

# Communist and Democratic Censorship in Slovenia: The Case of *Pupilija papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki*

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*Recent lawsuits against writers (cf. Pikalo and Smolnikar) have not only raised the issue of relations between literature and reality, but also have illustrated an interesting transformation in censorship practices in Slovenia after the fall of communism. Under communism the authorities usually suppressed literary texts or theatre performances, a practice that enabled the artists to continue with their work while bringing them a considerable increase in popularity. The article analyses the case of the show *Pupilija papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki*, which stirred up significant controversy both in 1969 and in 2006, when it was restaged/reconstructed. Differences in reactions to this show demonstrate changes in formal and informal control over cultural events.*

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In the former Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1991 there was no official theatre censorship. Nevertheless, there was informal censorship, and it was perhaps even more effective. As Polde Bibič, a renowned Slovenian actor describes it, “A Party official would call a general manager of a theatre and tell him not to perform a certain theatrical text or to withdraw an ongoing production from the programme” (Bibič 72). In 2007, the freshly renamed Janez Janša (born Emil Hrvatín),<sup>1</sup> the director of a reconstruction of *Pupilija papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki* (*Pupilija, Papa Pupilo, and the Pupilecks*), told me that the slaughter of a hen at the end of the show was omitted because Nevenka Koprivšek, the manager of the Stara elektrarna [Old Power Station] where the production took place, did not approve of it. It was not so much an ethical choice as merely a pragmatic one because the organization could have

been fined up to ten million Slovenian tolar (around €41,800) for doing this. Generally we think that freedom of artistic expression in independent Slovenia is guaranteed and that this is one of the features that distinguishes our present reality from the communist era. However, as is clear from the *Pupilija* case, artists and cultural management personnel still change their performances in order to avoid conflict with the authorities. We cannot claim that the present situation is the same as the one between 1945 and 1991, but it nevertheless provokes similar consequences. Thus I will compare both versions of *Pupilija* and their destinies in order to analyse two different types of censorship and to answer the question of whether or not the democratic social system enables artists to speak more freely. The results should introduce some perspective to the commonly accepted notion of the complete freedom of speech in Slovenia and raise new questions about the social role of contemporary Slovenian theatre.

### **Censorship – an ambiguous term**

Before I start analysing these performances I have to clarify some basic terminological issues. “Censorship” is definitely an ambiguous term. It can be brutal or soft, explicit or implicit, before or after the fact, and so on. Furthermore, it can also take the form of self-censorship, in which artists themselves change their works to avoid provoking unwanted consequences. Institutionalised censorship never existed in the former Yugoslavia or in Slovenia, so by “unwanted consequences” I mean interference in an artistic production that is caused by the authorities. This can take place either from outside, which means that artists or their work are banned from the public space, or their public performance is made difficult or even impossible, or from within, when artists consciously change their work in order to avoid dire consequences. For the latter I will use the more accurate term “self-censorship”, although I have to stress that this is more a matter of form than of intensity. Self-censorship is thus no less problematic than explicit interference in the arts by the authorities. One might say that it could also be considered more problematic because it is usually less obvious and more easily disguised as an autonomous artistic choice.

The performance *Pupilija papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki*, the only theatrical performance of the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre, is especially suitable for my analysis. Its premiere in 1969 provoked tremendous controversy. Authorities and cultural elites rejected it as an obscene – and even dangerous – production, whereas the younger generation and some dissident intellectuals supported it in the name of artistic freedom and autonomy of

the arts. The performance survived almost a year thanks to a commonly used tactic of the theatre under communism in Yugoslavia. That is to say, because of Yugoslavia's federal structure it was often possible to stage a controversial or even banned performance in another republic. In 2006 Hrvatin/Janja staged a reconstruction of this legendary performance by the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre but, surprisingly enough, omitted or softened all the controversial scenes. The most problematic one, the slaughter of a hen, was omitted altogether, and it turned out that this was the consequence of self-censorship. We might thus speculate that the democratic society of our time has actually become more puritan and repressive than communism was at the beginning of the 1970s, which is considered to have been a decade of severe ideological control. Before anything more about this interesting hypothesis can be said, however, I must present both productions in more detail.

