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Research Article

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Absurdity and/or Reality: Grotesque and Tragicomic Realism in *Balkan Spy* (1983)

Julija Pešić*

This article explores the forms and functions of grotesque realism in the play *Balkan Spy* (1983) (*Balkanski špijun*) by Dušan Kovačević. The analysis is focused on the mechanisms of grotesque that the author uses in order to create a tragicomic version of reality, and on the effects of this aesthetic choice. The analytical approach to the dramatic text shows that Kovačević employs elements of both conventional and modern theatre. In other words, contemporary grotesque realism, caricature, irony, bitter/dry and subversive humour are the most dominant dramaturgical techniques that the author brings in order to create his characters as well as the absurd world caused by political paranoia.

Keywords: dramatic illusion, grotesque, caricature, irony, tragicomic effect

The contemporary playwright, theatre and film director Dušan Kovačević¹ deserves the complete response of critical thought not only because he is one of

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¹ Dušan Kovačević is a Serbian playwright whose plays have been staged at theatres across the former Yugoslavia, in Eastern and Western Europe, and in the United Kingdom, the USA, Canada, and Iran. Kovačević's oeuvre includes more than twenty-five titles, which makes him one of the most prolific dramatists in contemporary literature. To name just a few, his plays include *Maratonci trče počasni krug* [The Marathoners Run a Victory Lap] (1972), *Radovan treći* [Radovan the Third] (1973), *Balkanski špijun* [Balkan Spy] (1983), *Profesionalac* [The Professional] (1990), and *Lari Tompson – tragedija jedne mladosti* [Larry Thompson – Tragedy of A Youth] (1996). Kovačević has also won prestigious national and international awards. He is a four-time winner of the Sterija Award and a two-time winner of the Golden Arena in Pula. His other awards include the Joakim Vujić Award, the Miloš Crnjanski Award, the Marin Držić Award, the October Award given by the City of Belgrade, and the Vjekoslav Afrić Award. He received two Best Screenplay Awards for the films *Balkan Spy* (*Balkanski špijun*) and *The Professional* (*Profesionalac*) at the Montreal World Film Festival. The latter was also awarded the title of Best Film by a jury of the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) in Montreal and Best Screenplay and Best Film at an international film festival in Viareggio. In 2003, the European Film Academy of Berlin

the most popular contemporary dramatists in the region of the former Yugoslavia, but also because of the influence of his plays and films, and the specific humour contained in them. Previous readings of Kovačević's plays by renowned theatre critics such as Vladimir Stamenković, Muharem Pervić, Jovan Hristić, Filip David, Radomir Putnik, Branka Jakšić-Provči, David Putnik, and Zoran Milutinović (to name just a few) offer a variety of analytical and methodological perspectives indispensable in every new reading of Kovačević's works, at the same time pointing to the fact that his dramatic work is almost inexhaustible and can indeed be interpreted in many ways, always following the track of the keys it offers. In other words, Dušan Kovačević should be read from the point of view of discovering, tracking, and interpreting the immanent poetic signals of his multilayered and thought-provoking work. However, previous analytical attention has not yet considered the complex relationship between dramatic illusion, grotesque realism and bitter/dry humour, as well as how these elements of Kovačević's plays are aesthetically structured, and for what end. At the same time, the domain of structure of dramatic illusion as a core of drama cannot be explained without exploring its consequences for the formation of Kovačević's characters. Each character is shaped by the deliberate development of the action on which the conflict is based. Considering that Kovačević's bitter/dry humour cannot be defined outside the reception area, it is necessary, moreover, to explain the mechanisms and techniques that the author uses in order to produce a tragicomic effect. Therefore, this article observes the mechanisms of grotesque, caricature, and bitter/dry humour as key models of Kovačević's tragicomic world, for which the play *Balkan Spy* (1983) (*Balkanski špijun*) is a good example.

In this article, I will be relying on Wolfgang Kayser's theoretical framework about grotesque as an art form and tool of expression. In his comprehensive study about grotesque in art and literature, Kayser theoretically observes grotesque through epochs, focusing on its visual and semantic characteristics. In particular, Kayser defines grotesque as one of the most dominant 20th century art forms, used for an estranging and distancing effect with the purpose of making familiar things seem unfamiliar, and, consequently, more significant to the audience (observers or readers). In addition, in contemporary art, the grotesque simultaneously provokes a humorous and frightening effect for which, according to Kayser, the literary work of Franz Kafka is one of the best examples. "Humour is an inalienable part of grotesque",² in which both reality and illusion, possible and impossible situations, are intertwined and

nominated Kovačević for Best Screenplay for *The Professional* (*Profesionalac*) along with six other screenwriters. Kovačević received a number of other film awards at festivals in Valencia, Marseille, Vienna, Germany, Czech, Slovakia, and Poland. This long list of recognitions would not be complete without adding his screenplays for movies *Beasts* (1976, directed by Živko Nikolic) (*Beštije*) and *Who's Singin' Over There?* (1980, directed by Slobodan Šijan) (*Ko to tamo peva*). The latter is counted among the most outstanding and most critically acclaimed works of Yugoslav cinema (officially voted best Yugoslav film 1945-1995) and has also earned a Chaplin Award in Vevey. Kovačević co-wrote the screenplay for the *Palme d'Or* winner *Underground* (1995) (*Podzemlje/Bila jednom jedna zemlja*), directed by Emir Kusturica. With so many prizes under his belt, Dušan Kovačević can be rightfully regarded not only as a representative figure in contemporary drama, but as one of the most important and prolific European post-World War II dramatists.

