

FAMILY AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN TANGO BY SŁAWOMIR MROŻEK AND ITS PRODUCTION ON THE STAGE OF THE SLOVAK NATIONAL THEATRE

MAREK GODOVIČ

Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts, Bratislava

Abstract: The study analyses the text of *Tango* by Sławomir Mrożek. It maps out the author's shift from grotesques to dramatic text, in which he prophetically predicts the future of Polish and Central European societies. His capacity to reflect on actual reality, to make it unique and to derive from it the absurdity of the situation is not only a peculiar feature of the author but it also is characteristic of the East European style. The study also analyses social and family aspects of the play and their portrayal in the productions of the Slovak National Theatre (SND; 1967, 1997). *Tango* was performed on Slovak stages under different political regimes, which have markedly affected the concepts of individual directors. Despite the fact that it is not primarily a politically focused theatre play, it reflects upon the quintessential questions of the period having no straightforward answers. The study focuses on the naming of thematic lines, especially those that relate to social and family aspects which are most prominent in the concept of the play and to their transformation to stage form.

Key words: Sławomir Mrożek, *Tango*, absurd drama, Slovak National Theatre

In the early 20th century, Slovak theatre professionals and audiences were not much exposed to the theatre of the absurd. At that time, several plays were written which employed the devices of absurd drama: the plays by Rudolf Skukálek (*Hodinky* [Watch], 1963; *Metla* [The Broom], 1964; *Piliny* [Sawdust], 1965) or *Veľká parochnja* [The Big Wig] by Peter Karvaš (1964, book publishing in 1965). Absurd dialogues during afternoon sessions in Tatra Revue Bratislava were entertained by Milan Lasica and Július Satinský. A more intensive contact with absurd drama was established in theatre production. The playwright Sławomir Mrożek was a new phenomenon in Slovak theatre; he keenly reflected upon the then social atmosphere and his plays were more understandable than the plays by Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco. The very first dramatic text by Mrożek that was produced on Slovak theatre stages was *Moriak* [The Turkey] (Slovak National Theatre, abbr. SND, 1963), followed by *Veselica* [The Party] (Academy of Performing Arts, abbr. VŠMU, 1963) and *Policaĵti* [The Police] (Nová scéna [The New Stage theatre], 1963; J. Gregor Tajovský Theatre in Zvolen, 1964). The apex of the early experience with Mrożek's creation was the staging of *Tango* by three Slovak theatres over a three-year time span.

Mrożek's *Tango*: a little history of Poland and of Central Europe

The play *Tango*, published in the Polish theatre monthly *Dialog*, in 1964, is an important cornerstone in the creation of Sławomir Mrożek. He wrote the play subsequent to his one-act plays and plays *Policaĵti* [The Police] (1958), *Mučenictvo Petra*

Oheya [The Martyrdom of Peter Ohey] (1959), *Moriak* [The Turkey] (1960), *Strip-tease* (1961), or *Veselica* [The Party] (1962). In his drama, Mrožek engaged the elements of grotesque, irony and caricature. He made his name as a keen observer of the language of socialist realism with its empty phrases and subtleties and as a playwright who was able to work with it very effectively. Once *Tango* was published in Poland, it was soon staged abroad (France, Germany, USA).

The publicist Martin Bútora maps out Mrožek's transformation of a playwright of one-act plays to an author of full-length plays: "*Tango* is both horrible and remarkable theatre. The latter applies especially because it constitutes a kind of dividing line in Mrožek's hitherto dramatic creation. In it, Mrožek, satirist and master of grotesque, 'for the very first time, catches the breath' of a playwright of high calibre who wrote his earliest fairly standard theatre play."¹

In *Tango*, unlike his grotesque one-act plays, Mrožek employs (put in the words of Jan Bloński) coordinated absurdity, while combining the elements of grotesque and farce with the period facts of life, thereby achieving greater naturalness and credibility. He works with the facts of a real-life family tragedy, but the absurdity does not ensue from the symbol, it is not a woman buried in sand as is the case of Beckett's *Šťastné dni* [Happy Days] or a character acting in an environment of nothingness, devoid of any humanity. He works in a fashion similar to that in his play *Strip-tease*, in which absurdity is not created by an omnipresent hand, but rather by the situation of two men who are manipulated by it. The characters of *Tango* live their real-life days in their household, in concrete time and cope with real-life situations (generational conflict, wedding, infidelity, interpersonal relations), however, they are trapped in them in a bizarre way. Each individual advocates the philosophy of his/her life and individual beliefs.

