

PRODUCTIONS OF EDWARD ALBEE'S PLAYS IN SLOVENIA AND THE CRITICS' RESPONSE

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Abstract

The article focuses on Edward Albee's four plays belonging to the theatre of the absurd which have been performed in Slovene theatres so far. The author analyses Albee's *The Zoo Story*, which has been produced four times, his *American Dream* and *A Delicate Balance*, which have been performed only once, and Albee's most known work in Slovenia, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which has been produced six times in Slovene theatres. The continuation of this article focuses on each of Albee's above mentioned four plays including their production details, directors, actors, the comparison of critics' opinions and an estimation of how Slovene audiences accepted them according to the number of spectators and critics' responses.

INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Second World War the theatre in the United States was divided into two groups. Martin Gottfried, the author of *A Theater Divided*, names them (without any political connotation) the right and the left wing (Gottfried 1967: 3). At first sight they do seem to convey certain political significance because this division is also based on different ideological forces, as well as on the artistic perception of the contemporary world as shown in these plays.

The right wing of the American theatre was „the establishment”, to be more precise, Broadway, with its successful, safe, expensive, professional productions of conservative kind of plays, traditional styles of design and performances, right-wing actors who were actually professional followers of director's instructions (or „professional ashtray carriers”), uninformed public and right-wing critics' circle (27- 35). The king of the dramatists whose plays were produced there was William Shakespeare with his great tragedies, his histories and comedies, then Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov (only with *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Three Sisters*), Bertold Brecht, George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Molière, William Inge, Neil Simon and among many others also Edward Albee. Successful musicals also played an important role (*My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, *Hair* etc.). This theatre was written with a capital letter (The Theater) and characterized

the American theatre as such. However, it was in the hands of the business people, it was all about show business. The motto of Broadway was simple: what mattered was financial success, art was of secondary importance. Every play was supposed to be finally also sold to Hollywood. To sum up, the fate of the nation's theatre was in the hands of businessmen.

The answer to the question why Broadway symbolized entertainment, financially safe productions and offered little space for innovations in the theatre, experimental theatre and seriousness could be connected with the country's historical and social background. In comparison to most European countries, the United States was a relatively young and prosperous country after the Second World War. Besides, the country had many natural resources. In less than two hundred years the country gained much economic success, and in the 1950s it was financially the strongest among all the countries which had taken part in the Second World War. Nevertheless, the country's culture was still far behind European culture due to its lack of national cultural tradition. American culture was mainly developing towards entertainment which was needed and wanted and was at that time still searching for its own identity. American theatre was in the same position despite some good plays which were written after 1945: Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*; Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *Picnic*. These three American dramatists presented the beginning of the golden age of the American theatre although there was not much innovation in their plays. Their works depicted some very good right-wing drama (19-20). Martin Gottfried's opinion is that their „playwriting [was] too old-fashioned, the realism too restricting, the language too dated, the structure too conservative, the humour too broad, the morality too backward, the points too obvious, the climaxes too artificial, the stories too ornate, the restrictions too rigid” (24).

Younger generations were beginning to criticize everything traditional, the political situation, the social situation, at the same time racism was on its way which presented the opportunity for novelties and the growth of the nation's culture. Film was becoming more and more popular and the theatre was slowly losing some of its popularity. The result of such dissatisfaction was the arrival of the left-wing dramatists and, generally speaking, left-wing theatre. Its advantages were that it had no roots; it was determined to contradict the traditionally oriented theatre; it was new and was therefore not burdened with experiences, it was, energetic, clever and restless. All in all, it had all the necessary conditions to start developing a new kind of art. The offshoot of the left-wing theatre was actually the reaction to the right-wing theatre.

The left wing's key word was „art” and artists who cooperated with this theatre wanted it to remain its sacred place. The left wing turned away from realistic and didactic plays that provided answers to social questions. The theatres belonging to the left wing presented the minority even though they included numerous resident smaller theatres, cafes, even churches, and it soon became known as off-Broadway and later also off-off-Broadway (the term off-Broadway refers to plays which were not presented or acknowledged on Broadway). Their directors were usually bright and talented young men who had become disenchanted with Broadway either because they could not get any work there or because they thought that art was more important than show business. The

left wing was antagonistic to the norm and it pushed for change. It resisted popularity and attacked traditional values and beliefs, their productions were not commercialized. The dramatists whose works were produced in these theatres during the first few decades after the Second World War, were, for example, Everett LeRoi Jones (*The Slave*), Jean Genet (*The Blacks*), Federico Garcia Lorca, Georg Büchner, Heinrich von Kleist, Gertrude Stein, Edward Albee, Jack Gelber, Jack Richardson, William Hanley, Murray Schisgal, James Dey, Arthur Kopit, David Mamet. The works of other dramatists who primarily belonged to the right wing were also produced here but the directions and their productions tended to be in the left-wing style.

The beginning of off-Broadway could be connected with the year 1952, the revival of Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* which was not very successful in 1948. The production took place in the former night club Sheridan Square and the actors were known as the Circle in the Square group. Their production was a success and after this production many other theatre groups prepared their productions. Off-Broadway theatres were mainly placed outside the area of Broadway, which lay between 41st and 52nd Street in New York. To be more precise, off-Broadway theatres were in Greenwich Village and the Lower East End in New York (Downer 1967: 171). Off-off-Broadway came into existence as the reaction to off-Broadway theatres when the latter had already become too conventional and traditional for new innovations. The most known off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway companies were The Living Theater, the Open Theater, La Mama Experimental Theater Club, Actors' Workshop, San Francisco Mime Troupe, Caffé Cino, Café La Mama and many others. The tradition of off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway is still present in the United States today. However, they are known under the name of *indie theater*, a term which was introduced by the dramatist Kirk Bromley.

