

## From Xenophobic Fortress to Dystopian Supermarket, or How Balkan Playwrights Imagine Europe

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### Abstract

*In this paper we examine the imagining of Europe as manifest in several plays written in the late 1990s and early 2000s by two prominent Balkan dramatists - Goran Stefanovski and Biljana Srbljanović. Specific attention is paid to two tropes: Fortress Europe, and Europe as a dystopian society. The analysis signals an emerging agency of the local subject who has moved from frustration with imputed Balkanness and exalting in view of the European project to an attitude of scorn for western hollowness and critical deliberation on a common future for Europe and the world. The conclusion is that at the core of this vision lies a Balkan discontent with the enforced acculturation within the western paradigm.*

### Introduction

Balkan scholars since the 1990s have for the most part endeavoured to analyse and deconstruct western negative perceptions of the Balkan cultures, that is - the discourse which – after Todorova's seminal study *Imagining the Balkans* – came to be known as “balkanism” (1997, p. 17). However, only a few thorough efforts have been dedicated to examining the local self and its imaginative other; see, for instance, the analyses of identity representations in Balkan fiction and film in Norris (1999) and Iordanova (2001). Even those who have championed Balkan complexity and cultural profusion over western simplifications have done so by pointing to a Balkan uniqueness against the backdrop of a western (or common European) paradigm. For example, when Stoianovich (1994) strenuously claimed that Balkan cultures constituted a fundamental part of Europe, he was responding to the pretexts put forward for their exclusion from the new European project. While Stoianovich sets out to make a case for the recognition of Balkan cultures, however, his case

acknowledges a condescending point of view: the Balkans are objectified, and the West should ensure that they are helped and integrated. Like most other scholars, Stoianovich does not venture to consider Balkan perspectives on Europe or the West in general. Hence, the relationship remains unidirectional, and western Europe clearly assumed the role of the sole agent of recognition. By extension, this argument may suggest that there is neither intricacy nor agency within the Balkan cultures when one tries to conceive their professed European characteristics.

Rather than taking on this implication by other scholars who have worked on the issue of western perceptions of the Balkans, in this paper we examine aspects of how the Balkan's imagine Europe, as manifest in several plays written by two prominent dramatists – Goran Stefanovski and Biljana Srbljanović. The nuances are important insofar as they transcend the debate over inclusion or exclusion and reveal a culturally based critique of the European project. In this context, one could recall the words of Rupnik (1988): “Nowhere is the identification with Europe as a whole stronger than where it is most threatened, where the defence of a culture is part of a search for alternatives to the partition of the continent” (p. xv).

It is important to bear in mind that the contrasting imageries which are discussed here were produced almost simultaneously, in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the idea of Europe and the prospect of integrating the Balkan countries into the European Union attained a high currency in public discourse, sometimes even becoming a substitutive ideology for the post-communist societies. The contradictions that we highlight, however, do not seem to be only a corollary of the painful and equivocal transition from one social paradigm to another, but also a sign of the emerging agency of the local subject who moves from frustration with imputed Balkanness and exaltation in view of the European prospect to an attitude of scorn for western hollowness and critical deliberation with regard to a common future for Europe and the world.

We discern two specific tropes: Fortress Europe; and Europe as post-historical dystopia. Ambiguous in principle, the incidence of these tropes in contemporary Balkan drama may be seen as a performative act: rather than attesting to some reality of Europe, these representations usually serve the purpose of constituting a backdrop for Balkan self-definitions. As in all performative enunciations, these images speak much more of the cultural enunciator himself. It is also significant that they usually appear in a farcical mode; the humour which is used evinces a form of protest. Nevertheless, this

is not a symptom of dehumanising occidentalism of the sort which Buruma and Margalit (2004) trace in the Arab world, or exhibited by certain Russian thinkers from the nineteenth century. Rather than an abominable West seen through adversarial eyes, at the core of the two Balkan dramatists' perception lies the unease of acculturation: to be recognised and included by Europe seems to necessitate significant change and thankless abandonment of local difference, albeit the sense of identity loss is preceded and paralleled by a strong desire to be 'of the West'. The inability to coinhere local differences within the western paradigm does not eliminate this desire; however, its failure to be realized throws the local subject back and forth from self-depreciation to resistant scorn for western hegemony. As can be gathered from the textual analysis below, an impaired or hegemonic transculturation warps the contact into cultural rifts and stereotyped imagining.

