriously. His attempts fail, one by one, even his last (accidental?) one. Having shot Nikita, the caretaker or the Supreme Judge—Who Knows?—he is prosecuted in court and sentence is passed by his former colleagues: the severest punishment imaginable—he is set free to choose his own future. Having no choice, he does so, accepting the role of the deceased Nikita and enjoying it thoroughly, until the moment when somebody knocks on the door: the new judge who has come to administer justice.

*Jutri bo lepše / Tomorrow and Kaj pa Leonardo? / What about Leonardo?* received much critical attention. In numerous interviews the author explained the genesis of the plays as well as their themes. Interpretations appeared in playbills as well as with the published versions of the plays.

Vesna Jurca points out the difference between Flisar’s narrative prose and drama, the former being very cosmopolitan, the latter taking place in closed rooms. Flisar’s own explanation of this phenomenon is that he “likes to deal with a condensed conflict” which is insoluble and as such also a metaphor for some existential constant and with this an expression of the essential tragicomedy of human existence.<sup>3</sup> According to the author, both plays represent the externalization of man’s inner conflict stemming from his wish, on the one hand, to quarrel with God for not having created a more perfect world, and on the other hand, to acknowledge passively things as they are as well as the world as it is.

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<sup>3</sup> Jurca 13.

Although not a widely applied term as regards Slovene literature, Flisar's works are postmodernist. According to Vili Ravnjak, the absence of the Absolute in *Jutri bo lepše / Tomorrow* represents the play's key driving force. Indeed, the perpetually absent Supreme Judge stands for an equally perpetually absent God, the Absolute. Flisar's characters—there are no protagonists—are absurd creatures, caught in the web of painful nothingness where everything is relative, as best expressed by Rembrandt's introductory words: "Good morning, room ... Good morning, fire ... Which would be a sparkling fire if we had firewood ... And a fireplace ..." Through most of the play Mishkin is the one who wants to escape, to find some meaning in the metaphysically vague future: "We have to strike back!" "I was brought up to believe in tomorrow" (35–6). "Tomorrow" stands for meaningful existence in which clear lines can be drawn—the dead ones are the dead ones and those alive are those alive. Not like Nijinski, who is shot by Mishkin but fails to die or be even wounded. What makes Flisar's drama such a charming piece is his ability to combine elements of concrete reality with allegory and symbolism.<sup>4</sup> When Flisar's drama *Nimfa umre* was first produced in Maribor in 1989, Flisar wrote in the playbill,

The director and the actors are priests in an ordeal. An illusion is sacrificed on the stage which is, as we are all bound to the same myth, common to all spectators ... The death of the illusion results in sobering up, in purification ...

The cold provincial setting of *Tomorrow* represents a microcosm of the modern world, a world populated with people who persevere in a meaningless, empty existence that has long since turned into a rut without anyone noticing it. Flisar is quite pessimistic, for his play's ending indicates that no matter how hard one tries to change the world for the better, it remains the same. According to the author, however, the play is more comedy than tragedy and this is why it ends with a neutralization, though a temporary one, of the inner conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Evald Flisar is fluent both in Slovene and English. His English versions of Slovene texts are more than mere translations; Flisar has a fine feeling not only for linguistic subtleties but also for approaching the target audience. Both his stage directions and dialogs may differ slightly

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<sup>4</sup> Vili Ravnjak, "In the Whiteness of Snow," in Evald Flisar, *Tomorrow* 72.

<sup>5</sup> Jurca 13.

between versions. The introductory description of the scene in act 1, scene 2 of *Jutri bo lepše / Tomorrow* reads in Slovene: “Luči. Jesenin, Rembrandt, Nižinski in Miškin sedijo pri mizi in pijejo čaj.” The English version is more subtle, “Lights. YESSENIN, REMBRANDT, NIJINSKI and MISHKIN are sitting at the table, drinking tea, refilling their mugs from a samovar.” Bearing in mind that for an average Englishman drinking tea represents an important ritual, Flisar added some details that would have been of little significance to Slovene audience. The importance of the ritual is further underlined later on in the same scene. Whereas the Slovene text is stripped of any emotional overtone, the English counterpart virtually sets one in a tea-drinking mood:

JESENIN: Predvsem pa imamo še dovolj čaja. Dobrega ruskega čaja. (Dolije nekaj čaja v Miškinovo skodelico). Pijte, Aleksej Ivanovič (11).

YESSENIN: We also have enough tea, thank God. Shall I pour you some more, Aleksei Ivanovich? (Refills Mishkin's mug from the samovar.) Good Russian tea (14).