² Kayser, Wolfgang. 1968. *The Grotesque in the Twentieth Century*, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, edited by Kayser, Wolfgang. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 140.

overlap while making an aesthetic structure — “a segment of life in which reality and illusion are so closely intertwined that deceptions are constantly created. Nevertheless, they are deceptions. As spectators we enjoy the error, even if it is our own, because reality finally unmasks it”.³

Dušan Kovačević is an author who uses bitter/dry and subversive humour to capture the essence of everydayness. A witness to the era of socialist Yugoslavia, a listener and an observer, this master dramatist views theatre as an ever-present opportunity for speaking right away, here, and now. Kovačević does not exclusively address theatregoers as his target audience. He also reaches an audience that rarely goes to the theatre. The artistic world created by Kovačević outgrows the stage, making people aware that there is something else beyond the theatre, something that is not just make-believe, something far more serious: reality. The characters portrayed in Kovačević’s plays, which create an entire system of poetics and aesthetics in their own right, inhabit the boundaries of art and reality, both comedy and tragedy. The grotesquely caricatured protagonist of Ilija Čvorović showcases the repercussions of an ideology on the life of an individual in the play *Balkan Spy* (1983) (*Balkanski špijun*). In defining some constants of the lives of people in socialist Yugoslavia, Kovačević does not shrink from laying bare ideological fanaticism, bigotry, ruthlessness and unbelievable, pathological and incurable human stupidity. *Balkan Spy* is a story of political paranoia and madness, beginning with harmless humour and ending in a macabre rant celebrating Stalin. The deep tragedy of a human being poisoned and ruined by an ideology unmasks reality to show how a victim of violence becomes a vector of violence in society. Kovačević’s propensity for caricatural distortions produces effects that are equally comic and frightening.

Balkan Spy is a play about political paranoia that turns an ordinary man into a fanatical defender of a state and its warped political system. Written at the onset of a political and economic crisis hitting Yugoslavia (in the early 1980s), this immensely successful dramatic piece not only explores the topics of contemporary politics and social issues, but also offers a close study of the mental state of mind of the individuals created by such systems.

The seemingly peaceful family life of Ilija Čvorović, a former inmate incarcerated at the Goli Otok prison in 1949, is disturbed by the arrival of Petar Markov Jakovljević, his reticent tenant, whom the main character believes to be a spy for one of the countries of the Western bloc. As the plot unfolds, the protagonist’s paranoia, fear, and hatred spread to all the characters, forever shattering their lives and mutual relationships. Towards the end of the play, Kovačević transforms the character of Danica, who embodies a patriarchal, withdrawn, and simple woman at the beginning, into Ilija’s zealous henchman. His twin brother, Đura, who was also imprisoned at Goli Otok, joins in the manhunt. Kovačević’s protagonist has only one meaning in life: he is on a mission to save the country and catch “a dangerous enemy”. He quits his job, borrows money, spies on people, concocts stories, sees things that are not there and declares that the only accurate perception of reality is his own, and nobody else’s. Sonja (Ilija’s daughter) realises what has been

³ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 134.

happening, but is unable to change anything. Finally, it turns out that the mysterious tenant is in fact a harmless person, whereas his landlord suffers a heart attack and, all alone, his family broken up, presses ahead in the world of his own delusional visions leading him to his doom.

The subject of the play seems disturbing. However, the comedy of *Balkan Spy* emerges from the discord between Ilija's perception of reality and the real reasons that are behind it. The tenant is not a secret agent. He has returned to the country having spent two decades abroad, and wants to put the money he has earned into opening a tailor shop. In the meantime, he is also facing all the problems that beset the everyday lives of ordinary people, even Čvorović himself (such as bureaucracy, corruption, unemployment). By providing a number of the details of daily life, Dušan Kovačević rarely lets his audience lose sight of empirical reality. For instance, Ilija's brother Đura comes to visit him, bringing coffee and toilet paper because of the shortage of such consumer goods. Only after five years does Sonja succeed in landing a job, thanks to a bit of string-pulling. Ilija cannot get hold of nitroglycerine due to the scarcity of the medicine in pharmacies, and the tenant has to deal with the overbearing bureaucratic machinery. A contrast between the realistic *procédé* Kovačević uses to portray his characters and the grotesque tone of their lives allows the audience to maintain a distance to the topic of the play. Were it not for the exaggerations, hyperbole, ironic travesty and plot twists, *Balkan Spy* would be nothing more than just a story of the tragic fate of an individual in a totalitarian regime. This, however, is not the case, as will be shown further below.

