

# Political Performances

Theory and Practice



Edited by  
Susan C. Haedicke  
Deirdre Heddon  
Avraham Oz  
E.J. Westlake

**Themes in Theatre**  
**Collective Approaches**  
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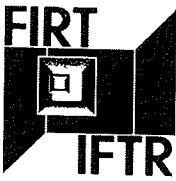
## Theory and Practice

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Political Performances Working Group



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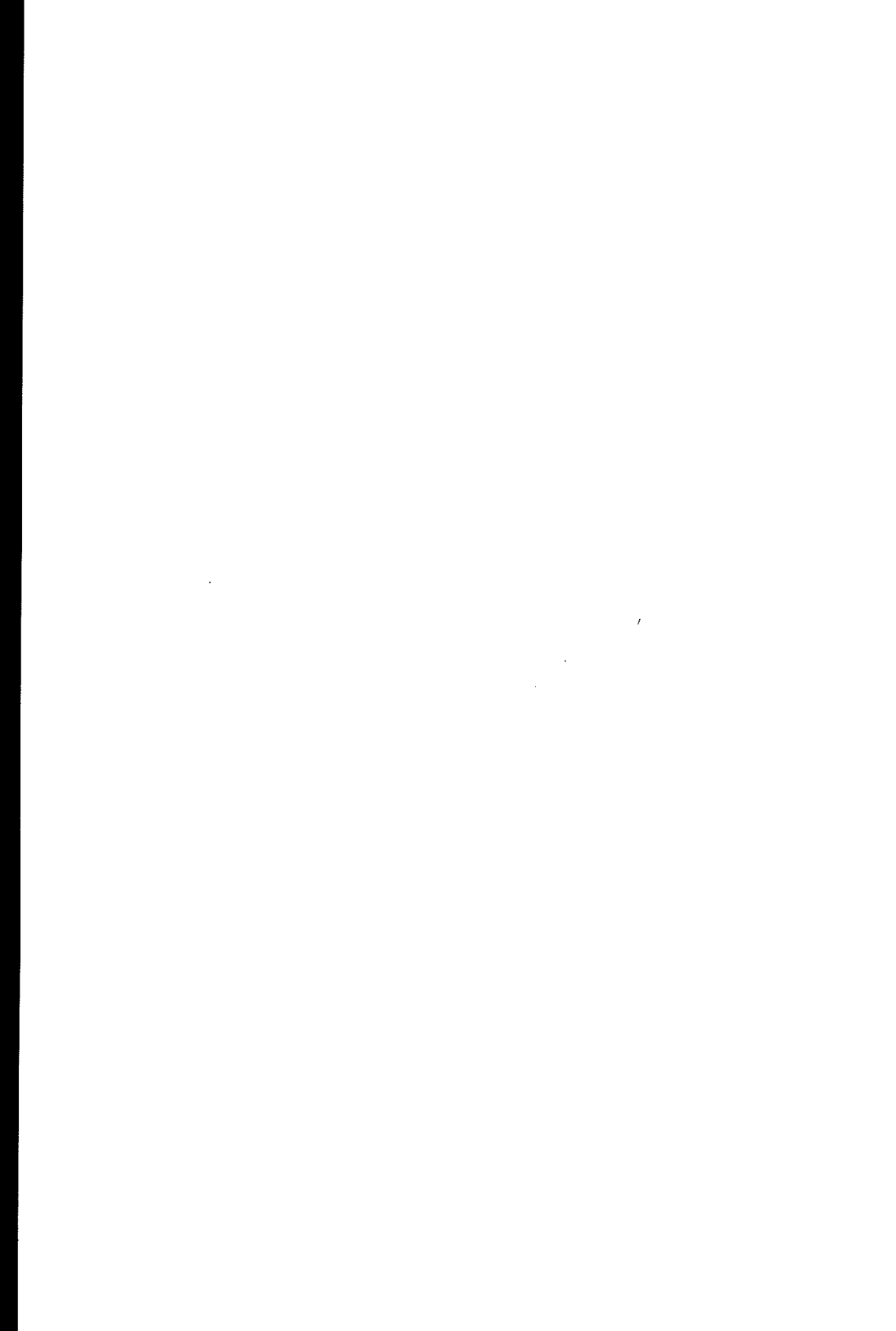
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## THE COMEBACK OF POLITICAL DRAMA IN CROATIA: OR *HOW TO KILL A PRESIDENT* BY MIRO GAVRAN<sup>1</sup>

