

Magdalena Koch

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
Research Unit of Gender and Transcultural
Balkan Studies
Poland

UDC 821.163.42-2.09

316.346.2-055.2:792.01

DOI 10.5937/ZbAkU2210068K

Scientific review

Gabriela Abrasowicz

Faculty of Philology of the University of Wrocław
Laboratory of Transcultural Studies on Theatre
and Drama of Post-Communist Europe
Poland

The Discourse of Female Body in Contemporary Croatian Women's Playwriting and Theatre

Abstract: The aim of this article is to present selected aspects of medicalization and politicization of the female body as a theme in contemporary Croatian drama and theatre. Our analysis presents artistic proposals discussing women's reproductive functions and dysfunctions (such as pathology of pregnancy, the destructive power of the pregnancy metaphor, physiology and philosophy of pregnancy, infertility and in vitro) illustrated by four plays written by women playwrights from Croatia. The exemplification is an abridged overview of the most representative textual-theatrical strategies in the socially and politically engaged „ginedramas“ (*ginodrame*). Three acclaimed writers and directors, Lada Kaštelan (*Before Sleep*, original: *Prije sna*, 2005), Ivana Sajko (*Woman Bomb*, original: *Žena-bomba*, 2003; *Landscape with the Fall*, original: *Krajoлик s padom*, 2011) and Magdalena Lupi Alvir (*Barren*, original: *Jalova*, 2011), deal with the fundamental questions of woman's existence, combining elements of art and medicine. Some matrophoras, i.e., metaphors of motherhood and mother-child relations which demystify and reinterpret female physiology, are analysed in the text.

Keywords: Croatian drama and theatre, female body discourse, pregnancy, infertility, in vitro

The issue of abortion, adoption, difficult motherhood or efforts to have a child by means of in vitro fertilisation is becoming in many post-communist countries (e.g. like Poland, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro) a topic of political debates and causes considerable reverberations in the form of protest actions, which are a kind of social street performance in the public space, but also artistic works carried out in parallel or as an aftermath of these actions.¹ After the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, the turn to corporeality has also been distinctly present in the local women's playwriting. It may even be stated that in the last quarter of a century, a kind of textual hyperproduction of women writers is noticeable, and medical themes or metaphors appear in their dramas in many variants (procreation, an aestheticisation of the body, mental disorders, ageing). Against this work's background, particularly noteworthy are the depictions of the female body as a stage on which various social and political spectacles related to procreation are played out.

Croatian and Serbian women artists, developing themes related to the medicalisation and politicisation of the female body, create alternative counter-discourses and certain manifestos. They draw attention to the painful clash between the personal, sensitive experiences of the drama protagonists and the socio-political public space, which strives for restrictive and ruthless management of the female body, including its most intimate aspects. The projects on the level of dramatic text and stage productions realised in Croatia, and the stages of Slovenian theatres help make the audience aware of how the female body becomes a stage for public performance.

The analysis will present artistic proposals discussing women's reproductive functions and dysfunctions illustrated by four plays written by women authors (and directors) from Croatia. The exemplification is an abridged overview of the most representative textual-theatrical strategies in the involved so-called ginedramas (*ginodrame*). Three acclaimed writers and directors, Lada Kaštelan, Ivana Sajko and Magdalena Lupi Alvir, deal with the fundamental sphere of woman's existence, combining elements of art and medicine.

¹ It is worth mentioning examples from the world of theatre, such as the Boris Liješević's *Plodni dani* [*Fertile Days*, Atelje 212 & Cultural Center in Pančevo, premiere – 2012], reading of the *Cjankali* drama by Friedrich Wolf (dir. Mariusz Witkowski, S. Jaracz Theatre in Łódź, premiere – 2016), the *Porno* [*Porn*] play based on *András Visky's text* (dir. Cezi Studniak, Teatr Nowy in Poznań, premiere – 2016), *Dziecko* [*Child*] play based on Inga Iwasiów's drama (dir. Martyna Łyko, Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, premiere – 2017), or *64* play based on Tena Štivičić's drama (dir. Alisa Stojanović, Atelje 212, premiere – 2021; dir. Arija Rizvić, Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, premiere – 2021).

