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The People are Hamlet's Friend:

Meta-theatricality and politics in Ivo Brešan's *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*

In his 'Spiel im Spiel und Politik' Werner Wolf draws attention to the ever more frequent coupling of political themes with self-referential techniques in European drama since the 1960s. Among the many examples of this coupling one thinks of Genet's *Le Balcon* (1956), Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1964), Grass's *Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand* (1966), and plays by Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, David Hare, Peter Nichols, and Tom Stoppard. The coupling of drama's 'meta-isation' ('*Metaisierung*') with political themes, claims Wolf, does not happen by chance; rather, it is made possible by the 'political functionality of the basic characteristics of the play within a play'.¹ Wolf also points out that the tension between the metatheatrical form and the political contents is obvious in many of the examples. This tension results, above all through the questioning of the 'effectiveness of political literature'. In the dramas he analyses Wolf discovers the 'meta-literary question about the values, possibilities and limitations of *littérature engagée*'. At the end of his analysis he raises the question: why is it that such a great number of dramas combining political themes with the device of play within a play appeared in the 1960s in particular? Wolf offers two possibilities as starting points for further analysis: the first suggests that authors primarily interested in political content resort to popular, fashionable postmodernist forms, whereas the second suggests that the authors who are primarily interested in the form of drama perceive political themes as suitable material for the fleshing out of its structure.

Drama has always been, at least to a certain extent, political: when writing about the political aspect of the theatre Siegfried Melchinger had himself have to write a history of drama that dealt with more or less all prominent European playwrights.² In his analysis of Euripides' *Bacchae* Charles Segal demonstrated that drama had 'discovered' its meta-theatrical dimension at almost the very beginning of its history.³ However, unlike the ubiquitous political dimension, meta-theatricality appears in a developed form only sporadically. When it does so, it is always at times when the manner of dramatic representation and its purpose become problems that need to be addressed.⁴ Such times usually coincide with those of succession of literary-historical periods in theatre or in literature as a whole; it is at these times that a great number of plays which interpret drama and theatre as an artistic practice appear. Through their structural as well as thematic elements they, in a meta-poetic manner, edit, structure, legitimise and evaluate the artistic practice to which they

¹ Werner Wolf: 'Spiel im Spiel und Politik. Zum Spannungsfeld literarischer Selbst- und Fremdbezüglichkeit im zeitgenössischen Drama', *Poetica* 24 (1992), p.192.

² Siegfried Melchinger: *Geschichte des politischen Theaters*, Velber, 1971.

³ Charles Segal: *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*, Princeton, NJ, 1982.

⁴ For further details on the subject see Zoran Milutinović: *Metateatralnost: Imanentna poetika u drami 20. veka*, Belgrade, 1994.

adhere. My argument is that the coupling of political themes with meta-theatricality in the drama of the second half of the twentieth century is the symptom of one such moment. Theatre has lost its privileged place in society's political life, and a large number of 'meta-ised' plays testify to drama's attempt at grappling with this loss. The gradual downfall of *littérature engagée* affected the whole of literature of the second half of the twentieth century, but drama suffered the most because of the rise of film, which took over many of the theatre's traditional functions. The meta-isation of drama, especially the use of the play within a play, represents a sentimental (in Schiller's sense of the word) attempt to re-legitimise the traditional function of the theatre as a forum in which the *polis* questioned itself and 'acted itself out before its audience'.⁵ This is not an easy task: theatre no longer is and probably will never again be the medium in which social problems are raised to such resounding effect – not only because film is today's most popular form of representation, but also because nowadays social problems can be tackled in many different venues. For example, the average columnist in a top-selling weekly, can today expect to have a much greater influence than a playwright embodying Lessing's intelligence, Ibsen's energy and Brecht's talent. A naive approach, which was still an option for Sartre and Camus, would today prove to be the downfall of any form of social-critical ambition. That is why the plays that Wolf analyses base themselves on what is deemed best in the memory of the genre: by using the device of play within a play, they invoke a glorious moment from the history of drama, in which the theatre was the dominant form of representation and of social analysis. At the same time however, they confront the play framing the play within the play with contemporary reality, in which the theatre can no longer aspire to the place it previously had in society.

In the hands of different playwrights this has different consequences. With this device some playwrights try to re-legitimise drama, with varying degrees of success. However, in many of these plays one can notice, in Wolf's words, 'a tension between the meta-theatrical form and the political content'. In other words, the result is not fully regained legitimisation, but a deeper doubt concerning the possibility of regaining any lost territory. Nevertheless, this scepticism is productive in another way: with its help, drama can question itself regarding its own possibilities, and find solutions which will serve as the basis for what theatre historians will one day refer to as a new literary period.

II

Ivo Brešan's *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* (*The Stage Play of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja*) is an example of such a play in Croatian literature.⁶ Written in 1965, but first performed in 1971, the play contains many facets of the traditional comic arsenal – from parody, satire, to burlesque and grotesque – and yet it still leaves one with a feeling of despair, something that comedy usually does not allow for.

W.E. Yuill had meticulously studied the critical reactions to the play in Croatia during the 1970s. From today's vantage-point the debate that had followed the first performance of Brešan's play looks like a typical story from the period of

⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet: *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, 1972, p.24.

⁶ Ivo Brešan (born 1936) has published four collections of plays (*Groteskne tragedije*, 1979; *Nove groteskne tragedije*, 1988; *Tri drame*, 1993; *Utvare*, 1997), three novels (*Ptice nebeske*, 1990; *Ispovjedi nekarakternoga čovjeka*, 1996; *Astaroth*, 2001) and a collection of short stories (*Pukotine*, 2000).

Yugoslav liberal socialism: party critics denounced the play's 'anticommunist tendencies', with the obligatory references to the opinions of workers, but did not have the play banned. Liberal intellectuals defended the play, claiming that it contained no anti-communist tendencies, and so on and so forth until the next case in which the same participants would repeat the same arguments. However, one comment quoted by Yuill is remarkable because of its precision. 'I did not observe', writes Vjekoslav Mikecin, 'in the structure of this work, [or] in the composition of its characters and so on, any deliberate political tendency on the part of the author to ridicule or belittle the Communist movement or the ideas of Communism'.⁷

The drama was popular and for a long time it was frequently staged and read. As early as the beginning of the 1980s it was included in the curriculum of undergraduate courses in literature at all Yugoslav universities. It was read as a critique of communism. Today I believe that *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* is not about communism at all, but about something completely different, something that the drama itself only hints at, but never overtly names.

