

The Innovative Dramatic Works of Simona Semenič

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Abstract Simona Semenič is a female Slovene playwright whose dramatic writing can be compared on the international level with Sarah Kane, Elfriede Jelinek, Anja Hilling and Ulrike Syha. They all have in common the search for linguistic and formal originality of expression, they strive for innovation in their dramatic writing, which will be heard in our world of media-shaped culture and bring an immanent theatrical solution. The paper considers three no longer dramatic texts by Simona Semenič: (1) *The Feast or the Story of a Savoury Corpse or How Roman Abramovič, the Character Janša, Julia Kristeva, age 24, Simona Semenič and the Initials z.i. Found Themselves In a Tiny Cloud of Tobacco Smoke*; (2) *Sophia or While IAlmost Ask for More or a Parable of the Ruler and Wisdom*; and (3) *7Cooks, 4Soldiers, 3Sophias*. The main characters of all three are tormented and abused women, victims of religious and political wars, and of patriarchal patterns and imposed social roles; thanks to their thematic and formal similarities, the three selected dramas could form a trilogy. The fates of the women, which are based on real people, are presented in a fragmentary way within a timeless fictional frame, while Semenič, through innovative textual strategies, achieves artistic effects and contemplates ethical aspects from a universal perspective, and so her works are relevant everywhere. Her writing is characterised by the undermining of established reading conventions (absence of capital letters or punctuation, writing in verse form, etc.), whereby the reader is included more closely in the process of decoding and interpreting the text. The division between primary text and ancillary text is transcended, since the stage directions are more than just guidelines for staging and become an equal part of the text, with an emphasis on their narrative function (comment on what is happening, narration of events separated by space and time, a means of communicating with the audience, etc.). The addressee of the dramatic text must thus think about the basic relations, who is speaking and to whom,

as well as about the status of the author, the dramatic characters and their own position. The reader/spectator is emotionally and cognitively more involved in what is happening and becomes to a large extent a participant and consequently shares responsibility for the state of society and the world. Although Semenič breaks the basic dramatic conventions, she at the same time relativises and revitalises them in metadramatic form, while the new textual strategies are most closely connected with the questions of reception and the power of theatre in today's world.

Key words Slovene drama; Simona Semenič (1975-); dramatic form; stage directions; spectator

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The Female Slovene Dramatists and the Social Context

Contemporary Slovene drama is a complex of different thematic elements, language varieties, genre models and formal searches; and in contrast with previous periods, since 2000 a breakthrough by female dramatists has been noticeable. Throughout history there have been very few female playwrights, either in Slovene or in other European literatures. The beginnings of dramatic writing in Slovene reach back to the female writers Luiza Pesjak (1828-1898) and Zofka Kveder (1878-1926), while after World War 2 the dramatic works of Mira Mihelič (1912-1985) stand out and in the 1980s Alenka Goljevšček made a name for herself. There have of course been other female dramatists — in other social circumstances the woman's voice has tried to make itself heard through drama — but they became a vital part of the development of Slovene drama only in the new millennium. There are

various reasons for the sudden increase in the number of female playwrights — for in the twenty-first century there are more than in the whole of the previous history of Slovene literature — but they are linked to the social status of women and educational factors, as well as public calls and workshops connected with dramatic writing, and encouragement of women's creativity¹ (Pezdirč Bartol, "Slovenske" 271).

The contemporary female playwright was first noticed by literary and theatrical scholars, whereas theatres themselves were at first hesitant and the dramatic texts of women writers only slowly made their way from independent writing projects and small non-institutional performances to the small stages of the main Slovene theatres and, gradually, the main stages of the national theatres. Female dramatists also made a breakthrough onto foreign stages. Dramas are now being written by numerous women writers, including: Dragica Potočnjak (1958), Desa Muck (1955), Saša Pavček (1960), Žanina Mirčevska (1967), Zalka Grabnar Kogoj (1967), Kim Komljanec (1978), Simona Semenič (1975), Jera Ivanc (1975), Saša Rakef (1980), Tamara Matevc (1972), Simona Hamer (1984), Vesna Hauschild (1985), Tjaša Mislej (1985) and Iza Strehar (1992). From their biographies we can see that contemporary women dramatists in Slovenia have two things in common: almost all are connected with the theatre, as actors, directors, translators and particularly dramaturgists; and secondly, they all studied and so master dramatic theory and the history of drama, thus their writing appears and develops through a close relationship with practical theatrical work.