Pathology of pregnancy – Before Sleep (Prije sna) by Lada Kaštelan

One of the most famous Croatian playwrights, Lada Kaštelan², although officially disavowing the feminist trend, in her works focuses on the lives of women, their bodies and psyche, and uses various, also medical, so-called matrophoras³, i.e., metaphors of motherhood and mother-child relations. The play *Before Sleep (Prije sna; 2005)*⁴ is set in a gynaecological ward, a typically feminine and at the same time medicalised space. In the hospital room, micro performances are played with six patients embodying specific medical disorders: threatened pregnancy, miscarriage, ovarian resection, abortion under pressure from the husband, cancer of the reproductive tract, infertility. Female ailments, which are closely related to various manifestations of fertility deregulation, pregnancy pathology and gynaecological diseases, become specific emblems of the characters. The focus on the naturalistic and crude image of genital features, or rather their imperfections, “clearly resonates with the mental state of the female patients” (Rafolt, 2011: 178). The sterile hospital room physically and symbolically limits the protagonists, creates a kind of women’s ghetto and becomes a blanket under which various problems resulting from interpersonal relations are closed. Women representing different age and social groups form a kind of community immersed in the hospital whiteness of beds and identical shirts. This colour, so strongly emphasised in the play, characteristic also of doctors and pharmacists, symbolises emptiness, lack, including the absence of life.

The patients – nameless and devoid of explicit attributes – hidden behind a hospital room dividing screen are at the same time obscured by the type of illness that defines their disposition, plans, relations with people and system of professed values. Patients from neighbouring beds see each other not as psychologically formed personalities but mainly as a set of disease symptoms, which the Younger Woman exaggeratedly explains:

2 Lada Kaštelan (born in 1961, Zagreb) is a graduate in classical philology and drama. She is the author of a volume of poetry, dramatic texts, screenplays for film, television and radio. From 1987 to 2007, she was a dramaturge at the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb and during several editions of the theatre festivals „Dubrovačke ljetne igre“ and „Splitsko ljeto.“ Since 2001 she has been working as a lecturer of drama at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb. She has won many prestigious theatre awards and is a pioneer of the so-called Croatian women’s playwriting.

3 Matrophors have both positive and negative semantic potential, but the primary purpose of the procedure of embedding them in the text is to demystify and reinterpret female physiology, see R. Dakin Quinn, *An Open Letter to Institutional Mother*, In: *Generations – Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, ed. D. Looser, A. E. Kaplan, Minneapolis 1997, pp. 174-182.

4 L. Kaštelan, *Prije sna*, In: *Odbrojanje. Antologija suvremene hrvatske drame*, ed. L. Rafolt, Zagreb 2007, pp. 461-513. Quotations in our translation [M. K. & G. A.] are given according to this edition with page numbers in the main text. Premieres of the play: *Prije sna*, dir. Nenni Delmestre, Gavella Drama Theatre, Zagreb 2005; *Prije sna*, dir. Ivica Boban, Croatian National Theatre in Split, Split 2009.

YOUNGER WOMAN: Ira S., age 28, after having both ovaries removed, with attacks of paranoid hallucinations caused by hormonal imbalances, believes that men and women can be friends. Marija V., age 35 or a little more, with an advanced, threatened pregnancy, convinced that her husband Mate, who returned from the war, was never guilty of anything (p. 475).

Female companions in misery find that gynaecological conditions stripe them of intimacy, are humiliating and stigmatising because they can weaken or eliminate their reproductive capacities, i.e., question their socially and culturally useful femininity. In this limited cycle of life and death, categories such as dream and wakefulness, hope and disappointment, youth and old age, fairy-tale archetype and everyday life appear side by side by contrast.

Defective bodies wither away in parts, and the tissues removed in the healing process do not turn into the inert matter and continue to cause distress to the women. Patients, after the removal of diseased organs (or their parts), do not feel purified but rather more impoverished, mutilated and less valuable. They seek solace in the disposal of not only the separated particles but in this way, and they also wish to put an end to any activity of their bodies:

WOMAN: And I would rather they burned. And what I would most like is that they would burn me too, that I would turn to dust and ashes, now, right away (p. 469).

