

Identity Capers

The new generation of Slovenian playwrights isn't only interested in geopolitical concerns

BY RUTH MARGRAFF, WITH SAŠKA RAKEF

Ljubljana's Old Town cafés and open markets, with their narrow streets and dragon-studded bridges, welcome both strolling musicians and tourists sipping hot wine. This "little Prague" jewel of a city, whose name is usually thought to stem from "*ljubljená*," or "beloved," is also home to four of Slovenia's eleven public professional theatres as well as several internationally renowned theatre festivals, including City of Women, Young Lions and the not-to-be-missed Desetnica Festival of Street Theatre.

In December '06, Slovenia's first and only play-development program, PreGlej—in residence at Ljubljana's Glej Theatre—initiated a staged reading series of new Slovenian and American plays. The series, called REDEYE: A New York/Ljubljana Translation Think Tank, resulted from a series of exchanges between PreGlej and the New York-based WaxFactory. It took place over several months this past fall as part of the European Dream Festival, and was supported by the Trust for Mutual Understanding and the Slovenian Consulate of New York.

In September, the playwrights Simona Semenič, Zalka Grabnar Kogoj and Saška Rakef traveled to New York to work on English translations of their plays in collaboration with playwrights Young Jean Lee, Jason Grote and Ruth Margraff, along with directors Ivan Talijancic, Jay Scheib and Sarah Benson. The Americans then traveled to Ljubljana to hear their new plays translated into Slovenian.

When the PreGlej idea of a "staged reading" excited a wave of television, radio and print attention across Slovenia, we on the American team started to ponder our overexposure to conventions of new-play development—a notion that is actually quite new and distinct for Slovenian playwrights—and our assumption that the work would reflect a certain cultural identity. Benson, artistic director of New York City's Soho Rep, says she expected the Slovenian plays to be much more focused on the complex context of the region. "Instead I found writers viewing themselves much more as part of a larger and aggressively contemporary tradition—and not writing exclusively about Slovenian concerns," she says. "I discovered in directing Zalka Grabnar Kogoj's play that the actors are more interested in behavior than in psychology. It was so refreshing to work with actors asking different questions."

Since Slovenia was the Yugoslavian province closest to Europe before the brutal 1990s civil war—the one that remained



Ivan Talijancic, center, and Jason Grote discuss *Balance* at Glej Theatre.

the most economically stable and that is now part of the European Union—there has long been a tension in Slovenian culture when it comes to the notion of identity. Mateja Pezdirc Bartol, a professor of Slovenian literature at the University of Ljubljana, describes a marked withdrawal from historical themes and political engagement in new playwriting—in contrast with the work of prominent 1980s playwrights Dušan Jovanovi, Drago Jančar and Rudi Šeligo, who wrote about state control, revolution and totalitarian regimes.

However, playwright Semenič, who founded PreGlej—the name is a play on the verb for "to view/preview"—is quick to point out (in a September '06 *Brooklyn Rail* article by Amiel Melnick) that "in Slovenia, there is a terrible gap between the young and the old generations of playwrights. And our generation is not being staged. We are criticized because you can't see a recognizable Slovenian identity. The feeling is that Western

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Europe and the older playwrights dare to write about the Balkan wars, but we don't feel them as ours. We're somehow too close and not close enough."

The playwrights nurtured by PreGlej are definitely challenging preconceptions, but their challenge is an intimate one, turning inward and presenting what Slovenian theatre critic and playwright Rok Vevar, also quoted in the *Brooklyn Rail*, calls "private universes defined by impossible relationships." Vevar, who collaborates frequently with Semenič, sees her work as a mixture between performance art and playwriting. "She constantly thinks of how to produce interruption in a certain regime of looking," says Vevar in an e-mail exchange. Semenič's REDEYE entry, *24 Hours*, might be an example of this. She

bodily excretions. Contemplating accidental fatherhood, Egon complains: "Gray suit, a tie...half past six. I get up. There's a woman in the bathroom. I don't know her...she's a mess.... Dead biologist Ela.... What are you if you eat meat-eating plants? A vegetarian or a meat eater?"

In translating *Balance*, playwright Grote says he found himself "unconsciously Americanizing, or at least neutralizing, some of the more subtle Slovenianisms. I found myself rewriting the play without intending to."

"We're all looking at the problems of the world and because of that it might seem that treating the problems we have at home is banal or overly domestic," Kogoj told the *Brooklyn Rail*. She elaborated over e-mail: "*Balance* is play about illness in a modern



The staged reading of Saška Rakef's *Shelter*, directed by Jay Scheib.



Simona Semenič's *24 Hours*, directed by Ivan Talijancic.

writes two generic couples overlapping in a fragmented white space who are eventually bombarded by 26 "spams":

HE 1: Listen, I'll go by myself. Just for a look. Maybe I'll find something.

SHE 2: It's beyond my control. No wait. It's beyond my control. Sounds great. Great idea.

SPAM 11: Anita. Age: 25. Height 1,70. Kg. 55. Program—anal: Yes. Oral: Yes. Vaginal: Yes. Kiss: Yes. Realizing fantasies: Yes. Does it with couple: Yes. Price: 4200 USD (for 24 hours).

HE 2: And what are we going to do if we're done with this?