Edward Albee's plays which belong to the tradition of the theatre of the absurd and were written from 1958 to 1968 were also first produced off-Broadway. Only some of them found place on Broadway. His first play, *The Zoo Story* (1958), was first produced outside the United States, in Berlin, at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt, and only after a successful production there, it was performed at the off-Broadway theatre Provincetown Playhouse in 1959. Albee's other plays were performed either in New York or Connecticut in off-Broadway theatres: The Jazz Gallery (*The Sandbox*), The White Barn (*Fam and Yam*), York Playhouse (*The American Dream*), Billy Rose Theatre (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Tiny Alice*, *The Box*). Later some of his works were also produced on Broadway in the Martin Beck Theater and the Studio Arena Theater (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*).

Only four of the above mentioned Albee's plays belonging to the theatre of the absurd, have been performed in Slovene theatres so far. His first play, *The Zoo Story* has been produced four times so far, his *American Dream* and *A Delicate Balance* once and Albee's most known work, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, six times.

The continuation of this article focuses on each of Albee's above mentioned four plays including their production details, directors, actors, the comparison of their critics' opinions and an estimation of how Slovene audiences accepted these plays according to the number of spectators and critics' responses.

THE ZOO STORY

Albee's first one-act play, *The Zoo Story*, was first produced in Slovenia at the Eksperimentalno gledališče v Ljubljani (The Experimental Theatre in Ljubljana) in 1962, which was only two years after its first production in the United States and three years after its premiere in Germany. The second production took place four years after the first one in 1966, at the Akademija za igralsko umetnost v Ljubljani (The Academy of Dramatic Arts). The third production was prepared twelve years later in Celje at the Slovensko ljudsko gledališče (The Slovene People's Theatre) in 1978 and the last one at the Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča Maribor (The Slovene National Theatre Maribor) in 1997. From now on the Slovene names of theatres are used.

The first production of *The Zoo Story* took place in the Slovene experimental theatre, which was established in 1955. Its aim was to present those plays that resident theatres did not have enough interest in. This theatre presented the plays in a circle arena. It did not have a steady cast although its directors were professional. The productions were usually presented at Križanke (Viteška dvorana) or in the Mestno gledališče ljubljansko theatre in Ljubljana (The Municipal Theatre of Ljubljana) (Moravec 1967: 314).

Its premiere was on 18th May 1962. The play was translated by Marija Lužnikova, whereas the direction, script and costumes were taken over by Žarko Petan. The performance was repeated ten times, which was the usual number of repetitions in this theatre at that time. Neither a playbill nor a programme was issued.

Thirty-five years after this production the critic Veno Taufer wrote a theatre-review for the main Slovene daily newspaper *Delo* (30.1.1997: 8). He praises the play's first performance in Slovenia and its actors on the occasion of the play's production in Maribor in 1997. He is of the opinion that the main appraisal goes to the director, Žarko Petan, and the actor Tone Slodnjak, who acted Jerry. Taufer thinks that due to such a good performance, Albee has been thought of as one of the most celebrated playwrights in Slovenia.

The second production of *The Zoo Story* in Slovenia took place at the Akademija za igralsko umetnost v Ljubljani in 1966. Its director was Zvone Šedlbauer and the play was produced on the basis of the translation made by Lužnikova in 1962. The play was performed three times. No further details are available because no programme was published (Moravec 1967: 287).

The third production of Albee's *The Zoo Story* was performed at the Slovensko ljudsko gledališče in Celje in 1978. The play was directed by Bogomir Veras, who also acted as Peter, and Janez Starina, as Jerry. The directors decided for the same translation (by Marija Lužnikova). The play's set designer was Avgust Lavrenčič. The opening night was on 24th November 1978 and the play was performed twenty times. A short programme for the play and its production was written and published for this occasion (Kaufman, ed., 1983: 49).

One of the directors of the play, Bogomir Veras, states in the programme in his article „Kulturnemu animatorju in potrošniku (To the Cultural Animator and the Con-

sumer)" that both directors decided for this play to be shown because they agreed that a man's existence in an urban environment was not the case of big American and European cities only but also of Slovene ones. Veras is of the opinion that human anxiety is becoming more common despite newly introduced material wealth (e.g. cars), especially if it develops even further towards materialism and forgets about cultural aspects of life. Veras adds that people should be aware of their biological needs and should also pay more attention to their spirituality (Anon. 1978-79: 2).

France Vurnik states in his article „Bridka zgodba odtujenosti"(A Bitter Story of Alienation) (24. 10. 1978: 5) that although the play presents the American big-city life, it also applies to people's lives outside the United States. Jerry's alienation is thus authentic and deeply moving. Both Jerry and Peter are the figures of modern civilization. Vurnik also stresses that this Albee's play is thus not only a play about an American way of life but also about ours (24. 10. 1978: 5).

Such responses prove the fact that Slovene audiences as well as the director and the above mentioned actors agree that *The Zoo Story* is not an exotic play about man's alienation. It deals also with our problems and as such constitutes a relevant part of the repertoire of our theatre.

The last production of *The Zoo Story* was at the Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča in Maribor in 1997, thirty-five years after its first performance in Slovenia. The premiere was on 24th January 1997 and its director and set designer, Matjaž Latin, decided for a new translation of the play by Alja Predan. The dramaturg was Vili Ravnjak. Peter was acted by Davor Herga and Jerry by Jure Ivanušič. The performance was presented 22 times and seen by 1312 visitors. A playbill was printed for the opening night and the play was also included in the next season programme and was performed an additional seven times. The total number of visitors was 1562 (Vevar 1999: 55).