Since 1960, the highest profile Slovene woman dramatist has been Simona Semenič and it is her innovative dramatic works that will be the focus of this article. Semenič was born in 1975 and graduated in dramaturgy from the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana; she now works as a director, producer, dramaturge and performer, but above all as a dramatist. She has written more than twenty dramatic texts, most of which break with the basic conventions of dramatic writing and thus belong to the postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 2003) or are no longer dramatic writing² (Poschmann 2008). Her best received works are: *24 UR* (24.hrs, 2006), *Nisi pozabila, samo ne spomniš se več* (You didn't forget, you just don't remember anymore, 2007); *Jaz, žrtev* (I, the victim, 2007); *5fantkov.si* (5boys.si, 2008); *zgodba o nekem slastnem truplu ali gostija ali kako so se roman abramovič, lik janša, štiriindvajsetletna julija kristeva, simona semenič in inicialki z. i. znašli v oblaku tobaknega dima* (the feast or the story of a savoury corpse or how roman abramovič, the character janša, julia kristeva, age 24, simona semenič and the initials z.i. found themselves in a tiny cloud of

tobacco smoke, 2010); *medtem ko skoraj rečem še ali prilika o vladarju in modrosti* (sophia or while i almost ask for more or a parable of the ruler and wisdom, 2011); *tisočdevetsto enainosemdeset* (1981, 2013); *sedem kuharic, štirje soldati in tri sofije* (7Cooks, 4Soldiers, 3Sophias, 2014); and *mi, evropski mrlič* (we, european corpses, 2015). She has received a number of awards for her work, including on three occasions the Grum Award for the best original Slovene drama.

Simona Semenič on the Map of Contemporary Female Dramatists

Simona Semenič is not only a recognised and successful dramatist in Slovenia, but also abroad: her plays have been translated into a number of European languages and staged in Sweden, Slovakia, Norway, Russia, Israel, Bulgaria, the USA, Serbia and elsewhere. Her most successful work, which has been staged most often abroad, is *5boys.si*, which through the logic of children's games addresses the different forms of violence in the modern world. Semenič can be compared to a number of central European female dramatists, such as Sarah Kane (1971-1999) and Elfriede Jelinek (1946), and especially to her German contemporaries Anja Hilling (1975) and Ulrike Syha (1976). They all have in common the search for an original linguistic and formal mode of expression, they strive for innovation in their dramatic writing, which will be heard in our world of media-shaped culture and bring an immanent theatrical solution. All these dramatists put into words the relevant themes of our time that call for social reflection. Their similarities are also apparent in the relationship between the text and the performance, for their texts are performed in a very open way and demand of the reader, the director, the cast and the audience that they resolve certain basic issues — who is speaking and to whom, and the relationship between the primary text and ancillary text, narrative elements and dialogue — since their plays are often a mixture of different discourses.

Simona Semenič has spoken about this in an interview, in which she said that when writing *5boys.si* she was dealing primarily with two questions: “what is today only a theatre text (not, for example, a TV drama) and how can themes such as war and child abuse reach a public that is used to everything?” (Plahuta Simčič 15). These are two key questions, of dramatic form and reception, and the work of Elfriede Jelinek, Sarah Kane, Anja Hilling, Ulrike Syha and Simona Semenič bring extremely innovative answers. Since form to a large extent defines the content of the dramatic works of these writers, I shall discuss here the formal characteristics of selected works by Simona Semenič.