### **Fortress Europe and the Aliens Within**

Goran Stefanovski (1952) is a Macedonian playwright and a professor of dramaturgy formerly working in Skopje and Stockholm, now teaching in England. He marks the beginning of Macedonian post-modern drama with his inter-textual use of dualist mythology and folkloristic material in his play *Jane Zadrogaz* (1974). He was celebrated for plays like *Wild Flesh* (*Divo meso*, 1979), *Hi-Fi* (1982), *Black Hole* (*Crna dupka*, 1987) and others, which were staged in theatres across former Yugoslavia. Sometimes employing a modernist strategy, too, Stefanovski writes about intercultural encounters and identity conflicts. This is particularly evident in his plays *Flying on the Spot* (*Let vo mesto*, 1981), *Tattooed Souls* (*Tetovirani dushi*, 1985), *Sarajevo* (*Saraevo*, 1993) and *Casabalkan* (*Kazabalkan*, 1997). In this paper we look at Stefanovski's latest plays.

*Hotel Europa* (2000) was written as a script for theatrical experiment which eventually had remarkable success at festivals like the Wiener Festvoshen, the Bonner Biennale, the Festival d'Avignon, and Bologna 2000 – European City of Culture. This major production involved ten directors, choreographers and designers, and twenty-five actors and dancers from various Balkan and Baltic countries. Its reception was indeed imposing, very often due to its ambivalent play with the "West's stereotypes of the primitive East": to celebrate easternness in front of western audiences, reports one critic (Munk, 2001b, pp. 132), meant to let them feel "whatever they felt,

including condescension, irritation, sympathy, admiration, and occasionally (...) delighted surprise" (p. 133).

*Hotel Europa* is, in fact, a collage of scenes. These revolve around the topic of immigrants, refugees, displaced and homeless people from the eastern European countries who headed west after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The dramatic action takes place in the course of 2000. Insisting on strong theatricality, Stefanovski gives detailed instructions as to the place and setting which eventually emerge as a metaphor for Fortress Europe. Formerly a suburban one-night-stand accommodation building, Hotel Europa is meant to represent many of that kind which in the 1990s were used by western European governments to house immigrants from the post-communist countries. The intended audience is invited to enter the "shadowy, dirty and ambiguous reality of the underbelly of Europe" (Stefanovski, 2004b, p. 20), led by six locals who run the establishment and give comments as to the occupants of the nightmarish "labyrinth set-up of rooms, halls, corridors, terraces..." (p. 22). We are presented with a sequence of stories of suffering and human drama. In the first scene, a Latvian family dissolves: the husband is ruined by alcohol, fighting imagined wars for Latvian national dignity in pubs while his wife and mother struggle to keep the baby twins comforted in a tiny room at Hotel Europa, where they illegally distil vodka and sing the lamenting aria: "Oh, what has the cruel West done to us? Thus left and forsaken" (p. 32). In the second scene, we see Odysseus ten years after the walls of divided Berlin ("the last Troy") have fallen; he is unable to escape the bewitching embrace of Circe, and he sadly contends: "We are utterly lost. We do not know where East or West is..." (p. 40). In the third scene, a young man pays an older prostitute from an eastern European country to play a perverted sexual game with him in which a knight awakes and marries princess Rosamond; the prostitute then sings him a lullaby, being thankful for salvation from the communist prison state and finding freedom and shelter in Hotel Europa. "Next time I want to be a soldier of the United Nations on a peace mission," he says, before leaving her room (p. 52). In the fourth scene, a long history of blood feuds between two Albanian families is settled. Disguised as a waiter, a young man comes to avenge his brother who was killed by some professor who now dwells in Hotel Europa. But the visitor decides to forgive rather than to avenge. In the fifth scene, a female drifter enters the hotel and meets an angel in the cupboard, alleviating her sadness with an ambiguous dream of a safe haven or death. In the sixth scene, a newly-married couple having hitchhiked from Russia ends up in a dim room of Hotel Europa. The

bridegroom is obsessed with the fact that they have finally made it to the West, and so he kisses the “western European bed (...) western curtains (...) western floor”, and hurries to make “a western baby (...) who will not suffer the Eastern fate of his parents” (pp. 78, 80). However, the bride seems confused, she imagines the faces of her forefathers on the hotel window and thinks they are angry at her; then she lights a candle and prays to her saint. Eventually, they discover a suitcase under the bed, full of money, and a bloody heart wrapped in a cloth inside. She wants to go home, but they stay and make love. The last scene depicts the Eastern European entrepreneur: Igor, a *nouveau riche* mafioso with a bodyguard and a German Shepherd on a leash who wants to buy the hotel and turn it into a grand hotel casino; the audience is invited to his party in the banquet hall where a band plays a blend of blues and kitschy turbo-folk music “characteristic of the Balkan countries in transition” (p. 112). Igor is eventually shot by his girlfriend Ivana, who refuses to marry him or accept that a sworn criminal like him could become a respected philanthropist. She ends the party sardonically by singing Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*.

