

## PARTISAN DRAMA (1941—1945)

### Introduction

There has been a lively theatrical activity in the partisan army during the second world war, which stimulated also the production of number of theatrical texts. This article is an abbreviated version of a larger research of these texts and historical development of partisan theatre, therefore I will try to present the formation and work of the most important theatre groups (Slovenian National Theatre on a freed territory and some of the military groups), and analyse the structure of original texts by using an analogy with *commedia dell'arte*, which is limited to fixed characters and situations. I will do this by going through two plays — Vitomil Zupan's *Birth in a Storm* and *Mother* by Mile Klopčič — in detail, in Conclusion, however, I will try to present a wider image of this part of Slovenian dramatic literature by taking into account numerous other plays which are listed under Analysed agitkas at the end.

At the very beginning we have to clarify some terminological questions that stem from former research of our matter, the most exhaustive being *Literature in War Years 1941—1945* by Viktor Smolej and *Partisan Dramatic Literature* by Ferdo Fischer. They use terms sketch and report (on-the-spot report), as these were expressions that were used among theatre people in the partisan army. After the war partisan dramatic texts used to be called sketches also because this stresses their shortness and unpretentiousness. As it isn't suitable for longer and more complex texts, that are rare, but nevertheless exist, Matjaž Kmecl in his *Mala literarna teorija* (1976), uses also the term agitka, which is taken from Russian revolutionary and social-realistic theory of drama. This term seems much more suitable, as it doesn't specify the length of the pieces, but puts out the main quality of these texts, being agitation and propaganda for the partisan movement and communist revolution. It has been finally put forward by Andrej Inkret

in *Enciklopedija Slovenije* (1987). These agitkas were never performed alone, but as a part of so called meetings that Jože Tiran, actor and organiser of theatrical life in partisan army, described as follows: "On meetings we performed various things: from solo songs accompanied by accordion, to recitations, artistic narration, sketches, choir singing, solo accordion, duets, trios, ballet and folklore dances. Usually the meeting started with commissar's speech about political issues, which was followed by recitation and the rest of the programme. At the end we put something humorous to lighten up the atmosphere" (Smolej 1971: 281). (translated by G.T.) Now, let us look into the historical development of the partisan theatre.

### The development of theatre groups

As dramatic literature needs a large theatrical apparatus for it's performance it is in the least favourable situation during the war time. Theatres were established mainly on freed territories, which were usually recaptured by the Germans or Italians soon afterwards. First such theatre, named Agitteater, was formed in Stari log (in Dolenjska region, south from Ljubljana) in the last week of June and the first of July 1942. Agitteater seized to exist even before it gave it's first performance, as the territory was conquered again by the occupational forces.

Just before the capitulation of Italy, in summer of 1943, the headquarters of partisan army declared a general mobilisation of cultural workers, which stimulated a large number of professional actors, singers, musicians etc. to join the resistance forces. The consequence of that was the second theatre group in Dolenjska region, named Jerman's group after it's leader Janez Jerman. They performed first two important partisan dramas — *Mother* by Mile Klopčič and *The Evening under Hmeljnik* by Edvard Kocbek — on the Assembly of delegates of Slovenian nation which took place from 1. till 3. 10. 1943 in Kočevje. *Mother* instantly became a hit, was translated in Croatian, French, Slovakian and Romanian language. It was played not only in former Yugoslavia, but also abroad in Algeria and after the war in the USA. Jerman's group soon afterwards became a victim of a German offensive that started on the 21. 10. 1943.