Her writing constantly breaks with or questions the basic dramatic conventions, particularly Ingarden's formal dramatic characteristic of a division

between primary text and ancillary text, and Szondi's concept of the absoluteness of drama and the connected status of the dramatist and the addressee, i.e. the reader or spectator. From this perspective three innovative dramatic works will be analysed: (1) *The Feast or the Story of a Savoury Corpse or How Roman Abramovič, the Character Janša, Julia Kristeva, age 24, Simona Semenič and the Initials z.i. Found Themselves In a Tiny Cloud of Tobacco Smoke*; (2) *Sophia or While I Almost Ask for More or a Parable of the Ruler and Wisdom* and (3) *7Cooks, 4Soldiers, 3Sophias*. In all three works the author poses ethical questions connected with society's attitude to those who are Other, disadvantaged, marginalised, because they come from the East, because they are women or thinking individuals, all connected by the fact that for society they are unheard, silenced and deleted voices, they are impotent and subordinated. The dramatic characters in all three works are tormented and abused women, the victims of religious and political wars, of patriarchal patterns and imposed social roles. Thanks to their thematic and formal similarities, the three selected dramas could form a trilogy.

The Feast or the Story of a Savoury Corpse or How Roman Abramovič, the Character Janša, Julia Kristeva, age 24, Simona Semenič and the Initials z.i. Found Themselves In a Tiny Cloud of Tobacco Smoke

This is a drama that is constantly aware that it is not written in the form of a drama. The classical dramatic text begins with stage directions that tell us about the characters, about when and where the drama is unfolding, whereas Simona Semenič's begins like this:

there are seven characters in this play, one of the seven characters is mei, the seventh character in this play, step in front of you, respected (western) theatregoers, with a pipe in my hand. (Semenič *The Feast* 1)

The seventh, anonymous character in the play is the one that presents the whole event to us, that is the feast attended by the five eminent guests from the title, who are served a stew made from a human corpse. The whole time this character warns the reader or spectator that he or she is in a theatre, either through direct address or by mentioning scenic elements, and not least through the time constraint. The seventh character thus has the function of a narrator, who announces guests, chats politely, comments on and interprets the whole feast, but also manipulates the facts and relativizes what is happening. The anonymous character's narrative represents a frame within which are placed the dispositions of the corpse; although no longer

alive, the corpse is the only one to directly state and represent the identity of different women:

the corpse is still standing at the front of the stage, moving its lips
and then you hear it

my name is olena popik and i didn't want to die
i didn't want to die
don't ask me why i didn't want to die, because i won't be able to answer
i didn't want to die should be enough

dear spectator, if you didn't know before, from this moment on there's no
doubt that in front of you there is a corpse
a few lines further you'll realize this is an eastern corpse
in this play there are no western corpses, only eastern
(if such a thing as an eastern corpse even exists) (Semenič *The Feast* 7)

We are witness to the shocking stories of women that have been subject to different forms of violence: rape, abuse, being drowned, beaten, murdered... although the violence is not seen on the stage, but rather mediated by the corpse — these are the acute cries of the powerless at which the reader/spectator cannot remain indifferent.

On the television news we see primarily the faces of the ruling class, experts and journalists, who comment on images, who talk about what is shown and what we are supposed to think about this. Horrors are not banalised because we see them too often. We don't see too many suffering bodies on our screens. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies that cannot return our gaze, that are the object of speech without being able to speak themselves. (Rancière 60)

Semenič returns an identity to this anonymous body: they are not nameless victims, they all have a first name and a surname, for each one we find out some specific biographical details and fragments of their fate; all the victims are real people whose stories the author found online, which helps her to break through the stage illusion. The message of all the victims is the same and is repeated like a refrain throughout the text — “I wanted to live”; all are connected by the fact that their life was ended violently. The story repeats from one narrative to another

