

The Apparitional Gay and the Invisible Everyone Else – LGBTQ+ Identities in Contemporary Croatian Playwriting

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Abstract: Although Croatian literary fiction has lately seen a noticeable rise in LGBTQ+ authors and themes, the same cannot be said about the sphere of playwriting. Seldom clearly outed and openly represented as homosexual, LGBTQ+ characters in Croatian drama are actually always – gay men, always accompanied by at least a little dose of (auto)homophobia. This means that the entirety of other “sexually variant” identities – including lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer – are quite literally invisible.

As far as the representation of gay men is concerned, I will approach it through the concept of the *apparitional lesbian*, borrowed from Terry Castle, who uses it in order to describe the “haunting” presence of lesbian identities in the history of literature. In my presentation, I will argue that the same concept can be applied to the ways gay men are present in contemporary Croatian plays.

More often hidden than exposed, silent than loud, confused than lucid, the *apparitional gay* in Croatian playwriting thus becomes the prototypical figure that reveals the mainstream social attitude towards LGBTQ+ identities in the wider social sphere. Examining works by authors such as Vladimir Stojsavljević, Tomislav Zajec, Dino Pešut and Goran Ferčec, whose works are the (only) ones that have featured gay characters in Croatian plays, I will draw out the contours of this *apparitional gay* figure. I will analyze the way he has thus far “lived” in Croatian theatres, exploring the paradoxes of his existence, while simultaneously pointing out that a research of this kind has never taken place before.

Keywords: Terry Castle, Croatian playwriting, Croatian theatre, LGBTQ+ plays, Tomislav Zajec, Dino Pešut

In 2018 I was invited to take part in the round table *Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Croatian Plays* in Zagreb Youth Theatre, in connection with one of the theatre’s premieres, quite symbolically titled *What is Missing* [*Ono što nedostaje*]. The moderator, a

queer writer himself, Srđan Sandić¹ invited Darko Lukić, also a queer writer, dramaturg and researcher, and me as speakers. When I first received the call, I asked Sandić what exactly we are going to talk about, since, from what I knew, there really were not many openly homosexual identities in contemporary Croatian plays.

This scarcity, as it turned out, was one of the main topics of our round table, echoing Terry Castle's claim asserted in her groundbreaking exploration of lesbian characters in the literary canon. In *The Apparitional Lesbian* Castle writes how "for too long our thinking has been dominated by a kind of scarcity model: either there aren't any lesbians at all, or too few to matter" (18, 19), whereas she used the rest of her book to prove this kind of oblivious thinking wrong, with one of the central questions of her book being: "why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us?" (4). In this paper, I will ask the same question in relation to the existence of all LGBTQ+ identities in the Croatian dramatic canon.

Although an important aspect of Castle's research refers to the problematic relations inscribed in the, too rarely problematised, acronym LGBTQ+, namely the fact that too often "we 'forget' about the lesbian by focusing instead on gay men" (12), my research will reiterate exactly that same position she holds problematic. Not because of my own convictions but thanks to the reality of the material at hand.

While one can find some, albeit rather scarce and often hardly visible, traces of homosexual identities in contemporary Croatian playwriting, all other identities are almost completely lacking. To be more precise, if one were to express oneself in numbers, one could say there are around 12 openly gay characters in the history of Croatian drama, 2 lesbians and 1 transvestite. And more often than not, they have not been the main characters in their plays. And even when that was the case, their non-normative sexuality was never the central issue of the pieces at stake.

The first historical appearance of a homosexual act in the works of Croatian dramatists appears in *Marlowe* by Vladimir Stojsavljević. The first part of his *Elizabethan Trilogy* (for a detailed interpretation see Govedić "Volja") features a gay sex scene, obviously relying on frequent scholarly claims about Christopher Marlowe's homosexuality (Dickson). Although the stage instructions do not venture further from stating that the time and place of the scene are *Night* and *Somewhere*, the dialogue between the two characters, Marlowe and Ingram, clearly suggests some anal sex is happening.

Interestingly enough, after *Marlowe* it took another ten years for gays to appear again in a Croatian play, and once again, thanks to Stojsavljević. His *Love Gossip* [*Trač*

1 Since his work was never staged in a professional setting I did not include him in this analysis, focusing instead exclusively on the authors whose texts have been put on stage as professional performances.

o ljubavi] from 1994, premiered a year later in Zagreb's Theatre &TD, directed by the author himself, was the first play to feature explicit mention of the word *fag* (*peder*). A story about three characters, two brothers and two gays, was much more explicit in putting a homosexual relationship directly on stage, although not so explicit as to show its carnal, physical aspect or to repeat the word *fag* once more (Ružić "Iluzija"). For that to happen, we will have to wait another 20 years. *Love Gossip* features another *first* when Croatian playwriting is concerned – it was the first one to deal with the theme of the HIV epidemic, although the name of the disease is never spoken out loud.