Despite that Jerman's group was destined to play a significant role

in our theatrical history. The plan to reform the group into Slovenian national theatre had to be postponed and slightly altered because of the offensive, but it finally came to life by the decree from the 12. 1. 1944. The season opened on 20. 2. 1944 with performance of *King at Betajnova* by Ivan Cankar and lasted continuously till May 1945, when SNT (Slovenian national theatre) performed in Zadar (Croatia), where it had to withdraw because of the last fights going on in Slovenia. The best performances chosen by its manager Filip Kumbatovič Kalan were Moliere's *Le malade imaginaire*, *The Bear* and *The Proposal* by A. P. Chekhov and some parts from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. A large part of the repertoire consisted of original Slovenian plays that were mainly written in the last two years of war. Those were: *Hard hour*, *Tatterdemalions* and *The Jail Has Opened* by Matej Bor; *Three Clocks Lagging Behind*, *Revolt* and *Jelenov žleb* by Vitomil Zupan; *Mother* by Klopčič; *Crime on the Square of Novo mesto* by Jože Bon. They also organised two training courses for young talents in March 1944 in Črnomelj, and a month later in Semič. There has been around 50 students, taught by some prominent theatrical workers from before the war — Josip Vidmar, Filip Kumbatovič, Matej Bor, Dragotin Cvetko, Jože Tiran, Zvone Sintič and others. These students later became the backbone of the military theatre groups such as Frontno gledališče of the VII. Corpus in Dolenjska region and Theatre group of the IX. Corpus in Primorska region. The latter also performed in northern Italy seemingly to both Slovenian and Italian population, as we have some translations of partisan dramas in Italian.

#### Structure of agitka

Working conditions in partisan theatre groups were harsh if not almost impossible, as they had to perform in the middle of fights and in all thinkable places (in the woods, in front of a barn, in taverns etc.). After the establishment of the SNT the conditions got a bit better, but now the demand for new plays was increasing rapidly. Everyone was asked to write new works, but this led to total lack of quality and control over the ideological points of contents, which is why they later chose to publish only works by certain authors. The plays had to be produced rapidly and of course they had to be comprehensible for the widest possible

audience, which both necessary led the authors to choosing dramatic types and a form of improvised drama that can be compared to a certain extent to commedia dell'arte. I will try to detect agitka's fixed characters and their relations in a play *Birth in a Storm* by Vitomil Zupan and search some references for the character of a mother also in *Mother* by Mile Klopčič, as this was the first play to establish this very frequent character in partisan drama. *Birth in a Storm* is especially suitable for my task, as it has been written in 1944, when partisan drama was at its prime, and is one of its longest plays. It takes place in an industrial plant, jail and village, both before and after the Italian capitulation, which are the most frequent spaces and time in whole partisan drama.

Zupan sorts his characters between positive and negative pole by two criteria. First is historical situation (aggressors : victims), and second ideological determination (nazis, fascists, clericals, conservatives : communists). Let's look at the extremes first.

Most positive is Andrej Krim, communist from before the war, who has lived most of his life in jail because of his determination. In the first act he is the leader of the resistance in the city, in the second we see him tortured in prison, but he gives nothing away and is rescued by the resistance on his way to the scaffold. In the third act he is one of the commanders on the freed territory and he is fighting with the enemy for his idea (freedom). He sacrifices his own wife Nina in order to kill the German officer Harz. Krim is positive character by both mentioned criteria, which means that he is practically flawless. He is the bravest, infallible, most loving husband... We shall name this type of character a hero.

At the negative pole we find by the same criteria servant Žolc. He is the only one on the side of the aggressor and clerical ideology. He is the villain from the start, selling the members of the resistance to the Germans and therefore killing his own compatriots. After the officer of SS Harz shoots a wounded partisan, Žolc slams him with his gun, saying: "Shot isn't entirely reliable. And then he might be speaking ill of me" (Zupan 1945: 50). There is nothing human in Žolc. All he wants is domination, which he justifies in God. This seems to legitimise all means, including collaboration with the aggressor and killing, in which he is

even more eager than the nazis themselves. We shall name this character a traitor.