### ***Pupilija papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki (1969) and communist censorship***

The premiere of *Pupilija* took place on 29 October 1969 at the Knight's Hall of Križanke in Ljubljana. Only two or three days after the premiere, the theatre group was thrown out of this venue and had to look for alternative places to perform the show. The Križanke hospitality was withdrawn by its manager Bračič, possibly following higher orders, or simply because this was considered the best move after the first negative reviews in the newspapers (Svetina 276). The audience was shocked by a performance that consisted of a series of unrelated scenes from contemporary life: a fragment from *Snow White*, a computer simulation, Partisan songs being sung, a horoscope, riddles, an advertisement for the magazine *Elle*, breastfeeding of a grown man, recitations of poetry, a bath scene, and so on. Most shocking was that all these seemingly childish games were set in both social and existentialist contexts. The former was introduced at the beginning by actors and audience watching the evening news together – a daily ritual of every member of the audience – which provided an essential connection to the spectators' real lives. The latter was the actual slaughter of a white hen on stage. "A knife cuts the hen's throat. The blood splashes audibly into a metal bowl. The 'executioner' kneels down. Lights in the hall are turned on. An organ plays a lullaby. The performers remain kneeling until the last spectator leaves the hall" (Svetina 275).

The reaction was so fierce that in all probability no one had expected it. Bratko Kreft, himself a playwright and an author of some controversial

plays before the Second World War, left the hall in the middle of the performance, and Jože Snoj wrote one of the negative reviews for the newspaper *Delo*. There he suggested that such a theatre group might sooner or later kill an infant on stage (see Snoj). The majority of the audience was horrified by the actual death on stage and the obscenity of the show. Thus it was that the most controversial scenes were the execution of a hen and the taking of a bath in which two performers were naked on stage. The latter even became the basis for a police report that resulted in a court case, although the theatre members were never convicted.

At the same time, however, it provided the group with enormous popularity throughout the country. The next performance was on the University of Ljubljana campus, where 1,200 tickets were sold in a matter of hours without any promotion. The Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre continued its tour in Maribor, where Croatian television reported on it. This act spread the theatre's fame to other Yugoslav republics. The performance appeared in Zagreb in March and May of 1970. In the interim it was also performed in Rijeka and later in Belgrade. It was awarded a prize as the most avant-garde performance at the MFSK (Festival of Student Theatres) in Zagreb and also received a special award in Belgrade at BRAMS (the Festival of Amateur Theatre Groups). Several parts of *Pupilija* were recorded by a television group from West Germany, and the complete show was filmed by Ljubljana Radio and Television. Mysteriously, this film was "lost" for many years until segments of it were found in an archive a few years ago.

### ***Pupilija* papa *Pupilo* pa *Pupilčki* (2006) and democratic self-censorship**

In 2006, after he had seen the filmed version of the show, Hrvatin/Janša decided to create a reconstruction. His primary aim was not merely to restage the legendary performance, but to engage in a dialogue with it and its original social context. Therefore he combined interviews with original performers, reviews and articles from 1969, and the filmed version of *Pupilija* with the acting – or perhaps better, the re-enacting – of it by his own performers. Thus, as Blaž Lukan and Rok Vevar suggest in their reviews, there were actually three performances interacting with each other. First, the original version, which was directed by Dušan Jovanović; second, a contemporary show which was directed by Hrvatin/Janša and could function entirely on its own; and finally the interaction of the two in which both shows comment on each other (see Lukan, Vevar). The show was a great success, and it poses interesting questions about reconstruct-

ing theatre performances in general. However, this will have to be left for some other occasion, as we are primarily interested in censorship or self-censorship in the arts.

One would expect to see the most controversial scenes performed after almost forty years with a lot of nostalgia, but with no protest whatsoever, because nowadays one can see naked actors on stage in the mainstream theatres, and contemporary performers seem to push the limit of the acceptable beyond our wildest imagination – as is the case with performances by Marina Abramović, Bob Flanagan and Ron Athey, or Stelarc. The interesting thing is that the most controversial scenes – the bath and the execution of the hen – were modified in Hrvatin/Janša's reconstruction.

The existing recording of the performance was cut before them, which gave Hrvatin/Janša the idea of filming the actual bath scene and projecting it on a big screen at the back of the stage while the performers re-enact it with their clothes on and without an actual bath-tub. In this way he preserved the dialogue between the original and reconstructed versions while at the same time side-stepping the possibly offensive scene. In an interview on 4 June 2007 Janša explained to me that he changed the scene because spectators were seeing naked performers in almost every contemporary production and were therefore quite used to it. In other words, today it is more subversive to keep one's clothes on than to take them off. Although one can easily agree with Janša, the fact remains that the bathtub scene did not stir any controversies in 2006, and we cannot say whether it would have if it had been staged in the original version.