Kovačević meticulously steers dramatic action, starting with exposition, through the conflict (the tenant's arrival), the climax (proving Ilija's thesis that "everything is contrary to how it appears"), the peripeteia (Sonja's "The Discussion about the Father"), to the epilogue. Leading the storyline to the edge of disaster, he nevertheless manages to take it to an unexpected twist. It seems as if the confusion surrounding the tenant is going to be cleared up successfully. Everything is set to be revealed as it would be in a conventional comedy, and Sonja's amorous aspirations were, of course, going to be fulfilled. Although Kovačević brings dramatic action to a fever pitch by allowing for the possibility that everything may "end as it should end", the author nevertheless pushes his characters into disaster spelt by their previous actions. Ilija is left all alone, and Sonja's flirting with the tenant, perceived as a potential romance, does not blossom into one by the end of the play. From the perspective of dramatic structure, this potential for romance serves the author as a means for shedding light on the tenant from a different perspective. From the very beginning and throughout the play, Sonja is the only member of the Čvorović family who has not lost her grip on reality and the only one who maintains critical distance from all the goings-on in the family home. Ilija is overcome by his paranoid idea and Danica is very much under his thumb, while his brother Đura has the role of emphasising Kovačević's view of how social and political deviances lead to dangerous and fatal consequences.

The storyline of *Balkan Spy* unfolds as a game of spying and the unmasking of "a dangerous spy", whereas its plot develops towards proving Ilija's thesis that

“everyone is guilty until proven otherwise”.⁴ The play ends without the erring characters waking to reality, since there is no anagnorisis (recognition) or general reconciliation between the characters that is so typical of comedies.

The text of the play itself is divided into two acts. Every scene features a subtitle conveying its essence. Kovačević's stage directions are not only instructions to actors on what to do and where to move on the stage; they also represent a study of the setting of the play and the music accompanying dramatic situations and constitute a counterpoint to the plot.

Kovačević sets the initial dramatic situation by postponing the arrival of the tenant. Danica Čvorović, immersed in her ‘potato peeling’ chore, is expecting her husband to return from a routine questioning by the police. The voice of a radio announcer is suggestive of the atmosphere of a social and economic crisis. Before Ilija takes to the stage, the radio announcer adds:

*“Coming up next will be your favourite Argentinian tangos, in the broadcast ‘The Music of Your Youth.’”*⁵

The beginning of the final scene of Act II, entitled “Interrogation”, contains a repetition of what was said in Act I, Scene I using the exact same order of events: Danica is peeling potatoes, then we hear the radio announcer's report and finally ‘The Music of Your Youth’:

*“Coming up next will be arias from a variety of different operas, in the broadcast ‘The Music of Your Youth.’”*⁶

The author employs details such as dance music, the voice of the announcer and the sound of an engine to make a connection between the world of empirical reality and its representation in the work of art, as well as to amplify the dramatic quality of a seemingly peaceful life. The voice of the radio announcer and the sound of the dance music, recurring in cycles several times during the development of the dramatic action (Act I, Scene I – The Tenant; Act I, Scene IV – Counter-espionage; Act II, Scene X– Interrogation) are counterpoints to the action, unfolding towards a potential catastrophe right from the exposition through the conflict all the way to the climax. These details provide a marked contrast to the action. This view is supported by the fact that the tenant's arrival tears down the well-balanced world of a preliminary situation. Polarity is created by the contrast between the ‘talk’ about unfavourable social circumstances (depicted in the radio announcer's speech), implying a measure of dramatic quality at the level of meaning of the play, and the dance music (the Argentinian tango), ironically implying harmony that is actually false. Kovačević shifts the conflict from the realm of dialogue to create a conflict in the realm of sound. A speech act (which constitutes a basic unit of language) has been replaced by audio sensations. As such, it underscores transitions and forms part of the text as its structural element. A roaring

⁴ Kovačević, Dušan. 1998. *Balkanski špijun*, in *Odabrane drame I*, edited by Kovačević, Dušan. Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 221.

⁵ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 187.

⁶ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 235.

engine, recurring every time the gripping dramatic situation is brought to a fever pitch, additionally highlights the tenant's arrival.

The dialogue at the very beginning of the play defines the conflict between Ilija and the tenant. It takes place between Ilija and Danica.

*“Danica: Why did they call you?
(Ilija is silent. He shakes off the ashes, nervously, high above the ashtray. He pulls on his moustache with his fingers.)
Danica: Did they call you because...
Ilija: Because what?
Danica: Well, you said, maybe they were checking...
(Ilija stares at her, shaking his head.)
Ilija: You are going to drive me into my grave. Is he at home?
Danica: Who?
Ilija: My dead father! Who do you think? Our Tenant!
Danica: No.
Ilija: Where is he?
Danica: I don't know. He left this morning... he hasn't come back. What happened?
Ilija: Nothing. But... it's just beginning.
(His wife shrinks and sits, staring at her worried husband.)
Danica: Why did they call you?
Ilija: Because of him.
Danica: Because of him?
(Danica shifts on the chair, not knowing what to say, or how to continue.)”*⁷

The author thus postpones the tenant's appearance. By using pronouns (such as he, him), Kovačević suggests the tenant's mysteriousness. Juxtaposing two opinions in Act I, Scene I, the author confronts two possible ways of looking at the prime mover of the dramatic action. It will be shown later why this is important in terms of the point of view and the attitude of the audience towards dramatic illusion. Danica still sees the tenant as an ordinary man. In Ilija's opinion, he is dangerous.