The rest of the characters find themselves between these two extremes. Closest to traitors are nazis and fascists, latter being mostly humorous and incompetent cowards, as agitka began to develop only after the capitulation of Italy in 1943. The difference between Germans and Italians is quite obvious in Zupan's work, as Italians never lay hand on another human being (two soldiers in prison even admire Krim's courage), while SS officer Harz kills a Partisan on stage.

There is of course a question, why we interpreted Žolc as the most negative character and not Harz. The answer lies in Harz's ideological determination, namely in the fact that he has none. As a German soldier, he, in legal sense, rightfully fights the rebels. In third act he seems to step out of the negative role in thoughts about his wife, son and home, so that he actually sees things more clear than heroes themselves. "God knows whether we come to this world as equals and only later become more or less corrupt. The worst usually become noble people. Why are you disgusted with me? Because I am a fascist?" But Zupan doesn't wonder too far from the basic structure, in which villains have no human quality, so Harz changes completely in the next moment. "Suns of bitches, I'll send them to the Russian front. As if everything were against me. Don't you think, you can escape! I'll strangle you" (Zupan 1945: 58)! Actions of occupiers can be legal and therefore they can have some human qualities from time to time, but they can't change their position, which doesn't apply for the traitors. The aim of agitka was a general mobilisation of Slovenian population, so they offered a pardon to all traitors that would come into their ranks and repent for their past actions. The ones that are converted move to the positive half of the scale, the others (like Žolc) are rejected forever, and therefore represent the negative extreme in agitka.

The characters in the middle that can change their position are the most frequent ones, as they easily served as an example. Such characters are machinist Miha and foreman Mirtič. They wait and can't decide for either option. They are trying to justify their fickleness with rational reasons as are military power of the enemy, personal interests,

fear for loved ones... We shall name such character waverer, who is the most intolerable by agitka, therefore he/she has to move. *Birth in a Storm* shows both possibilities.

Miha joins the rebellion in prison (2. act) and becomes a partisan commander (3. act). In the process of the play he goes from being a waverer to being an active fighter, character type that we will show in detail later, which isn't yet a hero, but it isn't far from it either. No wonder that Mirjana, who is turning down his love in the 1. act, is now totally in love with him.

Mirtič moves in the opposite direction. In the 3. act he finds himself side by side with Harz, and the fact that he hasn't killed anyone doesn't help him a bit. Harz tells him at the end, when the catastrophe is inevitable, that war is always fought by two strong forces (in our case Germans and partisans), and the ones in the middle will be killed at the same moment they seize to be needed by either one side or another. Mirtič obviously moves from being a waverer to being a traitor and therefore gets the nature of Žolc.

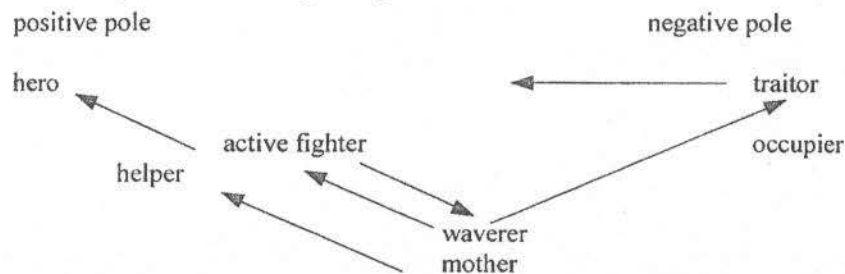
Character type of mother has been set by agitka with the same title written by Mile Klopčič in 1943. It was extremely popular and useful, as it represents an image of home and loved ones that soldiers have left behind. Mother is more plastic than hero, her main feature is an inner conflict between her egoistic wish to keep her children safe and sound under her arms, and the necessity of war time, which asks for human sacrifices and soldiers. There is a potential in her to become a character of tragic nature, but we are still in the world of agitka, therefore mother comes to the conclusion, that historic moment is more important than her selfish wishes, she puts rifles in the hands of her sons and sends them to war. It is quite common that she even becomes an active fighter herself, either by inviting her sons and all partisans to come and look for shelter in her house, or by going after her son/s to help him/them actively in their fight.

