Contemporary Anglophone Plays on Montenegrin Stages in the Post-Pandemic Era

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the reception and impact of nine contemporary Anglophone plays in Montenegro during the post-pandemic era. Analysing data from theatre archives, reviews, and interviews, the study examines the selection, production, and reception of these plays in the context of Montenegro’s political, social, economic, and cultural landscape. The research highlights a sustained interest in both classic and modern-day Anglophone playwrights and delves into complex societal challenges, providing a backdrop for understanding the theatre’s role in addressing these issues. The adapted plays, which explore global concerns and existential themes, contribute to a dialogue with Montenegrin society and challenge accepted norms. The absence of COVID-related plays is discussed, revealing programming policies and priorities. Ultimately, this paper explores how theatre continues to be a vital platform for critique and engagement with contemporary issues, reaffirming its role as a space for dialogue and collective therapy.

Keywords: Anglophone plays, post-pandemic, theatre, Montenegro

Sodobna anglofonska dramska dela na črnogorskih odrih v obdobju po pandemiji

IZVLEČEK

Avtorica obravnava recepcijo in vpliv devetih sodobnih anglofonskih dramskih del v Črni gori v obdobju po pandemiji. S pomočjo podatkov iz gledaliških arhivov, kritik in intervjujev preučuje izbor, produkcijo in recepcijo teh iger v črnogorski politični, družbeni, gospodarski in kulturni krajini. Izsledki kažejo, da se uprizarjata tako klasična kot sodobna anglofonska dramska dela, pri čemer so prikazane tudi zapletene družbene spremembe, ki pomagajo razumeti vlogo gledališča pri reševanju teh vprašanj. Dramske priredbe, ki se ukvarjajo s svetovnimi izzivi in vprašanjmi človeškega obstoja, vzpostavljajo dialog s črnogorsko družbo in prevprašujejo uveljavljene družbene norme. Avtorica se sprašuje, zakaj se na repertoarjih ne pojavljajo dramske igre, povezane z virusom COVID, kar kaže na programske usmeritve in interes gledališč. Obravnavano je tudi vprašanje, v kakšni meri je gledališče še vedno pomembna platforma za kritiko in ukvarjanje s sodobnimi vprašanjami, pri čemer avtorica ugotavlja, da je gledališče še vedno prostor za dialog in kolektivno terapijo.

Ključne besede: anglofonske dramske igre, obdobje po pandemiji, gledališče, Črna gora
1 Introduction

Theatres worldwide observed World Theatre Day on March 27, 2020 without an audience. COVID-19 forced the curtains to fall, prompting theatres to transition to virtual environments in order to sustain the artistic spirit and alleviate the period of required isolation in the battle against the coronavirus.

The first anti-pandemic measures related to theatres in Montenegro were implemented on March 12, 2020. The theatres, along with cultural institutions engaged in theatrical production and numerous festivals functioning as institutions, suspended their regular repertoires. “The context closed theatres”, stated one of the leading Montenegrin theatrologists, Janko Ljumović (2021, 4), such that theatre as “a living art form and the performance as an act that unfolds between performers and the audience became an impossible mission”. The crisis brought to light the fragility of live theatrical art, with risks to artistic production processes, including the impossibility of participating in festivals and uncertainties surrounding planned premieres before and during the pandemic (Ljumović 2023, 185). As the situation unfolded the theatres in Montenegro waited a long time for protocols that would allow them to reopen, mainly due to the fact that “the cultural system was not a priority”, but also because “hardly any voice seeking possibilities was heard” (Ljumović 2021, 4). When the protocols finally appeared, they established maximum numbers of audience members and daily performances, to which theatres had difficulty adjusting.

Nevertheless, theatres and cultural institutions in Montenegro tried to respond creatively to the crisis. Physical distance, the “new normal” (Ljumović 2021, 4), opened the need for social connections, a secure space for that being the internet. Some experts in the dramatic arts argued that theatre had proven to be vital and adaptable to the new conditions, while others believed it should strictly adhere to its established norms (Marojević 2020, 21). It was at least shown that, despite the crisis, and perhaps because of it, theatre remained indispensable. We shall consider the activities of four institutions significant in this context, especially with regard to their Anglophone productions.

During the pandemic, the Montenegrin National Theatre adapted to challenges through the multimedia project Živimo kulturu (living culture), supported by the Ministry of Culture and implemented through various media channels (Ljumović 2023, 185). Collaborating with Radio and Television of Montenegro, the theatre produced Poetski teatar (poetic theatre), indicating a shift towards establishing a “multimedia theatre” (Marojević 2020, 33). Importantly, amid the prevailing restrictive conditions of the 2020/2021 season, two premieres (both of them Anglophone plays!) were successfully staged: Viktor Lodato’s The Woman Who Amuses Herself (Žena koja se igra Đokonda), and Lucy Prebble’s The Effect.

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1 In Montenegro, a small country with approximately 630,000 people, the focal points of theatre production comprise two national theatres – the Montenegrin National Theatre and the Royal Theatre Zetski dom – along with two city theatres, the City Theatre Podgorica and Nikšić Theatre. Furthermore, there are irregular and sporadic theatrical productions organized by municipal cultural centres and summer theatre festivals. The independent theatre scene is characterized by underdevelopment and operates in a significantly unequal position compared to budgetary institutions.
In this period there were still no digital transformation strategies, and the Ministry of Culture's only contribution was the archival recordings of performances broadcast on Radio and Television of Montenegro (Ljumović 2021, 4). One exception to this trend was the unique initiative of the Royal Theatre Zetski dom entitled Zetski dom sa Vama (Zetski dom with you), which unfolded on social media during the early months of the pandemic. Diverse themes brought together friends, collaborators, and the audience of this theatre through short video narratives, stories, and experiences, emphasizing the foundational role of dialogue and communication in theatre (Ljumović 2021, 5). However, the premiere and reruns of the Anglophone play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Ko se boji Virdžinije Vulf?), directed by Paolo Magelli, initially scheduled for October 7, 2020 at the same theatre, were postponed due to the coronavirus.

Amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, the City Theatre Podgorica adapted to the circumstances, bringing joy to children through various online initiatives (through social media, a website, and YouTube channel) including workshops, plays, songs, and stories (Marojević 2020, 21–22). This theatre initiated virtual programs on the World Day of Theatre for Children and Young People, successfully launched the Regional Internet Theatre Festival for Children, staged one premiere, and initiated rehearsals and preparations for two other plays. Despite the lack of performances, Nikšić Theatre maintained an active presence through intense publishing activities, releasing one double and one standard issue of its journal Pozorište (Theatre) online, which chronicled events in other theatres through various media channels, such as TV and radio.

Transitioning from the historical backdrop of Montenegrin theatres’ responses to the pandemic and its aftermath, the subsequent subsections examine the reception of nine contemporary Anglophone plays staged in Montenegro in the years since.

Within the framework of this paper, the term “contemporary” refers to plays that emerged from the 1950s to the year 2016. The productions in Montenegro were based on new Montenegrin translations or Serbian translations, some of which had been used in well-known theatre productions. The translations remained largely faithful to the original English texts. The plays were staged in four theatres (the Royal Theatre Zetski dom, Cetinje, the Montenegrin National Theatre, Podgorica, Nikšić Theatre, and the City Theatre Podgorica) in the post-pandemic period, from 2021 to 2023. We have chosen to research the stage productions of these theatres because they form the focal points of theatre production in Montenegro. Besides, these are the only professional theatres in Montenegro that function as public institutions: the Montenegrin National Theatre and the Royal Theatre Zetski dom have the status of national theatres, and the other two are city theatres. Further, the Royal Theatre Zetski dom and Nikšić Theatre share the longest theatre tradition in Montenegro, dating back to the year 1884.

The first section highlights Montenegro’s enduring interest in adapting Anglophone plays, and explores the significance of contemporary Anglophone plays staged in Montenegrin theatres over the past three years, examining their relevance to global issues, the political contextualization of the choices of the plays staged, the role of the plays in challenging local societal norms, and their contribution to redefining the purpose of theatre amidst modern challenges.
The second section offers an in-depth study of the reception of each contemporary Anglophone play through the lens of theatre archives, critical reviews, and interviews with theatre practitioners, examining key themes, translation challenges, production details, and reception by both critics and audiences. The chapter sheds light on the plays’ resonance within the Montenegrin context, providing the essential social, political, and theatrical context for a deeper understanding of each play. The analysis is structured around specific theatres, not only for clarity but also to reveal the nuanced selection process aligned with each theatre’s programming policy.

2 Contemporary Anglophone Plays on Montenegrin Stages: An Overview and Socio-Political Contextualization

The theatre and performance archives in Montenegro reveal a longstanding interest in contemporary Anglophone playwrights, dating back to the 1950s (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 220). Before 2000, Montenegrin theatre practitioners exhibited a keen interest in adapting not just earlier classic playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Ben Johnson, but also prominent literary figures of the twentieth century (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 220). Research on the reception of contemporary Anglophone drama in Montenegrin theatres in the first two decades of the twenty-first century affirms the enduring appeal of “classic” playwrights among Montenegrin audiences, while concurrently witnessing an increasing fascination with adapting contemporary playwrights such as Edward Bond, Steven Berkoff, and Martin McDonagh (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 219). An in-depth analysis of the reception of 24 contemporary Anglophone plays staged in Montenegrin theatres in this period revealed that the decisive factors contributing to the selection and positive reception of particular authors and their plays were high artistic value, popularity and current relevance, directorial skill, actors’ sensibilities, and the appeal of specific theatre genres (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 228). The study also showed that the Anglophone plays staged reflected a trend towards politicization in response to contemporary challenges.

This research on the reception of contemporary Anglophone drama in Montenegrin theatres in the post-pandemic period builds upon the aforementioned study. Drawing upon data sourced from theatre archives, reviews, and interviews with Montenegrin theatre practitioners and scholars reveals that over a post-pandemic period spanning three years (commencing from the 2020/2021 theatrical season), four professional theatres in Montenegro have staged nine contemporary Anglophone plays. This rate of three per year is twice that seen in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The findings affirm the enduring popularity of “classic” Anglophone playwrights such as Edward Albee, David Mamet, and John Osborne among the Montenegrin audience. Concurrently, there is a consistent trend of increasing interest in adapting works by modern-day Anglophone playwrights during the post-pandemic era, including Victor Lodato, Lucy Prebble, Simon Stone, Martin McDonagh, Duncan Macmillan, and Anthony Neilson.

In his article “We Need to Go Back to the Beginning”, the journalist and theatre critic Bojan Munjin (2022, 5) argues that, following the near-complete halt of theatre activities during the pandemic, which forced theatres to grapple with the question of their physical survival, they
must now confront a new war, a new threat to humanity. The author depicts this new war as “a poisonous and deadly mixture composed of digital civilization, an era of cheap spectacle, a world driven by devouring profit, a devastated environment in which we suffocate, and finally, a pessimistic sense that we have lost the meaning of our own lives” (Munjin 2022, 5). Examining Montenegro’s distinctive political, social, economic, and cultural landscape over the past three years, particularly in the aftermath of the global pandemic, only enhances our understanding of the prevailing threat.