*“Danica: Well, he said he studied at some school and twenty years ago he went to France and became a tailor. His brother is a tailor too. At least that's what Sonja says. She says that for now his stay is temporary, but he hopes to come to Belgrade for good. He is trying to open his own shop –
[...]
Ilija: That man, that Petar Markov Jakovljavić, that evil and dangerous man with his three names! They've had him under surveillance for a long time. They asked me what I knew. When did he arrive? What's he done? What's he told us? Who visits him? Does he have many friends?”*⁸

The situation is rather specific in terms of the play's comic structure/composition. The relationship established between the erring protagonist (such as in conventional tragedy), the antagonist and the *raisonneur* is inversely proportional to that which exists between characters in conventional comedy. Ilija Čvorović is the erring protagonist, and the character of Sonja could have played the role of the *raisonneur*, but she does not serve

⁷ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 188.

⁸ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 189.

that dramatic function at all. The character type of the antagonist does not exist in *Balkan Spy*. The tenant has potential to fulfil this role, but it does not happen. In order to create a comic structure, the erring protagonist needs to show a tendency towards imposing his obsessions (paranoid visions) on other participants throughout the development of the play's action. Finally, the erring protagonist must be 'brought back' to the state before the beginning of the play (to restore the harmony and order existing in the preliminary situation).

The character of Ilija Čvorović not only fails to return to the state of harmony, but manages to spread his paranoia to other characters as well. Danica accepts his delusional vision as truth and his brother Đura becomes his direct abettor. The characters of the tenant and Sonja are the antithesis of the three of them. Their relationship could have been developed to create another subplot in the play (and incorporate elements of melodrama by creating a love triangle between the tenant, Sonja and Dragan, Sonja's fiancé). Yet, Kovačević opts against developing the relationship any further in this direction. During a series of dramatic situations causing conflicts, Ilija repeats his obsessive action and has a tendency towards spreading it to others. A new 'order' is imposed, *i.e.* new functional relationships are built. Kovačević's protagonist stays in his own paranoid world. Therefore, there can be no recognition or reconciliation at the end of the play as at the end of typical (conventional) comedies and, accordingly, there is no restoration of balance. Such an ending is indicative of the author's intent to give the play the form of tragicomedy.

The main features of Kovačević's *Balkan Spy* are the complete unity of its dramatic action, with a linear and logical plot structure involving cyclic repetitions of situations at the beginning and at the end, the fact that it also has unities of place and time, and authentic characters whose motivations are grounded in psychological cause and effect. The action of the play with its causally-constructed plot reaches its climax in the final scene, which has potential to end in the way traditional comedies usually end. This, however, does not happen. Although the characters serve the plot following the typical principle underlying Aristotelian theatre, the final scene lacks the general recognition and reconciliation that is so characteristic of comedies. From the perspective of the play's structure and meaning, Ilija Čvorović's behaviour is fully appropriate (functionally positioned) as the play's action unfolds. He devises new ways of proving his tenant's guilt over and over again, thereby maintaining suspense in the play so that it is never broken from the beginning to the end.

Kovačević's application of the principles of postponement and intimation at the critical moments in the development of the action requires further analysis and discussion. Namely, every time that the plot develops towards an *anagnorisis* and a possible denouement, Kovačević purposefully interrupts such a line of action, leaving the audience to imagine what a character may have said or done. This technique is used to maintain dramatic tension and thus capture the audience's attention. Ilija's twin brother, Đura, appears at the end of Act I (Scene V – Attempted Murder). Ilija is supposed to tell him about the goings-on in the Čvorovićs' home. Kovačević has carefully set this scene and Ilija's story. Đura arrives, sits at the table, and moves his handgun from the back pocket

into the front pocket of his jacket, asking whether any of the household members have fallen ill. Kovačević then uses Ilija's brief conversation with Danica to prolong the conversation between the two brothers.

*"Ilija: Are the pastries burning?
Danica: No."*⁹

Ilija, then, gets up from his chair, crosses to the door of the tenant's room and tries to hear if there is anyone behind it. After eavesdropping, he goes to the cupboard, turns on the radio and turns up the volume. He finally comes back to sit at the table and only then does he start talking about the tenant *ab ovo*. The author sets out all these actions in detail in the stage directions. Act I ends precisely at the moment when Ilija starts reciting his monologue and Act II commences immediately after he finishes it, although the monologue itself remains unspoken somewhere in the 'interstice' between the two acts. The ending of Act I is such that the audience can only presume what Ilija may have told his brother, since Kovačević does not expressly give the contents of their dialogue or his monologue anywhere in the play. This creates an even greater sense of anticipation, *i.e.* builds up suspense and tension, and the audience cannot but wonder what will happen next, which serves as a force that moves the action, through which the storyline unfolds.

Balkan Spy is an example of Kovačević's dramaturgical inventiveness. In it, the author has successfully blended elements of both tragic and comic dramatic forms in one of his most popular characters. Placing a tragic protagonist in a series of comic situations, where every new dramatic situation is amplified (thus having a stronger comic effect) compared to the previous one, is not the only pre-condition for creating comic effect. It is undisputable that Ilija Čvorović is a great protagonist. Value judgements of the dramatic situations discussed above are formed depending on the point of view of every individual character in the play. This innovative dramaturgical device allows the playwright to integrate two relatively asymmetrical situations into one that determines how the world of the play is to be perceived. This is indicative of an important rule of theatre. The character portrayed in the play "is not confined strictly to the person".¹⁰ Instead, he pervades the theatrical world that revolves around him at its centre. The paranoid character in the play is not only Ilija Čvorović. That character is manifested in situations that determine other players, breaks them down and destroys them: he is also manifested in the manner in which his paranoia, his delusional 'logic' harasses the tenant and everyone around him in the world comprised of Ilija – Danica – Đura – Sonja – the tenant. Every individual dramatic situation has as many different dramatic possibilities as there are perspectives, which are in turn contingent on the point of view of every individual character.