More interesting is the destiny of the final scene – the execution of the hen. Because the Animal Protection Act (“Zakon o zaščiti živali”) forbids slaughtering an animal outside specially designated areas unless done so by breeders for their personal use, the performer, and also the organization that hosted such a performance, could have been fined SIT 150,000 and up to SIT 10 million, respectively. Today the fine would be even higher – up to €84,000. The ending was thus censored by Nevenka Koprivšek, the director of the Old Power Station, who was not ready to take the risk. In the end it was likely this was the right decision because there were police present at the premiere. Instead of the original ending, Hrvatin/Janša devised four alternative endings, and spectators had to vote for their favourite. The alternatives were:

1. A video recording of the reconstruction of the original scene;
2. A video recording of a testimony about the execution;
3. A reading of the Animal Protection Act;
4. An actual execution of a hen.

The members of the audience usually picked the fourth alternative, and were then asked to do it themselves. Because no one from the audience ever volunteered to do this, the hen survived. Nevertheless, we, the spectators, were brought as close to the actual experience as possible – and it was definitely a painful one.

It is obvious that an actual death on a theatre stage would still be a shocking experience; however, the fact remains that what was done at the end of the 1960s in a totalitarian regime has been censored in our democratic society.

## Conclusion

We can thus conclude by answering our original question. Does democracy in Slovenia allow artists to say or do more than they could 40 years ago? One is tempted to answer “no” immediately, but that would be too easy and it is far from the truth. In general, artists are allowed to do anything they want. They could even kill a hen on stage if they were prepared to defend themselves in court. However, the result is the opposite. What had actually happened in 1969 no longer happened 40 years later. The reason for this is, at least in my opinion, a formal change of control.

Totalitarian censorship's main features were ambiguous rules and inconsistent interventions. In other words, one could never be sure what was allowed and what was prohibited. On the one hand it was possible to perform a banned production successfully at another place and/or time, and on the other to see a successful production censored after some time for no apparent reason. This vagueness stimulated theatre artists to test new ideas, to invent different tactics of deception and cover-ups, and resulted in the most thriving period in the history of Slovenian theatre and dramatic literature.

Today we are facing a different situation. In principle one can say and do anything – the freedoms of speech and expression are written into our constitution – as long as one does not break the law. When one crosses this line, one faces dire consequences that no longer affect only the work of art, but rather one's financial situation. Hence, the main difference between communist and democratic censorship is that in the former Yugoslavia, when the authorities banned productions, works of art and their authors were able to continue working more or less without consequences.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the banned productions turned them into dissidents and theatre into a relevant public space where alternative political statements could be made. Nowadays the law attacks the author in person.

If found guilty of a crime, the author has to pay a fine or go to jail. In the first case the fine is usually much larger than the income from one's book sales or theatre production, so the financial status of the author or the theatre is at risk.

In the case of *Pupilija*, one can summarize the situation as follows: Jovanović and other members of the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre were charged, but were never seriously prosecuted or convicted. Their production became famous throughout the country in part due to its problems with the authorities and cultural elites. Most of them continued to work in the theatre (at the Glej Experimental Theatre and the Pekarna); some of them even became renowned actors and directors in mainstream theatres (such as Jožica Avbelj and Dušan Jovanović). Nowadays, freedom of speech is taken for granted and court cases against artists do not result in a general public debate anymore. This means that artists are no longer able to adopt the role of dissidents and, as a result, their work does not receive the subsequent publicity. Furthermore, financial consequences can endanger their financial status, and can thus change their lives for years, so it is quite understandable that they try to avoid such conflicts. Because it was clear that killing a hen on stage would lead to a court case that would probably be hard to win, Nevenka Koprivšek did not want to take chances. Considering the tight budget of a non-profit cultural institution she could not afford to lose, she herself felt compelled to censor the reconstruction of *Pupilija*.

Was the show therefore less convincing or relevant? I do not think so. It was one of the best performances of the year, but this is exactly the rationalization that I am trying to avoid. This is the point of ideological mystification, when we usually say: "I know, but ...". I do not want to suggest that we should look back on communism with nostalgia and see it as a social system with a higher degree of the freedom of artistic expression. My aim is simply to show that neither should we take artistic freedom in democratic societies for granted. Self-censorship can be the consequence of pragmatic decisions, but it should be conscious. Otherwise theatre, and the arts in general, may lose their ability to open up debates and cause us to question our reality.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Janez Janša is also the name of a Slovenian politician that became the prime minister of Slovenia's center-right government elected in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> This is only true for the period from 1956 to 1990, because in the first decade after World War II some artists were actually shot for political reasons.

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