The play's director, Matjaž Latin, states in an interview entitled „Vsak ima svoj zoološki vrt" (Everybody Has Got His Own Zoo) given before the premiere that Albee is a playwright who analyses and dissects eternal relationships between people. According to Latin, everybody has got his zoo, either at home, at work or within himself. That is why Latin wants to point out the blockade and inability of communication between people, which is more and more present in their lives (Grizold 23. 1. 1997: 14).

The actor Davor Herga remembers that he learnt much about Peter during the rehearsal (Ravnjak, 1996-97: 1). On the outside Peter's life is good. Only through his conversation with Jerry, Peter finds out that he does not know much about his own family, that his friends are merely business partners and that he spends each Sunday alone. He has animal instincts but does not know how to defend himself and his family. In his opinion, the play speaks about contemporary situation in the United States and in Europe. Peter is a true representative of the Internet generation since he does all his work alone at home and knows his business colleagues only through the Internet. Both of his daughters also have a computer at home and so they leave him alone. He does not talk with his wife and he carefully plans his weekly life.

The actor Jure Ivanušič (Jerry) describes the character of Jerry as a person with numerous frustrations, which are the result of unsolved and unforgotten childhood memo-

ries: the loss of his parents and homosexuality (*ibid.*). As Jerry he wants to show the rage and inability of a man who is caught in his own problems and cannot solve them.

Another two positive critical opinions were written about the play. The first one, written by the critic Dario Svetej (28. 1. 1997: 17), who praises the two actors and the director who managed to intensify the play from the quiet beginning to Jerry's dramatic death. Another critic, Veno Taufer, points out in his article for the newspaper *Delo* (30. 1. 1997: 8) that Albee is deeply engaged in our understanding and sensitivity for the distress of a modern urban man. He especially praises the actor Jure Ivanušič. His stammering and faltering are not the result of Jerry's psychological state but his unbearable social situation.

The director's idea of Peter communicating with others with the help of the Internet makes this production really interesting and up-to-date. The fact that his daughters also possess computers in their rooms illustrates the picture of Peter thinking that material things make people alive and happy and that personal relations and physical contacts among people are unnecessary.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Albee's next one-act play which has been produced in Slovenia is *The American Dream*. It was performed at the Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča v Ljubljani (The Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana) only a year after Albee's first one-act play, *The Zoo Story*. The premiere was on 19th January 1963 at Križanke (Viteška dvorana) two years after its premiere in New York. The play was translated by one of the most prolific Slovene translators, Janko Moder, and directed by Žarko Petan. The set director was Sveta Jovanović and the costume designer Anja Dolenčeva. The cast included Duša Počkaj (Mommy), Janez Albreht (Daddy), Vida Juvanova (Grandma), Slavka Glavinova (Mrs. Barker) and Boris Kralj (Young Man). A short programme was prepared and published describing the play's production and its author. The play was presented 18 times (Moravec 1967: 168f). In the next season the play was part of the programme presented abroad while the Drama theatre company was on its tour in Poland. The rest of the programme included Primož Kozak's *Afera (Affair)*, Albert Camus' *Caligula* and Félicien Marceau's *Eggs*. Albee's *The American Dream* was one of the best performances of the last three seasons and all the plays shown on the tour were highly praised (Predan 1975: 15).

An anonymous critic points out in the leading Slovene newspaper *Delo* before the play's premiere that Albee's work does not portray a modern American society only but it provides a much more general picture of contemporary society, which is becoming dehumanised (Anon. 18. 1. 1963: 6). The play's director, Žarko Petan, who directed many avant-garde plays in Slovenia during this period, is of the similar opinion (Zupančič 1962-63: 3). Petan thinks that the mechanization of humanity and its consequences, the danger that people will be equalled with objects and become their slaves one day, is a general picture of contemporary society.

On the other hand, the critic Vasja Predan thinks that both Albee's plays, *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream*, are about classic American problems: dehumanization and slavery. However, the spectator cannot remain untouched by the future of mankind

(Predan 22. 1. 1963: 5). Another critic, Lojze Smasek, writes for the newspaper *Večer* (11. 4. 1963: 5) that Albee deals with the mistakes and diseases of his own country only because he is a patriot who wants to make America a better place. The destiny of the victims is tragic because other people make them dream the American dream about their superiority and disharmony between their wishes and the possibilities of realizing them. Josip Vidmar, one of the senior Slovene critics, thinks that *The American Dream* is a typical American play, a grotesque, which with its almost normal physical appearance calls our attention to the horrors lying below it (6. 2. 1963: 5). According to Vidmar, Albee's plays are typical American plays and are therefore exotic for Slovene audiences. However, another critic, Filip Kalan, states in his book *Odmevi z ekrana* (Echoes from the Television Screen) that Albee's *The American Dream* has had a profound effect on the theatre in Slovenia due to numerous discussions about the theatre and that it has accelerated the growth of new dramatic genres to which also *The American Dream* belongs (1969: 27f). Kalan also thinks that the play was really well received because of two actresses (Duša Počkajeva as Mommy and Slavka Glavinova as Mrs. Barker).