and goes on endlessly, which the author illustrates at the end by listing the names of the victims — a list without end. Although the corpse represents the victims it acts as if alive and it makes direct declarations in order, to paraphrase Rancière, to return the spectator's gaze. The corpse's statements have a powerful effect on the reader/spectator partly because of the great contrast with the careless chatter of the narrator, who together with the announced eminent guests represents the western, developed world, a position of power and ease. The guests are only part of the narrator's narrative, they do not communicate with the narrator or the corpse, but they do eat the stew made from a corpse — a dish that points to the society of indifference that devours the weak, from which even the dramatist herself is not excluded:

simona semenič stops feeding herself at the moment the corpse becomes
silent
she is sitting there, lingering a little
lingering some more
and then takes another portion
(it seems the wonderful smelling stew is to her taste)
(Semenič *The Feast* 19)

The spectator is also a part of the western world, which the narrator is always addressing directly (valued audience, highly respected public, excellent spectator, etc.); the narrative of the narrator, like that of the corpse, is aimed at the spectator (the corpse is looking at you, do you hear, it's waving at you, introduce yourself...), which actively includes the audience in what is going on — the audience member is no longer a privileged spectator, but an active participant and consequently jointly responsible for the state of society.³

The basic duality of the traditional dramatic text is apparent in the division between dialogue and stage directions, or primary text and ancillary text ⁴(Ingarden 252), but this is not the case with the text we are discussing. As is clear from the quoted excerpts, that division is transcended, although maintained in the printed record, with italics used for the narrative of the anonymous character and plain font for the corpse's words. The text has an unusual visual form, without divisions into acts and scenes, while speeches are not assigned to characters, but rather the text flows uninterruptedly, like free verse; the length of lines is partly dependent on pauses in speech and the transition to a new line often replaces punctuation. The text is exclusively in lower case letters. It transcends the definition of drama based

on the axiom of absolute drama⁵, where the reader/spectator is faced directly with the persons shown, who present themselves through direct speech: this applies only to the anonymous character, while the eminent guests are mediated through narrative and the corpse represents the different fates of tormented and abused women. In spite of its non-dramatic exterior form and numerous narratological elements the text always retains the basic ontological dramatic situation, i.e. being staged in a theatre, the presence of an audience and the constant time limit. Although Semenič's breaks the basic conventions of the dramatic text, in her metadrama she both relativises and revitalises them.

Sophia or While I Almost Ask for More or a Parable of the Ruler and the Wisdom

Patrice Pavis writes that the parable is “a reduced version of our world” where the “dramatist often does not choose the easiest paths, so that the present is described with all the violence of naturalist details, because that would risk concealing the essence, whereas the ideological mechanism that it supports and its supposed veristic appearance would not be revealed” (519). The drama of Simona Semenič arises from the fairy tale tradition of rulers in luxurious chambers, but at the same time we are faced with an “educational story” about the structure of society, a demonstration of its mechanisms, of how it manipulates people, fabricates internal enemies, of revolt, war and social responsibility. The text is thus built on a presentation of the universal and the concrete: the fairy tale sometime and somewhere breaks through the real here and now, most obviously in the image of the 20-year old flowering linden tree, one of the basic symbols of Sloveneness, which corresponds to the origin of the dramatic text in 2011, on the 20th anniversary of Slovene independence. The dramatic characters are bearers of archetypal characteristics that are expressed even by their names: power and the state are represented by the strong ruler Vladimir (*vladati* in Slovene means to rule), the spiritual adviser Bogomir (*bog* is Slovene for God) and the minister Branimir (*braniti* means to defend). Due to dissatisfaction among the people and the possibility of revolt they must find someone to blame and so they identify as dangerous three sisters: their names are Ljuba, Vera and Nada, representing the three ethical imperatives of love, faith and hope.