Active fighter is a transitional character type. Miha comes to this position from being a waverer, Fatur on the other hand starts from here to go among heroes. He is an activist of the resistance from the beginning, but he is also a student, and as Krim reveals to him, he thinks too much to

be a hero. So when Fatur goes into the woods, is captured and brought wounded to prison by the enemy, he becomes a hero — a fighter that doesn't think about the absurdity of war, but fights fiercely instead.

Somewhere between heroes and active fighters finds itself a character type of helper. These are mostly women characters like Nina, Andrej Krim's wife, in *Birth in a Storm*, who is supporting her husband and hero in his fight. Krim might not be a hero without her, but nevertheless she isn't completely devoted to the common goal. She fantasises about the future freedom, children and her happiness with Andrej. At the end she proves her loyalty by sacrificing herself, when she asks Andrej to shoot, although Harz shields himself with her. Therefore helpers are almost as positive as heroes.

These are seven fixed characters of the agitka, which are arranged between positive and negative pole as follows:



Now we can summarise the structure of agitka. It mainly deals with the types in the middle, although we might get the feeling that they are all on the positive half of the scale. That impression comes from the fact that there are possible transitions in both ways, but there are many more to the positive side. Villains therefore represent more a contrast than a real force. Everybody tends towards the hero, which is an ideal for agitka's characters and partisan army's agitators.

### Conclusion

Partisan drama was written in specific historical and ideological circumstances. The time asked for general mobilisation of Slovenian people, for fighters, who wouldn't think about their actions, and revolutionists, who will be able to carry out a social revolution in the

future. All these asked for propaganda on the largest possible scale, which included many people, who were not even talented amateurs, let alone professionals with theatrical experience. No wonder that partisan drama reveals a simple structure of seven fixed characters, and that almost all texts seem to be variations of this main theme. Such dramatic literature was very easy to write and at the same time easy to control it's political orientation.

Previous research of the matter mostly stems from the persuasion, that this literature was completely dictated by the revolutionary leadership. As a consequence we get two opposite views of the matter. On one hand admiration, because it represents our nation's struggle for freedom, and on the other hand rejection of any aesthetic value, because of it's connections to communist revolution.

It is of course impossible to deny, that partisan drama with it's seven fixed characters and relations between them sets an image, which was needed by partisan propaganda. The important question at this point, however, isn't so much, whether this is so, but rather, was this forced on authors, or was it the consequence of something else. Considering all texts that I have analysed in a course of my research, I would say it is mainly the consequence of general historical experience. On one hand there were circumstances of war, that made theatrical creativity and work nearly impossible, and lack of talented writers, on the other great deal of optimism and belief in a brighter future, which were genuine feelings of the authors, provoked by the struggles and horrors of second world war.

The destiny of *Three Clocks Lagging Behind* seems to be characteristic in this sense. It is agitka of an average quality, where three respectful men of a village can't see the social change that war brought. The play was criticised by Boris Kidrič, one of the political leaders of Slovenian partisan resistance, to be too negative towards Italians and some Slovenian political groups. He forbade further printing of the play, before it would have been corrected, but the fact is, that this Zupan's drama is the most frequent among all partisan plays, considering the number of printed editions. It would be hard to agree that Vitomil Zupan was forced to write in this way, as he was arrested, partly because

of his work and partly because of his life style just a few years after the war, but this is a story that exceeds our interest at the moment.

We can find further argument for our thesis in existence of partisan plays that tend to move away from the basic agitka's structure towards bourgeois drama. Such play is *Women by the grave* by Božo Vodušek, which is, together with the *Evening under Hmeljnik* by Kocbek, subject of a book *Dramatic literature of NOB 1* by Taras Kermauner. It is interesting that his conclusions are quite similar, although the period 1941—1945 is just the beginning for him, as he mainly analyses further destiny of this theme in our literature after the war. In this he shows progressive disillusion and final decay of the agitka's world.