SHE 2: Should we do it?

HE 2: It's beyond my control...

In contrast with established Slovenian comic playwrights Tone Partlji and Vinko Möderndorfer, who satirize capitalism, urban upstarts, political elections, party discords and lust for power, Bartol sees the work of younger dramatists as much more intimate and private, culled from domestic and everyday situations with themes of violence, manipulation and invasion of privacy.

For example, Kogoj's black comedy *Balance*, also translated into English for the PreGlej exchange, features the everyday violence and cruelty in the relationship between Ela, a female biologist caring for a putrid meat-eating plant, and her slacker lover Egon, whom she pays to feed her plant with his various

romantic relationship—this is happening everywhere, not only in Slovenia. In the play there is no [gender] hierarchy. I even think the woman is a step ahead of the man."

Other new Slovenian plays from the 2006 Borštnik Meeting, a central Slovenian theatre festival, seem to defy identification. Bartol describes them as "a web of different images and ideas, language variants, generic models and dramaturgical explorations, so that we can only sketch its outlines rather than capture the whole richness of its poetics." Ana Lasič's play *For Now, Nowhere*—in which a character named Split is publishing a novel also called *For Now, Nowhere* with Sara, who is writing a novel called *Escape*, and Alona, who is writing a novel called *Homecoming*—evokes not only foreignness and migration, murder and suicide, but also a sorely unfocused individual suffering from identity problems and urban loneliness. *Prešeren Cabaret*, by Jure Ivanušič and Marko Vezovišek, celebrates Prešeren Day, the Slovenian day of culture, as a chance to settle accounts on "the cultural battlefield." Andrej E. Skubic and Lasič's *Fužine Blues* sets a crucial football match in a multi-ethnic city, which throws into high relief the nationality issues in Ljubljana's suburbs. The worlds of the city and the suburbs are revealed to be not only different, but often irreconcilable, though sometimes right next door.

The 2004 edition of the European Theater Convention's book *The European Theatre Today: The Plays* observes that the lead character in Sebastijan Horvat and Nataša Matjašec's *Get Famous or Die Trying (Elisabeth 2) monologue* is split between

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her character and the actress's own false identities. It explores the buffer zone between fiction and the intimacy of the real world. In Saša Pavcek's *Pure Spring of Love*, the program notes state, "Something unbridgeable stands between human aspiration and life, some obstacle, which disputes the possibility of absolute love and authentic being." Pavcek's sentences are "as if they sprang from the physical sensation of mourning for the lost, rejected fullness of life."

WaxFactory artistic director Talijancic feels the struggle for artistic identity, however, is a healthy one in Slovenia, whereas for the rest of the Balkans it is still painfully tumultuous. For him, the newly forged Slovenian identity is not insular, but incredibly inclusive and open to other cultures. "During our PreGlej exchange, I found it remarkable to see how young Slovenian writers addressed issues that were impossible to relegate to an easily identifiable niche."

Rakef concurs. "There are expectations about what we should write about based on a geopolitical key that is pre-established," she says. "Most of us, for example, do not touch upon our recent Balkan history, but in England, my play *Home* was interpreted to be talking about the genocide in Kosovo—which by no means was my theme! My theme was the need for the reorganization of space

after the entrance of a new element. This has contributed to my decision to rewrite the play against that given interpretation."

Home (previously titled *Shelter*) seems to conjure the hysteria of what is unknowable even between mother and daughter (Mira)—let alone the hysteria brought on by the stray dogs Mira brings into a house that breathes and moves as if it were alive. Rakef's Mother screams:

Everybody sticks to their own kind! (*pause*) What did I say about loyalty? Ah? What did I say? You have to be loyal to your own kind. Loyal to me. But no.... You didn't quite succeed, now did you? Fitting in. (*pause*) You should be glad you've a place to come back to! So we're helping strangers now, are we?... At least I taught you hospitality. But loyalty comes before hospitality. (*pause*) You know, the breed is what counts these days... pure breed... (*laughing*) Bloodline pedigree! (*calms down*) Don't worry. They don't strangle dogs anymore... Kindness cannot conquer, cannot rule. At most it might appeal to guilt but for sure it doesn't appeal to survival. (*giggles*) Kindness doesn't feed mouths, it gets eaten. Look at nature...

Out of boredom, Rakef's dogs start fighting, though Mira tries to get them to

stop with the suggestion of "doing some art." In the end, the dogs run off stage and out of the auditorium as Dog 7 blurts out, "I'm on YouTube! I'm on YouTube!"

Surveying the new generation of playwriting, Vevar says, "There is a bit of postwar syndrome with a devaluation of the word and its credibility or truth as our important playwrights—Jovanovi, Šeligo, etc.—lost authority, became authority or took positions that they longed for. We would declare ourselves as nonpolitical because we didn't have the energy to care. Everything is different now. Perhaps young playwrights from Slovenia and the U.S. are more alike now—struggling for our holy bread." ✎

Ruth Margraff is a McKnight-commissioned playwright with the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis and is also writing a Rockefeller Foundation commission for the Apollo Theater. She completed a Fulbright fellowship to Greece in new opera last year.

Saška Rakef's plays have been presented in Slovenia, Bosnia, the U.K. and the U.S. She is currently studying performance arts at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London.