The strength of that something can be measured by its ability to transform and assimilate everything it comes into contact with. Brešan's play opens with the inhabitants of Mrduša Donja intent on staging a play, this following a party directive. The manner in which Puljo, the chairman of the local People's Front Committee, presents this task to the assembled villagers announces the overall satirical/farcical tone of Brešan's play. 'Culture and education are', says Puljo, 'progressive': '... before the war that bourgeoisie didn't give a bugger for us country-folk, as far as education goes! They did their best to keep us in the dark and [pull] the wool over our eyes, [as if] we were, a lot of senseless cattle, see? But it's different now, comrades! We got the workers in power, and a government that's out to see you get cultured, whether you like it or not, and get hygiene and 'lectrification and 'dustrialisation and nationalization and 'mancipation, and all that, not to mention education and culture!'⁸

Brešan uses the classic comical device: he takes the serious and filters it down to its most basic elements through a consciousness that neither understands the seriousness nor is able to repeat it in the correct way. Puljo had managed to memorise the basic principle of the everyday State-Party discourse, which had continuously insisted on the comparison with the 'state of things before the war and the revolution': the old was bad, the new is good; the old government bad, the new one good. However, he bundled all the 'cultural and 'lightened things' that end in *-ation* together, obviously not understanding either the meaning of these words or of the activities they signify. Therefore his short speech sounds like a parody of official party discourse, as well as a parody of the basic motif of the Enlightenment. The effect of this comical device is ambivalent: on the one hand, Puljo sounds funny in his attempt to mimic the voices from the radio, but on the other, those voices become funny too, because the basic structure of political propaganda that underlies them is revealed through Puljo.

Had this been all, Brešan's drama would have proclaimed itself to be a comedy at the very beginning. But it was not all: the first scene of the drama ends

⁷ W.E. Yuill: 'The Grotesque Tragedies of Ivo Brešan', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 61, IV (1983), p. 539.

⁸ Ivo Brešan: 'Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja', in Ognjen Lakićević (ed.): *Antologija savremene jugoslovenske drame*, Vol.1, Belgrade, 1984, p. 36. I am quoting from William E. Yuill's translation (Ivo Brešan: *The Performance of Hamlet in Central Dalmatia*, Zagreb, 1992, p. 8), which I have slightly modified for clarity's sake. Henceforth the first number in brackets refers to the relevant page number in the Croatian text, and the second to Yuill's translation.

with a radio programme in which what we heard from Puljo was being repeated in a non-parodic manner. In it one can identify something more than the propaganda exaggerations and the characteristic vocabulary, which further reinforce the comic effects of the drama's first scene. Like a window onto the world, the radio programme introduces into the drama the attempts of the revolutionary government to modernize and industrialize the country, to introduce electricity and water supply, as well as to reduce illiteracy and improve the educational standards of the people.

That the latter is more than necessary in Mrduša Donja becomes obvious after Puljo's speech. Every comedy owes its effect to the audience's readiness to not take anything too seriously: the audience of Plautus' comedies, imbued with the Roman virtue of thrift, laughed at the scenes in which other people's money was being squandered, whereas they quaked in their boots over their own. One should imagine a voice that addresses the audience half way through the play warning them that the man at whom they are laughing at that very moment will spend the rest of his life in penury without a roof over his head, and that this could happen to them too. Even if that would not stifle the laughter in the audience, it would certainly discomfort them. The effect of Brešan's tuning into the radio report on the after-war modernization of the country is similar to the effect of that Roman voice: in the first scene of the play we see how hilarious it can be when people try to do something which they are neither qualified for nor able to understand; at the end of that scene, however, we hear that the impulse that brought this comedy about in the first place was at its core completely serious and needed – and not funny at all. This ambivalent structure of relativization of the comic is repeated throughout the play. The further it unfolds, the more terrifying it becomes, until the very end of the play when the assumption that Brešan's drama is a comedy is eradicated.

Puljo's short speech demonstrated that one, albeit ideologically inspired but nevertheless needed and serious attempt of the new government had managed to reach Mrduša Donja only in the shape of a parody. In the continuation of the first scene it will become apparent that other things will not have much more luck either. This time the subject is the first half of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is retold to the assembled villagers by Šimurina. As a result, the parody is even stronger and more diversified, and consequently the mechanism of transformation, which was only hinted at in Puljo's speech, can here be perceived more clearly. What did Šimurina see, and what did he understand in the Zagreb theatre? The scope of his understanding is defined by two principles. The first principle is the lowering, the translation of all things spiritual, idealistic, and abstract on to the material-physical level, that is the elementary principle of Bakhtin's grotesque realism.⁹ Šimurina cannot see that anything but sex could keep Polonius and Gertrude in the same room, and he interprets Ophelia's attempt to talk to Hamlet as a sexual advance. He had much to say on the subject of the physical appearance of the actresses, paying special attention to the size of their breasts.

While the first principle regulates his overall understanding of the relationships between the male and female characters in the play, he applies the second principle to the public domain of the plot in *Hamlet*. This principle states that all the events should be interpreted on the basis of the paradigm through which the Yugoslav Communist Party interpreted the recent past and events immediately following the war. Hence the heroes become 'all for progress and Socialism and the

⁹ M.M.Bakhtin: *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i Renessansa*. Moscow, 1965, p. 26.

workers and all that' (Hamlet and his father), whereas the villains become 'enemies of the workers, black reactionaries'(58;13). The appearance of the travelling actors in *Hamlet* is understood by Šimurina as the arrival at Elsinore of a 'cultural group, [a] sort of agitprop' made up of the 'representatives of workers and peasants'; Hamlet's conversation with them is viewed as 'an emergency meeting', and Mousetrap as demonstrations against the monarchy. Šimurina cannot but interpret what he sees on stage through his own experience and his personal insight into human relationships and bits and pieces from the public discourse that could reach him. 'He interpreted the schism in the state', writes Boris Senker, 'in the same way that the Party (...) had taught him to interpret 'class relationships' in society, and he understood the schism in the souls, (Hamlet's, Ophelia's, Gertruda's) in the same way that his village had been understanding family and sexual relationships for decades and centuries.'¹⁰

The retelling of *Hamlet* in the first scene of Brešan's play is interrupted by an overlap of the dramatic fiction with reality: Škoko, a young man whose father was arrested, and who goes on to play Hamlet's role, steps onto the scene with an angry line directed at Bukara, the local Party chairman in the role of Claudius, at the exact moment when Šimurina announces Hamlet's entrance addressing Claudius. This indicates how the roles will be distributed and how the reality of Mrduša Donja will become intertwined with the fiction of Shakespeare's play. Thus the first scene announces all the major themes of Brešan's play: this will be an ambivalent comedy with a large number of uncomfortable laughs, a meta-drama about the relation between the theatre and reality, and a play about something that conquers and outlives both culture, ideology and morality. The scene is set and the play may begin.