#### Analysed agitkas

- Apih, Milan: *Rdeča armada prihaja*, 1944, Partizanski oder 6.  
Bor, Matej: *Ječa se je odprla (The Jail has Opened)*, 1944.  
Bravničar, Dušan — Veljko: "Mati," *Gospod Lisjak*, Pokrajinski odbor za primorsko Slovenijo, 1944.  
Gustl: "Hitler in Mussolini," *Gospod Lisjak*, Pokrajinski odbor za primorsko Slovenijo, 1944.  
Ivanov, Radoš (Šumrada, Vinko): *Slovenska mati*, 1944, Nova pisarija 1.  
Košak, Milan: *Birokrat*, 1945, Partizanski oder 5.  
Kozina, Marjan: *Štirje bratje*, 1945, Partizanski oder 6.  
Ljevišič, V., Mašistov, A: *Paška*, 1945.  
*Srečanje, Slika iz dnevov srečanja med Rdečo Armado in NOV Slovenije*, 1945, Partizanski oder 7.  
Šilc, Majda: *Obisk, Agit — prop* Skoja X. udarne brigade Ljubljanske.  
Vošnjak, Sergej: *Borba*, 1944.  
Zupan, Vito: *Jelenov žleb*, 1944.  
Zupan, Vito: *Punt (Revolt)*, 1944, Partizanski oder 2.  
Zupan, Vito: *Tri zaostale ure (Three Clocks Lagging Behind)*, 1944, Partizanski oder 1.  
Zupan, Vitomil: *Aki*, 1944, Partizanski oder 5.
- #### Agitkas published in books and periodicals after the war
- Bon, Jože: "Zločin na novomeškem trgu (Crime on the square of Novo mesto)," *Težka ura (Hard Hour)*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1967, Knjižnica Kondor 94.  
Bor, Matej: "Gospod Lisjak," *Težka ura (Hard Hour)*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1967, Knjižnica Kondor 94.  
Bor, Matej: "Težka ura (Hard Hour)," *Raztrganci (Tattereddemalions)*, Slovenski knjižni zavod, Ljubljana, 1946.  
Bor, Matej: *Raztrganci (Tattereddemalions)*, Ljubljana, 1946.

- Jarc, Miran (Janez Suhi): "Gabrenja," *Obzornik (1951)*, 144 — 148.  
Klopčič, Mile: "Mati (Mother)," *Težka ura (Hard Hour)*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1967, Knjižnica Kondor 94.  
Kocbek, Edvard: "Večer pod Hmeljnikom (Evening under Hmeljnik)," *Edvard Kocbek, Zbrano delo 7/2*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2000.  
Rehar, Radivoj: "Hrustač," *Težka ura (Hard Hour)*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1967, Knjižnica Kondor 94.  
Sintič, Zvone: "Naš pohod," *Težka ura (Hard Hour)*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1967, Knjižnica Kondor 94.  
Vodušek, Božo: "Žene ob grobu (Women by the Grave). Igra v 5 prizorih." *Slovenski zbornik 1945*, 304 — 316.  
Vreg, France — Mile: "Morale je zmanjkalo," *Težka ura (Hard Hour)*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1967, Knjižnica Kondor 94.  
Zupan, Vitomil: *Rojstvo v nevihti (Birth in a Storm). Dramatska reportaža v treh dejanjih*, Založba slovenskega knjižnega zavoda, Ljubljana, 1945, Novi ljudski oder 3.

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Kalan F., 1975, *Veseli veter*, Ljubljana.  
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Kocbek E., 1982, *Listina*, Ljubljana.  
Kralj L., 1988, *Teorija drame*, Ljubljana.  
*Literatura*, 1977, Ljubljana.  
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Poniž D., 1995, *Komedija in mešane dramske zvrsti*, Ljubljana.  
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