But perhaps the finest example of text drift comes towards the end of the play, in act 2, scene 4, the trial scene. The English version uses to the full the possibilities of the rich, archaic-sounding rhetoric of the legal language; the Slovene counterpart, however, sounds fairly “neutral” in that respect:

JESENIN: Aleksej Ivanovič Miškin. (Obkroža Miškina in ga vsake toliko časa potreplja po ramenu.) Obtoženi ste, da ste si 24. februarja ob trinajsti uri petindvajset minut v prostorih sodišča, na katerem zdaj teče proti vam sodni postopek, nezakonito prisvojili strelno orožje, namenjeno izključno za oskrbovanje sodišča z mesom, in z njim ravnali tako neprevidno in neodgovorno, da ste povzročili strelne rane, ki so terjale smrtno žrtev. Obtožba vas bremeni zlonamerne malomarnosti, zaradi katere je v najlepših letih in v nepopravljivo škodo naši skupnosti preminil Nikolaj Sergejevič Dobronosov, po domače znan kot Nikita, vrhovni sodnik tega sodišča- (60).

YESSENIN: Aleksei Ivanovich Mishkin. (Circling around him) You're charged that on 24 February at 13.00 hours you did unlawfully take possession of dangerous firearms intended

exclusively for the provisioning of the court with meat, and handled the said firearms so carelessly and irresponsibly that you caused gunshot wounds which resulted in the death of an innocent man. You're charged with willful negligence which caused the demise, in his prime and with great harm to this court, of Nikolai Sergeevich Dobronosov, affectionately known as Nikita, the Supreme Judge of this court (65).

The critical response to the Slovene performance was favorable. Nevertheless, Slavko Pezdir, in his otherwise positive evaluation of the performance pointed out the director's necessary though obvious lack of critical distance from his own text. As a consequence, the performance occasionally lacked inner tension and firmness.<sup>6</sup> Matej Bogataj not only saw a parallel between Flisar's play and Gogol's *The Inspector General*, both of which employ the device of returning the end to the beginning of the play, but he also pointed out the Beckett-like absurdity of the protagonist who fails to realize that he has come to a completely different environment—one without hierarchy, without a center, without a top—yet an environment characterized by complete and therefore so much more terrible freedom.<sup>7</sup> According to Leigh Johnson, the play is “a polished dramatic jewel—a joy to perform for the most demanding of players, and a joy to watch, not least for the connoisseurs.”<sup>8</sup>

## II.

1992 saw the publication of yet another bilingual drama by Evald Flisar, entitled *Kaj pa Leonardo? / What about Leonardo?* The two texts are separated by Leigh Johnson's essay “A Play about Crucifixion,” as well as its Slovene translation (“Drama o križanju”) and Diana Koloini's paper “Kolumbov sindrom” (“Columbus's syndrome,” untranslated).<sup>10</sup> Flisar originally wanted to dramatize a

<sup>6</sup> Slavko Pezdir, “Le efemeroni smo: premiera v Vodnikovi domačiji,” *Delo* 27 November 1992: 9.

<sup>7</sup> Matej Bogataj, “Evald Flisar: *Kaj pa Leonardo? Jutri bo lepše*,” *Literatura* 5.22 (1993): 105.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, “In the Whiteness of Snow,” 76.

<sup>9</sup> Ljubljana: Ganeš; London: Goldhawk, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> The play was first performed at the Mestno gledališče ljubljansko (the Ljubljana City Theater) on 9 October 1992 in a production by the resident company directed by Dušan Mlakar. In the early 1990s the play was also

story in, which the author describes the behavior of his patients.<sup>11</sup> However, he soon abandoned the idea, deciding instead to write a play about a man who has lost his memory. When asked to compare the two plays, *Jutri bo lepše* and *Kaj pa Leonardo?*, Flisar pointed out that the latter is less allegorical and more realistic. This is why it must end tragically.<sup>12</sup>

Flisar's drama takes place in the isolated world of a neurological institute. The patients are people who, due to brain injuries, have lost their personal integrity; they "compensate" with certain, hypertrophied brain functions—sniffing, listening, memorizing. Each of them lives in his or her own hermetically closed world that will not allow any real communication. But they assert themselves by demanding attention from others, doctors and nurses included, and they can be very rude, both verbally and physically. The institute is run by Dr. Hoffman who has his own ideas as to how these patients should be treated. He sees in them individuals who should be protected until they have regained the power to understand things and make free decisions. He does not want to impress his "reality" on them but hopes to reconnect them to their own "realities"—that is, their own stories. In order to achieve this, he makes use of poetry and poetic passages from Shakespeare's plays (*The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*). This should instill in patients a capability to act in conflicting situations; it should enable them to take sides and make decisions as well as to differentiate among values.