Paradoxically, Artur, member of the young generation, is a proponent of tradition, which the family is bound to rediscover, if its complete collapse is to be averted. Son Artur rebels against his father Stomil and mother Eleonora and her frivolous life, against his grandma Eugenia's love of card-playing and his uncle Eugeniusz's inclination to shun responsibility. He is determined to demonstrate this opposition through marriage with Ala, his sister-in-law. At the outset, the events are tartly and artlessly, almost childishly, commented on by a noisy and disorderly unscrupulous newcomer Edek. Bigger and minor characters based on real people come and go and the grotesque elements of the play are a paraphrase of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, not only by text innuendos (early in the play Eugenia sends Artur to a monastery) but also by underlying motives. Artur, like Hamlet, fights his family in a similarly crazy and unconventional manner. The Polish drama theorist Jan Kott was the first to have used this comparison: "Artur, like Hamlet, is the last of ideologists and like Hamlet of the theatre of Shakespeare and of Artaud, he dies murdered. Fortinbras will come after him."²

Mrožek combines tragic aspects with comic and grotesque aspects. As opposed to Shakespeare, he foreshadows the repercussions after the death of his hero. He does not develop full-fledged characters, it is only Artur who undergoes a thorough transformation as the plot evolves. He is the only one to trigger the audience's empathy,

¹ BÚTORA, Martin. *Tango na výbornú*. In *Študentská Praha*, 18 July 1967, Vol. 3, Issue 27, p. 12.

² KOTT, Jan. *Rodzina Mrožka*. In *Dialog*, 1965, Vol. 10, Issue 4, p. 73.

although his ideological and emotional confusion is hard to understand. Rather than revolting against established conventions, Artur rebels in their favour: he defies the morals of his parents, he defies their past which they remember as a time of freedom and the breaking down of prejudice. The young man is convinced that such social tension is offensive and disheartening. He wants to recreate the moral status of his family, its conventional role and dignity. Artur wants to change society and restore the old order, tradition and, put in his own words: "You have been non-conformists for such a long time that, eventually, the last of norms, against which one could revolt, has collapsed."³ He feels strong sentiment for Ala who is still imbued in childish indecisiveness, lacks experience and has a limited intellectual background and shamelessly offers him physical love as a mere enticement without feelings or emotions. Formally, Artur wins her consent to marry him. However, he is only capable of advancing his "traditionalist" experiment to a point when he realises that tradition without content is dysfunctional and meaningless. Artur needs a new content, which is death. He turns to Edek for help who, through a brute-force attack, benefits from the situation: he kills Artur and becomes a new primitive and ruthless household leader. "From the knowing of nothingness there runs a direct way to the absolute dictatorship of Camus' Caligula and it is no different in Artur's case. (...) While Caligula eventually realises the absurdity of his theory, Mrożek's Artur has no time to realise this and to learn his lesson, because he dies."⁴ In *Tango*, with the replacement of the head of household/society, no purging takes place in the meaning of hope for the rehashing of eroded life and family ties in a dilapidated middle-class flat. Instead, fear sneaks in. It should be noted that *Tango* is more a masculine view of family ties and social relations. Four men intervene in the plot, whose energy radius becomes weaker with growing age. The exchange of views between Artur and Stomil in the first act and between Artur and Edek in the third act has a profound impact upon the thinking of the females in the family. All they can do is talk back and object meekly.

The second, social dimension of Mrożek's *Tango*, continues to be very current despite a time span of fifty years since it was written. Traditional and liberal world outlooks clash in the play. Son Artur, the representative of the conservative wing of the family, challenges his father Stomil and his reckless, almost avant-garde, experiments. It is only uncle Eugeniusz who becomes Artur's temporary ally. However, Eugeniusz's resoluteness lasts until a moment when he no longer understands Artur and is lured by Edek.

Last but not least, the political dimension is also present, as *Tango* communicates an accurate and undistorted perception of society. Even with the best phrased ideas an ideology may converge on totalitarianism and brutal power, which is best evidenced by a breathtaking finale. Brutal power embodied by Edek gains control over the family and there comes he, a dauntless individual and aggressor attracting all social attention. The Czech drama theorist Milan Lukeš puts it this way: "The plot of *Tango* does not draw a circle; the final situation is not an imprint of the introductory situation. On the contrary, a kind of a new quality is introduced. He who understands the futile waiting for Godot as the climax of hopelessness, is reminded by Mrożek

³ MROŻEK, Sławomir. *Tango*. Translation by Milan Lasica. Bratislava : DILIZA, 1967, p. 12.

⁴ PORUBJAK, Martin: *Tango pre Katušu*. In *Kultúrny život*, 1967, Vol. 22, Issue 17, p. 10.

that by Godot's arrival, the situation may get even worse. It depends on Godot."⁵ In Mrozek's case, Godot is very real, it is lout Edek who is present on stage while the plot evolves and as the play draws to a close, his personality is unveiled and a character who until then used to put smiles on audience's faces, turns into a dangerous tyrant.