At the time of its production, *Hotel Europa* was an alarming theatrical gesture against the lack of deeper concern within the European Union for the agony of the “unwanted European brother” (Stefanovski, 2004b, p. 20). And although the Schengen borders moved further East to include many of the former communist countries, the issue of ‘*The Other*’ of Europe who is yet within still remains all the same. The images in *Hotel Europa* are striking for two contrasting reasons. At first, they invoke stereotypes which are regularly employed to justify the concept of Fortress Europe. For example, the Russian mafioso and eastern prostitute are emblematic of a whole arsenal of negative models. Nevertheless, the overall picture which Stefanovski depicts ultimately turns into a critique of a Europe of internal divisions. The alien from the East is confined to a symbolic social space, within Europe but not of it. He is isolated and displayed as if in a civilizational underground, so that he can be defined and controlled. Even the ancient canny Odysseus cannot escape the mechanisms of the new European order. The six characters in the play (bellhop, social worker, maitre d’hotel, receptionist, daughter, and caretaker) who take the audience around this European limbo represent the system by which the other is handled; giving comments – superficial, full of good intentions or xenophobic, they arbitrate reality and seem to have a definite answer. In this macabre vision of Europe there is no space for change of the pre-imputed roles, or a recognition that could lead to an integrated society.

For instance, the breakaway from blood feuds by modern Albanians receives no credit, while the new generations from the East (like the Russian couple) remain haunted by ancestral ghosts and agonised by the pressure to give up traditional values of love for the new ethics of money. Ivana's refusal to marry the mafioso turns into a shooting; she repeatedly fires at Igor who seems to bear the bullets but will not die; courageous to resist machismo and tribal spin, this eastern woman nonetheless gets beaten and spits blood; real change, if hardly possible, is pushed into a distant future. Likewise, the lonely drifter who meets her guardian-angel surfaces as a metaphor of the inner human quest for meaning; yet this aspect of human existence seems also confined within a stereotyped framework: "Everything from Eastern Europe is instantly overtly political", Stefanovski comments on this fifth scene (Munk, 2001a, p. 132). Not only culturally, but even at the crux of humanness, he seems to suggest, Europe exhibits inner fissure. Thus, rather than boosting unity and positive ideals with the anthem *Ode to Joy*, Europe in this play appears as a dystopic system in which solidarity and openness are replaced by mistrust and ignorance. This very ethos of Fortress Europe, hints Stefanovski (2004b), also breeds Europe's greatest threat: "Hotel Europa is a womb where the time bomb of European implosion is ticking away" (p. 144).

To a certain extent, the ideas in *Hotel Europa* originate in a preceding script by Stefanovski entitled *Euralien* (1998), which was produced by Intercult Sweden and performed within the festival programme of Stockholm - Cultural Capital of Europe 1998. Conceived as a theatrical event in "an amusement park, a kind of Disneyland of nationalist kitsch", the play reaped an additional symbolic value when performed at Gamla Riksarkivet, the former Swedish National Archives building in Stockholm (Tiselius, 1998). Choosing the venue as an "obvious place to bury nationalism", the producer – no doubt – anticipated political implications (Tiselius, 1998; for details on the production, see Klaić, 1999). The script, too, touches upon the hot issues of immigration and intolerance in Europe. Lacking a basic plot, it comprises independent scenes which dramatise the fate of what Stefanovski calls 'Euralien' - the other of Europe who is within. Two years before *Hotel Europa*, he explores the possibilities of involving the audience. The spectators are guided through the labyrinth of Riksarkivet, from one room to another, to witness – as some sort of ghost – "how sad and funny it is to be a citizen of the 'other' Europe" (Stefanovski, 1998, p. 2). They are forced to queue and apply for a visa; they are interrogated and maltreated before they are given a passport that allows them to peep into the dark reality of "the Invisible