The characters' statements are set in a wide narrative context, which begins even with the title, but the identity of the speaker remains hidden until the final lines of the text, when we find out that the narrative flow belongs to Sofija, the wise mother of the three girls. The role of Sofija is thus reminiscent of the

anonymous character in the first drama we discussed: Sofija is also a narrator who creates and comments on events, just that the reader does not know who is speaking and her role in the staging is dependent on the director's reading. Sofija is part of the story world that is described, a kind of "generative narrator" (Richardson 152) who does not, however, communicate with the other dramatic characters, since her communication is aimed at the reader/spectator. The dramatic text retains the basic formal division into dialogue and stage directions, and the speeches are assigned to roles, but Sofija's words are in italics. Anne Ubersfeld observes that: "the basic linguistic division between dialogue and stage directions concerns the subject of statements, in other words the question *who is speaking?* In dialogue this is a paper being that we call a *character* (who is not the same as the author), but in the stage directions it is the author who speaks" (26). This means that, according to Richardson, in the case of Semenič the stage directions do not belong to the author, but to a dramatic character and are better suited to the definition of narratologists who emphasise that stage directions are not the voice of the author, but that of the narrator. Sofija is thus written in the form of stage directions that have a narrative role, so that the audience is not just following the direct statements of dramatic characters, but is gaining a more precise insight into their thoughts; above all, Semenič extends the chronotope of events outside the audience's field of perception, so that they get the feeling of a "novel-like context." So the stage directions are not an ancillary text, as Sofija has the largest share of the text. Ingarden observes that the ancillary text is omitted during staging, or rather materialises in theatrical signs, through which it moves from the domain of language to a non-verbal, largely visual message⁶; in this dramatic text the stage directions cannot be staged since they remain at the level of language, or rather a partial transition to materiality is dependent on each directorial reading. Moreover, their formal character, even when they bring information about time and space, is different from traditional drama, with the text beginning with the words: "above the royal city/dark clouds/are gathering/gathering/many many years ago" (Semenič *sophia* 1); this is not just related to the pragmatic function, but also the poetic one — the aesthetic nature of the note is shown by repetition, unusual word order, the transition to a new line and so on.

The similarities with the previous text are not merely formal, but are also on the thematic and ideational level, which is apparent particularly in the way women are shown as victims; in this particular instance, the fate of the three sisters is taken by Simona Semenič from a real case, i.e. the Drina martyrs, who were killed by Chetniks and thrown in the river during World War 2.⁷ Ljuba, Nada and Vera

thus end up in the river. They could buy their freedom by cooperating with the authorities, but because they wish for a better and fairer world for all they are thrown into a brothel, where they are abused and raped by the ruler and soldiers. Because of their civil disobedience they are tortured, beaten, beheaded and their bodies thrown in the river, while their death is exploited for political benefit — the guilt is placed at the door of barbarians from the East and the girls are declared to be war heroes. The question of how to show all this horror on stage is brought by Semenič to the level of the narrative, as a direct description of events — in other words, not mimesis, but diegesis: throughout, Semenič believes in the power of words, which are for her more powerful than images.⁸

the catchpoles grab hold of hope
 strip her
 bare
 so I can see the blood has coagulated
 my name is
 and I am an aristocrat
 the catchpoles beat hope up
 striking her bare body with whips
 her young body
 the flesh is ripping while blood squirts
 hope screams in crying
 hope cries in screaming
 and they keep beating her
 one, two, three, four, five of them with whips
 the body twists
 the flesh rips, the blood squirts
 and then the five get tired
 the body is lying there completely still
 I gave birth to her amidst the smell of acacias (Semenič sophia 71)

Birth and death and the connected maternal tragedy put Sofija on the side of the female principle of birth and love, which is in opposition to the masculine principle of power, war and violence, but the contemporary parable does not have an unambiguous message, it is “never completely translatable into a lesson of some kind: it submits to the play of different meanings and the reflection of theatricality” (Pavis 520). This is particularly true in the case of the figure of Sofija, at both the

form and the content level: her position in the drama and the final events is both evasive and enigmatic, for as the mother of martyrs she is given the honour of marrying the ruler and her relationship with Vladimir constantly shifts between admiration and contempt, her own feelings and the wellbeing of the country, so that the relationship between wisdom and power remains ambiguous and unresolved.