Jan Błoński⁶ also refers to these rude and rough persons, called *chams* in Polish. A *cham* is a person who ends up on the bottom and has the power to pull down other people. Mrozek's play is based on the principle of gradual fall. Family members defend positions that are so wide apart that instead of salvation there comes a gradual fall to the bottom. To illustrate opposite poles and themes, Błoński uses Mrozek's one-act plays. In *Tango* these opposites are: reason versus the physical body, hypocrisy versus brutality, civilisation versus barbarity, effort versus inaction.⁷ In the end, the victory of negative phenomena is obvious, despite that, catharsis takes place: the finale is disturbing and at the same time, it gives hope for change. It is interesting to watch Mrozek's work with language and form. He is very resourceful in using empty phrases, sayings and jingles. He employs changeable language – at times, it is full of conventional social subtleties, on other occasions his characters would speak slang.

When writing the play, Mrozek was inspired by sociobiology which connects socio-political phenomena with the world of biology. That which is imported in society seems to have a remote archetype in the childhood of mankind, in animal organism. The tension between the animal and human, between the animalistic and emotional is generated during the clashes between Artur and Edek, which establish the basis for verbal absurdity. Intertextually, Mrozek employs the elements of various literary inspirations. *Tango* is a syncretic drama in which diverse dramatic conventions and motifs having far-reaching consequences are used. Realistic action epitomising generational conflict implanted in the commonplace reality of the life of the commoners has been written according to the canon of a classical dramatic text, which meticulously observes the unity of time and location of an action.⁸ Unlike earlier Mrozek's works in which absurdity and grotesqueness are more prominent and, therefore, closer to absurd drama, in *Tango*, the motives of protagonists and of their characters are partly revealed. Having said that, Mrozek failed to avoid certain flattening of the protagonists' characters. They are grotesque types of characteristic manifestations. Indeed, they are more individualised than the characters in his one-act plays from the earlier period, however, except for Artur, they do not undergo any significant transformation. They turn into instruments through which various social views are manifested. Such one-dimensionality also transcends the relations between the protagonists. Mrozek, more than other authors of absurd drama, works with "micro community" (as Marta Piwińska puts it)⁹.

⁵ LUKEŠ, Milan. Hamlet and Artur. In *Divadlo*, 1966, Vol. 17, Issue 2, p. 16.

⁶ BŁOŃSKI, Jan. *Wszystkie sztuki Sławomira Mrożka*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo literackie, 1995, pp. 56 – 57.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ GUTKOWSKA, Barbara. O „Tangu” i Emigrantach” Sławomira Mrożka. Katowice : Wydawnictwo Książnica, 1968.

⁹ PIWIŃSKA, Marta. Mrozek, czyli słon a sprawa polska. In *Dialog*, 1966, Vol. 11, Issue 5, p. 104.

There is a clear link between *Tango* and *Svadba* [The Wedding] by Stanisław Wyspiański, who was a representative of the literary movement Young Poland, which is the Polish version of a modernist stream in arts on the verge of the 19th and 20th centuries. Ideologically, Wyspiański paraphrases the romantic and real worlds: intellectuals meet burghers and peasants at a wedding. At the wedding, they all are haunted by the phantoms of Polish history. Mrożek also paraphrases *Ferdydurke*, a novel by modernist Witold Gombrowicz, in which one of the most acclaimed 20th century Polish authors links up the world of the main character with the outer environment. The hero is not mature enough to fulfil his ambition, he struggles against his immature nature. The author employs surrealistic elements, grotesque and irony. Gombrowicz's Józef Kowalski is similar to Mrożek's Artur in his striving to change big history without having to undergo a process of inner transformation himself. However, there is a difference – the world of Gombrowicz remains to be integral and the commoners form an indivisible whole, thus giving an impression of a society that can survive on the condition it undergoes a reform.

Mrożek also has affinity to the poetics of the formalist and avant-gardist Stanisław Witkacy Witkiewicz, who is known in Polish literature for his plays with a psychedelic dose of irony, sarcasm and grotesque. According to the Polish drama theorist Jan Kott, "Witkiewicz has arrived too soon. Gombrowicz lives in exile. Mrożek arrives just in time. Not too early, not too late, on both the Polish and the Western watches."¹⁰

Hence, Mrożek is not the first author to have introduced absurd elements, criticism and irony to the Polish literature. His forerunners gave him a momentum to be able to implement a platform of absurdity and hidden metaphors, paradoxically, at a time which opposed it. Given the fact that such tradition and context were not at hand for Slovak theatre professionals who were exposed to Mrożek's texts, they had to devise a specific way of capturing his works without becoming pathetic, superficial and incomprehensible. Facts of life that refer to family life and political situation have become the main bridging points to understanding Mrożek by Slovak theatre professionals and audiences.