SANJA NIKČEVIĆ

Although Croatian drama was very subversive during the communist system, after the fall of communism so called political drama disappeared from Croatian theatre as well as from other theatres in the countries of former Yugoslavia. If 'political drama' is talking about the social and political forces that destroy the life of an individual, it looked like playwrights in the new political system could not define who the representatives of life-shaping forces were: bureaucracy, nationalist governments, mafia in rise, *nouveau riche*... At some point, war plays tried to fulfill that function but were marginalized in Croatian theatre. On the other side, plays about dysfunctional families were offered as the best political plays possible although in those plays society was so unrecognizable that no political representative could see the criticism. The comeback of political drama in Croatia happened with the play by Miro Gavran, *How to Kill a President* (2003). This defined globalization as a force that shapes and destroys our lives.

### POLITICAL DRAMA IN THE SEVENTIES

Political drama describes political and social forces that shape the life of an individual; actually, not just shape but also destroy because political drama is always critical of or subversive toward society and its political representatives. He considers affirmative political plays as mere propaganda (Melchinger 1971: 10). Boris Senker defined Croatian plays that were especially critical toward society at the end of sixties and in the seventies as *a political wave* (Senker 2001: 24-32). In order to escape political repercussions, these plays were applying a kind of genre mimicry—the playwrights were running

away from the mainstream dramatic forms of high art (drama, tragedy) into the lower genres,<sup>2</sup> mostly comedies or absurd grotesques, later nominated as *political grotesques* (Mrkonjić 1985: 55). Nevertheless, representatives of political structures in power recognized themselves in the grotesque picture and struck back.

There were some very direct, very personal, and very dangerous attacks in the media or at festivals' round tables. A Cornerstone of this kind of political writing is Ivo Brešan, whose play, *Hamlet u selu Mrduša Donja/Performance of Hamlet in Small Town*, written in 1965 (published and staged 1971), (Milutinović 2004: 161-177) was severely criticized as *dangerous and anti-socialist* on prime-time TV news by an esteemed literary critic who was also a highly political figure. The play was about a rural attempt to stage Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and during that staging Hamlet's story is repeated in a contemporary version and with communistic vocabulary. The main communist is a crook who sacrificed the honest accountant and is now using his own daughter to destroy the accountant's son because the son seeks the truth and revenge. Skrabe-Mujčić-Senker's *Domagojada/Play about Domagoj* (1975), a play about historical misunderstandings of Croats, was openly and directly attacked at the round table of the Sarajevo international festival MESS with similar arguments.

Sometimes plays were silenced soon after opening nights. Nedeljko Fabrio's *Reformers* (1968) is a historical play about real historical figures who actually represent the highest contemporary political figures: Martin Luther, as an old charismatic leader who is now enjoying laurels and some worldly enjoyments was a picture of our president Tito, while a Croatian reformer, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, the only one who stayed pure in following revolutionary ideas because of which he was expelled and abandoned, was easily recognized as representing some of our contemporary communist dissidents.

The political pressure on theatres and directors became so high that after a while they were not willing to stage contemporary Croatian drama at all. For that reason, not just political, but Croatian drama in general, was silenced during the eighties. At the end of the sixties and in the seventies we had more than twenty very active new playwrights, mostly political (e.g. Brešan, Bakamaz, Bužimski, Bakarić, Fabrio, Kušan, Šoljan, Šnajder, Škrabe-Mujčić-Senker, and

so on), but in the eighties most of these names were not staged, and we got just three new names (Miro Gavran, Lada Kaštelan, and Mate Matišić). Obviously, the sword of political drama was broken.