The conflict begins as one day a young, ambitious doctoral candidate, Dr. Da Silva, comes to the clinic to conduct her research

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performed by the Hevesi Szandor Theater in Zalaegerszeg in Hungary. In 1993 it won the Grum Award for the best play of the year. In August 1993 *What about Leonardo?* was presented as a rehearsed reading at the Tricycle Theatre in London as part of the "Festival of Drama from the Countries of Former Yugoslavia." On 22 October 1994 *What about Leonardo?* opened at the City Theater, Reykjavik, Iceland, in a production of the Reykjavik Theater Company, directed by Hallmar Sigurdsson.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Thought His Wife Was a Hat*, in *The Man Who Thought His Wife Was a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Summit, 1985). The work was adapted as a chamber opera in the U.S. See Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook*, libretto by Christopher Rawlence, New York, CBS Masterworks, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Jurca 13.



there. Her theory is that patients should be returned to "normal life." She selects one of the patients, Mr. Martin a former delicatessen owner, as her object of experiment. Backed by the media, her intention is to make a "new Renaissance Leonardo" out of Martin, a man who would be a genius in both science and art, a superman, a man without bad habits or a Freudian subconscious." Martin proves at first to be a good pupil—he learns easily and memorizes astonishingly. In this "man without memory, without ego, without desires, without a will of his own—a man with an inner vacuum" (45)—Dr. DaSilva sees the opportunity for her own promotion. She is not interested in what Martin wants, and he wants simply to be, to act, to be accepted on his own terms. Dr. Hoffman, on the other hand, overlooks the fact that poetry and drama include dark emotions as well. And since Martin is incapable of clear judgment, he takes Othello's passion too literally and kills his "Desdemona," Dr. Da Silva. He also kills Dr. Roberts, a C.I.A. employee, whose idea it is to make Martin an obedient, automated agent who speaks all languages, masters all types of combat, can pilot war planes, feels comfortable with every kind of weapon, can carry out whatever task he is given, unburdened by doubts, moral qualms or concern for his safety (87).

And he kills the Leaning Man, another patient. After the murders, his memory returns; now he is capable of a decision and has also got his sense of guilt back. But, as Dr. Hoffman puts it, "... now, when he is whole again, he is split: Between yes and no, doubt and conviction, fear and courage" (96–7). Unable to cope with this situation, Martin prefers to retreat to the world of his "madness."

Flisar's drama is open to different interpretations: the neurological institute with its "crazy" inmates can be understood, according to Johnson, as a microcosm, a metaphor for the larger world, a temptation we should resist.<sup>13</sup> In his opinion the play is much subtler and more profound. He sees Dr. Da Silva, Dr. Hoffman, and Martin as "the cornerstones of the human psyche, the dynamics of its functioning." The female doctor is a representative of "the relentless pursuer of change in the human psyche, the unscrupulous opportunist," whereas Dr. Hoffman represents permissiveness and tradition, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson 99.

patient stands for the human urge “to just be” (100). “What we are witnessing in this play is a ritual crucifixion of the eternal child in us.”<sup>14</sup>

Diana Koloini, however, sees Flisar’s play in the context of those works of literature that are based upon a hospital or a similar institution as a miniature version of the world. Indeed, one is, for example, reminded of Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) or even a recent Slovene drama by Drago Jančar, *Veliki briljantni valček* (*The Great Brilliant Waltz* 1985). Life within the walls of the institute is considered *almost* idyllic, for Dr. Hoffman believes he has no right “to break in their worlds, which are complete in a way, and try to force them, by hook or by crook, back into the framework of our normality” (35). The ambitious and aggressive Dr. Da Silva, who, believing that the end justifies the means and knowing no scruples, shatters this idyll. Her goal to create a “new Renaissance Leonardo” brings us to the main problem posed in the play—namely, the cool, rationalistic approach of medicine as science in which there is no room for humanity: people become mere experimental rabbits. *What about Leonardo?* is one of Flisar’s universal plays that is equally relevant in Slovenia, England, or elsewhere. The author calls it tragicomedy, but it is more tragedy than comedy. There is little humor in it and whatever humor there is is very dark. The play tells us that something is amiss with our so-called civilization.