The first Tango in SND: Absurdity in real time

Tango saw its Slovak premiere at State Theatre Košice, on 15 April 1967, under the direction of Oto Katusa and in translation by Jozef Marušiak. The phenomenon from Poland was repeated: there, *Tango* was premiered in the regional theatre in Bydgoszcz, in 1964, and only afterwards it was premiered in Warsaw, in Teatr Współczesny, under the direction of Erwin Axera (1965). The stage director Oto Katusa ventured to capture the text literally; however, judging by reviews, acting and dramaturgy gave a highly inconsistent impression. The production indicated potential pitfalls of absurd drama in Slovak theatre: Katusa's effort to produce absurd drama by employing absurd means proved a failure.

In 1963, a young stage director Peter Mikulík joined the Slovak National Theatre. He capitalised on his proverbial sense of irony, paradox and grotesque in the productions of playwrights moving on the edge of grotesque and absurd drama (Sławomir

¹⁰ KOTT, Jan. *Rodzina Mrożka*, p. 16.



Slawomir Mrozek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 17 June 1967. Božidara Turzonovová (Ala), Jozef Adamovič (Artur). Direction Peter Mikulík. Photo by Jozef Vavro. Theatre Institute Archives.

Mrozek: *Moriak*, [The Turkey] 1963; Samuel Beckett: *Šťastné dni*, [Happy Days] 1964; Václav Havel: *Záhradná slávnosť*, [The Garden Party] 1965). Prior to that, in cooperation with Milan Lasica, he had staged one-act plays on the scene of The Academy of Performing Arts in Reduta: *Veselica* [The Party] and *Strip-tease* (1963), with the then students of The Academy of Performing Arts Stano Dančiak, Milan Labuda and Pavol Mikulík. The early productions by Peter Mikulík are based on the predominance of text and acting, while direction interpretation is subdued.

The dramaturgic feat of staging Slawomir Mrozek's play by the SND drama ensemble rather than by a smaller alternative theatre proved to have its limits. The issue largely concerned actors' interpretation of absurd drama which was uncharted territory for both Slovak actors and theatre makers. The staging of absurd drama by employing absurd means missed the true essence of Mrozek's texts.

As distinct from Oto Katuša, director of Košice production, Peter Mikulík made use of realistic, almost civilian, elements in his production of *Tango*. His *Tango* has no complex construct: the director gave prominence to the text per se. He did not resort to the older translation by Jozef Marušiak, which was too literary for his taste. A new translation for Mikulík's production by Milan Lasica was more colloquial. Despite a fairly meaningful bringing together of a realistic basis and grotesque unconventionality, actors' interpretation and their individual approaches varied greatly. The theatre critic Milan Polák commented on the production: "It is apparent that he [Mi-



Sławomir Mrozek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 17 June 1967. Mária Kralovičová (Eleonora), Ondrej Jarjabek (Eugeniusz), Oľga Borodáčová (Eugenia), Ivan Rajniak (Edo). Direction Peter Mikulík. Photo by Jozef Vavro. Theatre Institute Archives.

kulík] has drawn a lesson from his previous encounters with the plays by Mrozek, Havel, Topol and Pinter. Using sharp moves and distinct contours he makes a rough outline of the character which must be filled with a highly realistic life-giving sap within the parabolically outlined contours. Mikulík's direction is noted for several distinctive strengths: refined sense of drama synthesis, of the composition of mise-en-scene, rhythm, a subtle and simple development of interpersonal relationships and, last but not least, the capacity to offer his idea to the actor and guide him to its realisation."¹¹

A clear direction vision has also been viewed positively by the theatre critic and dramaturg Martin Porubjak: "One should not discount Mikulík's effort to materialise all interpersonal relations, his particular concern for veritable and natural action of actors and his sense of authenticity in the building up of compact situations on stage and his ability to discreetly and effectively accentuate a thought by employing rhythm and arrangement (towards the close of the performance Edek is seen slumped down in his chair placed on top of a table – it is the chair from which the now dead Artur used to loudly proclaim his theories of power)."¹² Natural and realistic action with grotesque and irrational elements are unique to Mikulík's direction.

¹¹ POLÁK, Milan. Potlesk autorovi i predstaveniu. In *Pravda*, Vol. 48, p. 2, 22. 6. 1967.

¹² PORUBJAK, Martin. Realistická fraška, In *Práca*, Vol. 22, p. 4, 29 June 1967.