A DELICATE BALANCE

Albee's *A Delicate Balance* has been performed in Slovenia only once so far. Its premiere was at the Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča (the Slovene National Theatre) in Ljubljana on 8th February 1969. The play was translated by Maila Golobova. Its director was Miran Herzog, its set designer was Viktor Molka and the costume designer was Vida Zupan Benčičeva. The play was performed twenty-eight times (Clemenz 1973: 8). The cast was Štefka Drolčeva as Agnes, Jože Zupan as Tobias, Duša Počkajeva as Claire, Majda Potokarjeva as Julia, Angela Hlebčetova as Edna and Maks Bajc as Harry (Negro 1968-69: 461). A programme commenting on the play, its author, production and cast was prepared for its premiere including a translation of the interview with Edward Albee on his playwriting.

Jože Koruza wrote a critical response to the production two days after its premiere. He comments that the director faithfully follows Albee's text and that he presents it as a realistic drama (10. 2. 1969: 3). Koruza focuses on three characters: Počkaj's Claire, a woman about whom certain negative effects of alcoholism are already visible; Drolč's Agnes, who is a practical, decisive, matter-of-fact and embittered woman because of her husband's alienation; and Zupan's Tobias, a confused husband full of moral dilemmas. The other three characters gave average performances, whereas the whole production was in his opinion very successful.

Josip Vidmar writes a few days after the play's premiere about what he thinks that balance presents: sterile peace, harmony in a standard American family, and their best friends from the same social class (14. 2. 1969: 5). According to Albee, the life of the representatives of this social class is weary; it equals precarious living and is spiced with psychoanalysis, alcoholism, erotic reminiscences and suspicion. Such balance is based on an enclosed and infertile idyll between people who are focused on their own existence only and it is therefore short-sighted. Vidmar is of the opinion that the cast was average with the exception of Štefka Drolčeva as Agnes, Jože Zupan as Tobias and

especially Duša Počkajeva as Claire. Vidmar thinks Herzog's production was rather interesting.

Another critical response to the production of *A Delicate Balance* was published in *Mladina*. It was written by Andrej Trupej (24. 2. 1969: 9). He describes this play as a grotesque comedy about typical American middle-class family life. The family, in his opinion, is rich but bored, hollow and monotonous. Albee's heroes are enclosed in their own world and lonely. In his opinion, the play is based on the quartet and it does not stress the role of the newcomers. The best actresses, in Tropej's opinion, are Počkajeva, due to her acting of an intoxicated virgin who quickly finds entertainment in every possible situation, and Drolčeva, whose Agnes is a lonely wife and arbiter, while Jože Zupan was not convincing and Potokarjeva was too hysterical. Trupej stresses that this production belongs to the best Slovene productions of the season 1968- 69.

What surprises me is the fact that this play has been produced only once in Slovene theatres so far. Its theme is universal and raises questions about family matters and family friends which are eternal. This play is about a rich and bored family although the same relations could also be true for middle-class families nowadays. In such families relatively unimportant material things make their family members as well as their family friends more alienated, bored and envious. In these days when small unpredictable events can stir up a family, it would be interesting to study and observe the family members' reactions, especially the reaction of spoilt children, when unexpected events of a family life would cause the family's delicate balance to be disturbed.

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

The last of Albee's full-length plays which have been produced in Slovenia is his most known and probably also the most successful play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It was first performed at Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča in Ljubljana in 1964, only one and half a year after its premiere in New York. The next productions took place at the Slovensko stalno gledališče v Trstu (The Slovene Permanent Theatre in Trieste) in 1980, at the Akademija za gledališče, radio, film in televizijo (The Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television) in 1990, then at the Prešernovo gledališče Kranj (The Prešeren Theatre Kranj) in 1990, at Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča in Maribor (The Slovene National Theatre in Maribor) in 1995, and finally it came back to Ljubljana's Drama Slovenskega narodnega gledališča (Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana) in 1997.

The first production of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in Slovenia is his third work which was presented to Slovene audiences. The first translation of this play was made by Maila Golobova, and it was directed by Mile Korun. Uroš Vagaja was the set designer and Alenka Bartlova the costume designer. The premiere took place on 1st February 1964. The cast was: Duša Počkajeva as Martha, Jurij Souček as George, Marija Benkova as Honey and Danilo Benedičič as Nick. The premiere was followed by 72 performances in 1964 and it became the most popular production of that season. The second place was taken over by Shakespeare's *King Lear* with „only“ 48 perform-

ances (Moravec 1967: 169f). A theatre programme was also prepared for the premiere commenting on the author, his play and its Slovene production.

Vasja Predan writes in the play-bill that this play is supposed to take the audience into the labyrinth of the new image of the American dream. Its aim is to provoke the audience, to awake its moral conscience, to insult and to inspire the audience's rebellion and resistance to the „rotten lemon“. Predan believes that Albee depicts a typical American family who cannot keep their intimate life to themselves anymore. The promised land of electronic civilization is presented through the spectrum of a dehumanised family with an imagined son in the centre igniting conflicts (Zupančič 1963-64: 176f). In his article, Predan praises the premiere, the cast, and especially the actors Počkajeva and Souček as well as the director, Mile Korun. He believes that this production could definitely be presented abroad. The vision of a world almost completely devastated and deformed with morally rotten relationships presented by Albee, is real (3. 2. 1964: 2). Three weeks after the premiere, Predan wrote another article for the fortnightly magazine *Naši razgledi* about this production (22. 2. 1964: 73). He calls Albee an *enfant terrible* of contemporary American drama, who is accepted in Europe both with open arms and indignation. Predan believes that there is an American version of Europe in *Virginia Woolf* since he thinks that the traces of Ibsen and Strindberg can be found in this play. According to Predan, this play is about the new truth of the contemporary middle-class world encountering dehumanisation, alienation, disintegration, erroneousness and even decay. Albee does not present a happy-end illusion, which is so typical of the American film industry and literature. Again, Predan stresses the high value of Korun's production. In Predan's essay „Dva Američana“ (Two Americans) (1975: 253), the critic thinks that Albee's world is still strange to us. However, he finds one common thing between the two worlds. Albee's world unfolds in the absurd wish not to be the way it is, whereas our world tends to reach the point of absurdity. Predan thinks that Albee warns us against the consequences of invisible lust.