III

As in many comedies, the way the characters' speak is the main source of the comic effects: they have added to their sparse peasant vocabulary, with its obscenities and crude expressions, the jargon of the new times, the Party slogans and political correctness. Because their new, revolutionary world consists of 'comrades', so do Shakespeare's characters become 'Comrade Laertes' and 'Comrade Hamlet'. When Puljo wants to say that he disagrees with someone, he has to express it by using Party clichés about 'incorrect stances' and 'deviations from the Party line', to which others reply that they have had 'enough of this farting about' and 'don't give us that crap'. It is completely understandable that those who speak in such a way will have certain difficulties with the comprehension and pronunciation of Shakespeare's lines, which therefore have to be re-translated to make them more accessible to them, into the decasyllabic lines, characteristic of South Slavonic heroic oral poetry, with a medley of swear words, crude expressions and Party rhetoric. This does sometimes have a comic effect, but that by no means exhausts their interventions in Shakespeare's play. In order to play *Hamlet* the inhabitants of Mrduša Donja have to adapt Shakespeare's plot to make it comply with 'either the likely or the necessary'¹¹, as Aristotle put it, to make it represent their moral and mental world. Of course, the fact that other worlds might exist in addition to theirs, does not cross their minds. Thus Ophelia cannot read a book while waiting for Hamlet to arrive: instead she has to do something that is more becoming of a girl from a socialist village, spin wool, for example. Hamlet cannot be a prince, because he is a hero, so in their version he

¹⁰ Boris Senker: *Hrestomatija novije hrvatske drame*, second part, Zagreb 2001, pp. 256-257.

¹¹ Aristotle: *Poetics*, translated by K.A. Telford, Chicago, 1961, p.17 (1451b).

becomes 'a progressive leader that fights for the rights of the working class'. This is done in order to prevent his resembling King Petar Karađorđević and to bring the plot closer to the prescribed Party line. Hamlet's father also becomes a leader of the people's fight for freedom. Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius become the representatives of the 'anti-people's regime' which was toppled during the revolution, and the Mousetrap turns into the demonstrations against the monarchy during which peasants shout out the same slogans that they were shouting a few years previously at the Party rallies held to persuade people to be against the restoration of the monarchy. The plot of *Hamlet* ends up changed to such an extent that one cannot find any similarity between the original and this version, which makes the teacher Škunca happy since it lessens his sin of adaptation. Despite the drastic changes, the version satisfies the inhabitants of Mrduša Donja because they recognize their own social drama in it, their only social-historical and political experience.¹² Precisely because they do not even try to imagine a different world with different laws of the likely or the necessary, they succeed in fulfilling one of the theatre's basic functions: the mirror up to nature, as their unfortunate victim would say¹³, or in Mačak's words, they put up a 'show that would let our people see our (...) Socialist system'. The contrast between the two worlds, the mental and moral universe of *Hamlet* and the universe of its remake in Mrduša Donja, forms the core meaning of Brešan's play.

In the world of Mrduša Donja certain aspects of *Hamlet*'s plot are 'likely and necessary': just as Claudius murders his brother in order to come to power, Bukara sends Škoko's father to prison, and consequently to death, by way of intrigues in order to get money from the communal funds. Just as Ophelia makes Hamlet confide in her in the eavesdropping scene, so does Andja with Škoko. Just as Hamlet hesitates to take a determined step against his father's murderer, so Škoko delays the beginning of his action. However, this is where the similarities between *Hamlet* and its remake in Mrduša Donja end. In this version of *Hamlet* Ophelia kills herself because she become pregnant by Hamlet, and not because her conscience drives her to madness. Things are much grimmer in the reality of Mrduša Donja: Andja successfully survives the short-lived feeling of guilt caused by making Škoko disclose the truth in front of Bukara and Puljo. What is more, she later vindictively refuses to confirm the existence of a letter proving Bukara's guilt. Faced with the image of his crime reflected in the mime of the travelling actors, Claudius's confidence is shaken and immediately afterwards we find him kneeling in prayer. Faced with the direct accusation that he had stolen the money from the communal funds and sent an innocent man to prison, Bukara shows no signs of hesitation: he doggedly continues to lie to the peasants, and reminds Puljo, who for some reason wants to know what had happened to the ledger, that he too is not completely innocent and that it is better not to start disclosing the truth. Under such circumstances it is impossible to perform Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The teacher Škunca knows the people he lives with well when he explains the principle of adapting Shakespeare in the following words: '[...] Let's begin! This is what they call the 'Mousetrap' scene. And they call it that because Hamlet tries to trap the king's conscience, [as if it were] a mouse, you see. He's hired some actors that are going to put on a play to show the king they know what he's done. Now, that was [all] very

¹² On social drama and theatre see Victor Turner: *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, 1982.

¹³ For Shakespeare's conception of dramatic art see Ann Righter: *Shakespeare and the Idea of Play*, London, 1964.

well for Shakespeare, but things have changed now. Now that we've got a progressive society, you can't trap people's consciences [in the way that] you trap mice: they are too smart for that. So what I've done is I've turned that old-fashioned scene into a demonstration by the workers against the dictatorial monarcho-imperialist regime.' (85;56) Not only is it the conscience that cannot be trapped, in other words that sound morality is lacking, but one cannot even hope for the possibility that those without sound morals can be made to answer. The cynical teacher goes on: 'D'you really think that if you find the bastard and put the finger on him, it's going to make any difference? You've no idea what you are up against! They're all on his side, every manjack of them. In the end they'll prove it was you that took the money.' (83;54) And if there is no morality or law, the very idea of justice acquires an original interpretation: Bukara, in the role of Claudius, explains the meaning of the duel between Laertes and Hamlet as follows: 'Comrade Laertes and Comrade Amlet! I am your lord and king! Let's have no more of this unseemly talk! If you can't live together in peace, then you'll have to fight it out, right here, in front of me! And may the best man win!' (106;74) In the Mrduša Donja version of *Hamlet* the stronger man determines what is and what is not justice. And in the end, Bukara readily responds to Andja's initial refusal to participate in the plot against Škoko because she loves him: 'Don't be so bleeding old-fashioned, lass! Who goes for love these days! It's not progressive. You don't want to worry about all those old wives' tales! It's here today and gone tomorrow now, you know!' (68;40) She is not convinced and asks the teacher for an explanation: is it fair that Ophelia helps Claudius, if she loves Hamlet? Yet again the teacher's cynicism lives up to expectation; he declares: 'Of course it's not right, but it makes sense, doesn't it? Love? Love? What d'you mean, love? Love's like a puff of smoke, lass. Now you see it, now you don't. Omelia might offend the king, see, and that would put her dad in a spot, and that's no joke.' (75;45) Indeed, in the world represented by Brešan's play, no characters are brought together by love; there are no attempts to determine either truth or justice, and with the exception of Andja's short-lived vacillation, there is no remorse, no guilt. Because of all of this, the *Hamlet* staged by the villagers does not contain Horatio, the embodiment of loyal friendship. In the original casting Horatio was supposed to be played by Šimurina, but the teacher changes the cast, relieves Šimurina of the role and declares Horatio to be redundant, because henceforth 'the people will be [Hamlet's] friend' (61;33).