It is therefore not surprising that there are but a few minor differences between the two versions of the play. Now and then the text is a bit longer in the English version, as for example:

Hoffman: It is not a question of what anybody is offering you, Mrs. Martin. We’re talking about your husband, who is my patient. Rats, bunnies and chimpanzees are abused in the name of science, but people can still say no, thank God—and if they can’t, they have doctors who can say no for them” (48).

Hoffman: Saj ne gre zato, kaj kdo ponuja vam, gospa. Gre za gospoda Martina, ki je vaš mož in moj pacient. Podgane, kunce, opice res zlorablamo v imenu znanosti, z ljudmi pa tega ne smemo početi” (44).

Or the author adds a colorful slang “proverb”:

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson 99.

Martin: (nagnjen kot Poševni zasleduje Poševnega, ki zasleduje Carusa) Izpulil vam bom vsak las posebej! Te bom tko mahnu, da t'bo v piskru zacingljal (36).

Martin: I'll pull out every one of your hairs! I'll kick your face in! (40).

The play received much critical attention when staged in Ljubljana. Flisar himself explained the play as a "philosophical metaphor" but "in no way a camouflaged political or social criticism."<sup>15</sup> Veno Taufer praised the text as well as the performance itself; however, he thought that a more general and sober presentation of media and state manipulation would contribute materially to the play's denouement. In his conclusion he says that everybody, the director, the actors ... managed to bring the play to where the author had wanted it: "to a rather shuddering tragicomedy."<sup>16</sup> Slavko Pezdir points out the fact that "in his drama the author opens up a number of political and philosophical questions," querying himself throughout about the role of art in the contemporary world.<sup>17</sup> Pavel Fajdiga begins his critical article by reminding us that there is always a bit of truth in every madness, "if not otherwise, per negationem." He, too, praises the performance all the while pointing out its realism.<sup>18</sup>

### III.

Flisar's next play, *Tristan in Izolda / Tristan and Iseult* was another joint project with the Slovene version of the text on one side, the English one on the reverse, and in the middle Vili Ravnjak's paper "Dekonstrukcija mita romantične ljubezni" ("Deconstructing the Myth of Romantic Love"), as well as some Slovene Chamber Theater rehearsal photos.<sup>19</sup> The play was first performed by the Chamber Theater at Vodnikova domačija in Ljubljana on 13 February 1994, under the direction of Flisar and Branka Bezeljak Glazer.

*Tristan and Iseult* is based on the well-known medieval cycle of French chivalric novels, the protagonists of which have since turned

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<sup>15</sup> Jurca 13.

<sup>16</sup> Taufer 8.

<sup>17</sup> Slavko Pezdir, "Praizvedka Flisarjeve tragikomedije v MGL," *Delo* 9 October 1992: 6.

<sup>18</sup> Pavel Fajdiga, "Kaj pa Leonardo?" *Slovenec* 15 October 1992: 8.

<sup>19</sup> London: Goldhawk; Ljubljana: Julija Pergar, 1994.

into a myth of fatal, romantic love. In his play, Flisar both revives the myth as well as demythologizes it. His paraphrase of the medieval myth concentrates on the second phase of the characters' love affair, "the phase of falling out of love and the destructive consequences of being in love."<sup>20</sup> Flisar's preoccupation with the notion of "romantic love," according to Ravnjak a state that is both biological and psychological, is actually the main theme of the play. *Tristan and Iseult* takes place in the present, although the author constantly reminds us of its link with the past through the parallel character of Mark (in the original Tristan's uncle but now alternately, his fellow-employee in a reincarnated version and a minstrel) as well as through characters who are all "paraphrases of their mythological namesakes."<sup>21</sup> They are Tristan and Iseult as well as Iseult's mother.

The two main characters are middle-class people: she types playscripts for the local theater, washes, and cooks; he sells apartments. In the course of time, obviously, their great love has cooled off. They try to keep it alive by playing the roles of passionate lovers from world literature. When this "field" is exhausted, Tristan appears in several disguises (as a student, a fabulously rich Arabian Prince, a painter) but in each of them he fails to satisfy Iseult's needs. She wants a real hero and he cannot be one. "They are essentially depressive characters who are unable to live independently, ... each of them afraid to face his/her own self ..."<sup>22</sup> Having been entrapped by daily routine, they feel lonely and isolated. They yearn for something that is out of their reach, for love that would give their lives not only a boost but ultimate meaning. It is an illusion which becomes even more obvious in act 2, ten years later, when their social status has improved considerably. They are fairly well-to-do: Mark is no longer Tristan's boss but his subordinate and his wife's potential lover. According to Ravnjak, the play offers a confrontation of two romantic myths, the first one dating back to the twelfth century, the second one modern. Central to both of them, however, is a search for love as the ultimate meaning of life. As Ravnjak puts it, the protagonists shift the theme and the plot of the play "from the erotic level onto the existential one" as they no longer search for God/eternity in the partner (the way the mediaeval Tristan and Iseult

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<sup>20</sup> Vili Ravnjak, "Zakaj imajo sloni velika ušesa?" in *Jutri bo lepše* 92.