During the ten years after Stojsavljević there was one more play dealing with non-normative sexualities – *John Smith, Princess of Wales* [*John Smith, princeza od Walesa*] by Tomislav Zajec, subtitled *An Event from British Life, in one scene* [*Zgoda iz britanskog života, u jednom prizoru*]. It was the first text published by an author that would, in the following years, rise to be one of the most prominent and proliferate playwrights in the region.

Zajec's first play tells the story of John Smith, a British car mechanic, obsessed with Lady Di to such a degree that he often takes on her identity, by means of her clothes and make-up. The trouble starts when his surroundings, meaning his ex-wife, one of his customers and his boss, find out about it. Although some critics insist on differentiating John Smith's transvestitism from transgender and transsexual practices, limiting his transgression only to cross-dressing (Baković 196), I opt for a more courageous reading in which John Smith is one of those rare LGBTQ+ characters in Croatian plays that are not (only) gay. The text, I believe offers more than one indication for such a reading, from Diana as the ultimate gay icon (for a detailed analysis of the ways in which Lady Di is queer, see Spurlin) to its fatalistic ending in which John Smith kills all the other characters in a sudden burst of violence. In this sense, I believe that *John Smith* is an obvious manifestation of transphobic feelings, pathologising this identity and reducing its complexities.

Zajec is also the author of another gay-themed play, *What Is Missing* from 2015, staged in 2017, that Ružić describes as "at times funny, and precisely structured, but at the same time full of common places which add a tone of banality to everyday tragedies" ("Uvjerljiva dominacija"). Interestingly enough, another critic, Nina Ožegović, calls Zajec's text a "multilayered, lively, intelligent, strong, touching and poetic text that is also very brave and, in relation to the dominant conservative-catholic discourse in Croatia, even subversive and provocative", pointing out later on that the performance based on it contains probably "the most explicit depiction of a homosexual act in Croatian theatre" ("Ono što nedostaje"). Although there is no sex on stage, there is kissing that could probably be also characterised as foreplay, so Ožegović's claim possibly holds true.

But, at the same time, it feels like the author did not get rid of the homophobia prevalent in his earlier piece as both of his two gay characters are pretty bad at

handling their sexuality, a feeling that is best expressed in the following sentence one of them says to his *girlfriend*: “As if there is some tragic mistake ... somewhere ... inside of me”. That is also the most explicit they will get when it comes to words, showing once again how coming out is sometimes much more difficult to get by in language than in the physical world.

Of course, it is not the only play that suffers from this syndrome. Firstly written as a film script and produced as a feature film in 2002, *Fine Dead Girls* [*Fine mrtve djevojke*] was later, in 2013, adapted for stage too, with the same team behind it. Writer Mate Matišić and director Dalibor Matanić, two of the most prolific and popular contemporary authors, created a movie that has, as Mima Simić writes in her review (“Fine mrtve”), entered the canon as the first lesbian movie in Croatian history. But, unfortunately, the aim of Simić’s text is to prove that “not only it is not a lesbian movie, but a sexist and patriarchal product which operates in the same cruel film tradition that represents lesbians (and women) as victims, and posits lesbian relationships as an impossibility”. The problem is that one cannot resist the feeling that the lesbian identity was only chosen by the authors as the best possible contrasting factor used for criticising Croatian society, not because of their genuine interest in the topic. And it seems that the film’s theatrical adaptation suffers from the same problem. Writing about the staging which “becomes darker and more bitter than the movie” (Govedić “Fine”), Ružić effectively summarizes the authorial position stating how “the director and the dramatist seemingly have a heart for everyone, but in reality they don’t have it for anyone, not even for the two leading heroines” (“Duhovit i provokativan”).

The most problematic layer of the representation of lesbian identities in this movie, which is then also transported to the play, is, as Simić writes, the fact that the two main characters “treat their homosexuality as, what Weiss calls the ‘happen to be gay’ syndrome that shouldn’t and couldn’t have any wider implications on the society” (“Fine mrtve”). That is also why the film ends with one of them dying, while the other is reintegrated into the heterosexual matrix where she erases her previous sexual identity. As Dolan writes, “death or exile as plot devices appear often in lesbian plays of the 1980s, as if the playwrights, while describing lesbian life, could only write their characters’ strengths [...] by later punishing them with tragedies” (491) and this text proves that some cultural contexts are still stuck in the same paradigm that does not allow for different scenarios when LGBTQ+ identities are in question.

Clearly, both *Fine Dead Girls* and *John Smith, Princess of Wales* are examples of texts that work on affirming what Clum would call the outside or heterosexual point of view towards the gay subject matter (171) with *What is Missing* being stuck somewhere in the middle. During and after the 2000s, there were two more authors whose plays included

non-heterosexual characters which could be considered as more *inside* examples of gay representation on stage – Goran Ferčec and Dino Pešut.