However, in the world of Brešan's play, one cannot find Hamlet either. At first it appears that two characters, Škoko and Škunca, compete for the role of Hamlet in the play which unfolds in the reality of Mrduša Donja, but it will become clear that neither of them could fill Hamlet's place, even if they were understood to be one and the same character. It seems that the teacher Škunca's recommends himself for the role with his first line in the play. When the Party leaders inform him of his duty to prepare the performance, Škunca replies that he has no experience and that he does not feel capable of directing a play, adding: 'I just don't feel up to it. I'm a sick man, you know. It's my liver.' (38;11) As realistic motivation, this statement of Škunca's has a simple meaning: he bombards his superiors with reasons for not being able to accept the job he has been given by them. However, at the same time Škunca represents himself as a melancholic, and therefore the ideal candidate for the role of Hamlet at the overlap of Shakespeare's play and its repetition in the real world of Mrduša Donja.¹⁴ This could be understood as a clear signal for interpretation: the

¹⁴ The liver was believed to be the depository of *black bile*, the cause of melancholia.

audience expects a Hamlet in the play *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*. If a character, who has been silent up until this moment, establishes a symbolic connection between himself and Shakespeare's Hamlet by uttering his first sentence, one can assume that it will be he who takes on that role. At the same time however, this assumption is ironically relativized on the intertextual level for those spectators who recognise the opening line of Dostoevskii's *Notes from the Underground* in Škunca's line.¹⁵ It is hard to imagine a less Hamlet-like figure than Dostoevskii's hero. In the entire body of European dramatic literature there are few such effective, concise yet at the same time complex characterizations such as that contained in Škunca's first line in *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*.

The irony used in the characterisation of the village teacher Škunca continues throughout the play. Besides Škoko, Škunca is the only character in Brešan's play exempt from comic-grotesque characterization. He is the only character in *Mrduša Donja* who understands the position Škoko finds himself in, and he is the only character who tries to help him with a kind word and, to the extent to which he can and is able to, with immediate intervention, as in the scene where he informs Škoko that the conversation with Andja was set up for a hidden audience. His cynical analyses of the moral climate in *Mrduša Donja* are correct and serve as guidelines for the audience's interpretation: without them the meaning of the play would be completely altered. Finally, Škunca is the author of the *Hamlet* adapted to the needs of *Mrduša Donja* – the play 'that would let our people see our, what d'you call it, our Socialist system' (37;10). It is clear that exaggeration is at work in his adaptation which stems from an attempt, not only to satisfy the literary and theatrical taste of his commissioners but also from his need to take revenge on them by ridiculing them. While he is staging his grotesque play, he makes the 'actors' make threatening gestures by rolling their eyes and gnashing their teeth, and thus heighten the grotesque element even more. It goes without saying that the instructions he gives, are exactly opposite to the advice given to the travelling actors by Hamlet. The teacher mocks the Party leaders, but he never goes too far, and as a result they cannot fully grasp his ironic remarks and his cynicism. Škunca lacks the courage to go beyond this. 'I'm getting on, I'm not as young as I was, I've got a family to think about, and it's not easy for me to swim against the tide' (83;54), he says about himself. When the Party officials attack him, and Škoko jumps to his defence, the teacher explains: 'That's enough of that, lad! There's no call [for starting] a fight. I can look after myself, thank you very much. I know better than you how to cope with stupidity. I've been fighting it for the last five years. It's chased me out of five jobs so far, and the one thing I've learned is that you have to come to terms with it, learn to live with it... Very well, comrades, I give up. I'll do whatever you want'(60;32). The teacher is not trying to hide his own cowardice from himself either: 'There are even bastards who sell their souls for a cushy job and a bottle of plum-brandy every day'(75;45), he says obviously referring to himself.

However, even if Škunca is spared comic-grotesque characterization, he does not avoid being ironized. That is best seen at the moments when the village teacher recites two of Hamlet's monologues. The choice, of course, is not arbitrary: in the first case it is the monologue depicting Hamlet's strongest self-contempt ('Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I!'), and in the other it is a fragment of Hamlet's most famous monologue ('To be or not to be'). Are the monologues sufficient indicators

¹⁵ 'Ia chelovek bol'noi... [...] Ia dumaiu, chto u menia bolit pechen.' F.M. Dostoevskii: *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh*, tom chetvertii, Leningrad, 1989, p. 452.

for us to perceive Škunca as being Hamlet's surrogate in the play *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*? Had the monologues been recited by a different character and in a different context, this may have been the case. By reciting the first fragment, Škunca identifies himself with Hamlet, who despises himself because of his inability to take action. Shakespeare's Hamlet overcomes that moment and starts to act; Škunca however, never begins to act, and explains why he no longer even thinks about taking action. At the very end of Brešan's play, when Škoko is asking him for help, Škunca calmly replies: 'I am sorry Joco... I told you... I don't get involved. It's none of my business (112;78)'. There can be no Hamlet without his desire to meddle and to be concerned with Hecuba, let alone about things that take place around him. Thus all that remains is just a village teacher with a certain penchant for literature who 'mumbles' Hamlet's monologue 'drunkenly' (98;67), and interrupts it at the lines:

..... *To die, to sleep,*
No more and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache...