Thus, despite involving a number of comic elements, *Balkan Spy* is still a drama and the tenant, Petar Markov Jakovljević, is the prime mover of its action. Dramaturgically speaking, the mystery in the Kovačević's play lies in

⁹ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 214-17.

¹⁰ Souriau, Étienne. 1982. *Mogućnosti tačke gledišta*, in *Dvesta hiljada dramskih situacija*, edited by Souriau, Etienne. Belgrade: NOLIT, 175.

the fact that at the very beginning, the prime mover of the story, the tenant, is rendered from the 'third-person' perspective, with subsequent shifts in the perspective throughout the play. The tenant is seen through the eyes of Ilija Čvorović or those of Danica. The point of view then shifts from Danica to Sonja. Despite Ilija's grotesque tirades and a series of comic situations, for aesthetic reasons the audience is not given any conclusive answer as to who the tenant actually is until the final scene of Act II ("Interrogation"). Dramaturgically speaking, the tenant has no 'functional' opportunity to (re)present himself within the play since some other character talks about him.

As a result of employing such dramaturgical methods (techniques), the inner tension of the main character outlines figures that define dramatic situations. The first begins with a dialogue between Ilija and Danica about why Ilija had to go to the police station. Only later does the audience learn why he had to go. The protagonist refers to the tenant as "he". "He" does not appear until the very end of Act I, Scene I. The tenant is intensely present in the world of the play, but he is only talked about until his postponed appearance, used by Kovačević to increase the tension in the play. The audience learn that there is a "he" in the house of the Čvorović family, but does not know who he is. "He" has arrived from France, is apparently a tailor and wants to open a store – this is the situation as seen from the point of view of Danica. Since "he is suspected by authorities", he must be "a spy" working for "the imperialist states". Ilija's perception of reality (the reality of the play) becomes the point of view of the audience for a moment, as Kovačević shifts the point of view back to Ilija. In other words, Kovačević skilfully changes point of view in order to create comic effect, not to confuse his audience. The tenant appears, but the audience is, dramaturgically speaking, 'unable' to make any value judgment about him except suppositions. Only in Act II, Scene VIII does Kovačević introduce a different perspective by shifting the point of view from Ilija to Sonja. A dialogue between Sonja and Danica casts light on what lies behind the conflict between Ilija and the tenant from a completely different angle. It is finally revealed what has been going on. The previously mentioned Scene VIII, entitled "A Discussion about the Father" in the dramatic text, introduces the perspective of a possible *raisonneur* (Sonja) into the comic structure. Because of the argument between Danica and Sonja, the protagonist and therefore the entire dramatic illusion is viewed from a completely different angle. Sonja's point of view, which corresponds to the 'third person' point of view (the perspective of the playwright) in the scene called "Interrogation" (Scene X, Act II) finally sheds light on Ilija's motivation.

*"Sonja: Do I have to explain it all to you as if you were a little child? He's had a nervous breakdown. He's got it into his head to drive our Tenant away, in fact he is driving him away. And tailing people he doesn't even know. He doesn't go to work, he's going into debt, he's buying stupid things, hauling in useless equipment and dogs. He'll kill someone. He'll end up in a mental hospital. It's urgent that he gets treatment."*¹¹

Analogous to Act I, Scene I (the dialogue between Danica and Ilija), Sonja and Danica talk about the tenant using only pronouns to refer to him and express

¹¹ Souriau, *Mogućnosti tačke gledišta*, 227.

conflicting value judgments, with Danica adopting Ilija's point of view. As long as Ilija's point of view is present, the action of the play has the tone of the dramatic mode. The comic effect is achieved by the opposition between the two perspectives, Ilija's and Sonja's, *i.e.* Ilija's perception of reality and the real reason for viewing reality in that way. The audience therefore perceives the effect of the dramatic action (the dramatic illusion) as comic.

Balkan Spy follows a conventional dramatic structure (with events following one after another according to the law of probability or necessity), and the only element that involves a departure from the causal development of its realistic story are the sound effects used in the play. This departure is manifested as cyclic repetitions of the voice of the radio announcer and the sound of the dance music. In keeping with such a literary *procédé* (the realistic one, to be specific) that is typical of Kovačević's works from the period of the early 1980s, the behaviour of his characters is motivated to the extent that is necessary for the development of the storyline, along with a more detailed depiction of the main character's psychology. This feature of *Balkan Spy* may be interpreted as the writer's aim to offer a full, complete, and comprehensive explanation for the position of the protagonist in the world of the play that revolves around him. To achieve this, Kovačević not only uses literary devices such as dialogue and monologue, but also puts his tragic anti-hero into a series of comic situations, gradually amplifying their comic effect as the story line unfolds.