Republic of Euralien” (p. 3). They meet customs officers, smugglers, asylum seekers, a prostitute, a fool, a fortune teller, a street singer who shows maps of overlapping kingdoms, a Turkish or Roma toilet cleaner who asks advice on social allowances, a peddler who sells forged passports, ammunition, and arms of all kinds... Somewhere in the middle of this nightmarish journey, the audience meets Dr Eugenio, a specialist in genetic purity, who demonstrates how each European should be purified from the virus of the other within. Two scenes are especially illustrative of the contrast which Stefanovski wants to convey. The one is futuristic, the other self-referential. In the latter, a chauvinist (“charming old Swedish gentleman, clean, nicely shaven, well groomed, expensive clothes”) greets the spectators with a calm voice and explains that “civilization is determined by nationality”; he despises “this multi-culti drive!” and protests against allowing foreigners to perform the play *Euralien* at Riksarkivet, “a sacred institution where all of the historical documentation of this nation has been stored for a hundred years” (p. 24). In the futuristic scene, called “Ex-Sweden,” we see Stockholm in the throes of a civil war; the city is divided among warring sides, and a Swedish woman tries to find her way home, asking help from Bosnian UN observers. “I envy you so much,” she says to the soldier at a check-point, “You are a Bosnian gentleman. And your country is a civilized social democracy. A welfare state. You haven’t seen war in such a long time. You are simply not barbaric like us” (p. 18). The civilised observer, however, asks her to spread her legs and pose for a photo before she is allowed to cross the sniper-fire and disappear into the darkness of the cityscape.

Both in *Euralien* and *Hotel Europa*, Stefanovski employs a farcical treatment of cultural conflicts portending a dim future for the old continent. These plays surface as a calculated act of resistance against the investiture of Fortress Europe. Besides bringing politically charged dramatic images, both scripts contain stage directions with unusually extensive ideological statements against nationalism, xenophobia, and intolerance in general. The protest, however, seems directed and shifting: while exhibiting and mocking the frustrations of the ‘eastern aliens’, Stefanovski warns of the arrogance in the western world. It is a vision of impossible dialogue: defined by a desire for entering where access is denied, the easterners are stigmatized as a sort of cultural black hole which has nothing to contribute to the western universe.

In a later play, *Everyman: an Immorality Play* (*Sekoj: amoralitet*, 2002), Stefanovski’s vision escalates into an insurmountable rift: he criticizes the West as a morally corrupt consumerist society which has jettisoned any

suggestion of former Byzantine grandeur and eastern spirituality for the sake of technological progress and materialist vainglory. The universal Christian didacticism of the well-known medieval genre 'morality play' is farcically subverted into a polarised vision of timeless Byzantium on the one hand and a post-industrial West which has lost its Christian substance on the other. In this play, *Everyman* no longer trembles before Death nor presents good deeds to secure a passage to heaven; instead, he confronts Death with self-assuredness and hedonistic pride, while Death recoils back with a shaken identity. In Stefanovski, the thematic role of *Everyman* is taken by six mortals, each epitomizing one of the major human vices; they are British tourists who arrive in a remote hotel at the end of the season in Spain. Anastasia, the living form of Death, comes disguised as a hotel rep; she speaks poor English and she associates herself with Byzantium. She tries to exercise her authority, but the tourists self-importantly parade their sins, and eventually swoop her away. The contrast is both in time and space: postmodern western Europe represented by the British versus ancient Christian Byzantium represented by Anastasia. The judgement is clear, too: western Europe has become so materialistic, immoral and arrogant that Byzantine spiritual values make no sense; Death is no longer a criterion to understand life and good deeds are replaced by the idolatry of sin.

It is plausible to see that Stefanovski would distinguish Byzantium and the West as two disparate civilizations, thus explaining some of the frustrations of the present-day Balkans. Generally, it may seem that he is keen to simplify the legacies. Consider, for example, his essay "Tales from the Wild East" ("Prikazni od diviot Istok", 1999) which illustrates how this topic has haunted him for quite some time. Stefanovski admits that he wrote the essay in response to the question "Why is the East not sexy anymore?", raised at the international theatre summer festival in Hamburg in 1999. The answer, among other witty details, includes a depiction of two different master narratives, of eastern and western Europe, "in their ugliest, most vulgar forms" (Stefanovski, 2005, p. 73). He calls the eastern world Byzantium:

It is a closed society, vertical, patriarchal, macho, rural, only one person at the top knows anything - it is a closely-knit society, where you can never be lonely, but can never be left alone either. Social position is fixed; everyone has a nickname - your past, future and present are all a given thing. There is no democracy, no tolerance, no logical space for homosexuals - or women, for that matter. Individualization comes at a



deadly price. This is a world of ethnic fundamentalism. On one side, brothers in eternal embrace, on the other-traitors and outsiders. This narrative is black and white and is only concerned with the collectivist tribal issues... The Eastern European story is a tale of one lock and one key. (pp. 73-74)

Western Europe, on the contrary, is personified in Donald Duck:

He lives in an urban, fast, global, consumerist, post-industrial society. He has no mother, no father, no wife, no children. He takes care of three nephews - God only knows whose they are. He sees his girlfriend from time to time, but then they go to their separate homes in their separate cars. Donald Duck doesn't belong to anything larger than himself. He is an individual par excellence. A loner in pursuit of happiness. He is like a cowboy in a saloon whose life depends on being quick on the draw. His narrative has no geography or history. It is splintered, fragmented, dispersed. Donald Duck is the bastion of political sterility and metaphysical failure. (p. 74)

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the events afterwards, suggests Stefanovski, have allowed for the entry of Donald Duck into Byzantium and for imposition of "his model of the world ... primitive and unlike the western European social-democracy. It's a variety of cowboy capitalism... Donald Duck comes with a stick and a carrot and the universal mechanism of greed and consumerism" (p. 86). Stefanovski implies that the appropriation of this model causes frustrations. Eastern Europe, and in particular the places which have been under Ottoman rule, have experienced different historic rhythms and, indeed, dissimilar cultural definitions. Hence, the historic "arrhythmia" prompts two different attitudes: "Our identity oscillates between deep inferiority and a lofty superiority. The inferiority is based on a sense of economic worthlessness. The superiority is based on a sense that we are the exclusive owners of Soul" (p. 86). The "most vulgar forms" of the opposing master narratives defined by Stefanovski in this essay are, in fact, two stereotypes. Presumably, his dramatic ambition would be to deconstruct them.

One version of the ideas presented in the essay "Tales from the Wild East" is evident in *Everyman*. Donald Duck is represented by six characters who embody various aspects of the contemporary western European ethos:

Ray is a greedy stockbroker, obsessed with money and “too busy to die”; Tim is a bulimic freak who worships his body and has “a deal with death ... to stay forever fit and healthy”; Jo is an irresponsible single parent of two kids, a slothful housewife who consumes fast food and TV soap operas, quizzes and chat shows, so she “can’t be bothered” to care about death; Vicky is a posh shopaholic lady who trusts that plastic surgery will make her stay “forever young”; Helen is a hedonistic club-goer and lustful drug addict, “oblivious to dying”; Ken is an aggressive racist who loves beer and football, and is rough and ready, so death does not dare “to come and show her face” (Stefanovski, 2004a, pp. 21-23). All six characters lack spiritual values: they are obsessed with vanity and passions. They do not think of their souls or believe in anything beyond themselves. They are, in fact, soulless. It is a vision of the western world that fights death by disregard and prolongs life by technological inventions. Divine moral imperatives are made unnecessary and freedom is defined in terms of ability to satisfy passions. Death is no longer feared because it is denied the role of providing a meaningful link between moral practice and eternity. We see a materialistic society which seeks freedom and eternity within itself, not beyond itself, in the form of absolute moral liberalism and a biotechnological make-up of life.

On the other hand, Byzantium as depicted in *Everyman* is different from the Byzantium of the essay “Tales from the Wild East”. Rather than “a closed society, vertical, patriarchal, macho, rural ... a world of ethnic fundamentalism” (Stefanovski, 2005, p. 73) – Byzantium in this play becomes a nostalgic image of something irredeemably lost: it is an ideal of society guided by three categories: freedom, love, and art – all having a divine meaning. Here freedom is defined as liberation from passions and sin, and art as a possibility of grasping the truth. The love of the soul for eternity surpasses all earthly human emotions; the quest to see God as a person necessitates a tragic endeavour: to dance with death and make her a bride! These representations are mainly uttered by Anastasia. In Scene 4 she tells of her youth in 1400 when she worked in the Spiritual Death Department. Her early assignment was to observe if people had neglected their souls. “Our work was praised”, she says. “I was *someone*. Dying was celebrated. It was connected to grand things” (Stefanovski, 2004a, p. 19). In Scene 8 she speaks of Andrey Rublyov, the 15<sup>th</sup> century icon painter canonized as a saint by the Russian Orthodox church in 1988 and most renowned for painting the mystical icons of the Holy Trinity and Virgin Mary. Anastasia portrays Andrey Rublyov as someone who was able to look Death “in the eye” and who