The theatre's notice about Albee's play published in the newspaper *Delo* just before the premiere, is rather interesting. The author points out that this play is „inappropriate for young people under the age of 16“, probably due to the large amount of cursing and the sexual relations mentioned between Martha and George (Anon. 29. 1. 1964: 8).

Josip Vidmar states in his article in the newspaper *Delo* (4. 2. 1964: 5) that Albee's world of university professors is exotic, unexpected and unusual for Slovene audiences. However, their world touches us, especially George's, who seems to be inferior because of his failed career, and later on also Martha's destiny, which can easily be understood. The critic stresses the play's inner strength and praises Počkaj's Martha and Souček's George. In his book *Gledališke kritike (Theatre Reviews)*, Vidmar again stresses the presentation of the older couple (1968: 116). He thinks that because of them the performance is superb. Počkaj's Martha is persuasively vulgar, repulsive, seducing, egocentric, dangerous but still human, especially towards the end of the play when she breaks down. Souček's George is a perfect and first-rate creation. George combines intoxication, relentless passion for unfolding the past, clear-sightedness, humour, superiority and a weary life full of melancholy, jealousy, hostile love and loving hostility.

Another critic, Lojze Smasek, agrees in his article published in the regional newspaper *Večer* (6. 2. 1964: 8) that *Virginia Woolf* presents the misery of existence of

those people for whom we would never presume to have such problems. Their systematic foisting and their massacre is still too monstrous and unfounded. However, he entitles his article „A Great Performance” because he believes that the director’s production and the actors’ input are great. Moreover, he thinks that Počkaj’s and Souček’s roles are their personal masterpieces.

Mirko Jurak states in his article published in *Delo* (3. 3. 1964: 6), which he sent from London, that Slovene theatres’ repertoire is up-to-date in comparison with theatre programmes abroad. Namely, Albee’s premiere of *Virginia Woolf* in Ljubljana took place even a week before its London’s Picadilly Theatre production although the latter included two star performers from the original New York production (Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill), whose performance was excellent.

Andrijan Lah writes in his article in the weekly published in Celje „Strah pred praznino” (The Fear of Vacuum) (15. 5. 1964: 5) about Albee’s uncovering a fake façade of family life in the world of modern civilization. However, both couples are threatened by a horrible vacuum inside themselves which they all try to fill in with either alcohol or the exhibition of their mental dissection. He also praises the older couple (Lah 15. 5. 1964: 5).

What is more, Filip Kalan states in his book *Odmevi z ekrana* (Echoes from the Television Screen) that Slovene theatres have become up-to-date due to certain plays produced in Slovene theatres. Albee’s *Virginia Woolf* is supposed to be one of them. According to Kalan (1969: 49), Slovene theatres, especially Ljubljana’s Drama theatre, tend to continue its breakthrough into contemporary problems causing rigid critical reviews, disagreements between critics as well as some indignation of the audience who does not want its social non-engagement to be disturbed.

One can state that Korun’s production of *Virginia Woolf* was really a superb one. Many critics writing about later productions of the this play remember it and compare later productions with Korun’s production. Such a comparison was made by Slavko Pezdir more than a quarter of a century later (25. 10. 1990: 7) and by Lojze Smasek 30 years later (28. 2. 1995: 14). Milena Zupančič, the actress who acted Martha more than three decades later, also remembers Počkaj’s creation of Martha (Kranjc, 1997-98: 76). For Zupančičeva, the production of *Virginia Woolf* in 1964 was the best performance she had ever seen in her life and she needed a lot of time to persuade herself to act Martha in 1997 (Kranjc, 1997- 98: 76).

According to many positive critical reviews, Korun’s production of *Virginia Woolf* has been the best among Albee’s play performed in Slovene theatres so far.

The premiere of the second production of *Virginia Woolf* took place in the Slovensko stalno gledališče v Trstu (The Slovene Permanent Theatre in Trieste in Italy) on 25th January 1980 and was later on repeated 45 times (Kaufman 1983: 49). Its director was Dušan Mlakar who based the production on the new Slovene translation prepared by Maila Golobova. The set designer was Niko Matul and the costume designer Marija Kobi. The cast included Bogdana Bratuž as Martha, Anton Petje as George, Anica Kumer as Honey and Livij Bogatec as Nick. (Ferletič 1979- 80: 2).

Ferletič states that Albee attacks contemporary social relationships and passionately uncovers visually healthy relationships underneath which there is a lot of

corruption and brutality. She writes that Albee mercilessly dissects with a sharp blade each tiny part of human intimacy, where he finally finds the truth about the characters' total alienation from society, and their animal instincts (4 f). The actor Anton Petje believes that the play does not only depict the American way of life but also ours. The actress Bogdana Bratuž is of similar opinion stating that she does not see any big differences between the American and our world, adding that many things have changed since the first production of this play. Fifteen years later, there are many more similarities between the American and our world. This does not include the material wishes only but also the expectations about a prosperous career and the inability of certain classes and certain women's circles to climb higher. Petje adds that the Slovene interpretation lacks university professors' slang because there is none (6 f).