Particular to this landscape is that, in addition to the pandemic itself, during that period a significant political shift occurred in Montenegro: in August 2020, the ruling party of 30 years lost the elections. This change happened because of the endemic corruption permeating all spheres of society, including the cultural system, described by the theatre critic Maja Mrđenović (2020) as “generally contaminated, weakened, distorted by nepotism, corruption, clientelism, chaotic, and arbitrary”. The transformation triggered a collective sense of upheaval, prompting anxieties about forfeited privileges and national identity. The new political elite, navigating both political change and a global pandemic, failed to meet public expectations, reinforcing existing polarization. Initial optimism waned as the status quo persisted, leading to widespread disillusionment and historically low voter turnout. The European Commission Montenegro 2023 Report (2023, 5–6) underscored enduring challenges, such as corruption and discrimination, highlighting grave concerns over femicide, misogyny, gender-based violence, and violence against children.

In this light, we believe it is not just the inclusion of nine contemporary Anglophone plays in the repertoires of Montenegrin theatres over the last three years that is significant, but the particular choices: The Woman Who Amuses Herself, The Effect, Yerma, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, The Pillowman, Look Back in Anger, The Lungs, and The Lying Kind. These are plays that not only reflect pressing global concerns but also resonate within the specific Montenegrin political, social, economic, and cultural context. Thus they contributed to the fostering of a dialogue with the Montenegrin community and the challenging of certain accepted notions underpinning a Montenegrin society in transition.

The plays, premiered in four Montenegrin theatres, address various pressing global issues, including environmental concerns (overpopulation, pollution, and animal cruelty), mental health (depression, the impact of antidepressants on brain chemistry, and dementia), fundamental human rights (women’s rights), and such societal issues as corruption, hypocrisy, class struggle, infertility, child abuse, paedophilia, and the commodification of sex. However, underlying these plays are existential themes such as confusion about the purpose of the survival of the human species, and the recognition of art, love, and fantasy as essential means of transcending the existing chaos.

The absence of contemporary Anglophone plays addressing the COVID pandemic, some of which introduce new or hybrid genres, is evident. This can be attributed to the perception of the creators of programming policies in Montenegrin theatres, who may believe that Montenegrin audiences are not yet prepared to process the trauma of the pandemic. More
significantly, it may also be that other global issues, or those that are more pertinent for the Montenegrin context, further intensified by the pandemic, have been considered more pressing. As such, these issues have demanded more attention from the theatre, a singular public space that, despite exclusion from traditional media, serves as a platform for freedom of speech. But then it may also be that after the pandemic theatre needed to go back to its roots, discern between virtue and madness, and communicate this message to the world (Munjin 2022, 5). In a chaotic world “that has decided to destroy itself”, Munjin states, the theatre faces novel challenges – “not only in how we discuss [the chaotic world] but also in determining what we should talk about and for what purpose” (5). What he suggests is that theatre should scrutinize fundamental values such as love, kindness, selflessness, and sacrifice, and seek the meaning of human existence, life, death, and suffering, regardless of how old-fashioned and conservative it may appear.

3  Reception of Nine Contemporary Anglophone Plays on Montenegrin Stages in the Post-Pandemic Era (2021–2023)

The examined plays belong to various genres (romance, dark thriller, melodrama, tragedy, slapstick, satire, black comedy) and time periods: from John Osborne’s “classic” Look Back in Anger (1956), through those published in the second half of the twentieth century – Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962) and David Mamet’s Sexual Perversity in Chicago (1974) – to more recent ones, published in the twenty-first century: Anthony Neilson’s The Lying Kind (2002), Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman (2003), Victor Lodato’s The Woman Who Amuses Herself (2011), The Lungs (2011), Lucy Prebble’s The Effect (2012) and Simon Stone’s Yerma (2016). In the following subsections, organized by hosting theatre, a more nuanced examination of the reception of these plays will be presented. This includes analysis of the themes addressed in the plays, production/adaptation challenges, theatre practitioners’ stances on the plays and the reception by critics and audiences.

3.1 The Montenegrin National Theatre

Over the past three decades, the Montenegrin National Theatre has demonstrated its ability to offer new thematic interpretations of societal reality, as seen in numerous titles addressing transitional dilemmas and contradictions within the contemporary social context (Ljumović 2023, 186–87). During the period from 2021 to 2023, the Montenegrin National Theatre staged three contemporary Anglophone plays: two in the 2020/2021 season—The Woman Who Amuses Herself, which premiered on February 26, 2021, and The Effect, which premiered on June 9, 2021. Additionally, one play was staged in the 2021/2022 season: Yerma (Jerma) by Simon Stone, which premiered on December 29, 2022.

The Woman Who Amuses Herself (Đokonda) was the first performance to be staged in this theatre, almost a year after the lockdown. The play is based on a true story of Italian immigrant Vincenzo Peruggia, who, working as a glazier at The Louvre in 1911, stole the Mona Lisa and brought it to his bedroom, where he spent over two years captivated by his muse and her mysterious smile. He later attempted to sell it, and, despite the sensational crime, was also seen as a defender of Italy’s artistic heritage. Presented in fragments through monologue
scenes, the play raises significant questions that resonate with Montenegrin audiences: the helplessness and imperfection of man in the face of the perfection of art, the relationship between the common individual and art, the contrast between legal principles and personal conviction, the association of art with religious experience, inquiries into artistic heritage and the concept of patriotism, the intricate connection between man and art, the varied influences of art on individuals (including diverse interpretations and identifications with art objects), the role of art as consolation – a constant need for spirituality, beauty, and art during challenging times – and the role of a smile as a defence against death.

The director Dušanka Belada, who was also the dramaturge, notes that in an era where the aura of artistic works is diminishing due to hyperproduction and mass media, the play explores the reasons for fascination with a single artistic work from various perspectives, on multiple levels, and addresses the question of the meaning and function of art today (Marojević 2021c, 6). Although the play was the director’s first professional production, it received unanimous acclaim from audiences, both at the premiere and during the subsequent performances. This is particularly noteworthy considering the director is a young Montenegrin, making her debut in the theatre world. In 2021, the play was featured at the Yugoslav Theatre Festival in Užice. On the official website of the Montenegrin National Theatre, in the news section related to this festival (Crnogorsko narodno pozorište, n.d.), the festival selector, Bojan Munjin, explains that the main reason this play resonates with all of us today is the fact that art is undervalued in the contemporary era of “the cheapest spectacle”, which adversely affects our attitudes to art.