#### THE NINETIES OR THE SILENCED POLITICAL SUBVERSIVE VOICES

When we finally gained the longed for independence in 1991, everybody expected that freedom from the communistic regime and the proclaimed democracy would allow playwrights to write about all the “forbidden topics.” But quite the opposite happened. Playwrights that used to be the most subversive in the seventies were either still silenced, or changed their genre and began to write prose (Ivan Kušan, Nedjeljko Fabrio, Dubravko Jelačić Bužimski) or poetry (Tahir Mujčić). Some others started to write other dramatic genres: Boris Senker writes intertextual postmodern literary cabarets (*Frietzspil* from 2002 gives several different funny versions of the Croatian classical play *Noble Glembay's/ Gospoda Glembajevi* by M. Krleža), Nino Skrabe writes religious plays and melodramas, and Ivan Bakmaz dramatizes biblical stories.

It looks as if, with the independence of Croatia, writers could not precisely define the political force that governs our lives. They could not recognize clear personifications of power that can then be shown in the play. That personification in the former system was an uneducated, primitive person of power who, in the name of big ideas about “equality, rights for small men” and “a bright future,” destroys everybody who opposes, especially intellectuals who constantly criticize the reality.

#### WAR PLAYS IN THE POLITICAL FUNCTION

The nineties are important for Croatia not just because we gained political independence but because the price for that independence was a terrible war. The war shaped our lives for nearly ten years and maybe that is why war plays tried to take over the political function of the plays. War plays that were written in Croatia in the nineties can be roughly divided into the emotional and political. Emotional plays like Lydija Scheurman Hodak's *Maria's Pictures/Slike Marijine* (1992),<sup>3</sup> Hrvoje Barbir's *Telmah* (1996), and Renato Orlić's *Between Two Sky /Između dva neba* (1997) show victims without much debate about guilt. Political war plays are written from a very obvious political

point of view (they talk about the guilt, the aim, the goals and reasons for the war, and about the role of politics in it) and you can easily define the political stand of the plays as "left" or "right." The so called "left" tried to find the explanation or reasons for this war in Croatian guilt or by explaining that guilt is equally shared (Slobodan Šnajder *Snake's Skin / Zmijin svlak*, 1994).<sup>4</sup> The so called "right" were very clear about Croatian innocence and tried to show that all the guilt rests with the Serbian aggressor or international forces that simply inhibited Croatian defenses and in that way helped the aggressor (Tomislav Bakarić *Whiskey for his excellence / Whiskey za njegovu ekscelenciju*, 1994).

Political war plays were written from a sense of duty to express the attitude toward war. For that reason, these plays very often turned into a cold, unemotional construction; whereas emotional versions were much better. But, as Croatian theatre avoided that topic in either political or emotional versions, war plays never had the same power of political plays from the seventies and stayed marginalized in Croatian theatre. Those kinds of plays were staged on off productions in Croatia and their reception was greater outside Croatia (Nikčević 2003: 49-67).

Croatian theatre in the nineties offered plays that described the worst sides of society (which used to be called *new pessimism*) as political drama. The work of Ivan Vidic and Asja Srnec-Todorović, P. Marinković, and M. Brumec<sup>5</sup> fitted into the contemporary fashionable trends of postmodernism (quoting, metatextuality, mixing the styles and genres, open form...) and deconstruction (abolishing the meaning of the character and the world around). The latter characteristic meant that flat, reduced characters lived in a sort of vacuum meaning that the political forces could not be defined or recognized. This fit into the European trend of the so-called *new European drama* that flourished in Europe during the nineties, as clones of British playwrights Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. Although that trend was usually advertised as political and subversive, these plays offered only shocking pictures from the edge of society (drug addicts, prostitutes, and abusers) and were emotionally implosive and apolitical (Nikčević 2005: 255-272). The same situation was with British representatives, most known examples of new European drama (Marius von Mayenburg) or mentioned Croatian playwrights.

### FIGHTING THE PAST

The third kind of plays that were considered political in the nineties in Croatia were the "fight with the past" plays. New plays about sins of the former system were written or old ones staged, and the audience was supposed to detect the parallels and understand the new world around them. But the attempts to write new plays about the old system were not very successful, even for the most successful former political playwrights like Ivo Brešan or Slobodan Šnajder.