Bogdana Bratuž describes Martha as a futile woman: physically because she cannot have children, and spiritually because she and her husband could not equal her father's success. Anton Petje thinks that George has already turned into his own world and does not want to change either society or everyday life. His world is also futile and without future prospects. His depressed existence probably symbolizes the society's and thus the world's decay in general.

The set designer's purpose of placing a wire cage in the background indicates that the characters are caught in their own world. It is possible for them to only observe the outer world. The critic Andrej Inkret agrees that the symbolism of the wire cage intensifies the effect of captivity (29. 1. 1980: 8). However, he reproaches the director for the intensity of violence. Since it is too big at the beginning and too small at the end, the play lacks the balance of the brutality. This production also awakens in Inkret's mind the production directed by Korun in 1964.

Jernej Novak, also remembers in his theatre review published in Ljubljana's daily *Dnevnik*: (30. 1. 1980: 5) the first production of *Virginia Woolf* in Ljubljana from 1964 and compares it with the one in Trieste. According to Novak, George and Martha are both fanatic destroyers as well as deeply tragic characters who fight like two exhausted gladiators for their common death in the middle of the belied world in their absurd existence. Novak also praises Matul's idea of the wire cage as well as the dark silhouette of bare trees in the background. The critic believes that this production was a big theatrical success.

Tomaž Gorenc stresses in the youth magazine *Mladina* (7. 2. 1980: 33) that Albee's greatest feature is his uncovering of decay in American society. However, American society resembles all others although it still contains certain distinctive characteristics such as the destruction of the American dream about success, superiority, exaggerated ambitiousness, unaccomplished passion and unborn children. The critic thinks that the play's message is that sick ambition is the consequence of the sterility of a society which is caught in a kind of vicious circle (Gorenc 7. 2. 1980: 33).

The most extensive critical review was written by Vasja Predan in the fortnightly magazine *Naši razgledi* (22. 2. 1980: 104). The critic praises the set designer's idea of the wire cage and adds that the characters are caught in a domestic torture chamber where protagonists torture themselves and masochistically play with each other. The ambient is not part of the set designer's idea only but it is also part of the director's

procedure. Mlakar's message is that he sees Albee's vivisection as a pair of frightening scissors which are closing.

The third production of *Virginia Woolf* was prepared by students of the theatre academy in Ljubljana. The director was Zdravko Zupančič, Martina Bremec was the dramaturg and Pika Kompan was the set designer and the costume designer. The play was translated by Metka Zobec. The cast included Ksenija Mišič as Martha, Dragan Valter as George, Irena Varga as Honey and Robert Valtl as Nick. A short programme about the play and its production was also published (Vear 1992: 86).

The actors of Akademija performed this play on 22nd October 1990 on the main stage of the Slovensko narodno gledališče theatre in Maribor as part of the accompanying programme of the annual theatre event „Boršnikovo srečanje” (Anon. 20. 10. 1990: 14). The director of this production states for the interview for the newspaper *Večer* (24. 10. 1990: 5) that it is evident at the end of the performance that academy graduates can rightly be compared with professional actors and that the audience liked their production a lot.

The fourth production of *Virginia Woolf* was prepared at Prešernovo gledališče in Kranj. The director and set designer, Barbara Hieng-Samobor, directed the play on the basis of the latest interpretation written by Metka Zobec. Mitja Logar was the dramaturg. The premiere was on 19th October 1990 (Vear 1992: 83). The cast included Judita Zidar as Martha, Igor Samobor as George, Bernarda Oman as Honey and Pavel Rakovec as Nick. A short programme about the play and its production was also published (Vear 1992: 83).

The dramaturg Matija Logar writes in the programme that there are no taboos for Albee since he totally uncovers his characters (1990-91: 2f). Horrible situations of the two duets are not to be admired but one should have pity on them and try to understand them. Then he compares the critics' and the audiences' reaction from almost thirty years ago with the one in 1990. In 1964 the play was not thought „to be ours”. Now, in 1990, the play is about the situation in Slovenia as well since we do not live in a kind of reserve: our reality is mirrored on the stage.

The theatre critic Slavko Pezdir believes that nothing human is unknown to Albee (25. 10. 1990: 7). The dramatist presents the „worst” drama which is anchored deeply in the human soul. The critic also agrees that the play seemed strange thirty years ago to him, too. Now, it is also ours. What seemed like fiction then is true today also due to our material standard of living which is shown on the stage too; such as objects which are piled up, the chandelier the price of which is within reach now, the drinks and other material things. Pezdir praises the set designer's idea of dividing the stage with a glass wall. It seems to him that the atmosphere resembles the one in a winter garden. The verbal and sometimes even physical attacks are accumulating in front of the wall whereas the protagonists' arrivals and departures as well as rare moments of relaxation occur behind it. The critic thinks that the director's idea of attacks going on in the cold, sterile and aesthetic area is great. Albee's characters are caught in the world of belied values and sick professional, private and erotic ambitions. According to Pezdir, the cast in Kranj is brilliant. Zidar's Martha, aware of her father's materialistic and moral authority, uncovers

her true sadistic character, sublimity and fictitious untouchability. However, she breaks down after her failed adventure with Nick, and George's attack. Samobor's George carefully prepares her breakdown. In his closing words, Pezdir stresses in his review that Kranj's theatre has shown its great artistic ambitions and a lot of creative courage and adds that the audience's reaction after the premiere was enthusiastic.