7Cooks, 4Soldiers, 3Sophias

Fourteen dramatic characters appear in the text and are mentioned in the title, with the Sophias being based on three famous women from history: Sophie Magdalene Scholl was a member of the resistance movement against Nazism, who was beheaded in 1943 in Munich at the age of 21; in 1881 Sofija Lvovna Perovskajeva, aged 27, was condemned to death by hanging because of political activism, for taking part in a number of unsuccessful assassination attempts against Emperor Aleksander II; and Marie-Sophie Germain, a mathematician from Paris, who died in 1831 from breast cancer at the age of 55, without her education ever being recognised. In addition to sharing a name, the three have in common that through their thoughts and actions they transcended the constraints of their time and place, working against the demands and expectations of the patriarchal society — they were intellectuals and female activists who wanted to change the world. But the text is not a biographical drama, the fates of the three historical characters are presented in a fragmentary way, with an emphasis on their execution. As in the previous two dramas, the fate of the real Sophias are placed within a timeless fictional frame formed by the cooks and the soldiers. The cooks are the complete opposite of the Sophias, they sit in a semi-circle silently peeling potatoes, but at the same time they have an opinion about everything and everyone, they chat and gossip as the wheels of history turn. They are the eternal escorts of history's repeating events, apathetic, passive, petty, smug; they are the anonymous average mass, as the author emphasises through their names: the peevish one, the huffy one, the fat one, the dainty one, the boring one, the pedantic one and the pensive one. Their language is also carefully shaped in accordance with their defining characteristics, which brings a number of ironic emphases. The cooks are conformist preservers of the status quo, while at the same time being the ones who feed the soldiers, feed war, and drive the wheels of history. The soldiers are also nameless, labelled only by sequential Roman numerals; their male strength and charisma are emphasised, they carry out orders and fulfil bureaucratic regulations, ensuring social stability and supporting the political elite. The violence against the Sophias thus has two faces: incomprehension and insistence on an enforced social

role, as is emphasised by the cooks a number of times: “well, that’s nothing, a woman must get married, a woman must give birth, this is our mission, dear god, this is why we’re here, right” (Semenič *7Cooks* 81), and the physical removal of everything that might threaten the existing system.

This time, too, there is no display of violence in the foreground, more attention is paid to the procedure itself, the senseless rules, the accuracy of historical facts as the executor of the action, which is mediated through the brief speeches of the cooks, facilitating different directorial readings.⁹For the needs of the whole and a greater effect, Semenič dresses historical facts in fiction, making them universal. All the three Sophias in the drama are beheaded, although the second Sophia emphasises in one of her speeches that she was the first woman in Russia to be condemned to death by hanging because of political activism:

IV.

maybe it was as you say, madam, but we’ll execute you with an axe
regardless

the huffy one

this may not be historically precise, but it doesn’t make it any less true

the peevish one

and then

I.

do you forgive me?

the huffy one

he pauses for greater effect

sophia, the second one

i forgive you

the dainty one

i yawn

the pensive one

you swing (Semenič *7Cooks* 74)

This extract also illustrates the formal structure of the text, which does away with the duality of primary text and ancillary text (also typographically) and to the question who is speaking – we get the reply of the cook twice. The cooks make their speeches and say the stage instructions, there is no difference or hierarchy between them, and the reader/spectator is thus directly faced not only with what the dramatic characters say¹⁰, but also with the stage directions, for the ancillary text is also spoken by dramatic characters. The cooks are thus dramatic characters and at the same time narrators who comment on their thoughts and the world around them, communicating with the audience, adding different times and spaces to the whole, for the three Sophias belong to three different centuries and three large European countries. In this way, the formal structure of the text emphasises timelessness, the eternal wheels of history and thus the universality of the message.