<sup>21</sup> Ravnjak 93.

<sup>22</sup> Tatjana Zidar, "Velike zgodbe jedo majhne: razmislek o Flisarjevi dramatici," in *Stric iz Amerike* 98.

did) but rather within themselves.<sup>23</sup> The first is symbolized by Ireland, where Tristan and Iseult are about to go; the second by India, where Mark is going at the end of the play. In the course of the play, the present-day Tristan and Iseult gradually lose their illusion of all-encompassing, omnipotent love. They find it impossible to live on in a world that is barren, stripped of every illusion, and they die, but their death at the end is no real death for, according to Flisar, romantic myths cannot die. And so Tristan and Iseult will be dead when the play opens, only to be revived by the minstrel (he has to repeat his reviving ritual several times during the play) and "die" again at the end of act 2.

Flisar's play has a different setting for each version: the English one takes place in London and the Slovene in Ljubljana. This accounts for numerous variations that occur in both texts. Flisar has a fine feeling for linguistic nuances as well as for adaptation to either Slovene or English circumstances and settings. "Bacon and eggs" becomes "salama z jajci" in Slovene; "apaurin" substitutes for "valium"; Remembrance Day is replaced by the now defunct Dan borca; Tristan's favorite dish, "leg of lamb," is transformed into "telečje stegno" (all examples from act 1, scene 7). Other circumstantial adaptations include such modifications as, for example, the following:

Tristan: "Če pa se ponesreči," je rekla, "je ne bova zdravila v tujih posteljah, ampak bova, če življenje postane neznosno, skočila s Tromostovja v Ljubljano" (10).

Tristan: "And if it suffers an accident," she added, "we won't try to cure it in other people's beds, but will jump hand in hand off Tower Bridge" (12).

Now and then the dramatist adds humorous touches, in either version, obviously knowing very well what will catch the audience's fancy. In the aftermath of Mark's misfortune with the boomerang at the world championship, Flisar records the following dialogue:

Mark: (ponosno) Dobil sem ponudbo za intervju v New York Timesu.

Tristan: In?

Mark: Odklonil sem.

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<sup>23</sup> Zidar 95.

(Izolda prinese pladenjs s steklenico konjaka in tremi kozarci)

Tristan: Zakaj?

Izolda: Zato, ker so ga nameravali objaviti v humoristični prilogi.

Tristan: In?

Izolda: Dostojanstvo je pomembnejše od denarja in slave (54).

Mark: (proudly) I had an offer for an interview in the *New York Times*.

Tristan: And?

Mark: I turned it down.

Tristan: Why?

Iseult: (brings a tray with three glasses of cognac) Dignity's more important than money and fame (56).

The "adaptation process" is more likely to affect stage directions than dialogs. Flisar either distributes the former rather freely (see the above excerpt), or he omits or adds something in one or the other version. One has the feeling that he is being more specific in the Slovene, as if expecting his English-speaking audience to be better acquainted with the original medieval text.

Trubadur: Tristan je sanjal, da so mu zmrznile noge. Sedel je za mizo ob plesni ploščadi. Tam je bila tudi Izolda. Prišla ga je prosit za ples (81).

Minstrel: Tristan dreamt he went dancing. Iseult was there, too. She came to ask him for a dance (83).

And last but not least, Flisar also attends to the mentality of his audiences. In act 2, scene 3, almost all introductory dialog between Tristan and Iseult, in which they discuss a possibility of her being raped, is rendered in two different languages. The English text is longer, the vulgarity low key (we might even say more refined), whereas the Slovene version is shorter, abrufter, and more openly vulgar.