The fifth production of Albee's play *Virginia Woolf* took place at the Drama SNG theatre in Maribor. The premiere was on 24th February 1995. The director and the translator of this production was Radko Polič, Marko Japelj was its set designer, Livia Pandur the dramaturg and Bjanka Adžić-Ursulov the costume designer. The cast included Ksenija Mišič as Martha (for the second time), Brane Šturbej as George, Alenka Tetičkovič as Honey and Primož Ekart as Nick. There were 11 performances in the 1994-95 season, which meant 4201 visitors. A short programme about the play and its production was also prepared (Vearar 1996: 52). The play was thought to be part of the American cycle together with Serling's *Twilight Zone* and Kafka's *Amerika* (Forstnerič- Hajnšek 16. 2. 1995: 15).

The director, Radko Polič, states in his interview for the newspaper *Večer* (Grizold 20. 2. 1995: 8) that his idea is to produce the play in cooperation with actors, since he is an actor too, he also expects a dialogue with the director. He thinks that this play presents one of the most difficult modern texts and that it is also very difficult to find two pairs of first-rate actors who are almost a generation apart. He decided for the new translation and interpretation because this play is not about the decay of the American society only but also about the ethic and moral collapse of the whole western civilization. According to Polič, the play should be subtitled as black comedy.

Lojze Smasek writes for the newspaper *Večer* (28. 2. 1995: 14) four days after the premiere that Polič's production of *Virginia Woolf* is totally different from Korun's production which took place thirty-one years before. On the one hand, this production is much shorter and condensed, lasting only 110 minutes and there is no break. On the other hand, this production is also „ours”, it is Slovene as well and not foreign any more. Albee's farewell to American illusions is also a farewell to our illusions about the Slovene idyll concerning human relationships. The title of his critical review is „Skoraj obredno mesarjenje” (Almost a Ritual Massacre) because the cohabitation based on lies in the drama is turning into a merciless mutual massacre. According to Smasek, the director and the set designer have created a realistic performance which additionally questions the situation in which the two couples appear. The rusty car on the stage symbolizes their intimate relationships. The books which are piled to the ceiling obstruct an easy access and depict the basis of an idyll built on lies which must crash. The accessible bar with drinks symbolizes a barrier which can easily be defeated in case of a need. Smasek finishes his review pointing out that this production is a fresh interpretation of *Virginia Woolf* which - in addition - is performed by an excellent cast.

The rest of the critics who wrote about this production were not so positive. Andrej Inkret agrees in his article (28. 2. 1995: 8) that none of the three productions of *Virginia Woolf* which were produced after its first production in Slovenia in 1964, can repeat the success of the first one. Inkret expresses his negative opinion about Polič's interpretation because of certain grammatical peculiarities used by actors and because

of the destruction of the play's structure. According to Inkret, the essence of Polič's production is the intimate vivisection of erotic and sexual frustrations only. What this production lacks is the American social context and the conflict within the two families. Inkret also does not like idea about the red cabriolet being placed on the stage, because he does not see any appropriate symbolism in it. However, Inkret praises the actor Brane Šturbej as George and the actress Ksenija Mišič as Martha.

The critic Ignacija Fridl is also sceptical about the director's interpretation of this play and the set designer's idea of the car which occurs in almost every production at this theatre (1. 3. 1995: 12). In her opinion, Polič exaggerates in stressing some of the symbols of American culture too much. The car is therefore too intrusive. Fridl's opinion about the cast is also less positive than Inkret's and Smasek's. Ksenija Mišič's interpretation of Martha lacks development and oscillates between sobriety and intoxication only. Brane Šturbej's George lacks intellectual capacity, what is indicated by the playwright.

Peter Tomaž Dobrila evaluates this production in the review *Dialogi* published in Maribor as better than the production in Kranj (1995: 80- 83). According to this critic, Albee exposes his protagonists' dreams who gnaw to pieces their illusions and ask themselves what life would be like without any illusions. In Albee's world of abundance, tinsel, materialistic goods and a career-centred life one can feel the lack of love and the world's *spiritus agens*. Martha and Georges's marriage is like a pulsatile mousetrap and their relationship resembles the sadomasochistic variant of surviving marriage. Therefore their family life is spastic. The actor Brane Šturbej was excellent and Dobrila thinks that his role as George is Šturbej's best so far. Dobrila stresses Šturbej's chameleonic changing from an unfriendly host to an emotionally broken character who finally manages to let the ghost out of the bottle and overpowers everything that happens on the stage. Ksenija Mišič is in his opinion too clichéd, unnatural, artificial and unconvincing. Wearing the wig, she reminds the critic of the film version of this play and therefore of Elisabeth Taylor's acting.

Vasja Predan believes that this production focuses too much on Martha and George's vivisection of a nightmare, as a sadomasochistic destruction of emotions (3. 3. 1995: 36). However, this „tornado” is too violent at the beginning of the play and then it ceases. Predan also thinks that the best actor is Brane Šturbej, a sarcastic and brutal victim hiding his vulnerability, who later develops into the best role on the stage. Ksenija Mišič's Martha is too hysterical at the beginning and also too young for this role. Predan does not like Japelj's set design which is too chaotic and monumental and sees no reason for the car, the high bookcase and some other pieces of furniture.

Blaž Lukan focuses on Šturbej's George, who, like Albee's George, is also a realistic character (7. 3. 1995: 20). Šturbej's George is verbally fast and sharp, full of energy, inexhaustible, understanding, direct, a man of principle and the master of all the actions. Lukan thinks that Mišič's Martha lacks emotional span. She is physically and verbally too vulgar (7. 3. 1995: 20).