Conclusion

In all three texts the women victims are real people placed within a fictional frame: the bodies of eastern women, the Drina martyrs and three Sophias from history. These are not anonymous bodies, in all three cases we hear “my name is”. Semenič shows specific people, events, time and space, placing all within a timeless frame that is created through repetition of events, enumerating characters, a fairy tale structure, a revised role for stage directions, narrative elements, etc., through which the ideas in her dramas take on a universal message of relevance to different parts of the world. Individual fates become a kind of metaphor for all the tormented and abused women — victims of the male position of power, of the patriarchal society, of the western world — and so a feminist reading of these texts is a strong one. But Semenič’s reach is wider: war, the repression of the western world, senseless bureaucratic procedures, conformism, imposed social roles, the relationship between the exceptional individual and the average mass, institutionally supported violence, mechanisms of strength and power, and on the other side questions of empathy, social responsibility, understanding the different, the Other. In her dramas, Semenič gives a voice to the powerless, the unseen, the silenced and erased. If, as Lehmann observes: “Questions of social power are political ones” (295), then we can say that Semenič deals with precisely that kind of question and so her dramas are also political. These are global themes in today’s world, which appear not only in Slovene drama, but also world drama and call for social reflection.

The author continually plays with the audience’s feelings and aesthetic distance, and so her texts, in spite of their sharp emphasis on ideas, do not come

across as pessimistic since they employ different alienating strategies through which to soften the image of the world: irony, sarcasm, cynicism, the use of unusual words and humour, with the text permeated by enigma and ambiguity (maybe it is, maybe it isn't). Her texts are made up of different types of discourse, they are a generic conglomerate containing elements of ritual, fairy tale, political drama, comedy, parable; they are a mixture of the tragic and the comic, of irony and empathy, of the horrific and the playful, so that the position of the reader/spectator swings from the comfort of aesthetic distance¹¹ (Pezdirc Bartol "Recepcija" 196-198) to being directly addressed and actively participating. With regard to the latter, I am not referring to physical inclusion in the staging, as in avant-garde theatre, but rather the idea that the reader or spectator is in an active rather than a passive position, so that "watching is action" (Rancière 13, 15) — in other words, the audience is emotionally and cognitively involved, which Semenič promotes through different textual strategies. But new textual practices do not necessarily mean a radical break with traditional ones¹² (Lukan 167), they rather arise from awareness of the crisis of the dramatic form and of representation already present in the twentieth century. Simona Semenič's writing is also known for its undermining of established reading conventions, as well as destabilising the basic concepts of theory of drama. In the three texts discussed here there is a noticeable absence of capital letters and punctuation, which allows the author to include the reader more closely in the process of decoding and interpreting the text: "Basically, I wanted to leave open emphases, thoughts and punctuation. I didn't want to suggest where the end of the sentence was. I determined pauses in a way by starting a new line — as if writing poetry. I also use an exclamation mark only where it is strictly necessary. This way of writing is in principle very interesting. Sometimes I write as a statement what someone else might read as a question" (Semenič "sedem" 25). Semenič's dramatic texts have a different appearance, they are not divided into acts and scenes, they do not have a list of characters, the division between primary text and ancillary text is transcended, and the stage directions have outgrown their usual role — when the drama is staged they cannot be omitted or materialised as theatrical signs, for they have become an equal and constituent part of the text. It is not that the stage directions have been erased, but rather revitalised, with their narrative function being emphasised (narrative on separate events, comment on what is happening, the possibility of seeing into characters' thoughts, mediation of markers of time and place, a means of communicating with the audience, etc.). And by introducing narrative elements into what was once absolute drama, Semenič also has a stronger presence as the author. Anne Ubersfeld (26-27) observes that

the dramatic author voluntarily surrenders the right to speak in her own name and is the subject only in the stage directions¹³; Toporišič reshapes her observation as follows: “In the case of Semenič’s work we can understand the dramatic text as the author’s declaration or the expression of her ‘personality,’ ‘feelings,’ problems,’ since all the subjective elements are no longer directed to other speakers. Thus the text, in contrast with absolute drama, becomes subjective, with the author not surrendering the right to speak in her own name; the author is the subject not only of the stage directions, but of the whole text” (99). Narratologists have come to a similar conclusion: “narrative makes a fundamental contribution to the playwright’s creative hold, it facilitates interdiscursive experimentation and the revealing of the dramatic events promotes reflection” (Koron 45) .