Unlike this candidate for Hamlet, who has resolved his dilemma and chosen not to intervene, but rather to sleep and to dream, Škoko, with his very place in the plot of *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* and his role in the play within the play, can lay claim to the role of Hamlet. On the intertextual level the identification of Hamlet with Škoko is reinforced in a discreet and convincing manner in Brešan's drama. While Škoko's declamation of Hamlet's self-derisory monologue can only produce a comical effect, Škoko's spontaneous 'translation' of the same place into his own idiom sounds completely earnest and authentic (78;48-49). Shakespeare's original appears in Brešan's play in three places: the first time is when Bukara rehearses the role of Claudius and does not manage to articulate the verses fluently. The second time it appears is when Škunca recites the fragments from Hamlet's monologues, which, as we have seen, produce a comic effect. The third time it appears is when Škoko quietly says Hamlet's 'So be it!' (107;74) during the rehearsal. This short line is the only place in *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* which could be said to be the place of the complete textual and meaningful overlap between the two plays, Shakespeare's and Brešan's. Škoko is Hamlet at that moment, not only playing the role of Hamlet in the play rehearsed by the villagers, but also in the repetition of Shakespeare's plot in *Mrduša Donja*. The quiet determination with which he articulates the line is a sign that Škoko, just like Shakespeare's Hamlet, had made his decision and that he would take action soon.

However, this is where the identification of Hamlet of Elsinore with Hamlet of *Mrduša Donja* ends. When he finally decides to take action, Shakespeare's Hamlet is effective as far as the circumstances allow him. Brešan's Škoko is not: he manages to force Mačak to confess involvement in the theft of the ledger, but in a manner that removes the confession's validity. On the other hand, he carelessly lets his enemies steal his father's letter from him, and thus loses his primary evidence. The real Hamlet would have been able to bring the truth to the fore in *Mrduša Donja*; he would have taken revenge on the villains, even if he had to lose his life doing so. Škoko does not prove Bukara's crime, and he does not avenge his father: that is why all he can do is disappear from the stage into the unknown. Death is for Hamlets, Škokos are free to leave and live in any way they can and know how to. Just as there is no justice, love, loyalty or friendship in *Mrduša Donja*, there is also no Hamlet to

bring the truth, take revenge and die. That is why Škunca's version of Shakespeare's play fully corresponds to the circumstances in which *Hamlet* is to be performed: here 'to be or not to be' no longer makes any sense. The cynical teacher justifiably substitutes this inner dilemma with an external one: 'Shall I do him, or he do me...' (71;43). They did it to Škoko – and that is it.

VI

What is there in Mrduša Donja? If its inhabitants lack the cultural competence necessary for the understanding and performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which in itself may not be the most dreadful of things, if they do not have the conscience, morality, love, loyalty, honesty and courage, which in itself is far more serious a matter, what do they have?

At the end of Brešan's play they do eventually perform their own *Hamlet*, which does not even have anything to do with Škunca's remake of Shakespeare's drama. At the very beginning of this scene, while the 'actors' are still arriving at the rehearsal, Bukara gives us a glimpse into his own world-view: 'You've not got that many years to go, and what have you done? Nowt! Where have you been? Nowhere, mate, nowhere! Make the most of what's left, and be sure you get something out of life before they put the lid on you and nail it down!' (84;55). No one contradicts him. Then the rehearsal of the Mousetrap begins, but the play gets out of hand: the actors oust the director Škunca, and Bukara, the Party secretary and the chairman of the commune in the role of king Claudius, assumes the command of the play's direction. They are supposed to stage the scene at Claudius's court, and Bukara claims that his position as king, in other words as 'exploiter of the people', is not obvious enough and demands that he and his 'courtiers' be provided with wine. Everyone agrees to this (it has already become obvious that the teacher gives his assent to everything) and where there is drinking one should eat as well, and so food arrives on the set. This lifts the spirits, and a game of cards takes place to make the scene of the king's enjoyment appear ever more realistic. The good mood eventually finds its outlet in song:

ALL (singing): Oh, bolt your victuals like a pig his swill,
And clothe and bed yourself and drink your fill!
Support yourself upon the workers' backs,
Oppress the needy and exploit the blacks! (90;59)

This *Hamlet* starts to look more and more like a carnival including the ritual dethronement of the king. Bukara, the king of carnival, encourages his own dethronement; the mention of Denmark in the slogans that 'the people' are shouting out presents the last trace of *Hamlet* in the performance ('Monarchs out of Denmark!', 'Long live the democratic republic of the working people of Denmark under the wise leadership of President Amlet!', 90-91;60-61). The overall atmosphere becomes more and more joyous, and the 'courtiers' join in a round dance with the 'rebellious people', while the dethroned king pours wine into the rebels' glasses and gives them food, which causes the crowd to rejoice. 'Long live king Bukara!', the rebels shout. The carnival king Claudius is dead, long live king Bukara! They ask the teacher to join in as well because there are no bystanders in a carnival; everyone is a participant. Before long it is the turn for a carnivalesque change of clothes: from the chest they had received from the theatre wardrobe they take out the costumes and put them on. Soon enough every other line in this scene contains a

reference to the lower bodily stratum – genitals, the posterior and their functions: Majkača sits in Bukara's lap and screams because something pricked her; the peasants identify costumes as underwear; one of them claims that a sword is 'a toothpick for a horse's arse'; another has his skirt lifted so that they can look at legs; a third asks for a kiss on a cheek, and is offered a kiss on his behind; the fourth is prodded with a sword from behind, and then the merriment reaches its climax which can no longer find its outlet in words but in movement and song only: *'The peasants dance around Majkača dressed in Elizabethan costumes, stumble about, throwing the costumes here and there and singing: When Mara eats a honey-cake,/ The village knows she is on the make... Majkača stands on the table with arms akimbo, dressed in the queen's costume and watching them proudly'* (94;63).

I am presenting this scene thus to make the aspects that Bakhtin has identified as the key features of folk carnival and grotesque realism obvious. First of all, it is the grotesque body that eats, drinks, curses and laughs: not the body of an 'individual biological person, nor a bourgeois egotistical individual, but a people, moreover the people who, in their development, are continuously advancing and regenerating', the collective, tribal body which celebrates abundance and excess at the 'feast of the whole world'.¹⁶ From the very beginning, starting with Šimurina's retelling of the performance of *Hamlet* he had seen in Zagreb, and continuing with Škunca's remake of Shakespeare's play to its carnivalesque triumph, Brešan's play strives towards the principle of grotesque realism. However, this does not mean that Brešan's play is shaped according to the principle of carnival, which is the subject of Bakhtin's book on Dostoevskii: here literature is not carnivalized, but instead drama represents a world in which the carnivalesque understanding of the world prevails.