More media attention was given to the theatrical "fight with the past," especially the newly started Theatre Ulysses by Rade Serbedžija, on the famous island of Brijuni (the island where former president Tito had his summer residence and was visited by famous guests from all over the world). Rade Serbedžija is an excellent Croatian actor who attained world fame through Hollywood movies. With performances at Theatre Ulysses (*King Lear* 2002, *Marat-Sade* 2003, *Play Becket*, 2004) he tried to depict the main sins of the former regime as reasons for its failure. These performances, however, were made from the point of view that the communistic system was good but just had some aberrations—the same position that Rade Serbedžija held before. He played in some of the most critical performances of the former system but was nevertheless devoted to the system and the idea of Yugoslavia, up to the point that he really lost his homeland with the rupture of Yugoslavia.

In spite of different theatrical successes, these plays could not find answers to today's problem. The critical performances used to be an exhaustive valve in the former system—the opponents of the system were glad to see the aberrations publicly exposed, the true followers of the system believed that the exposure of the bad sides would improve the system. After the fall of communism emotions stayed the same but the positions are different. The believers in the communist system do not want to see its faults today and the general affirmation of the communistic idea in these plays are not enough for them. The opponents do not like affirmation of the main communistic ideas on stage and revealing only some faults of the system is not enough for them.

In spite of media attention, these plays could not help today's audience understand much about their lives, because, in spite of the ghost from our past that periodically disturbs us, the modern world is

moving forward and our lives are shaped by some other influences, forces other than former communism.

It is very interesting that a similar situation was found in other former republics of Yugoslavia. The most subversive, the most political playwrights from the former system are lost in the new one. Dušan Jovanović, from Slovenia, wrote a play with an English title (*Exhibitionist*), under the pseudonym O. J. Traven. Set in New York it talks about brokers, prostitutes, and drug dealers—a world that has nothing to do with the author. He publically admitted *that this play was like a safe and I didn't have a key for it* (Traven 2001: 6). For earlier plays like *Liberation of Skopje /Oslobodenje Skopja* (1979), one of his most famous plays, he had the key for sure. A similar thing happened to Dušan Kovačević, a Serbian playwright, one of the best and one of the most critical about the former system (*Balkanski špijun/Balkan Spy*, 1982, *Profesionalac/Professional* 1990). He still writes about Serbia but his plays have become a pastiche of topics and ideas (*Fife Star Dumpster/Kontejner sa pet zvezdica*, 1999) without the political subversiveness of former plays.<sup>6</sup>

#### POLITICS AROUND THE PRESIDENT

Obviously, all former political playwrights lost the enemies that symbolized the system, so they could not recognize new forces that shape us. Most of them still live in the old world (in the apartments they got from the state, doing the jobs that are paid by state, staging plays in governmentally subsidized theaters, publishing books with financial support from Ministry of Culture...).

Although there were some attempts by younger playwrights to describe our contemporary society and detect the problems within it (in the work of Nina Mitrović, *Neighborhood Upside down /Komšiluk naglavačke*, 2002 or some plays of Ivan Vidić like *Octopussy* 2002, *The Big White Rabbit/ Veliki bijeli zec* 2004) the real comeback of political drama in Croatia is the play *How to Kill a President/Kako ubiti predsjednika* (2003) by Miro Gavran.

This play could answer the question of why the former political playwrights were silenced—maybe because they were searching for their enemies too closely, in some local bureaucrat or some political figure, or some new rich and powerful person (mafia). Miro Gavran went a little bit further and broadened the view. *How to Kill a President* is a political play because it defines globalization as a force



that shapes (destroys) our personal lives and all small countries including Croatia. Globalization is a tendency that is explored in Gavran's play (and in a lot of sociological, philosophical, or political contemporary works), considered also as Americanization.

"The plot takes place in a transitional European country at the beginning of the 21st century,"<sup>7</sup> that recently gained independence and changed its political system, from communism into democracy. The four characters are in front of us.

Robert, a former dissident and a very ardent opponent of the communist system is now a director of the state Institute of Sociology and an esteemed professor. He is satisfied with his life, which includes his wife Stella (a director of a psychiatric hospital) and the twins. He is just preparing an affirmative paper for an upcoming conference on globalization.