The play also received an excellent reception from the theatre critics in Montenegro. Despite some dramatic shortcomings, such as the lack of focus in the first part of the play and caricatured secondary roles, the critics praised the production’s use of lighting and music that contribute to the anti-realist discourse, as well as authentic theatrical character Vincenzo Peruggia, with whose futile struggle to give meaning to his life the audience empathizes, seeing the contrast between the perfection of a work of genius and human imperfection (Čukić Šoškić 2021a, 9–10). This effect was certainly achieved owing to the outstanding performance of the lead actor, Zoran Vujović, who found the play liberating as it underscores humanity’s profound need for art and its noblest aspect – the smile – something we have all become lazy about. The critic Koprivica highlighted the director’s fresh interpretation of the familiar text, using “new stage solutions with multimedia effects”, and praised her skill in balancing the text and stage action, and employing the “golden ratio of all stage parameters” (2021, 8).

Just three months after Đokonda, and in order to engage younger audiences by selecting a media language and themes that resonate with them, the Montenegrin National Theatre staged The Effect (2012). The play, written by an emerging British playwright and producer Lucy Prebble, falls between happy romance and dark thriller. It revolves around two characters, Tristan and Connie, who volunteer for a clinical trial of an antidepressant and unexpectedly fall in love. The Effect is both an intellectual and emotional exploration that delves into brain chemistry and its influences on our feelings and moods, examining the experience of being in love, and the causes of severe depression.

The Effect was a regional production, which holds particular significance for the National Theatre in Podgorica. The dramaturge Stefan Bošković emphasized that this play features a
complex and layered narrative that shifts our perspectives, intricately exploring the human mind, delving into brain investigation, pointing out medical limitations, probing into causes of depression, and measuring the power of physical attraction (Marojević 2021d, 6). As the protagonists continually rationalize their feelings, attempting to discern the authenticity of their emotions and the influence of brain chemistry, no solution is proposed, and instead the play leaves the audience with the realization that “the human brain remains an enigma for medicine, and our individual feelings elude rational explanations” (Čukić Šoškić 2021). Bošković embraced the challenge of adapting the play to Montenegro, recognizing substantial cultural differences from its original setting, and highlighted the demanding three-month process of tailoring the text to the Montenegrin context (Marojević 2021d, 6).

In an interview on January 20, 2024, the director Danilo Marunović stated that for this accessible and topical play, aimed at young audiences, one of the crucial aspects of adaptation was the language. As the director wanted audiences to connect with the play through language, he alone with the translator and dramaturge carefully handled the text (the translator S. Perović even attending the actual staging of the play), endeavouring to incorporate the Montenegrin dialect that was otherwise associated with stereotypical, archetypal characters. For the director, the pivotal question of the play – whether the love which arises due to a chemical reaction that has been induced in the brain by a drug is equivalent to the love which occurs naturally – is a theme that resonates with audiences in Montenegro as much as those in London. This is because, as the director concludes, we live in a pharmaceutical era, obsessed with illnesses, and have made it our identity.

Despite significant efforts in adapting the Montenegrin language, the director felt that the title should remain in its original form to preserve its ambiguity. The design, music, and choreography were designed for young audiences. As such, according to the director, audiences responded positively, even to the sexually explicit scenes, which, the director claimed, were presented in an innovative way. The copulation scene, for example, is first presented to the audience through an audio recording, intensifying the mutual seduction among the characters on stage, followed by a video presentation of chimpanzees mating – creating a visual contrast on the symbolic, physical, and choreographic levels. Nevertheless, due to external circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the main actress’s inability to perform, the production ended early.

However, it appears that one of the reasons why the play received negative reviews, aside from a shortening of the text that lost some of the original text’s semantic depth, was the use of a multitude of audio-visual effects that lacked expressive impact. The “unnecessary complexity of media-driven symbolisms” was one of the reasons the theatre critic Čukić Šoškić (2021b) labelled the play “theatrical/pretentious”. While Čukić Šoškić praised the set design for breaking the space into multiple levels and giving the play a modern touch, the critic specifically criticized the director’s use of music – deeming it a mere auditory decoration with no connection to plot development or the characters’ emotions – and excessive video materials to evoke animal instincts, which detracted from the impact of the actors on stage and diminished the overall effect.

The question of the purpose of art in the present-day era, as raised by the play *The Woman Who Amuses Herself*, is also addressed by theatre director, writer, and actor Simon Stone...
(2018): “Why should people go to the theatre at all anymore? There are so many less time-, money- or effort-consuming ways to access narratives and entertainment. What is it that congregating in this ancient space brings to contemporary audiences?” Stone attempted to answer this question through his play *Yerma* (2016), based on Lorca’s tragic poem about the myth of longing for a child and the inability to conceive. He completely recontextualized the work, introducing a different kind of conflict, one between the political – a woman’s desire for autonomy in the face of societal expectations – and biological imperatives. The modern-day Yerma’s obsession with motherhood degrades her morally and psychologically, turning her life (marriage, family ties, and social status) into ruins. Attempting to appeal to contemporary audiences, Stone explained the effort he put into the staging of the play. With the deconstruction aiming to highlight the “documentary atmosphere in a theatrical setting” (2018) by challenging staged artificiality and fostering a transformative experience where audiences lose themselves in relatable individuals embodying classical theatre archetypes through inventive manipulations of space and time.