The difference is enormous. Had Brešan's play been the result of the carnivalization of literature, or, in other words, had it been the case of a literary work, that has the carnivalesque interpretation of the world as its shaping principle, the end result of the play regarding its meaning would have been completely different. The joyful, triumphant laughter; the usurpation of official, ideological truths and symbols of power and violence; the contemptuous laughter directed at all isolationist systems and obsolete world-views; the release from every fear, especially the fear of death, and the announcement of the birth of newer and better things to come: the eternal self-regeneration of life. Traditional criticism would have looked upon it as a proper comedy. The character that does not fit into the life of the society and its laws, in this case Škoko, would have been ridiculed and therefore punished. If he had rid himself of his flaw (vanity, avarice, etc.), he would have been accepted back into the society with merriment; he would have joined the others in the round dance, and at the end of the play society would have joyously reaffirmed its basic principle. Or, in another comic variant and without major differences, the social misfit who refused to be rid of his flaw, fault, or sin after he had been subjected to the society's ridicule would have been expelled from the community, which here is the case with Škoko, but the rules of society would still have joyfully triumphed in the round dance at the end.

This is, however, not the case in this play. Brešan's drama represents the triumph of the carnivalesque perception of the world in Mrduša Donja through a foregrounding of the negative aspect of grotesque realism; Bakhtin's idealisation of the folk carnival and grotesque appears in a new light. This carnival does not usurp the official and ideological truths, but the will to truth in general; it does not usurp the symbols of power and violence; instead it puts them on a pedestal; it does not

¹⁶ M.M.Bakhtin, p. 26.

announce the birth of the new and the better, but it reconfirms the survival of the old and the eternal.¹⁷ Indeed, the rules of society joyfully triumph in the round dance at the end of the play, and Škoko who rebels against it, is expelled from the stage and from Mrduša Donja – but what are the rules of society and what is the fault, the stain of which Škoko should be rid of in order to fit in the society? His sorrow at his innocent father's imprisonment, and his will to expose the truth publicly, the hypocrisy, the greed, the lies and the absence of conscience and sound morality, all these should be understood as his flaws. Unlike the traditional comedy outline, in which society invariably punishes the character with such traits, the tables are turned and the exact opposite happens: society punishes the one who does not possess these characteristics, because crime, hypocrisy, avarice, lies, absence of conscience and morality are the rules of this society.

Could we not call it a tragedy? Not at all: one deceived, honest man goes to prison and hangs himself there, probably out of despair or because he could not bear to live with the shame brought upon him. Meanwhile, one intelligent, desperate man, who had realised that society can only be confronted at the cost of one's own downfall, fits into this society and occasionally in a drunken voice recites monologues he has no right to, because they belong to a much more determined and stronger character. At first, one desperate son takes no action, and when he finally decides to act, because of stalling, because of his own carelessness, lack of focus and incompetence, he loses his chance to bring the truth into the open and, perhaps save his father's life. The others have seen and heard everything, most likely they have understood it all, but they do not care. What is tragic about that?

The question of determining the genre of a literary work is not only a matter of pedantic academic classification; there is more to it than that. Not only does genre indirectly govern the reception, it also influences the realization of the work's meaning. The answer to the question as to what genre a work belongs is always above all an answer to the question about its meaning. Often it is more than that: the answer to the questions that surpass the most broadly understood literary interest and the legitimate interests of the literary criticism. Such is the case with this play. Without a comic reconciliation or tragic pathos, *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* is too gloomy for a farce, as well as insufficiently serious for a social-critical drama. Lada Čale Feldman suggested 'burlesque travesty', which successfully describes Brešan's use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but does not account for the overall meaning of the play.¹⁸ To claim that we are faced with a tragicomedy is probably the closest we can come to the meaning of the play, but what this means exactly still remains to be seen.

Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja does not end with Škoko's exit from the stage and his likely departure from Mrduša Donja. When he disappears, Bukara orders that the merriment continue. Šimurina, Škoko's would-be Horatio, sets the rhythm for the round dance. Had he remained in the role of Horatio in the play they were rehearsing, and had that play managed to follow at least the basic outline of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it would have been Šimurina's task to remember and retell the tragic destiny of one noble spirit. However, since it was declared that Horatio was unnecessary, because 'the people are Hamlet's friend', by listing all the things that

¹⁷ Ivo Vidan also claims that the carnival scene should be understood 'not as a liberating act of people's spontaneity, but as a closing of the horizon in a circle from which there is no escape'. Ivo Vidan: 'Intertekstualnost u dramama Ive Brešana' in *Engleski intertekst hrvatske književnosti*, Zagreb, 1995, p. 202.

¹⁸ Lada Čale Feldman: *Brešanov teatar. Aspekti Brešanove dramaturgije*, Zagreb, 1989, p. 43.

uplift the soul and bring joy to the heart, Šimurina helps ‘Hamlet’s friend’ to forget the uncomfortable scene that had taken place only a few moments previously. The first verse whose chorus is: ‘Enjoy yourselves as best as you can / And let the blasted world go hang!’ addresses the same grotesque body earlier, and has as its task to return to the stage the atmosphere of the feast of the world. In the verse Šimurina lists ‘roast beef and pudding and all kinds of fishes, tasty chicken and mutton in slices’ (112;79), exclusively food and drink, the main objects of desire of the forever hungry, thirsty, and insatiable Mrduša Donja. The second verse, however, alongside ‘young maidens’ and ‘widows with buttocks’, because the grotesque body has other needs besides food and drink, includes the ‘party membership’, ‘management committee’, ‘high salary’ and ‘pension deal’. These are elements not belonging to the old folklore but products of the new, revolutionary socialist order; nevertheless they are in rhythmical harmony with the ‘sirloin steak’ and ‘young virgin’. In the third, final, verse, ten out of sixteen ‘values’ that bring joy to the heart and lift up the soul derive from the new era: ‘accountants’, ‘villas’, ‘committee’, ‘inspection’, ‘deficit’... these all signal that Mrduša Donja had successfully gone through the transition from the first verse to the third, stepping into the new, post-revolutionary era, that it had understood it in its own way; that it had struck a bargain with it and that it had assimilated it. Mrduša Donja can therefore subscribe with joy and without a care to any venture that the new order can bring, as it had subscribed to the venture of enlightenment and literacy, because it will be ready to face each of these challenges, to transform and absorb them so that from any conflict it could come out stronger and more powerful, victorious and eternal. What it had done with *Hamlet* it did with the revolutionary ideology: it had accepted it, adapted it to its own needs, swallowed it, belched – and now with a gaping maw it awaits the next attempt to change it. One can almost hear Šimurina including ‘privatization’ and ‘human rights’ into his lists forty years later.