After nine years of silence, Robert received an e-mail from his younger brother Igor who went to study for a Ph.D. in the USA years ago. Soon, Igor is arriving and we learn why he is in his homeland again. Igor became the head of an anti-globalization movement that consists of a lot of educated people who are terrified by the process of globalization and the results of it—destruction of any freedom in the name of profit, destruction of any diversity and quality and culture in the name of a unified lowest common denominator that is coming from one source. This movement has decided to act and that is why Igor has come back to his former country. He is supposed to kill the American president while he is visiting this country. Igor believes that this murder, and some other planned murders of influential people from the top of the globalization movement, would send a clear message. It would also make a centre of globalization power a tool for Igor and his friend to *make this world a better place*.

Igor chose his country to fulfill that task not just because he knows the country but also because he wanted to show his brother that he is still fighting for mutual ideals, *for a better world*. He believes that this is the best way to continue the fight that was fought by his father and his older brother. But things are not going as he planned. The conversation of the two brothers begins with emotions and memories of childhood, ideals about independence of the country, the wished-for fall of the communist regime... but very soon it becomes obvious that they now take different positions. The conversation soon becomes a debate on the topic of globalization. Whereas Robert thinks that

globalization is the only chance for small countries to enter into the *society of the civilized world*, Igor has a completely different opinion; he considers it as a terrible defeat of the entire ideal for which they fought and sacrificed:

This system is highly dangerous for small countries, I can even say destructive, they fall from debt to debt, and depend on international financial institutes, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The result of this is that their free activities are drastically limited. A country in debt has to reduce the income of its own citizens, cut down on social services, and invest in the manner in which their creditors order, if they should be able to pay off their overdue credits which are greater and greater every year. This is pure usury, modern colonialism. And what is saddest is that such vassal colonized countries, and ours is one of them, must have such a government, which knows how to wrap up its vassalage in an acceptable package and sell it to its citizens, so that all this would proceed under the conditions of social peace and apparent national pride [...] for how can you tell a beggar that he is a beggar. Big corporations invest big money to discredit local, national movements, and for the very idea of national states to be destroyed as obsolete and fascist. What is most absurd is that capitalist corporations find today in this slave labor the best allies in the rows of former Communists, left-wingers and humanists, who reject every idea of national domiciliation. Some kind of united front is formed, between left-wing internationalism and globalized capitalism. And the perspective of mankind, the perspective of all of us, is so black that it couldn't be blacker: the empire of a big, inhumane multi-national corporation—the blackest dictatorship, like no single futurist could imagine. The small are left with desperation and false hopes [...]. They want individuals to disappear, and for only consumers and producers to remain. When they destroy all natural wealth and pollute every river, they know that the last source of drinkable water will be in their hands. Although, certainly, it will not be found in the territory of their state. (Scene 8)

Igor is ready to go on, fight, and sacrifice more, but Robert is tired of all fights and longs for a normal life:

ROBERT: [...] I just ask you, don't now do something that could destroy you. Don't jeopardize yourself, and don't jeopardize my family, my wife and my children. I want at least a relatively normal life. My father destroyed my childhood, and I destroyed my youth myself, tilting exhaustingly at windmills. I lived so many years as an outcast, like a scabby cur. I no longer have the strength for this. Do not do this to yourself. I was a lone wolf. I thought that it was best for a man of my mould to go through life alone. Luckily, Stella appeared. Only in the last few years have I lived a normal life, accepted by the community. Please, don't take this away from me.

IGOR: You've become a slimy Philistine. (Scene 11)

This play is *a thesis*, but Miro Gavran is well known for his lively characters and emotional situations. So here we have not just the emotional conflict of two brothers, but women characters as well who bring real-life problems into the play. The first female character is Igor's girlfriend and collaborator until a private tragedy befalls her. Her parents were killed in a car accident and in the deepest grief she has found faith and cannot go on with Igor's terrorist ideas.

The second female character is Stella, "an ideal Robert's wife," as she said. Not just because she loves him, but because she has transformed Robert from an *unreal idealist* into a *real man of flesh and blood who can enjoy the family life*. She is even more terrified with Igor's idea. Robert and Stella are not just afraid for their family but also for the reputation of their country which can be expelled from the *circle of civilized countries* if it is host to such a terrible event. So Robert and Stella have to decide how to react to such a plan—should they just watch, should they report their own brother to the police, or...?