danced with her as if with a bride (p. 35). The identity crisis that Anastasia undergoes is caused by changes in the perception of death. She is mocked by the six British tourists who read her confession as a cheap love story. Also, Anastasia is dissatisfied with her new role of butchering humans in a bureaucratic manner. She seeks to restore the higher meaning of her existence. Nowadays, however, the Spiritual Death Department has been closed down and she has been made redundant. Death has become an industry run by apparatchiks who plan, organise and run marketing campaigns for products and are concerned only with the banality of death. Anastasia tries to uncover her authority and make the others shiver. Eventually, however, she is expelled by the almighty humans. Byzantine spirituality, or Death itself, becomes an exiled immigrant, an alien who is unwelcome in the world of self-assured western Europeans.

Notwithstanding the observable moralizing, Stefanovski's *Everyman* can be seen in the context of the Byzantine legacy as perceived within the Balkans. Unmistakably, this legacy is idealized in reaction to the stalwartly appropriated westernization. Yet the veneration of imagined Byzantium is combined with an astute perception from a western perspective. Thus, the representations seem catachrestically twisted in both directions: no matter how highly esteemed, Byzantine values are farcically represented as a redundant feature of the past, whereas the instructiveness of a western medieval 'morality play' is subverted into a lofty criticism of the present day. It is perhaps possible to interpret this not as a vision of two conflicting worlds but as an effort to see the lack within a single world; Byzantium belongs to the past, yet the question is: Can it still illumine western civilization? Stefanovski affirms the Byzantine legacy as a precious and necessary axiological key, yet he perceives that it has been made redundant and even non-appropriable by today's western society. To put it briefly, there are two concomitant forces behind this imagery: on the one hand Stefanovski protests a sense of bereavement of deeper ontological and emotional worth resulting from the global surge of capitalism and liberal values; on the other, however, he spurs a premonition of its inevitability.

This conclusion calls to mind the American political economist Fukuyama (1992) who declared 'the end of history', meaning by this that liberal democracy represents "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and an ideal which "could not be improved on" (p. xi). Drawing on G. W. F. Hegel and the interpretation of his work by the Russian-French thinker Alexandre Kojève, Fukuyama claimed that the contradictions that characterised previous

forms of social organization (notably the dialectic of lordship and bondage) are being overcome in a secular free-market democracy. The latter provides for both endless accumulation of wealth (by means of modern natural science and technology) and rationally balanced satisfaction of the human desire for recognition. Therefore, this flow of events will not conclude but it will be divested of evolutionary meaning. Although Fukuyama defends the directionality of history, his reflection on the idea of the last man by Friedrich Nietzsche lends an implicit pessimistic touch to his vision of post-history. For instance, Fukuyama observes that relativism “must ultimately end up undermining democratic and tolerant values as well” (p. 332). Also, he notes that physical security and material profusion do not abrogate the human desire to “struggle for the sake of struggle” (p. 330). No matter how inevitable, the end of history does not seem to beget a high level of personal satisfaction but rather an emotional bleakness and “a purely formal *snobbery*” as a “chief form of expression of... man’s desire to be recognised as better than his fellows” (p. 320). Oddly enough, precisely this vision seems reflected in plays from the Balkans produced in the 1990s and early 2000s. Playwrights like Goran Stefanovski, Biljana Srbljanović and others dramatize the thesis of Fukuyama, though not always wholeheartedly and often in direct contrast to the Balkan context. It is worth adding, though, that Fukuyama (2007) seems to divulge a sense of hope for reaching utopia in his later commentary, claiming that “the European Union more accurately reflects what the world would look like at the end of history than the contemporary United States.”