The play, produced at the Montenegrin National Theatre, marked the Belgrade director Ana Tomović’s first work in the country. Recognizing theatre as an art of the present moment, she emphasized the importance of *Yerma*, considering it a contemporary play with universal resonance, especially given its significance as a female-driven narrative. Tomović’s choice of work was also influenced by the significance of the play’s theme (the issue of ostracized women who cannot conceive) in the local Montenegrin (and broader Balkan) context. Furthermore, it reflects contemporary struggles and dilemmas faced by women (Ćetković 2022). The complexity of conveying these dilemmas on stage was confirmed by the lead actress, Kristina Obradović. For the actress, who grappled with the transformation of the protagonist’s evolving desire to conceive – from a casual idea through a genuine need to an obsessive struggle that fundamentally alters her life – the most challenging aspect of the character was attempting to bridge “the seemingly insurmountable gap between the idea of having no similarities with that woman and the eerie realization of how much of her is within [the actress]” (Višnjić 2023, 12).

The critics’ responses to the play were mixed. Čukić Šoškić (2023) praised the director for her subtle influence, unobtrusive set design, emphasis on the implosion of emotions in each scene through tense character relationships, and the shift of focus to the liberation of suppressed emotions at the play’s conclusion. Other critics, such as Nataša Nelević (2023), dismissed the director’s constraining ideological framework in exploring the concept of motherhood, echoing the criticism of Stone’s adaptation. Nelević argued that the contemporary Yerma’s desperate quest for motherhood and willingness to sacrifice everything to become a mother can only be viewed as abnormal and irrational, not tragic, reflecting twenty-first-century pragmatism and conformism that discard the imperative of female biology. Consequently, the adaptation was labelled a “psychological case study”, where the theme of motherhood is “interpreted as a pathological psychological phenomenon and subjected to criticism that is exclusively rationalistic and conformist”.

3.2 The Royal Theatre Zetski dom

The Royal Theatre Zetski dom is the oldest state theatre and cultural institution in Montenegro, and has established its dominance in the country’s cultural landscape through the successful
integration of transitional themes into a consistent programming strategy, skilfully avoiding traditional constraints (Ljumović 2019, 147). In line with this programming policy, the theatre produced two contemporary Anglophone plays in the 2021/2022 season: *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (Čikaške perverzije) by David Mamet premiered on September 20, 2021; and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Ko se boji Virzžinije Vulf?)* by Edward Albee, whose premiere on October 7, 2020 was cancelled due to the pandemic, but was eventually staged on November 2, 2021. Additionally, one play was produced there in the season 2023/2024: *The Pillowman* (Jastučko) by Martin McDonagh, which premiered on September 17, 2023.

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) by David Mamet is a dialogue-driven play featuring Bernie and Danny, urban males navigating a world of the 1970s where sexuality is commodified and fetishized. Through short, rapid scenes, they discuss their sexual fantasies and try to act them out with two women, Deb and Joan, who are also confused by contemporary sexual mores. The play highlights the alienation and the myth of consumption that surrounds sexuality. As stated by C.W.E. Bigsby (2001, 211), the play employs the singles bar as a metaphor for a society in which alienated individuals market themselves, and the play’s humour arises from the characters’ inability to comprehend themselves or others, creating an ironic gap between confident sexual language and awkward incompetence in real relationships.

The significance of this performance for the Royal Theatre and Montenegrin theatre more broadly is twofold. Firstly, it represents the inaugural staging of the play in Montenegro, filling a notable absence of the play on regional stages for an extended period. Simultaneously, it stands out as the debut performance featuring the complete ensemble of the newly formed acting troupe at the theatre. This Montenegrin production was based on a Serbian translation by Irena Kregar and Lary Zappia from 1991, which was used for the Yugoslav Drama Theatre’s production in Belgrade in 1991, and later became a huge hit.

In the official programme for the performance, the director Rakočević (2021) explained that he drew inspiration from Mamet’s response to the ideology of political-social idealism, depicting the story of an indoctrinated individual who is easily manipulated, which resonates with our reality. The director described Mamet’s characters as lost, rejected, and frigid, stating that they “paranoically seek an escape, outside of themselves, beyond their own wreckage” (8) in a pornographised society that is devoid of content and does not instil hope, confidence, or motivation. According to Rakočević, Mamet’s play proved to be much more inspiring than initially thought, leading the artists to present a somewhat different reading than expected with this play or the entire body of the author’s work (Marojević 2021a, 13–14). The actor Vule Marković stated that the director and actors’ new reading of the play resonates with the current moment, as it emphasizes the psychological perversions stemming from intimate frustrations and traumas, alienation, and the lack of communication in the present time (Marojević 2021a, 14). This is in line with how the actress Marija Labudović saw the world of the play – as depicting a world of technology where every perversion is accessible, overshadowing the importance of embrace, touch, and contact, especially with oneself, and the love we are all in desperate need of (Marojević 2021a, 13–14). This interpretation of the play is confirmed by the dramaturge Mišković, who saw the play as exploring “the castration of emotions resulting from overall transparency and [attempting] to break all taboos”,...
examining how we are losing ourselves in freedom, which paradoxically constrains us. The only solution for the four characters in emotional turmoil (of which they are unaware) turns out to be a simple thing: an embrace (Marojević 2021a, 13). Although the play resonated with Montenegrin audiences and offered an innovative interpretation, it was limited to only six performances with a lower-than-anticipated turnout (a total of just 272 people). The primary reason for this was the COVID-19 measures concerning audience capacity and seating arrangements.