Slawomir Mrozek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 17 June 1967. Mária Kráľovičová (Eleonora), Ivan Rajniak (Edo). Direction Peter Mikulík. Photo by Jozef Vavro. Theatre Institute Archives.

In the background there resounds a Dürrenmattian idea that our era can only be grasped through farce.

The theatre critic Ladislav Obuch writes in similar spirit. What he especially valued about Mikulík's direction was "smart unveiling and revelation of the background behind the thought process of the source text"¹³, which he managed to implant in the production as a whole and this is apparent "from the mood and the atmosphere of the performance, accurately capturing the basic characteristics of the source text"¹⁴. Peter Mikulík's direction concept approached society as a space in which the enforcement of any ideas

may be thwarted by brutal and cruel force. Unambiguous indications communicated from the stage at a time of communist "thawing", when Slovak society was at the crossroads of two worlds, were the proverbial raised thumb: "It is not Mikulík's aspiration to accentuate anything with cold and rational forthrightness; his concern is to appeal to the hearts of his audiences rather than to their reason, to shatter and shock their emotions and perception."¹⁵

Mikulík's *Tango* is to be given credit for its direction as a whole, while critics remain split on the quality and persuasiveness of acting. Paradoxically, the acting of the older generation is generally viewed more positively than the acting of the younger generation of actors. The actress Oľga Borodáčová was highly rated in the role of Eugenia: "For her verity and meticulously rendered real-life types with their characteristic and natural action in all situations."¹⁶ It should be noted, though, that the portrayal of the character by Borodáčová was determined by the inner state of the actress and by her peculiar "singing" diction, which in itself sounded absurd. Some critics raised objections against the dullness of acting of Jozef Adamovič in the role of Artur. In Milan Polák's opinion, Mikulík's production was deficient of an actor worth the role of Artur: "It was not that much the linearity of acting and its occasional shallowness that did harm to the performance, but rather the fact that it deflected its centre of gravity."¹⁷ On the other hand, Adamovič proved very convincing in distinguishing between Artur's inner transformations in all three acts. He managed to meaningfully fill in long monologues so as not to sound as empty talk (although, given the context

¹³ OBUCH, Ladislav. Mrožkove hľadanie nového obsahu života. In *Večerník*, Vol. 12, Issue 143, p. 3, 20 June 1967.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ PORUBJAK, Martin. Realistická fraška, In *Práca*, 29 June 1967.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ POLÁK, Milan. Potlesk autorovi i predstaveniu. In *Pravda*, 22 June 1967.

Sławomir Mrożek:
Tango. The Slovak
 National Theatre
 Drama ensemble,
 premiered on 17 June
 1967. Jozef Adamovič
 (Artur), František
 Zvarík (Stomil), Mária
 Kráľovičová (Eleonora).
 Direction Peter
 Mikulík. Photo by Jozef
 Vavro. Theatre Institute
 Archives.



of the play, they indeed are empty phrases).¹⁸ His style of acting was romanticising and lyrical and he used declarative tone of voice. He almost sounded like a poet declaiming his truths. Rather than being assaultive, his arguments in favour of family reformation based on genuine values are versified. He gets carried away with form more than content.

"Cham" Edek, rendered by Ivan Rajniak, was portrayed "more on the outward and over-exposed side"¹⁹, although, on the other hand, Rajniak was veritable in rendering Edek as "a savage with good choppers and excellent digestion"²⁰. He dramatically escalated Edek's side of a convivial lout who tries to sneak into family relations and to relativise them; at the same time, he purposely worked on the decomposition of this family. Critics also commented on the performance of Božidara Turzonovová

¹⁸ PORUBJAK, Martin. Realistická fraška. In *Práca*, 29 June 1967.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ POLÁK, Milan. Potlesk autorovi i predstaveniu. In *Pravda*, 22 June 1967.

rendering Ala. According to Martin Porubjak, “she is compelling in any such situation when contempt and superiority are demonstrated, or when she distances herself from the debauched family and introvert Artur. She does not deliver in situations that require emotions, passion or sensuality. The character of Ala is flattened to that of an ironical intellectual.”²¹ In Martin Bútora’s view, by her ironical expression and cold detachedness, she stylised herself in the position of a bored and indecisive woman of the world. “A little more femininity would do the job, her grief over dead Artur would be more veritable.”²² On the other hand, critics appreciated her effort at pragmatism and natural acting. Both actors, representatives of the young generation of actors, were guided by their teachers (for instance, by Karol L. Zachar) to classical psychological style of acting and, therefore, stylised approach to their parts and to the absurdity of the text were remote and unknown to them.