### **From Tango to Soap Opera: Post-History and the Last European**

Biljana Srbljanović (1970) is one of the most celebrated Serbian dramatists today. She worked as a teacher at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade before moving to Paris in 2006. Her plays have been translated into more than twenty languages and widely performed in Europe and the USA. For some of them she has won national and international awards, most notably one with a pan-European significance – The New Theatrical Realities Award – presented in 2007. The early plays of Srbljanović, written in the tradition of absurdist theatre, very often came to be read as an allegory of the outburst of nationalism, autocratic and neo-fascist tendencies and moral corruption during the regime of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia. However, in a couple of dramatic texts which alter her early thematic confines Srbljanović depicts various aspects of post-historical society: *Supermarket* (2001) and

*America, Part Two (Amerika, drugi dio, 2003)* take as their themes the problem of identity crisis and simulated satisfaction in the era of global capitalism.

Fukuyama (1992) himself believed that the re-emergence of nationalism does not shelve his 'end-of-history' thesis as being a short-lived upshot of post-communist euphoria. Nationalism in eastern Europe, he says, is "a necessary concomitant to spreading democratization, as national and ethnic groups long denied a voice express themselves in favour of sovereignty and independent existence" (p. 272). Srbljanović does not share this understanding of the nationalist upsurge, though her thematic shift may imply that she admits its transitoriness. In fact one can trace her figurative announcement of the transition to post-historicity. In her play *The Fall (Pad, 1999)* the main character, called Übermother of the Nation, has a son called Jovan ("the only son of the Nation or National Bastard") who falls victim to his parents' nationalism and idolatry of the past, but later resurrects and murders them (Srbljanović, 2000, p. 168). By so doing he symbolically renounces any historical anchoring. He champions an erasure of all memory of his language and country and also decides to change his sex. Finally, he invites everybody to dance "a tango for new Europe" (p. 274). In her subsequent play *Supermarket*, Srbljanović develops the suggestive finale of *The Fall* into a critical vision of European society at the turn of the new millennium. The story, she explains, happens in "the post-emotional and post-sexual era" (cited in Ostermajer, 2007).

Based in a provincial Austrian town ahead of the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dramatic story in *Supermarket* develops as a recurrence of a few motifs and situations which ultimately produce an image of a society characterised by a zombifying social order, interpersonal alienation, and emotional bleakness. Leo Schwartz is the principal at an immigrant community school where he and two other teachers instruct two students: Dianna, the daughter of Leo, and Kemal Ćahiri, a youngster of Turkish background. According to the author's instruction, the stage resembles a vertical section of the school, which in fact appears as a shop window. Thus, we peep into a 'social supermarket' in which seemingly repetitive scenes occur in seven subsequent days. There is a sense that the characters always go through "one and the same day time and again" (Srbljanović, 2000, p. 168). While the children do boring physical exercises under the instructions of coach Müller and repetitive touch-typing in the class of teacher Mayer, Leo hopelessly tries to convince Mr. Brita, a journalist from

the local newspaper, to publish a sensational story of Leo as a former victim of the communist regime. However, as the story develops it becomes unclear whether the identity of the characters is real or simulated. Before emigrating to the West soon after his wife left him, Leo had been known as Leonid Crnojević. (The surname is a direct and ironic allusion to the main hero of the novel *The Diary of Čarnojević* - 1921 - by the celebrated Serbian writer Miloš Crnjanski - himself, like his hero, a representative of an idiosyncratic exilic experience.) Once in Austria, he forges his personal dossier and implores Mr. Brita to read and publish it, hoping that an image of him as a dissident from Eastern Europe will make him respected and grant him a "ticket to eternity" (p. 207). However, the journalist claims that times have changed so he insists on an interview that will speak of the new reality of Europe. In fact, Mr. Brita has interviewed Leo at least twenty times in the past thirteen years, always putting him in the context of typical mistrust towards immigrants. The ambition of Mr. Brita is not to publish a story of a dissident, but to question whether schools for foreigners are still necessary.

Hence, as if in the very style of Fukuyama, the grand narratives of history and ideology seem dismissed. The dramatic story brings to the forefront fragmented trivial micro-narratives of individuals who simulate social roles while sinking into a moral and emotional gloom. Lady Müller has an affair with her colleague Mayer, but at the same time flirts with the impotent Leo, while Dianna has sex both with her teacher Mayer and her classmate Kemal. The latter, confessing to have been continuously abused by his mother, turns out to be a male prostitute, and Mr. Brita appears as his main client. Utterly distressed by these facts, Leo attempts suicide by burning his dossier and strangling himself on a heating radiator. However, the pipes burst and the fire is inadvertently stopped. Although the school is mostly in ashes, Leo becomes the front-page hero, all newspapers reporting that he risked his life to save the others. The closing scene of the play, called 'Happy End', reveals all the characters in a blissful embrace: Leo has accepted to be the best man of Müller and Mayer who are about to marry; Mr. Brita has adopted Kemal as his son; while Dianna also tells of her plan to visit her mother in England before returning to her father to live with him forever.