Only a month after the premiere of Sexual Perversity in Chicago, the Royal Theatre staged another iconic twentieth-century Anglophone work, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962), a play that is widely celebrated for its detailed character study, intellectual cynicism, sadomasochism, and exploration of the moral and existential abyss. This conversation piece – static, like most of Albee’s plays – explores a couple trapped in a toxic marriage made of lies and bitterness, and their decision to kill their fantasy child while forcing another couple to confront their own marital struggles. Here, Albee critiques American values, presenting an apocalyptic vision that depicts a struggle between the past and the future for the present (Bigsby 2001, 130). George, a history professor married to the daughter of the college president, symbolizes the past and rejects the new pragmatics embodied by Nick, a biologist representing the future. The play also examines the question of how we construct reality (Bigsby 2001, 130).

Even though the play reflects the societal implications of compensatory fictions and Albee’s examination of the fate of American values, suggesting a deliberate erosion of communality and trust with broader cultural implications, the play resonates deeply with Montenegrin society. Due to the pandemic, the premiere of the play took place about a year later than initially planned and rehearsed for. The director Paolo Magelli, who had staged Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? in Dresden fifteen years before the premiere in Cetinje, did not find a direct connection to the previous production. Quoted in an article for the Protagonist magazine, entitled “Revolucija je začeta u teatru” (Revolution is Conceived in the Theatre; 2022, 6), while discussing the thematic and conceptual aspects of reading and analysing this play in Montenegro, Magelli stated that Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is “not a literary but a political source”, carrying revolutionary aspects and a quest for truth in both family and society: it begins with an analysis of how lies support society, criticizes the academic world, and challenges the broader societal norm that presents lies as the truth.

The translator and the dramaturge Željka Udovičić Pleština stated that the enduring relevance of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? can also be attributed to the genre features of the play—its blend of dark comedy, melodrama, tragedy, slapstick, and satire. She also emphasized the contemporaneity of this work, which “lies in its fearless and unequivocal announcement of a penetrating, aggressive, and all-prepared ‘new’ generation that promotes the idea that success is measured solely by the criteria brought by liberal capitalism”, and stressed the potential of the play to offer us the possibility of individual escape from societal conventions (Kontić 2021).

Yet, for the theatre critic Nataša Nelević (2021), the widespread popularity of the play raised the risk of diminishing its depth and reducing it to stereotypical interpretations. Nelević
argued that Magelli’s reading of the play adheres closely to conventional interpretations, offering a familiar theatrical narrative that lacks substantial innovation despite incorporating visual spectacle, such as a giant chandelier on which the actors climb to share important words which are inaudible to the audience. While the critic praises the expressiveness of the actresses as well as the set design, the overall assessment highlights a deficiency in adopting novel approaches, including fresh theatrical language or new media, to address contemporary issues related to marital crises.

Regrettably, the production only ran for 12 performances. In a conversation in December 2023, the producer Aleksandra Maksimović revealed a notable challenge the production faced due to demands from the author’s agency, which required approval for the director, actors, collaborators, set design, costumes, and textual alterations. Despite submitting all the required information to the agency, a disagreement between the theatre and agency arose over the inclusion of a chandelier in the set design (the agency requesting the chandelier’s removal, despite having received sketches of it), ultimately resulting in the cancellation of the performance.

The latest play staged at this theatre is the contemporary Anglophone The Pillowman (2003), a black comedy by British-Irish playwright, film director, and screenwriter Martin McDonagh. The narrative revolves around Katurian, a fictional writer in an unidentified totalitarian state, interrogated by the detectives Ariel and Tupolski about the disturbing content of his stories, which resemble the bizarre murders of children that have been happening in his town. The play raises profound questions about art – the transcendental nature of art, the power of imagination, the interconnectedness between art and life, the artist’s role in society, the cost of freedom of expression, the need for art (storytelling), and suffering as a source for creation. Additionally, it explores themes such as the contrast between innocence (childhood) and corruption (reality), along with controversial subjects like child abuse, emphasizing the imperative of openly addressing such issues. The play received the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play.

Despite being performed widely around the world, the play has only been staged three times in the region: twice in Serbia (Belgrade, Sombor) and once in Montenegro (Cetinje). The main reason the young Montenegrin director Andrija Rašović chose this text for his master’s exam production was the fact that it celebrates the act of storytelling and “challenges its audience to confront the disturbing nature of stories, the power of imagination, and the delicate relationship of an unspoiled and innocent childhood faced with the harsh reality of the world we live in” (S. Vi 2023). In art, and especially in theatre, the director explained, “we should not shy away from the unspeakable. The central question we pose is: ‘What if, through stories, we give a voice to those who might otherwise remain silent?’” (S. Vi 2023).

The Montenegrin production was based on the Serbian translation made by Bojana Kovačević Petrović, which was then adapted to the Montenegrin language. In a brief conversation on January 11, 2024, the dramaturge Rajko Radulović mentioned that staging the story was challenging due to its complexity and unusual structure, making the text difficult to bring to life. However, he explained that the audience responded favorably to the play, as it helps them “to lose themselves in [it and] reevaluate views on life, art, […] and the world around us, the
dark truths lying hidden beneath the surface of existence” (S. Vi 2023). The black humour in the play, as described by Radulović, is therapeutic – “a protective mechanism against the absurdity of existence” (S. Vi 2023). Given the recent production, at the time of writing this article the play had only been performed three times in Montenegro.

3.3 Nikšić Theatre

Meanwhile, Nikšić Theatre, which stands as the second oldest theatre in Montenegro, has premiered two contemporary Anglophone plays in the last three years: *Look Back in Anger* (*Osvrni se u gnjevu*) by John Osborne, which premiered on December 20, 2021, and *The Lungs* (*Pluća*) by Duncan Macmillan, which premiered on November 30, 2023. It was in line with its programming policy of adapting classics that the theatre opted for *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the seminal post-war British play which sparked the first wave of Kitchen-Sink Drama, giving voice to the frustrated and socially marginalized lower-middle class, whose literary icons were labelled the Angry Young Men. It is a 1950s domestic drama about the conflict between Jimmy Porter, an intelligent and educated young man from a working-class background, and his emotionally reserved upper-middle-class wife. On a deeper level, it is a play about the life and protest of the working class, about angry men and women who suffer, “not the old revolt of the proletarian against a tyrannical aristocracy, but rather the complaint of a frustrated lower-middle class against the failure of its overlords to define any code at all, around which the community could conduct a debate about who should inherit England” (Kiberd 2006, 29).