The addressee of the dramatic text (reader, director and actors, spectator) must for each text think about the basic relations, who is speaking and to whom, as well as the status of the author, the dramatic characters and their own position¹⁴ (Pezdirc Bartol “Slovenske” 279). Dramatic texts demand the addressee’s active involvement, the addressee becomes an active category, the reader/spectator is involved in the action and is to a large extent a participant, and thus shares responsibility for the state of society and the world. Simona Semenič does not achieve ethical dimensions in her texts through explicit political statements or ethical imperatives, nor through the thematisation or direct display of violence, massacres, war crimes, abuse and so on. “Aesthetic experience becomes the condition of possibility for a particular kind of ethical relationship. The ethical relationship becomes, in its turn, the ground upon which political action might be attempted” (Ridout 66). Semenič takes a specific historical or contemporary social situation and, through innovative textual strategies, achieves artistic effects and opens up ethical issues from a universal perspective. Although she breaks the basic dramatic conventions, she at the same time relativises and revitalises them in metadramatic form, while the new textual strategies are most closely connected with the questions of reception and the power of theatre in today’s world.¹⁵

Notes

1. See Mateja Pezdirc Bartol. “Slovenske dramatičarke v 21. stoletju: med teorijo, prakso in inovativno pisavo”. *Slavistična revija* 64.3 (2016): 269-282.
2. See Gerda Poschmann. “Gledališki tekst in drama. K uporabi pojmov.” *Drama, tekst, pisava*. Ed. Petra Pogorevc and Tomaž Toporišič. (Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko, 2008) 148.
3. The first performance of the text, written in 2010, was the premiere on 13.11.2011 in the

private apartment of the director Primož Ekart, produced by the Imaginarni Institute, and instead of the eminent guests six members of the audience were placed at the table. The exceptional proximity and personal contact between all those present and the absence of a division between stage and auditorium served to emphasise the ethical charge of the text.

4. Roman Ingarden. *Literarna umetnina*. (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 1990)252.

5. See Peter Szondi. *Teorija sodobne drame 1880-1950*. (Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko, 2000) 130.

6. See note 2, 372.

7. See Semenič. "Umetnost se gradi na napakah". Pogovarjala se je Brina Rafaela Klampfer. *Gledališki list SNG Drama Ljubljana* XCIV.12 (2015): 22-28.

8. In the premiere on 24 April 2015 on the small stage of the National Theatre in Ljubljana, directed by Primož Ekart, the violence against the three women was emphasised by sound effects — the rhythm of drums and the sound of blows.

9. The premiere was on 16.9.2015 on the large stage of the City Theatre in Ljubljana. The director Diego de Brea emphasised timelessness through the black-and-white aesthetics of the set, the selection of music and the lighting, while for the executions he used other media, staged live with the projection of previously recorded material on a screen, i.e. acted scenes recorded in black-and-white.

10. See Note 5, 30.

11. See Mateja Pezdirc Bartol, Mateja "Recepcija drame: procesi gledanja, gledališki prostor in pojem distance". *Primerjalna književnost* 30.1 (2007): 191-201.

12. Blaž Lukan. "Nove tekstne prakse v slovenskem gledališču in strategije uprizarjanja". *Slovenska dramatika*. Ed. Mateja Pezdirc Bartol. Ljubljana: FF (Obdobja, 31), 2012. 167-173.

13. See Anne Ubersfeld. *Brati gledališče*. (Ljubljana: Mestno gledališče ljubljansko, 2002) .

14. See Note 1, 279

15. The article is translated by David Limon. The authors acknowledge the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0265).

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—. *the feast or the story of a savoury corpse or how roman abramovič, the character janša, julia kristeva, age 24, simona semenič and the initials z.i. found themselves in a tiny cloud of tobacco smoke*. Trans. Barbara Skubic. Manuscript.

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