In the play we have four different attitudes toward globalization (from terrorism to a return to spiritual values) and sort of an open end because nobody persuaded other character in the play (force does not count). With a conflict of two brothers, Gavran gives a picture of the world around us very strongly, and the very clear cut at the end will leave nobody without a stand. In this play Gavran is following Brecht and the main position of political plays by asking the audience not just to think about it, but to act in the world. Gavran asks for participation of the audience, a continuation of the discussion, but also that we choose our own stand. Everybody in the audience has to decide who he/she is—a conformist who can go to the reception of the minister who was "yesterday publicly accusing you of being anti-socialist" or a real person who thinks that the biggest conformism is to "stay in the status of eternal rebellion." Are you the uncompromised idealist in a faith against "injustice of this world," or a radically blinded stubborn person who ends by committing the crime called terrorism? Are we ready to accept the changes of the society, are we aware who is making decisions about our lives and how to survive in new circumstances, or are we just candidates for Stella's new ward in the

hospital—the one for new psychic diseases caused “by fear of new trends”—from globalization to GMO?

This comeback of the political play perfectly corresponds with European theatre trends (documentary plays, called *verbatim* in Great Britain). Tired of the socially unrecognizable worlds of the *new brutalism* or *in-her-face* drama, Anglo-American theatre is turning toward real social problems presented in the real words of participants. Although I can understand the reasons for verbatim theatre, I consider it a braver move to make an artistic artifact with real social problems and solutions and not just hide yourself with exact words and a lot of questions.

Maybe that is why Gavran’s play is so successful: it was published in Slovakia in 2003, a year before the first Croatian production (Zagreb, Teatar ITD, directed by Zoran Muzic, 2004), the same year it was staged in Wien (Teatar Brett); in 2005 in Sarajevo, BIH (Kamerni teatar/Chamber theatre); in 2006 in Germany (Theatre Sensemble from Augsburg) and published in France. As Robert would say: “You cannot deny that globalization has some good sides.”

But the picture is not so simple. In one eastern European country, the TV show was not made because it was considered to be too dangerous. So obviously it is not just me who recognizes the play as strongly political.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The first version of this article was presented in 2005 at a symposium on “Playwriting today in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro,” held in Zagreb and organized by the Slavic department from Sorbonne Paris and Department of Comparative literature from the Faculty of Philosophy at Zagreb. It was titled “Return of political drama.” The article was subsequently published in a book (Disput, Zagreb, 2007). With the continuation of research I developed the article as part of the chapter “Croatian political drama” that has just recently been published in my new book *What is Croatian drama to us?* (Croatia, Zagreb, 2008). Both editions are in Croatian. I presented that topic in English at 2006 FIRT congress in Helsinki.

<sup>2</sup> Similar processes of dramatic mimicry happened in Russia where, a decade later, subversive plays and performances were staged in puppet theatres.

<sup>3</sup> Published in PAJ, 77/2004

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<sup>4</sup> Published in PAJ 60/1998

<sup>5</sup> A good source about Croatian drama is the website of the Croatian Centre of ITI, <http://www.hciti.hr/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Du%C5%A1an\\_Kova%C4%8Devi%C4%87](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Du%C5%A1an_Kova%C4%8Devi%C4%87)

<sup>7</sup> Quotes from a play from

<<http://www.mgavran2.htnet.hr/plays/complete/president.html>> [Accessed 20 March 2009].

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*Political Performances: Theory and Practice* emerges from the work of the Political Performances Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research/Fédération Internationale pour la Recherche Théâtrale. The collection of essays strives to interrogate definitions and expand boundaries of political performance. Members of Political Performances are from around the world and so approach the intersection of politics and performance from very different perspectives. Some focus on socio-political context, others on dramatic content, others on political issues and activism, and still others examine the ways in which communities perform their collective identity and political agency.

The organizational structure of *Political Performances* highlights the variety of ways in which politics and performance converge. Each section - "Queries", "Texts", "Contexts" and "Practice" - frames this confluence according to certain common threads that emerge from essays that deal with topics from the ethics of autobiographical performance, the political efficacy of verbatim theatre, the challenges of community-based performance, political and self-censorship, and the impossibility of representing atrocity. The essays challenge existing ideas of political performance and point the way to new approaches.