Despite the fact that the play reflects the societal upheavals in post-war England, its themes resonate profoundly with contemporary Montenegro, marked as it is by polarizations and divisions along class, national, and religious lines. The play explores various critiques, including the gap between social classes, the intertwining of the church with ruling elites, the hypocrisy among believers, and the apathy, ignorance, and false patriotism of the ruling classes, along with their neglect of the common man. Additionally, it emphasizes the pressing need for ideals, solidarity, audacity, sensitivity, and enthusiasm. All these reflect the challenges and complexities of Montenegro’s current milieu. For this reason, the Montenegrin audience could easily identify with the characters in this play and the conflicts it portrays.

Janko Jelić, the art director of Nikšić Theatre, who selected the play for production due to its status as a classic of modern world literature, confirms this idea. In a brief conversation on January 10, 2024, he explained that the play was not a narrative directly about the war, but rather a tale illustrating the breakdown of a value system. Jelić and his team also sought a director with a new, fresh conception and impetus, leading them to choose Serbian director Jug Đorđević. However, there were differing views on the adaptation. Jelić deemed it advantageous to contextualize the play by integrating elements associated with the officers of the Yugoslav People’s Army and issues characteristic of the region. Conversely, Đorđević believed that this approach might not be suitable for the production (Marojević 2021b, 5).

Đorđević asserted that, beyond the myriad of themes in the work, the play fundamentally explores a class conflict that is essentially a “cultural, religious conflict between warring parties” (Marojević 2021b, 5). He mentioned that he and his team were interested in exploring the
people behind the conflict, “the grey area between black and white”, where heroes, regardless of their actions, will repent (Marojević 2021b, 4–6). The play is based on the Serbian translation by Milica Drašković, which was then adapted for performance in Montenegro by the dramaturge Tijana Grumić. The dramaturge shared the view that the work possesses a universal meaning that resonates with today’s audience, eliminating the necessity to localize or update the play (Marojević 2021b, 5).

Yet, even though the production adheres to the source material, a notable aspect of the play’s adaptation was the introduction of angry women alongside the angry men. The dramaturge Grumić emphasized that “the class question is inseparable from women’s struggle and emancipation” (Marojević 2021b, 5). In this adaptation, as Grumić explained, they did not want the women “to be reduced to the consequences of male actions; they are not merely portrayed as fighting over men, causing division; instead, they show solidarity and share suffering, from which strength and revolution emerge” (Marojević 2021b, 5). In addition to this, the set designer Rondović made an effort to move the set away from realism, placing it in a Victorian apartment (Marojević 2021b, 5).

Audiences responded positively to the performance, expressing appreciation for the actors. The lead actor Jovan Krivokapić deemed it essential to communicate Jimmy’s discontent with society, emphasizing that the primary source of the protagonist’s anger lies in his insecurity and fear of emotional pain, encouraging him to make pre-emptive strikes against others to shield himself from potential harm (Marojević 2021b, 6). The actress Maja Stojanović went deep into her portrayal of Alison, highlighting the character’s lack of self-awareness (Marojević 2021b, 6). The play garnered acclaim, yet a notable challenge surfaced regarding its duration – a substantial 2 hours and 15 minutes, deemed excessive for the narrative at hand. Even though the play had 10 performances on both main and regional stages, the unresolved set-design issues impacted both logistics and audience engagement.

The most recent production by Nikšić Theatre is the contemporary Anglophone play *The Lungs* (2011) by Duncan Macmillan. It is a play that delves into the challenges faced by today’s younger generation, unfolding a distinctive narrative about childbirth, ecology, and the overarching theme of transience. The key factors influencing the selection of the play were its popularity, its suitability for the chosen format, and its relevance to contemporary themes. In a brief discussion in Nikšić Theatre on January 10, 2024, the art director Janko Jelić revealed that the play’s selection stemmed from discussions with the theatre’s actors. They sought a smaller format suitable for two or three actors, inspired by the success of the award-winning production of *The Lungs* in a co-production by Exit Theatre and City Theatre Sisak in Croatia. The conflict in the story appears when a modern, educated, environmentally conscious urban couple decides to have a child. As the narrative unfolds, the couple grapples with the complexities that arise when he suggests having a child, triggering her worries and a desperate need to overthink and rationalize.

All the uncertainties and dilemmas faced by young couples today as they plan their future resonate with Montenegrin audiences: Should they have children or focus on caring for the future of mankind? Is being good equal to caring about the environment? Are they environmentally conscious enough? Does the planet only need the genes of thoughtful,
educated, and caring people? How can they avoid the consequences for their children brought about by a flawed educational system or their parents’ mistakes in upbringing, such as fitting children into certain gender roles or projecting their ambitions onto them? Various fears – such as the fear that having a child will signal the end of their own lives, the fear of not feeling love for the child, the fear of the effects of pregnancy on the human body, the fear of having a child with disabilities, and the fear of miscarriage – are just examples of the too many rationalizations that cause a lack of understanding between the couple. The key concern, however, is an existential question: how can anyone dare to bring a child into a world filled with serious problems such as overpopulation, lack of food and water, global warming, natural catastrophes, unpredictable climate change, political unrest, economic collapse, and an uncertain future. Although the existential crisis is overcome by the need for closeness when life happens, many dilemmas still remain. While written almost a decade before the COVID pandemic, the play’s title, its references to suffocation, and a foreshadowing of a global catastrophe resulting in a population decrease – “what we need is the planet to fucking purge us, fucking drown us, burn us, cull everyone by about two-thirds” (Macmillan 2011, 13) – all allow for a new interpretation of the play.