Two Ferčec's texts featured gay men as main characters, although one of them, *A Letter to Heiner M.* [*Pismo Heineru M.*] from 2008, which can also be read as an open love letter to the German writer and director Heiner Müller, only very marginally hints at the characters' homosexuality, focusing instead on elements of political identity of an unnamed Eastern European author.

His other text *Cruising* [*Kruženje*] from 2007, subtitled *Fragments of the Discourse of Desire* [*Fragmenti diskursa žudnje*] deals with the activity of cruising, typical for the gay community, openly discussing different parts of this "mating ritual", but in a very poetic way which paradoxically often obscures its homosexual subtext. The piece offers seven different possible locations as its setting, unsurprisingly, all of them unguarded public spaces, mostly parks, which are known as cruising spaces *par excellence*. Abundant with metaphors, the basic one being the one that identifies cruising with hunting, it often invokes themes of fear and secrecy, thus wrapping the whole narrative in an air of danger, transgression and even guilt, with shame never being more than a few steps away. And although this text is supposed to be all about sexuality, sexuality is seldom spoken of explicitly.

It is thus not surprising that, reading Ferčec's work, Terry Castle's words are easily invoked, especially when she writes how "the lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night" (2). Although part of the reason can definitely be found in the subtleness and elusiveness which are a trademark of Ferčec's writing in general, using such language results in compliance with the apparitional mode of thinking about LGBTQ+ identities.

The youngest of all the authors involved in this research, Dino Pešut has started working in the 2010s and has been the only Croatian playwright continuously "using" homosexual identities in almost all of his plays. Pešut's four award-winning texts: *L.O.S.E.R.S.* [*L.U.Z.E.R.I.*] written in 2012, *(Pen)ultimate Panda or Static* [*(Pret)posljednja panda ili statika*] written in 2014, *Grand Hotel Abyss* [*Veliki hotel bezdan*] and *Stela, flood* [*Stela, poplava*], both from 2016, all feature at least one gay character. And although, with the exception of *L.O.S.E.R.S.* to some extent, none of his works deal directly with their sexuality, and although their sexuality is often presented as something more burdensome than pleasant, and although it always stays at the margins of the main plot lines, what is common to all of them is the fact they speak about it in an open way. Whereas one could easily be confused about the sexuality of characters from previously mentioned plays, Pešut leaves no doubt in this sense. When speaking about the love that dares not speak its name, he dares do it.

The word *fag* is spoken out aloud often and without shame, as is the word *gay*, often accompanied with a healthy dose of irony. Stereotypes are frequently invoked,

but never to be reinforced, always to be deconstructed. Although sometimes quite far away one from another, the universes of his plays all share the same combination of social and political concerns intertwined with the personal sphere so it is only natural the stigma his characters carry because of their sexuality is never exclusively posed as a personal one, but always demonstrated as “inherited” from the society. Having said that, when one takes in consideration the totality of his work, Pešut has definitely done a lot to bring visibility to the gay identities in Croatian theatre, making a huge leap forward from previous shy and hidden representations, a leap that has to do, no doubt, not only with his personal voice, but also more importantly with the changes that have happened in the social fabric of the Croatian society in the past 20 years.

Ending this short overview, I want to point out that, in pursuing this kind of analysis, my aim was definitely not to put responsibility on individual authors or blame them for “wrong” representations. As we all know, the line between *problematic representations* and *representations of problematic issues* is often a fine one, and as long as LGBTQ+ remains a problematic issue, its representations will be prone to that kind of readings.

Another *caveat* concerns the fact that I have focused exclusively on characters that have offered direct “proof” of their LGBTQ+ identity. I am aware of all the dangers this kind of reductive reading implies but my interest here lied primarily in exploring the dynamic of the dramatic field and its relations towards LGBTQ+ identities in its totality, during the last thirty plus years, since the first non-hetero character appeared on the Croatian (then Yugoslav) stage. Since this kind of research was previously never pursued, and in this sense I consider it as only the first step, a kind of prerequisite for future, more transgressive, in-depth and complex, analyses which will hopefully broaden the narrow scope I was compelled to abide to.

After all is said and done, I can only conclude that, while Jill Dolan asserts that some “theorists and artists believe ‘lesbian and gay drama’ is already an archaic category, no longer necessary because such work has gradually assimilated into mainstream theatre and performance” (486), Croatian playwriting is still very far from that kind of assimilation. In other words, if we use the central thesis that Simić offers in her analysis of *Fine Dead Girls* (“Fine mrtve”), namely that the film touches upon the sexuality issue just superficially and that it is thus not a real lesbian movie, we could, in the same manner conclude that the Croatian stage has yet to wait its first real LGBTQ+ play.

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