Stage design is the work of Ivan Štěpán. The space is decorated as a burgher drawing room cluttered with period furniture and useless items. The characters look as if they live in a museum in which interpersonal relations are mothballed only to evolve in a gradual tragedy which establishes a new order. Several years after *Tango* had been premiered in Bratislava, the so-called normalisation was ushered in by new order. The costumes by Helena Bezáková reflected the generation to which the character belonged (for instance, Eleonora and Stomil looked like hippies who failed to grow up), although the attire of each character was marked by a detail which relativized their generational affinity (for instance, Eugenia wore an interwar dress and a baseball cap).

Through the works of Sławomir Mrożek absurd drama was presented to the period audiences of SND in a form different from the one known to them in the texts of Samuel Beckett. His works are no heavy existential drama with philosophical, metaphorical even, overtones, but rather plays that emanate human warmth and humour. Interestingly, Mrożek’s one-act plays do not shun brutality and aggression and there are times when man succumbs to them easily. The director Peter Mikulík, after the staging of *Tango* in SND, worked with Mrożek’s texts as guest director of Divadlo na Korze [Theatre on the Promenade], which staged three one-act plays by Mrożek in 1969: *Strip-tease*, *Karol* [Charlie] and *Stroskotanci* [At Sea]. After 1970, there was a ban imposed on Mrożek’s plays in Slovakia. Before that, *Tango*, directed by Stanislav Párnický, had been staged by Divadlo Slovenského národného povstania in Martin [Theatre of the Slovak National Uprising | Theatre], in 1969.

The second *Tango* in SND: The funeral of a family

After November 1989, a new wave of demand for Mrożek’s *Tango* was raised by Slovak theatres. In 1990, the play was staged by the New Stage theatre Bratislava under the direction of Stanislav Párnický and by J. G. Tajovský Theatre in Zvolen (direction Andrej Turčan). *Tango* re-appeared on the stage of SND in 1997. The election of Martin Porubjak as senior dramaturg of the drama ensemble perfectly correlated with the then atmosphere of socio-political upheaval. The management of the theatre approached the representative of the younger generation, Štefan Korenčí, to produce

²¹ PORUBJAK, Martin. Realistická fraška. In *Práca*, 29 June 1967.

²² BÚTORA, Martin. Tango na výbornú, In *Študentská Praha*, 18 July 1967.



Sławomir Mrożek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 14 June 1997. Róbert Roth (Artur), Michaela Čobejová (Ala). Direction Štefan Korenčí. Photo by Jana Nemčoková. Theatre Institute Archives.

the play. True, Korenčí did not have prior experience with Mrożek's plays, but his poetics converged on grotesque and irony. The majority of critics and reviewers agreed on the currentness of his direction concept which perfectly reflected the then social atmosphere in Slovakia, when fragile democracy was undermined by harsh power interventions (murdering of a staff member of the secret service, abduction of the son of Slovak president abroad, bureaucratic encroachments upon the functioning of culture).

Drama theorist Dagmar Podmaková examines the dramaturgical interventions into the older translation by Milan Lasica, which brought the text closer to the present (allusion to the Velvet Revolution, the jingling of keys).²³ There was no dramatic editing of the text by the director and the dramaturg Martin Porubjak; instead, they made it more current and certain phrases were reworded to have it correspond to the then colloquial language. Although the translation was made in the 1960s, it sounded current three decades on: it used the language of contemporary intellectuals which they would speak in privacy rather than in public.

Štefan Korenčí produced *Tango* as a portrayal of a forlorn and loudly declaimed revolt of young Artur, whose step into the unknown is passively watched by the rest of

²³ PODMAKOVÁ, Dagmar. Porevolučné tango v SND. In *Pravda*, Vol. 7, Issue 139, p. 7, 18 June 1997.



Slawomir Mrozek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 14 June 1997. Marián Geišberg (Stomil), Anton Korenčí (Eugeniusz), Anna Javorková (Eleonora), Viera Topinková (Eugenia). Direction Štefan Korenčí. Photo by Jana Nemčoková. Theatre Institute Archives.

the family. His concept was neither uncontrollably power-oriented nor instinctively passionate. The scenes looked like they had been cut out of a filthy and dusty hole, where nothing works, and apathy creeps into relations and into the inner states of characters. The production moved in sinusoidal oscillations, with abrupt changes in the rhythm of actions: the director created suspense in dramatic situations only to let it drop abruptly, while creating an empty interspace filled with awkward pauses and silence.