Slavko Pezdir announced the premiere in *Delo* one day before it took place and mentioned the fact that the play is based upon three

sources: the medieval myth of Tristan and Iseult, Flisar's short story "Metalec bumerangov" ("The Boomerang Thrower"), as well as some of the thematic elements of the play *Nimfa umre*. Pezdir also called the reader's attention to the sad fact that only a premiere and three repetitions were financially provided for. In his critical evaluation of the performance in the same paper four days later, Pezdir praises both the text and the performance, saying that Flisar's variation on the theme of love and death transplants the ancient Celtic legend about sinful yet invincible love in the contemporary world; what we get is a presentation of a universal love relationship between man and woman in its epilogue phase. The critic further notes Flisar's skillful dialogs that on the one hand open themselves to the eternal question of a relationship between man and woman while on the other remain firmly embedded in recognizable society of today. Tadej Čater's examination of the performance focuses on how skillfully the text transitions from comedy to grotesque, farce and tragedy, how it passes from one genre to another.<sup>24</sup> In Čater's view this is a play about ourselves thrown into a godless world, the one gods have left. It shows us what happens to us if we take myths too seriously without having previously verified the credibility and authenticity of the seventeenth-century troubadours' words. The play has also attracted critical attention on the stylistic level, as a drama of language.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV.

Flisar's next play, *Stric iz Amerike* (*Uncle from America* 1994), appeared in a dual (combined) edition, just like the previous plays.<sup>26</sup> The Slovene version is subtitled "Slovenska družinska tragedija," but there is no equivalent subtitle in the English version. The play was first performed at Mestno gledališče ljubljansko (Ljubljana City Theater) on 23 September 1994 by the resident company, directed by Dušan Mlakar.

*Uncle from America* is not so much a *Slovene* family tragedy as it is a tragedy concerning the modern family. The protagonist, Janez

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<sup>24</sup> Tadej Čater, "Brez ljubezni mi živeti ni," *Naši razgledi* 42.4 (18 February 1994): 44.

<sup>25</sup> Milan Dekleva, "Primi se za luft," *Dnevnik* 44.43 (15 February 1994): 18. Dekleva underscores the magical appeal of the chamber, ascetic theater.

<sup>26</sup> Ljubljana: Julija Pergar; London: Moran.

(Johnny), returns, after fifteen years from America to win back his one-time girlfriend Alenka, who dumped him for a more experienced lover. Now that he is rich—he claims to be in possession of a half a million dollars—she is only too happy to resume their affair as she has a dream of becoming a world-renowned painter, owning her own gallery. Yet other members of Johnny's family look up to him as well as their savior—not only in the financial sense but also as the savior of destroyed family relationships. Father, Mother, Sister, and brother Marko hate each other. Father is bitter because he has not been able to fulfill his ambitions and as a result he is extremely rude to everybody. Mother, who wanted to escape the rudeness and cynicism of her incontinent spouse, has moved to an old people's home. Johnny's sister, resigned to a life with her unfaithful husband, hopes that Johnny's return will put an end to his affair with Alenka, which does not materialize.

But then Johnny informs everyone that he has lost his fortune during a crash (later on, in a private conversation with Father, he admits he never had any money. But he did have a wife and a son whom he left behind). The news is enough for Alenka to drop him again but then she changes her mind when she learns that Father is the one who is rich, having won half a million in the lottery. And so she persuades Johnny to persuade Father to invest his money in a dilapidated mansion in the woods which could be rebuilt into a gallery. And Father is indeed persuaded, his only condition being that he move in together with Johnny and Alenka and that he be appropriately looked after. These conditions met, they move in together, but Alenka, who cannot stand the Old Man, plots his demise and finally succeeds one day when Father urgently needs his heart medication: she prevents Johnny from administering it. Eventually she, too, leaves, and the guilt-stricken Johnny remains alone among the ruins of the old castle as well as among the ruins of his illusions.

Flisar's Family is once again a microcosm of society at large, the society in which nobody respects any rules and everybody wants to enforce his or her will. Nobody is willing to conform to common aspirations, or, as we might say, aspire to the collective good. As Alja Predan puts it in her companion essay to the Slovene version of Flisar's drama, "If the balance between the individual and the collective turns in favor of one or the other, the family as an ideal unit falls apart."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Alja Predan, "Družina - splet norosti in bolečine," in *Uncle from America* 85.



There is no room for love and no respect in the nameless Family of Flisar's drama—that is to say, some characters are nameless and others not. The ones with the names still have a vague idea of normal family life and the ones without have ceased functioning as individual persons and are merely caricatures of family functions. In her essay, Predan speaks about the “me generation” of modern times, the egotistic people who are unable and unwilling to see beyond themselves. Flisar's play abounds in such characters.