The grotesque at work in *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donjat* resembles that explored by German Romantics rather than Bakhtin’s idealization: an alien inhuman force that governs the world, the people, their lives and their deeds, something that brings a smile to one’s face only to freeze-frame it on spot, ‘comical and frightening at the same time’¹⁹, still managing to appear in such a way that Hamlets and ideologists, educators and reformers, laugh at it at first, only to be smashed by its humour subsequently. In Brešan’s play we cannot find the gravedigger from Shakespeare’s play, because it is he who is the representative of this grotesque carnival nihilism in *Hamlet*. He is superfluous in *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*: this drama represents the world in which, after Škoko leaves the scene, only gravediggers remain.

In order to understand what exactly is being said in the claim that *Predstava* is a tragicomedy, one has to imagine a completely different ending to Brešan’s play. Let us say that Andja does not manage to come to terms with her conscience and commits suicide. Škoko, on the other hand, manages to take revenge and kills Bukara and his two accomplices, but in doing so he dies himself, at the feet of his faithful people, his faithful Horatio. And then someone or something comes to bring order into the country in which many things are rotten indeed. Who or what might this be, and what kind of order should they bring? Imagining one kind of order or other is possible: the one in which, for example, innocent people do not end up in prison and

¹⁹ Wolfgang Kayser: *Das Grotteske. Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, Oldenburg und Hamburg, 1957, p. 55.

thieves do not rule the day. To make this possible, the drama should not only have shown what this world would be like, but also to explain why it is the way it is. However, it does no such thing. Did the communist revolution make things rotten in Mrduša Donja? It is hardly likely: one cannot find anything in Marxism that would justify the theft of ledges. Moreover, such abuses of power can happen in all political systems. In any case, we have seen the way Mrduša Donja treats the official ideology – in the same manner as it treats Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It may be because the inhabitants of Mrduša Donja come from the Balkans, as W.E.Yuill implies (541,544), thus offering the incomprehensibility of the Other as an explanation? Maybe it is because simple peasants from the poorest region in Croatia are the subject of the play? In the dramas he wrote between the two wars Miroslav Krleža portrayed elegant members of the Zagreb bourgeoisie, the Glembays, as the moral failures who spoke in refined Croatian and fluent German. However, there is no ethical difference between them and Bukara. Maybe it is because they are ignorant and uneducated? The teacher Škunca is educated and knowledgeable, and still at the end of the play he refuses to answer Škoko’s cry for help, thus showing that knowledge and sound morality do not have to be related. Maybe it is because of all of these things together?

The play itself does not offer satisfactory answers to these questions, and therefore no interpretation could offer one either: that does not mean that the question is illegitimate within the discourse of literary criticism. In this case, the answer does not lie in the play. This is not coincidence; it is essential for the meaning of Brešan’s play, as well as for the definition of its genre: it constitutes part and parcel of modern tragicomedy. ‘Tragedy assumes guilt, trouble, moderation, range of vision, responsibility’, writes Dürrenmatt in the often cited paragraph from *Theatre Problems*. ‘In the routine muddle of our century, in this last dance of the white race there are no longer any guilty people nor any responsible ones either. Nobody can do anything about it and nobody wanted it to happen. Things can really happen without anybody. Everything is dragged along and gets caught in some sort of rake. We are too collectively guilty, too collectively embedded in the sins of fathers and forefathers. We are only grandchildren now. That is our bad luck, not our guilt: guilt only exists now as a personal accomplishment, as a religious act. Only comedy can still get on us. (...) However, the tragic element is still possible, even if pure tragedy is no longer possible. We can extract the tragic from comedy, bring it forward as a terrible moment, as a chasm beginning to open, in this way indeed many tragedies of Shakespeare are already comedies from which the tragic factor rises up.’²⁰ The gloomy impression that *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* makes results from this characteristic of the modern tragicomedy, from its refusal to deal with the reasons behind the events it had portrayed. In the end we are left only with that grotesque something, which is stronger and more powerful than ideology, culture and morality.

V

There can be no doubt that the grotesque round dance at the end of *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* presents an equivalent of the traditional play within a play. This dramatic device can fulfil different functions, but one of the most

²⁰ Friedrich Dürrenmatt: *Writings on Theatre and Drama*, London, 1976, p.83-84.

commonly used is to establish an external frame for the self-definition of drama.²¹ Within the relation between the outer play that serves as a frame and the play within the play, the former assumes the role of reality, and the latter represents the theatre or dramatic art. Thus the drama containing a play within a play can demonstrate its own poetic self-consciousness: what the art of theatre does in the real world, what its function is, and how one should understand the relation between reality and the theatre. In Brešan's play, this relation is demonstrated through the relationship of the play within the play rehearsed in *Mrduša Donja* and the outer play, but the outer play is also 'framed' and included into a wider context by the radio theatre reviews.

At the beginning of the play Mačak reminded the audience of the ancient doctrine about the theatre as a reflection of reality. Even though the main function of the play is the glorification of 'our Socialist reality', a certain critical function is allowed for as well. The play will, besides highlighting the good things, show 'the irregularities', as they would put it in *Mrduša Donja*, and so, like a benevolent and well-intentioned critic, become involved in the strengthening of the socialist system. Soon Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is transformed beyond recognition in the course of its rehearsals. However, this is ironic as well, since the *Hamlet* from *Mrduša Donja*, transformed into a grotesque round dance at the end of the drama, does fulfil the task that it had been set. Since we have seen and heard the villagers in the frame play, as well as in the play within the play, which represents the theatre, we can confirm with confidence that their reality succeeded in coming through their version of *Hamlet*: they laboured on their mirror until they finally made it reflect an image of themselves that they recognised. Opinions may differ about what is good and what is bad regarding such a reflection of reality. It appears that the creators and the performers of the play both agree that everything is in order with reality as well as with the play that reflects it.

Even though *Hamlet* happens to be their choice, the audience of Brešan's play does not have to be of the same opinion. *Hamlet*, too, contains a play within a play, as well as one important reference to the art of theatre. When he recognizes his own crime in the theatre fiction, in a parable that seemingly has nothing to do with him, Claudius's moral consciousness awakes. When he sees the actor who ends the story of Priam's death with eyes full of tears, Hamlet recognizes his own situation. Theatrical fiction interferes with reality first and foremost as an instrument of understanding, insight and self-awareness, but the knowledge gained with the help of fiction later on is transformed into action. In *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*, however, theatre does nothing. In order to intervene in reality in some way, Škoko has to step out of the role of Hamlet, interrupt the rehearsal and, by grabbing Mačak by the throat, make him confess to the theft. The nature of such reality, reflected by the play within a play, is such that it breaks, transforms, and adjusts every fiction that lays claim to insight. As an instrument of truth and of the changing of reality, the theatre in Brešan's play is completely powerless.