The play received acclaim from critics, securing the 2013 Best New Play award at the Off West End Awards. According to the critic Lyn Gardner (2011), this “distinctive, off-kilter love story” is “brutally honest, funny, edgy, and current,” and is also “bravely written” and “startlingly structured”. The stage production in Nikšić was based on a translation by the Serbian theatre director Ivan Vuković. The stage adaptation adhered closely to the original text, with only minor changes. It premiered at Nikšić Theatre on November 30, 2023 under the direction of Andrej Nosov and got an excellent response from audiences, both in Nikšić and in the capital, Podgorica, mostly due to the play’s contemporary themes being easily relatable, and the excellent performances. In a short span of time, the production has already had ten showings throughout Montenegro.

3.4 The City Theatre Podgorica

The City Theatre Podgorica itself, in line with its programming policy of staging internationally popular comedies aimed at meeting the demands of the audience (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 226), has for many years included in its repertoire the contemporary Anglophone play *The Lying Kind* (*Lažljivci*), which received its 15th-anniversary performance in this theatre in March 2023. The adaptation, based on Anthony Neilson’s play, was directed by Marko Manojlović.

As stated in the announcement of the City Theatre Podgorica, *The Lying Kind* (2002) is “one of the funniest, blackest and most shocking comedies ever seen” (Gradsko pozorište Podgorica n.d.). It was written by Scottish playwright Anthony Neilson, associated with In-Yer-Face Theatre.³ The play, which portrays a world made up of a tangled web of lies and controversial

³ Despite being initially linked to the *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (a term coined by Aleks Sierz and defined by Oxford Reference as “a new wave of British drama of the 1990s that was notable for its provocative uses of obscene language, nudity, violence, and taboo subject-matter” [n.d.]), Neilson’s later works, though still capable of startling audiences, harken back to the surreal and absurdist drama of an earlier tradition. See Bull (2011).
issues such as paedophilia, transvestitism, child abuse, dementia, and deaths of humans and animals, has been well received by Montenegrin audiences. An insight into the reception of the play in Montenegro in the first decades of the twenty-first century (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 227) shows that the popularity of the play could be attributed to its current relevance. The plot, centred around a white lie concocted by police officers to shield elderly parents from their daughter’s death, initiates “a whole chain of deceits, provisional interpretations, grotesque situations, and errors” (Tripković-Samardžić 2019, 227). Despite the challenge of adapting British black humour for the Montenegrin context, the director Marko Manojlović utilized the black comedy genre to deal with such serious issues and present Neilson’s scathing societal critique. The fact that this play continues to be performed on the stages of this theatre attests to the relevance of the themes it addresses.

4 Concluding Remarks

Theatrical responses to the challenges of the post-pandemic era in Montenegro affirm an ongoing trend toward the politicization of the theatre. The complex social, political, and cultural reality of Montenegro over the past three years, marked by two key traumas – grappling with the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and the polarization of society after the end of the decades-long rule of one political party – compounded by the global problems of the post-pandemic era, were reflected in Montenegrin theatre. Reflecting on Montenegrin theatre today and the significant gap between the exceptional talent of Montenegrin artists and the challenging working conditions they face stemming from structural and political issues, as well as the general politicization of the theatre, the director Paolo Magelli expressed hope that, despite the censorship that excludes theatre from the media and reduces it to its bare essentials, the theatre will strengthen its role as a place for enhancing “dialogue between the ensemble and the intelligence of the city where it operates,” and become a space for “constant critique and free thinking” (“Revolucija je začeta u teatru” 2022, 6–7).

The nine contemporary Anglophone plays adapted for the stages of four Montenegrin theatres in this period have played a significant role in this dialogue. Given that the environment of transition is a constant feature of the theatre of the Balkans (Ljumović 2019, 141), it should not be surprising that these plays addressed the most burning issues of Montenegrin transitional society. Aimed at generating greater audience involvement, they managed to challenge the accepted notions on which this society is based.

Some of them, such as Lodato’s The Woman Who Amuses Herself or McDonagh’s The Pillowman, prompt us to reconsider our relationship to art in the era of cheap spectacle promoted by the traditional media in Montenegro, and redefine the role of art and its therapeutic function. The prevalence of female narratives, such as Stone’s Yerma, not only reflects the contemporary struggles and dilemmas faced by women, but also echoes the specific, degraded position of women in the Montenegrin context. Others, such as Prebble’s The Effect or Macmillan’s The Lungs, reflect the uncertainties of young audiences and their existential despair in the face of the world’s challenges and the Montenegrin crisis. Innovative elements in new readings of certain classics – such as the emphasis on the psychological perversions of the manipulated individual in Mamet’s Sexual Perversity in Chicago, the focus on the angry women in Osborne’s
Look Back in Anger, or the revolutionary undertones of Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? – provoke a revolt against liberal capitalism and its implications in current Montenegrin political reality. Sometimes, the only way to address the ills that pervade a corrupted society seems to be through black humour, as exemplified in the adaptation of Neilson’s The Lying Kind.

The increased inclusion of contemporary Anglophone plays in the repertoires of four Montenegrin professional theatres, coupled with their popularity among theatregoers in the country, serves as evidence of these theatres’ efforts to contextualize issues relevant to their community, diversify the theatrical experience for audiences, and (re)establish the theatre as a place of debate. This is all the more apparent in light of the redefined role of a modern-day theatre as “a space of collective therapy, bringing forth symbolic reconciliation, (possibly) originating at the micro-level of imaginary community that comes into being for the duration of the performance between the performer and the audience” (Ljumović 2019, 142).

References