After the children had gone away, Father and Mother were unable to readjust to a “childless” marriage. They had nothing to say to each other, there was no common interest. The alienation is so much the worse for the fact that their marriage had been a patriarchal one. Mother was a homemaker, a servant and, eventually, his ungrateful, unfaithful husband's nurse. So instead of getting a divorce, the two of them remained together but regressed to immaturity, childishness and, eventually, to cynicism. In order to get away from it all, Mother voluntarily moved to an old people's home, shutting herself off completely. On a symbolic level, her withdrawal from the family is shown by her plugging her ears with cotton wool when she does not want to listen. Her Americanized son Johnny, the uncle of the title, is a parody of Slovene folk stereotype of the rich American emigrant. He will not only bring heaps of money but will also “redeem the family of its hatred and mutual emptiness, meaninglessness, and aimlessness.”<sup>28</sup> Yet he sadly fails to do either, first, because he has no money, and second because he is a dreamer unable to cope with reality. He is a weak character, Hamlet-like in his indecisiveness (which becomes most obvious in the scene with the dying Father who begs for help) he tries to satisfy both—his vulgar, demanding Father and his equally vulgar and ambitious lover. Unable to serve two masters simultaneously he eventually remains alone among the ruins of his life.

Flisar wrote two almost identical versions of his play. Differences exist between the Slovene and English texts but they are minor. The author, for once, did his best to *translate* the specific features of Slovene life and not adapt them the way he did in some of his earlier plays. In this respect *Uncle from America* differs from the earlier plays.

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<sup>28</sup> Predan 87.

Taufer points out that “the protagonists are either indecision or aggression personified, they are permeated with destructiveness as well as self-destructiveness, self-pity, selfishness, ill-wishing, envy ... In short, they are evil and that makes them tick.”<sup>29</sup> Taufer calls these the “archetypal Slovene” personal characteristics and points out how well they come to expression in Flisar’s smooth, skillful and witty dialogs. Taufer especially praises Flisar’s dramaturgy, which cultivates the dialog as the play moves along and solves the conflicts and intrigues in the same way, without saving them until the end. According to Taufer, the performance had some defects, too: it was somehow “too serious,” which weakened the comic and paralyzed the distance necessary to achieve the grotesque. Ignacija Fridl’s review places Flisar’s play in the tradition of family drama, so popular in the twentieth century, which leads away from stressing the social context into characterization of an individual.<sup>30</sup> Friedl sees Flisar’s play in this context. Praising the humor of the play, which is relaxing in the first part and turning into distress, despair, and the tragic in the second, Friedl asks herself whether the play is really a typical Slovene tragicomedy or whether it is more universal. A third review compares Flisar to Shaw, since both playwrights’ works read well and can be staged well.<sup>31</sup> The critic goes on to note that Flisar’s witty idea of giving the role of the observer to a child proved a bit too difficult for the child-actor. A quite negative review appeared in *Naši razgledi* in October of the same year. The author found the text and the performance dull, “an artifact without imagination par excellence.” “The new Slovene tragicomedy unravels itself as subsequent circling of big, fat fried chicken.” The play is not only dull but tasteless (e.g., the funeral scene); the characters are clichés characterized by naiveté and dullness.<sup>32</sup>

## V.

Last but not least is Flisar’s unpublished, bilingual play *Naglavisvet / Topsy-turvy*, broadcast by Radio Slovenia on 7 October 1994 under the direction of Jože Valenčič. The brief, untitled, and

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<sup>29</sup> Veno Taufer, “Premiera v mestnem gledališču Ljubljanskem. Kako smešna je lahko hudobija?” *Delo* 24 September 1994: 8.

<sup>30</sup> “Poltretja ura družinske anatomije,” *Slovenec* 27 September 1994: 12.

<sup>31</sup> Rapa Šuklje, “Stric iz Amerike,” *Dnevnik* 27 September 1994: 20.

<sup>32</sup> Bojana Kunst, “Povprečnost,” *Naši razgledi* 42.19 (14 October 1994): 44.

unsigned introduction at the beginning of the autographed typescript, showing English and Slovene on facing pages, reads:

Topsy-turvy (an upsidedown world) is a light-hearted, ironic and slightly cynical look at the most pressing problem of our civilisation: the ecological nightmare caused by consumerism and the underlying idea of permanent economic growth. In Potteroonia, the vicious circle of turning natural resources into consumer products and waste has reached the point at which producing more and wasting more is a matter of life and death. It is in this transmogrified yet chillingly familiar reality that our hero, Professor Swindleburger, sets out to create a working model of saner economy.<sup>33</sup>