However, both the play within a play and the play that frames it in *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* are put into an even wider frame through a radio programme after the fourth scene. The programme presents an anonymous theatre review of the staging of *Hamlet* in the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, directed by Tomislav Auer. (If it is not an authentic review taken from some newspaper from the period following the Second World War, this short pastiche is a masterpiece of

²¹ A broad overview of play within the play as a dramatic device in Robert J. Nelson: *Play within the Play. The Dramatist's Conception of his Art: Shakespeare to Anouilh*, New York, 1971.

the genre.) By putting it into a wider frame of reality recognized as historical – through the names of the director and the actors, the mentioning of the most significant Croatian theatre, and Zagreb itself – the reality of the fictional Mrduša Donja, with its Bukaras and Majkačas, becomes significantly less real and is revealed to be what it is in reality: theatre fiction. At first this brings a sigh of relief to the audience. The characters and the plot of Mrduša Donja are only a comedy, the author's farcical hyperbole; in the real world Zagreb does indeed exist, with its Croatian National Theatre where decent people gather to watch *Hamlet* in the evening, and not just any but already the second production of the Shakespeare's play in the same theatre since the end of the war. However, that sigh of relief disappears as soon as the audience realizes what the anonymous theatre critic, the voice of the Party and the State, is actually saying. The critic raises the question: why *Hamlet* again? Have not the comrade theatre artists heard that they are living '[i]n an age of great and fateful social change, following the occupation and national liberation struggle, in a time of renewal and reconstruction and radical transformation of the entire social structure' (98;67-68)? To deal with 'classics' in such an age means to distance oneself from social reality. Art cannot be absorbed in itself; it should not enclose itself in an ivory tower. It should be a 'form of our vital national consciousness [...] a forum in which the nation's crucial social and political issues may be debated' (99;68). The critic, and implicitly through him the Party, expect the Croatian National Theatre to stage plays about the contemporary social reality, and not fairy-tales from Elizabethan England, and so it becomes obvious that Mačak, in announcing a performance that would hold a mirror up to the Socialist system only translated the Party's official stance into his own idiom.

From the point of view of a theatre historian there is nothing wrong with that stance. The demand that the Party makes on the Croatian National Theatre poses one of the basic, if not the most important functions of the theatre and of drama. In the Greek tragedy, according to Jean-Pierre Vernant, the *polis* represents itself for itself: it puts a mythical hero of the bygone times on stage and relates him to the contemporary context.²² The city questions itself through the hero's behaviour and destiny: the Greek theatre is a large laboratory for social and political life. The difference however, lies in the fact that in the Athens of the fifth century BC the actors', directors', and writers' lives were not at stake, whereas in Yugoslavia in the period immediately following the Second World War they were.²³ This demand by the Party is hypocritical, because the staging of the shortcomings of socialist reality would not have been permitted in the first place: the supposed forum for the discussion of social problems would only have the task of glorifying the Party and the revolution, so it is understandable why the Croatian National Theatre decided to stage 'classics' for the second time.

However, an ironic twist takes place only if the audience, having heard the radio programme asks themselves: what if the Croatian National Theatre in its own way suitable to the first years after the revolution, by staging *Hamlet* for the second time over a short period, is doing exactly what the anonymous critic is expecting from it? *Hamlet* is, besides other things, a drama about the usurpation of power, about taking what does not belong to the usurper, about the arrogance of the looter, about that which is rotten in the state and about theatre fiction trapping the conscience of the violator in the mousetrap. What if by staging *Hamlet* the Croatian

²² Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet: *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, pp.1-5.

²³ For the history of political repression in Yugoslav theatre 1944-1956 see *Scena*, 2-3(1990), pp. 18-70.

National Theatre was speaking precisely of ‘the great and fateful change’ and ‘radical transformation of the entire social structure’? In this case, the same thing happened both in Zagreb and in Mrduša Donja: just as Bukara’s conscience fails to be caught in the mousetrap, so the new government, as its theatre representative testifies in his radio review, fails to see anything of importance in the two successive productions of *Hamlet*. The theatre interventions in reality are futile: one should not expect the truth and a change of reality from the theatre. In order to make a difference, one has to step out of one’s role, and, just like Škoko, grab Mačak by the throat.

This is the horizon that Brešan’s play projects through its meta-theatrical aspect. At the same time, it is evident that *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* is pre-eminently a political drama: far from ‘an ivory tower’, not removed from ‘social reality’, but *engagée* exactly in the way that the anonymous theatre critic demanded. What possible relations with reality can a drama depicting the political inefficiency of the theatre have? What does *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* as a politically engaged drama do in the Yugoslav society of the early 1970s? Is it not, in this sense, paradoxical to expect anything from the drama that, through a dialogue of sorts with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, twice showed that one should get rid of the misconception that the theatre can intervene in society? This is precisely the paradox of the drama which loses its own social legitimization: the drama is aware that the possibility for the theatre’s intervention in reality, of the theatre as an instrument of understanding and insight, and thus of social change – if it ever did exist – is now lost, and it does not even try to hide this knowledge about its own position, but rather it openly addresses it as a theme. However, if it consistently drew the conclusion from this recognition of its own position and possibilities, this could only force drama to become completely silent and disappear, or itself turn into a carnival we see at the end of Brešan’s play. Instead, drama paradoxically tries to remain an instrument of social criticism, and to legitimize itself precisely through speaking about its own inefficiency in the world. It does not recall the social efficacy of *Hamlet* (about which, despite all the assumptions based on the evidence of Shakespeare’s text, we cannot say anything with certainty) but Shakespeare’s meta-theatrical projection of theatre’s possible efficiency in reality: the Mousetrap and Hamlet’s question about Hecuba. Here two interpretations are open: on the one hand, one could say that *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* starts a dialogue with *Hamlet* and shows us that this notion of a possible efficiency of the theatre is unfounded and wrong. However, on the other hand, one can claim that Brešan’s play re-affirms the conception of the social function of theatre, and that it puts the blame for the failure of its function on that something in Mrduša Donja together with the ideological short-sightedness of the communists who had seen *Hamlet* twice in the Croatian National Theatre, but from whom Hecuba had been nothing. Both interpretations have something in common: if the world is out of joint, how could theatre possibly set it right?