The production is situated in a drawing room which is in complete disarray. The drama theorist Ladislav Čavojský wrote the following on the impression given by the stage design: "Director Štefan Korenčí and stage designer Jaroslav Valek arrived from the countryside and their shoe soles were stained with the filth of poultry pens. What we see is not a burgher drawing room from half a century back, as the author would wish to see, but rather a sterile "whitened" room with white chairs and a table. Contrasting life programmes have contrasting milieus. (...) I fear that I may affront producers – postmodernists, by using a old-fogyish comparison, but their production is reminiscent of Záborský's "Chujava"²⁴ view of reality – first comes the bad day, then comes the good day, while everything happens somewhere in the backwoods."²⁵

²⁴ The reviewer alludes to the short story by Jonáš Záborský *Dva dni v Chujave* [Two Days in Chujava] (1873).

²⁵ ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. Posledné tango v sezóne, In *Literárny týždenník*, Vol. 10, Issue 27, p. 15, 3 July 1997.



Sławomir Mrożek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 14 June 1997. Anton Korenči (Eugeniusz), Róbert Roth (Artur), Marián Geišberg (Stomil), Anna Javorková (Eleonora). Direction Štefan Korenči. Photo by Jana Nemčoková. Theatre Institute Archives.

Čavojský's review could not be more apt in naming the director's two polar view: during two consecutive days, the family tries to live in different systems. It becomes integrated; however, a forceful connection during the wedding does not work for them and the family falls apart. Korenči puts focus on this sharp contrast, which indeed triggers change, but, alas, a change for the worse. The space sprinkled with bird droppings is an image of the decomposition of the intimacy of family life. It is not furniture, as mentioned by Mrożek in his scenic notes, but rather bird droppings and piles of dust scattered on the scene like graves that convey destruction. There is just the table, at which Edek, Eugenia and Eugeniusz play cards. There are groceries and spirits on the table. There is a chandelier hanging over it, a pram in the background and a flight of stairs leading to a platform – the bier. When Artur enters the scene, he immediately assaults Edek. The opening scene suggests a total war declared by Artur on Edek: he pushes him away from the table, straight in the pram, by that very act degrading him to an insane person with whom he refuses to enter into a debate.

The stage design also accentuated the breaking down of the play into two parts. While in the first part Jaroslav Valek managed to create a powerful image of decomposition and hopelessness, in the second part there was no atmosphere or the presence of elements that would have helped actors in capturing their exacting roles. "The greyish scene sprinkled with bird droppings will have an emotional impact on us before the performance even starts. It is either awesome or awful, choose whichever-

er one you want, at any rate, it effectively conveys an atmosphere of an old dovecote serving its dwellers who blend in perfectly, both physically and mentally."²⁶

The costume designer Peter Čanecký clad the protagonists in filthy and shabby clothes. Artur's creasy suit long went out of style. The feelings of frustration were accentuated by the pale masking of actors. In the second part, costumes suggestive of filth, poverty, material and spiritual destitution were replaced with elegant (wedding) white or black dress, evoking chess pieces.

Artur, the main character, was rendered by Robert Roth. According to the critic Dagmar Podmaková, "Roth is not a young despot, just the opposite – he seems to be a controversial and insecure person who utters semantically unrelated words and sentences."²⁷ It should be noted that this was Roth's first big role with SND drama ensemble. Mrožek's Artur predetermined the specific talent of an actor who captures his role both intellectually and physically. Roth's style of acting is characteristic by neurotic gestures and agitated body movements. In *Tango*, his Artur overtly engages in conflict with Stomil, when they chastise each other for their opposing world views. According to the reviewer Barbora Dvořáková, "Roth demonstrates his intellectual style of acting on Artur. The actor delivers with every part of his body and shows extraordinary movement disposition, while crafting a psychologically compelling image of his hero."²⁸ His Artur is an intellectual wearing a jacket and a pair of Lennon style glasses, with a book tucked under his arm pit – he is pale and skinny as if cut out of Andy Warhol's pop art paintings. In contrast to the earlier production, he is more intellectual and pragmatic than Jozef Adamovič's romantic and poetic Artur. His conflict with other family members is more open and he is reluctant to consent to a compromise.

Lout Edek, played by archetypal and masculine Ján Kroner, is earthier and more instinctive compared to Edek from 1967. He solidifies his power status in family by enforcing ever crude ways. Kroner escalated his acting from infantilism (in the opening scene, he sits in a pram and leafs through a textbook of anatomy) to overt tyranny demonstrated through crudeness, ambiguous utterances and physical dominance. His Edek bluntly demonstrates superiority as the play draws to a close – seated at the table, he is possessively stroking Eleonora, who is on her knees, while announcing that he will continue to live in the flat as Artur's successor.