With regard to the theme and meaning of the play, Kovačević problematises the mindset of an individual, linking it to the destructive effects of a totalitarian regime. The intended meaning of the play must therefore encompass a re-examination of its political, social, and psychological context. However, *Balkan Spy* does not have political satire as its only aim. The central focus of Kovačević's dramatic interest is the state of a totalitarian mind and a cultural model in which such a society and such an individual can be created. The feeling of absurdity resulting from a hyperbolic and grotesque portrayal of the main character, Ilija Čvorović, who is at the same time easily recognisable and believable as a type of person who is unfailingly loyal to the ideology that created him, constitute one of several elements due to which this play is counted among the works of modern drama. Others include the author's application of the principle of postponement, an unexpected and tragicomic ending, as well as the ironic laughter of condemnation.

Balkan Spy includes a range of situations that make the audience laugh. However, the inner conflict occurring in the main character requires a more serious analysis than that found in the works of literary criticism that have dealt with this topic to date. Instead of depicting a comedy hero, Kovačević portrays an ideologue. He has substituted ideology for the actions of a typical comedy hero, *i.e.* mechanical repetitive acts and automatic reactions that prevent him from comprehending the reality he is in (thereby producing effects which make the audience/readers laugh). The audience learns this only at the end of the play, when Ilija Čvorović makes his agonising and emotional confession. What comes before this scene is still not sufficient to steer us towards viewing the play in the tragic mode.

Ilija Čvorović's ideological madness leads him to adopt a distorted view of reality. His perception of things is determined by his own predefined and absolute truth. Ilija uncritically fits everything he sees, experiences or hears into his own vision of reality. For instance, the "testimony" of the tenant's uncle (wherein he obviously repeats the lie told at the trial in 1946) allows him to believe without reservation in the "truth" he himself has created; going to the opera becomes in his mind a conspiratorial meeting of spies because Ilija cannot comprehend why an "honorable" person would even go to the opera.

"Ilija: That night they went to the opera, and the Tenant's girlfriend, the journalist, joined them. He's surrounded, you see, by people of such importance. These are not ordinary people. Anybody he shakes hands with is a well-known someone or something. There are spies all around us. We just need to know how to recognise them. Now, when I see one, I know exactly what he is. When they entered, I bought a ticket and followed them. Their seats were in the orchestra. I was in the balcony.

Danica: You went to the opera?

Ilija: Yes.

Danica: What did you see?

Ilija: Them. The opera didn't matter!

Dura: What a man has to endure because of these criminals.

Ilija: I wondered why they went to the opera, but when the performance began, I understood everything; there, they could whisper in peace because on stage they never stop bellowing. But the real reason they were there, I learned during intermission."¹²

At the same time, Kovačević has deprived his anti-hero of the ability to perceive the obvious reality. Reports given by the radio announcer provide an insight into the kind of country in which the Čvorovićs live. When the tenant talks about these issues, Ilija's reactions to his words are consistent with the twilight state. The tenant leads an ordinary life: he sees his friends, goes out for lunch, goes to the theatre, endeavours to open a tailor shop in the face of the overbearing bureaucratic machinery; Ilija Čvorović, on the other hand, eavesdrops on his conversations, follows him, peeps through a little hole in the ceiling, writes anonymous letters, stalks him. Ilija perceives the bad in the objective reality as natural and normal, whereas anything that is usual is fraught with impending danger for him. The mechanism of inverting the main character's sense of reality (Ilija's saying that "everything is on the contrary to how it appears")¹³ is the fundamental principle of dramatic composition applied in *Balkan Spy*. It facilitates a connecting ideology that destroys the individual (an element of tragedy) with the mechanism of repetition typical of conventional comedy.

Providing motivation for his protagonist's behaviour in his psychology, Dušan Kovačević depicts a totalitarian system that is responsible for creating such an individual. Despite his sense of duty and possibly pleasure in "straightening out a man",¹⁴ as well as his emotional confession about National Security Day,

¹² Kovačević, Dušan. 1998. *Balkanski špijun*, in *Odabrane drame I*, edited by Kovačević, Dušan. Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 221-22.

¹³ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 220.

¹⁴ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 247.

which represent some aspects of Kovačević's protagonist, his character still belongs to the genre of comedy.

Ilija has another motivation which is much more serious – fear. Wanting to prevent any possibility of falling under suspicion (which cost him two years in prison on Goli Otok in 1949), he does not begin his operation until it dawns on him that the police might suspect him as well. This is supported by a dialogue that takes place between Ilija and Danica just before the closing of Act I, Scene II (“Ilija’s First Day at Work”):

“Danica: Ilija, you, poor man, are you alright?”

Ilija: No, I'm not! Not when I have to deal with this! I wouldn't give a damn what he's doing, where they're meeting or what they're planning, if only that... that criminal didn't live in my house! Tomorrow, my name will be dragged through the news, when they report where he's been hiding out, making his plans. And he organises it all. The others looked at him as if he was God. He talks, he explains, he orders – the others sit and listen.

Danica: Calm down, Ilija. You need your medicine.

Ilija: I have lived honourably and I will die honourably. He is not going to turn my life into shit, so that people can look at me and point their fingers. These are hostile groups organised from outside the country He's got plenty of money to bribe people with. And he's going to open a tailor shop – he can tell that story to his dead father.”¹⁵

Kovačević has given Ilija the attributes of a man who is ready to endure violence as well as to inflict it whenever he can. This dialogue is indicative of the fact that, from his distorted perspective, truth is not something that everybody should be concerned with. Instead, truth falls within the remit of people who are responsible for it and paid to deal with it. Another important moment in the play that corroborates the opinion that Ilija is haunted by feelings of guilt and fear is the arrival of his brother Đura:

“Ilija: I'll tell you everything. First, I thought they called because of me. You yourself know that when you've done time, you're never at peace. You think someone is always checking up on you. And I know I haven't done anything. But I thought, with this world in such a situation – well, a lot's been written about that.”¹⁶ (Emphasis added)

It is evident that those two years in prison on Goli Otok seriously affected Ilija Čvorović and turned him into an authoritarian personality, because he is afraid even of the thought that the police might suspect him.