It is important to note that the action in the play is often interrupted by a musical accent and a freeze-moment, "like in soap operas at the end of an important scene" (p. 131). Hence, the action itself is travestied within the simulated genre of soap opera and its inevitable happy end. Asked in an interview as to the intention behind the play, Srbijanović (2004) claimed that

she primarily wanted to probe the dichotomy of true and simulated emotions and to expose the genre of soap opera as a predominant form of bogus communication in the present age. The implications, however, reach beyond her ambition of exploring in the artistic form.

*Supermarket*, as one researcher observes (Jovanov, 2006), parodies two contrasted narratives: “the subservient social subconscious of western European consumerist paradise” on the one hand, and “the mythical, pseudo-heroic super-conscious of the Eastern European ‘free intellectual’”, on the other (p. 88). It presents an image of a post-historical society in which anxiety, violence and sexual aberration are symptoms of a deep identity crisis. Nothing retains meaning, everything is made relative: ideological conflicts are forgotten, education is reduced to physical exercise and technical skills, while ‘Stranger in the Night’ replaces the Austrian national anthem at official celebrations. Equally, the individuals of this ‘supermarket’ carry on simulating their traditional identity roles as faithful Catholics, industrious Protestants, diligent teachers, caring parents and loving children while being ignorant, phobic, and frustrated humans. If the early plays of Srbljanović seemed to mount criticism against the recurrence of national mythologies and neo-fascist tendencies in Serbia or the Balkans as a whole, then her later plays - and *Supermarket* in particular - focus the critique towards the all-winning western capitalist paradigm. If Europe is an imagined epitome of that paradigm, then Srbljanović portrays it as a negative utopia: a system of simulated values, depersonalisation, and a constantly fabricated happy end. In other words, new Europe is a post-historical soap opera.

### Conclusions

To conclude, we need to ask the following: Why would a playwright like Srbljanović distance herself from issues which she holds dear in previous plays and which are frequently considered as typically ‘Balkan’, and then write about problems of western European liberal society with a sense of inevitable surrender, as if to a fated end of history, along with a coincident scorn? The question can be extended to Goran Stefanovski as well. In the postscript to the published edition of *Supermarket* and *America: Part Two*, Stamenković (2004) describes Srbljanović’s shift towards ‘western’ themes as “utterly unexpected”; moreover, he claims that this shift hails from her direct and personal encounter with the West (p. 214). Although these plays seem “less socially relevant than her previous ones”, concludes Stamenković, they reveal

“something which happens in our society or will occur soon” (p. 214). Why is this so “utterly unexpected”? If the imagery stems from an encounter with the western paradigm and an insight into its far-reaching and imminent imposition onto the societies of the Balkans, then the thematic ‘evolution’ of a Balkan playwright has a twofold rationale: it is both an emancipation from the balkanist realm of imputed identity positions as well as a new frustration with the consequences of acculturation which such emancipation brings.

In fact, both Stefanovski and Srbljanović have not abandoned their early thematic interests once and for all; their latest plays – Srbljanović’s *Locusts* (*Skakavci*, 2005) and Stefanovski’s *The Demon of Debar Maalo* (*Demonot od Debar Maalo*, 2006) – display a refined perspective on universal concerns, though the milieu relates to the Balkans. This is perhaps more obvious in Srbljanović’s *Locusts*, where she seems to revisit the world of her early plays (in particular *Family Stories*) yet through the lenses of *America, Part Two*. Despite his belief that American hyper-reality already anticipates all the answers to previous dilemmas, Baudrillard (1988) does not seem to undervalue the experience of post-orgy: “What do you do when everything is available – sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America’s problem and, through America, it has become the whole world’s problem” (p. 30). The images of Srbljanović and Stefanovski speak of this ultimate global uncertainty as if it were already an internalized (hyper)reality of the very Balkans. Therefore, having entered a post-historical age, we ought to subvert the point made in the succinct historical account by Mazower (2000) that “[t]he Balkans themselves occupied an intermediate cultural zone between Europe and Asia – in Europe but not of it” (p. 9). If to be the alien within Europe meant to be stigmatized, then now to be finally of it means to bear a sense of something utterly lost and only simulatively compensated.



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