Marián Geišberg (Stomil), with a face of someone who has just woken up, oscillates between a resolute and cross father who counters son's assaults and a gullible and pliable child. Dressed up in tight flare jeans and a shirt, he has the looks of a grown-up member of the Big Beat Generation. Eugeniusz (Anton Korenči), embodying a decent folk man pliable enough to adapt to any situation, can also show his side of a clumsy manipulator (his suggestion to get rid of Edek in the opening scene). As for female characters – mother Eleonora (Anna Javorková), grandmother Eugenia (Viera Topinková) and Artur's bride Ala (Michaela Čobejová) – their role is limited to that of playing into the hands of men, and it is no different for Mrožek than it is for Korenči. In a lengthy "love duet" Ala climbs down from a chandelier and en-

²⁶ ULÍČIANSKA, Zuzana. Nové poriadky v starom holubníku, In *Divadlo v medziciase*, 1997, Vol. 6, Issue 3, p. 5.

²⁷ PODMAKOVÁ, Dagmar. Porevolučné tango v SND. In *Pravda*, 18 June 1997.

²⁸ DVOŘÁKOVÁ, Barbora. Slovenské tango... jasné pravidlá! In *Sme*, Vol. 5, Issue 137, p. 8, 16 June 1997.



Sławomir Mrożek: *Tango*. The Slovak National Theatre Drama ensemble, premiered on 14 June 1997. Anton Korenčí (Eugeniusz), Michaela Čobejová (Ala), Róbert Roth (Artur). Direction Štefan Korenčí. Photo by Jana Nemčoková. Theatre Institute Archives.

twines her legs around Artur like a snake. Although Eugenia's bier which epitomises Artur's revenge on her and the image of the farce of their lives have their purpose in the play, they are lost in the preponderant verbal component of the dramaturgical

and directorial concept of the production. Despite several weighty moments, it was diluted into an amorphous narrative."²⁹

Tango directed by Štefan Korenčí on the Small Stage SND gave testimony of the time in which it had been written. It reflected the civil attitudes of drama producers who reacted to an adverse socio-political situation in a manner which was more candid than what the audiences were normally used to on Slovak professional stages. The finale contains an aberrantly evocative punchline. Edek, with a revolver tucked behind his belt, moving with a dispassionate dance step, carries Artur's dead body to the pram and then takes a photo in front of Eugeniusz's camera lens, amidst the dead family members. A dead body in front of him, a dead body behind him – the tango of death (or anguish at least) may begin.

Both productions of *Tango* were staged in SND (1967, 1997) at a time when the audience inherently perceived socio-political changes and debated them in their living rooms. They were in conflict with them, although the conflict in 1997 was not as imminent and fatal. In contrast to Mikulík's production with diverse generational streams (petty bourgeoisie, hippies), the characters in Korenčí's production look more subdued, slow and passive. They are in a space that is half dead and they gradually become decomposed and mouldered. In the second part, submersed in white, the moderate and "diplomatic" atmosphere of the first part evolves into an agitated and revolutionary row. At a time when the majority of Slovaks were wholeheartedly enraptured by the country's accession to the European Union, the production may have been looked upon as an utter disaster, as it gave no hope. "The *Tango* of Porubjak and Korenčí is a deep, artistic and witty metaphor of the quest for an ideal functioning of society. The fact that it is about a generation and a revolution way different from those rendered by the actors of SND in 1967, is alluded to by the subtle jingling of keys. And it is charm of the "unwanted" if the audience sees yet another picture of the present soaking through the performance. Having said that does not mean it is unwanted by production devisers."³⁰ Within the social context of the 1990s, other critics condemned Korenčí's interpretation of the text. "The quality of staging in almost all respects ousted the mounting of the play thirty years ago on the very same stage. What it missed then, sticks out from it now, that is, political background of the entire theatre of the absurd."³¹

It is this "political" background which makes Mrožek current and relevant to modern audiences. Like in Poland, Slovak audiences understand the context of his plays. They have personal experience with what it was like to live in a totalitarian regime, where distorted rules based on pretence and fear apply; in a regime where hero is he who rises to power while the rest are doomed to the silence of amorphous and anonymous masses. On the stages of Slovak theatres, Mrožek's *Tango* has lived several political turnarounds and even today, it is appallingly current.

The study was developed within the framework of the grant project VEGA 2/0143/16 One Hundred Years of the Slovak National Theatre. Theatre Productions 1938 – 1970 (drama, opera).

Translated by Mária Švecová

²⁹ PODMAKOVÁ, Dagmar. Porevolučné tango v SND. In *Pravda*, 18 June 1997.

³⁰ DVOŘÁKOVÁ, Barbora. Slovenské tango, jasné pravidlá! In *Sme*, 16 June 1997.

³¹ LEHUTA, Emil. Sezóna skončila kriminálnym tangom. In *Teatro*, 1997, Vol. 1, Issue 9, p. 10.