The play is thus about the professor, a British economic adviser, who fails to convince members of the Confederation of British Industry that his philosophy, called swindlethought, is good for Britain in the long term. So he decides to emigrate, together with his assistant Mona, to Trinidad and Tobago in order to become economic adviser there. But they are shipwrecked and land in Potteroonia, where everything is made of "potty" and where people are encouraged to produce and consequently waste more. When, after some time, he rebels against the Goodmachine, the master of Potteroonia, he and Mona are excommunicated, i.e. "depotterized." Eventually they find themselves on an old schooner sailing away from Potteroonia. All of a sudden a huge wave approaches their ship, interpreted by the professor as the collapse of the Potteroonian island—and he wakes up beside Mona, the alarm clock ringing. As he starts dressing for the day, the phone rings. The situation is almost identical with the opening scene of the play. He is wanted by the chancellor of the exchequer but avoids him by telling Mona to lie about his whereabouts. He falls in a trap just like he did the first time, claiming to be with the very same person the caller happens to be with. Outside, a hundred gentlemen are waiting, this time representatives of the most developed nations on earth, wanting a solution from him. The professor has a "funny feeling" that they are, perhaps, too late.

With this play Flisar opened up a new path: turning away from the psychology of human relationships he concentrates on the one major problem of the modern world: the ecology. The author uses a well-

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<sup>33</sup> The text is available at the Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica in Ljubljana.

proven model of drama where most of the action takes place in dreams. Eventually the protagonist wakes up to reality, which means that the end must necessarily be the same or almost the same as the beginning. As far as the two versions of the play are concerned, the satire is freely translated into English. Certain expressions are not the same in either version—for example, the Slovene “finančni minister” (minister of finance) becomes “prime minister”; parts of sentences are missing; so are some expressive words like “kreteni” (6). Obviously, Flisar aimed at getting his point through rather than translating word for word: “Profesor: Sredi belega dne in na delovnem mestu ste pijani kot žolna” (7) becomes “Professor: /.../ You’re pissed out of your mind” (7).

## VI.

It is inaccurate to talk about the translations of Flisar’s plays for they have been *written* in English by the author himself. Flisar once said that he needed approximately three weeks before he could completely switch from one language to another. Obviously, the text written first (Slovene or English) was a point of departure; however, the degree of the “sameness” of the two versions depends largely on what the play is about. In this respect no two editions are alike.

The plays discussed here represent their author’s commentary on the human condition. He notices and exposes the dark aspects of life that are not restricted to a geographical area but are universal. The positive reception of his plays in English and non-English speaking countries alike confirms this thesis. According to Flisar’s comment in the playbill for the 1992 performance of *What about Leonardo?* every one of us has been bombarded with other people’s stories ever since the early childhood. These stories are all we have until we are able to think critically and verify what others have said. The obvious reaction is revolt, negation of “old wisdom” as well as searching for better, more acceptable modes of existence. All our life is a single, long battle over whose story will predominate, ours or somebody else’s. If we move from the microcosm of family life into society at large, this means that the predominant stories will fall, according to Flisar, roughly into two categories, ideologies for the masses and scientific dogmas.

Flisar’s personae are weak people who fight a double battle: against themselves and against adversaries. They mask their indecisiveness with cynicism, roughness, vulgarity, and nonchalance. They are either victims of manipulation or they manipulate others. The

world they inhabit has lost its moral foundations. God is absent and there is no replacement. Escaping into dreams or fantasy proves futile and inevitably leads to tragedy. In short, despite humorous elements, the function of which can be quite cathartic, Flisar's plays are serious indictments of life. Moreover, owing to their figurative richness, interesting, vivid dialogues, and fine blend of tragedy and comedy, they appeal both to readers and theater audiences.

Univerza v Ljubljani

## POVZETEK

### SLOVENSKE-ANGLEŠKE DRAME EVALDA FLISARJA

*Pesnik, prozaist in dramatik Evald Flisar (rojen 1945) je avtor petih dvojezičnih, slovensko-angleških dram: Jutri bo lepše / Tomorrow (1992), Kaj pa Leonardo? / What about Leonardo? (1992), Tristan in Izolda / Tristan and Iseult (1994), Stric iz Amerike / Uncle from America (1994) in radijske igre (ni bila objavljena) Naglavisvet / Topsy-turvy. Za razliko od tedaj prevladujoče socialno angažirane drame se je Flisar obrnil k bolj intimnim temam, še posebej ga zanima zamotanost medčloveških odnosov. Piše psihološke drame, katerih osnovna gonilna sila je dialog. Obe verziji, slovenska in angleška, sta vedno izšli v isti knjigi, stopnja istovetnosti besedil pa je odvisna od tematike. V tem pogledu niti dve drami nista enaki. Pri Flisarju ne gre za prevode del(a), izvorno napisanega v enem ali drugem jeziku, ampak za avtorjevo malone sočasno ustvarjenje v obeh jezikih.*