The sixth production, and also the last one so far, was prepared by the Drama SNG Ljubljana theatre in 1997. The premiere was on 19th October 1997. The play was newly translated by Zdravko Duša and directed by Mateja Koležnik. Meta Hočevar was the set designer and Alan Hranitelj the costume designer. The cast included Milena Zupančič

as Martha, Radko Polič as George, Nataša Ralijan as Honey and Matjaž Tribušon as Nick. The play was seen by 10,224 theatre-goers and it was performed 27 times in the 1997/98 season (Vevar 1999: 31); it was shown again in the next season, bringing the total number of the audience to 12,896 (Vevar 2000: 33).

Anja Golob writes before the premiere that the decision made by Janez Pipan, the director and the general manager of the Drama theatre, to produce the play is a delicate one because of its success in 1964. However, the company managed to procure a good cast and decided to offer the direction to a young female director, Mateja Koležnik, who has already directed Albee's *Three Tall Women* at Mestno gledališče ljubljansko theatre a year before. According to Pipan, Koležnik has shown high sensibility and understanding of the 1960s literature (Golob 17. 10. 1997: 18).

Sanja Nikčević stresses in her review that Albee belongs to the new generation of American playwrights because he depicts a different point of view toward losers in comparison to O'Neill and Williams (Kranjc 1997/97: 15f). The latter dramatists try to find guilty individuals for their protagonists' tragic ends, whereas Albee presents losers without any condemnation. Their state is actually their choice and therefore not their curse. The critic agrees that the protagonists of Albee's plays are losers and feel weird. They do have certain predispositions for success but are unable to adapt to their environment and the pressure of the American dream due to their inability to communicate with other people. Martha, in the critic's opinion, equals George in education, sensibility and the fact that she is also a loser (16-18). According to Nikčević, in Albee's play women only support their men on their way to realization of their American dreams. However, Martha's life is also unsuccessful because she has failed in marrying her father's successor and establishing a family. The younger couple are losers as well: Nick fails in seducing Martha and Honey is unable to have children.

Another female critic, Petra Pogorevc, praises this performance as well as the then new translation by Zdravko Duša (21. 10. 1997: 21). She believes there are no weak points in this production. Moreover, the critic agrees that this play is also about "the Slovene version" of the American dream, about the capitalistic myth. The set designer contributes to the feeling of alienation, coldness and sterility of characters by deciding for the whiteness on the stage. This colour also suggests the essence of Martha and George's relationship. The four aquariums symbolically depict the four characters and successfully contrast their passions. Pogorevc thinks that the cast is brilliant. Zupančič's Martha is an aggressive, bossy and poisonous madam who always has the last word. Polič's George develops from a humiliated loser into a self-confident outsider, Ralijan's Honey is witty and Tribušon's Nick is her „appropriate" husband.

Andreja Babšek is in her review more sceptical about the success of the play, especially about its director Mateja Koležnik (22. 2. 1997: 16). She thinks that the director has failed in realizing one of her aims, i.e. to stress the importance of the younger couple. In this production, they are only spectators of the older couple's quarrelling. The critic sees in Honey and Nick the projection of Martha and George and the presentation of their former and present marriage. According to Babšek, Milena Zupančič is excellent because she is agitated, vulgar and at the same time a dame, a dangerous seducer, a mean winner and a humble loser. George is apathetic, furious, and full of mean but witty ideas. Nick is an introvert, a sulky parvenu, but lacks in being penetrating, which

could be supposedly the director's fault. Honey is lovely, witty, but too shallow. The critic also mentions the appropriate costumes made by Alan Hranitelj and the set design where whiteness prevails. This colour is meant to stress the coldness and emptiness of characters. The aquariums in pillars stress the vacuum and the mirror on the wall does not function merely as the characters' projection but also ours. The black armchair is reserved for losers, for George throughout the play and for Martha at the end of it.

Blaž Lukan critically observes this production by pointing out that the director has succeeded in only one of her four goals, that is in the cast, which is brilliant, but not without fault (23. 10. 1997: 8). He thinks that Martha is too obviously marked with her futility and alcohol. Polič supposedly did not follow the director's instructions and created his George at his own will. Ralijan's Honey is good but remains in the background, and Tribušon's George is too monotonous. However, the director supposedly failed in style of this production, in the balance between verbal assaults and physical attacks, and this is so because she let the direction to be led too much by the actors.

Veno Taufer also remembers the play's first production in 1964, which presented to him a total theatrical experience (12. 11. 1997: 30). Concerning this production's cast, Taufer thinks that George is the best actor because of his ambiguity and his ability of switching from a game and imagination into reality. Milena Zupančič convinces the critic in her aggressiveness and the acting of the young couple is also good.

It is actually not surprising that Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* seems to have been the most successful, discussed and also criticized play of all productions of Albee's plays in Slovene theatres. Among all six productions of this play, the first one presented at the Slovensko narodno gledališče Ljubljana in 1964 still remains the best one as far as the critics' responses are concerned. Their responses concerning this play are more or less similar. However, there are several disagreements concerning the directors' and set designers' interpretations. Albee's *The Zoo Story*, especially the production given by the Slovensko narodno gledališče Maribor was also highly evaluated. What surprises me is the fact that Albee's *A Delicate Balance* has been produced only once and that it was not much discussed. One should not forget that it received a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 and was nominated for a Tony Award for best play in the same year. I believe the play raises many questions similar to those in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and that it would still be relevant today. However, I look forward to new productions of plays written by Albee, although I believe that the director of the next production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* will definitely have a very difficult job to perform because critics will tend to compare it with the first six productions in Slovene theatres, especially with Korun's version.

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