To achieve a psychological portrayal of the main character, Kovačević uses a wide range of stylistic devices and dramaturgical techniques. Ilija Čvorović is a character whose personal drama is set as the inner conflict of character. His state of mind is the consequence of an ideology, even though Ilija is set into a series of comic situations. Kovačević gradually amplifies these situations as the storyline unfolds. Finally, an unexpected and tragicomic ending provokes the ironic laughter of condemnation. The monologue at the end of *Balkan Spy* lays bare everything that haunts and torments Ilija Čvorović to uncover why he is

¹⁵ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 200.

¹⁶ Kovačević, *Balkanski špijun*, 215.

what he is. The third reason behind his ideological madness is hatred. Ilija's profession and justification of his loyalty for Stalin suddenly turns into hatred as soon as he loses self-control in a fit of rage. That is the moment when Kovačević's anti-hero steps out of the comic genre. His terrifying admission and justification of crimes reveals an ideological mind created by fear and violence. Dušan Kovačević has managed to show how an ordinary man, due to a lack of capacity for rational reasoning, destroys himself as well as everything around him, including his family. That is why the ending of *Balkan Spy* seems so disturbing. Inciting laughter and drawing on the comic pattern, with a protagonist transformed into a man of ideology, *Balkan Spy* consequently approaches tragicomedy. The main protagonist of the play turns into a grotesquely distorted, tragicomic character.

The comedy of *Balkan Spy* arises also from the fact that the dramatic situations depicted in the play carry two different meanings. They have a meaning that is assigned to them by the audience, and another that is conditioned by the protagonist's point of view, which is contrary to the circumstances of the real world. In ordinary, everyday and banal situations, Ilija Čvorović perceives something that does not exist. Kovačević eliminates sympathy and empathy towards Ilija, which allows him to treat his play as a comedy. At the same time, the audience watching or reading the play is on the fence about two opposing interpretations of the mysterious tenant. In Henri Bergson's sense, this technique is known as "the inversion of common sense".¹⁷ It consists of the protagonist's efforts to mould reality to an idea of his own, instead of moulding his ideas to fit reality. He sees before him only what he thinks of, instead of thinking what he sees. Once the illusion has been created, Čvorović continues to develop it in all its consequences. Kovačević's protagonist basically lacks flexibility of opinion, which ultimately brings him to his ruin. Ilija adapts all real events to his distorted view of reality. His fixed idea and his insanity are projected into the world of the play, although Kovačević chooses not to show every projection explicitly.

What, then, provokes laughter if the protagonist is in a state of insanity? By depicting a series of hyperbolic situations and giving caricatures of realistic as well as coarse scenes, Dušan Kovačević brings his characters into a comic, even absurd, state, since all their assumptions, regardless of how dangerous they may be, clash with the reality of the events in the play. The fact that Ilija and Đura resemble one another physically because they are twins is an indirect and implied warning that evil is capable of propagating and spreading. Because of their hatred and aggressive and violent behaviour, as well as the danger posed by such a type of people and political systems that breed them, *Balkan Spy* takes on the meaning of a political and social satire.

It is impossible to untangle where the comic ends and the tragic begins in *Balkan Spy* and vice versa. The playwright's talent and application of appropriate artistic techniques determine how far the envelope of dramatic composition can be pushed. A moderately exaggerated personal trait can become a subject matter of a comedy. In the case of Kovačević's play, that trait

¹⁷ Bergson, Henri. 1987. *Komika situacije i komika riječi*, in *Smijeh, Esej o značenju komičnog*, edited by Bergson, Henri. Zagreb: Znanje, 64.

leads to devastating and tragic consequences, having bearing on the meaning of the dramatic text.

Exaggeration is not the only device used by Kovačević to render his comic characters. There is only so much that can be achieved by exaggeration. The playwright mainly exaggerates negative mental traits of his characters. To provoke laughter among the audience, these negative qualities must not become vices, *i.e.* they may not be a cause for empathy for the sufferings of the main character. For instance, Kovačević takes Ilija's ideological mind, fear and hate to the point where they turn into a fatal passion. In addition to the laughter of condemnation, the destiny of Ilija Čvorović causes fear and unrest. The writer, thus, once again, incorporates the elements of grotesque realism into the play.

Not once does Kovačević lose a sense of proportion. Adding a tone or two to the tragic intonation of the play and this character would not be funny at all. Ilija's fear and relative diligence are not characteristics that can cancel out his negative traits. Rather, their function is to add to the truthfulness and reality of the protagonist's life. That is why he is, in terms of the artistic skills used to depict him, a convincing type, and we can accept him as a truthful character that could exist in reality. As opposed to him, Đura is something of a prototype or a mock-up of Ilija's caricature. Undoubtedly, the writer's satirical and political intention played a part in the development of those two characters, which is why the Čvorović brothers have been caricatured as proponents of a totalitarian ideology. However, this is the point where caricatural distortion is separated from satire and developed further by transforming human beings into rigid and mechanical puppets. Such 'willing' caricature that is no longer rooted only in satire determines the protagonist's physical appearance, how he moves, thinks, and speaks. In that context, we can talk about a distinctive type of the "Kafkaesque grotesque",¹⁸ as modified by Kovačević, which in addition to the elements mentioned above, predominately features objectively portrayed elements of hopeless tragedy (cold objectivity) and a lack of emotional perspective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this article, I have considered a number of external and internal agents that have determined grotesque realism in the play *Balkan Spy*. The analysis included the issues relating to the genre classification of plays, its structure, the characteristics of the action, as well as the definition of mechanisms of grotesque employed through characters, and bitter/dry humor - the key elements of Kovačević's tragicomic world of dramatic illusion.

Balkan spy is structured as a conventional dramatic form with events that are causally constituted, *i.e.* they fall down according to the probability and necessity of the plot. However, the deviation is significant in the cyclical repetition of the voice of the radio-player and the music (Argentine tango). In addition, Kovačević portrays characters that are true to life in a particularly

¹⁸ Kayser, Wolfgang. 2004. *Groteskno u moderni*, in *Groteskno u slikarstvu i pesništvu*, edited by Kayser, Wolfgang. Novi Sad: Svetovi, 206.

believable and artistically distinctive manner. None of his works could be categorised as belonging exclusively to the comic or the tragic mode, since the comic does not exist without the tragic and vice versa. What is important is the relationship between these two elements. In *Balkan Spy*, that relationship is organic and permanent. A study of the techniques used by Kovačević to successfully create comic characters leads to the conclusion that, in portraying Ilija Čvorović, he has created a character that exists on the very verge of comedy and tragedy. Realistic and psychologically motivated heroes defines the position of the protagonist in the world of play. In order to achieve a comic effect, Kovačević brought Ilija Čvorović, into a series of comical even absurd situations that become more frequent as the plot progresses. His portrayal is, at the same time, shaped psychologically (the character's mental experiences) and physically (gestures), due to which he remains in the sphere of comedy. Although Ilija himself lacks the capacity to see how he appears to others (being comically unaware of himself), his mien is visible to the audience. Kovačević uses this contrast to provoke the booming laughter of condemnation in his dark comedy. The unflinching dynamics of their 'passion' can be understood also in the way of a fixed idea, as the display of the discord between man and the world in Kovačević's curved everyday life always contains something comical.

Disrupting the comic tone of the play by an unexpected, absurd and paradoxical ending full of irony and bitter/dry humour does not provoke laughter so much as it makes the audience ask themselves whether the horrifying possibility of indestructible evil could actually be the dreadful truth. Being stylised in the mixed genre of tragicomedy, the plot and the protagonist of *Balkan Spy* belong to the system of grotesque realism. The figure of Ilija Čvorović fits well into the existing system, adding to the multiple layers and complexity of Kovačević's play, which has outstanding artistic merits. An analysis of the devices used to create comic characters shows that Dušan Kovačević has managed to render a character that inhabits the very bounds between comedy and tragedy. In that context, what emerges is a type of male protagonist modified by Kovačević and belonging to the system of grotesque realism.

The grotesque realism of *Balkan Spy* is, therefore, achieved through the caricatural and hyperbolic distortion of Ilija Čvorović as a character and by introducing the motifs of madness and the double (his brother Đura). The animalisation of a human being is manifested in the protagonist's inner metamorphosis into a beast. At the same time, by looking at the socio-political and psychological contexts in a different light, Kovačević has demythologised the image of the so-called harmless little man. In other words, he has divested the tragic anti-hero, the denouement and the ideological views of their reliance on pathos. With regard to the comical stylisation of the language of the play, the author uses devices typical of the literary genre of comedy. The paradoxical ending of this open-ended play, as well as its ironic perspective, have disrupted the comic tone of *Balkan Spy*. The feeling of absurdity arises from the manner in which the protagonist is rendered, as he doubles, multiplies, and destroys everything around himself. The principle of postponement, the unexpected, tragicomic and absurd ending of the play, as well as the laughter of condemnation and irony, are all characteristics of *Balkan Spy* that ensure the play definitely enters the realm of the theatre of grotesque realism.

Finally, the diverse intonation and the range of Kovačević's laughter, often cynical and sarcastic, seek an intellectually ingenious audience. Therefore, the whole range, with all its features and aspects, in an innovative and original way has served the author to critically review the fate of a man, regardless of historical and political data. It is incalculable, terrible and merciless, without consolation and faith in the possibility of change. That's why bitter/dry humour is the strongest confirmed in the grotesque, tragic and caricature scenes created by the dramatic illusion of Dušan Kovačević. The objective world is deformed, becoming broken, inverted, unstable. The playwright sees reality from a stiff and black-skinned vision. The paradox of the so-constituted world of dramatic illusion is that the deformed vision turns out to be the most exacting. The sense of absurdity is largely manifested as a grotesque. It violates the established genre rules both in terms of meaning and in terms of the structure of the dramatic illusion. Kovačević, therefore, sees the world in all its contradictions and deformations. Bitter/dry humor allows the rejection of a rational, and its possible acceptance is caused by creepy laughter, that is also chanting and ridiculing.

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