The counterbalance for the protagonists, who nevertheless actively and firmly have their feet on the ground, is a patient in a pharmacological coma. Her presence provokes a wave of questions, speculations and causes a kind of permanent discomfort. The hospitalised women expand and pass on a fantastic „urban legend“ that grows into a macabre biography of a Ukrainian doctor. She allegedly became involved with a well-known specialist, and as their affection blossomed and she became pregnant, she contracted an unknown disease and was later given an experimental treatment by him. The „before sleep“ state symbolises a borderline situation and suspension between two orders. Sleep helps the protagonists to pass into another phase of activity, but also „to the other side“, which is mysterious, unknown, and therefore causes anxiety. It is associated with anaesthesia, the vestibule of death, as well as with an everyday nightmare composed of loneliness, a sense of abandonment, of being trapped in a female disease, powerless and dehumanised – all of which are at the core of the collective memories and feelings of many women co-creating or leaving the circle of fertility.



Figure 1. Theatre Archive, *Prije sna [Before Sleep]*, dir. Nenni Delmestre, Gradsko dramsko kazalište Gavella, Zagreb (2005)

The destructive power of the pregnancy metaphor – Woman Bomb by Ivana Sajko

The post-dramatic text *Woman Bomb* (*Žena-bomba*; 2003⁵) by Ivana Sajko⁶, where the problem of motherhood appears, but in a subversive version as a destructive metaphor of pregnancy, is an attempt to analyse the performativity of femininity “stretching from a life-giving identity to a life-taking one” (Rafolt, 2011: 193). The play enjoys great popularity not only locally but also Europe-wide and even worldwide (in 2004, the text was awarded by the Rockefeller Foundation). The title character is a cyborg woman encased in an explosive device (a shahid belt), which functions as a surrogate or imitation of pregnancy, while the terrorist’s body functions as an actor in a global performance of destruction and socio-political revolt.

5 I. Sajko, *Žena-bomba*, In: eadem, *Žena-bomba*, Zagreb 2004, pp. 19-56; English version: I. Sajko, *Woman Bomb*, transl. V. Butković, made available to us electronically by the author, for which we wish to thank her here. Quotations are given according to this version. Premieres of the play: *Žena-bomba*, self-referential reading by Ivana Sajko, Zagreb 2005; *Woman Bomb*, dir. Charlotte Brathwaite, Baryshnikov Arts Center NY 2005; *Žena-bomba*, dir. Bojan Đorđev, Beogradsko dramsko pozorište 2008; *Kobieta-bomba*, dir. Giovanni Castellanos, S. Jaracz Theatre in Olsztyn 2009; *Bombenfrau*, dir. Constantin von Thun, Kulturhaus Gotha 2011; *Kobieta-bomba*, dir. Wojciech Węglowski, Galeria Scena in Koszalin 2012.

6 Ivana Sajko (born in 1975, Zagreb) is a writer (author of dramas, novels and a theoretical treatise), director and performer. She is a graduate in drama, a PhD in humanities, and a co-founder of the „BAD Co“ theatre company and a member of the editorial board of the performing arts magazine „Frakcija.“ She has received many prestigious awards and cooperates with theatres in Austria and Germany. She creates stage productions of her texts in the form of the so-called self-referential reading. She experiments, crossing genre boundaries of drama and acting.

Here we are dealing with a form of techno-drama with an innovative structure. It consists of a polyphonic sequence of monologues or soliloquy forms. The author aims to present a psychological portrait of a nameless female suicide, whose tissues grow together with a bomb that is treated from now on as a separate, new life „ticking“ inside her. The Woman Bomb, entrusted with a special mission to dispose of a well-known politician, embodies a compelling fusion of advanced information technology and the human body. In the context of the resonance of elements from the technological and biological worlds, the bomb can be seen as an animated, organic segment that matures, develops and gains independence within the female body. The created figure of the terrorist, on the other hand, should be considered a dehumanised, maximally utilitarian machine, which under optimal conditions switches into reproductive mode. This transhuman figure is a symbol of postmodern, even futuristic motherhood (meaning a refusal to accept the traditional role of the mother), as well as of morphological freedom – the right to transform the body using genetic engineering and cyber-prostheses. This type of pregnancy simulation and destructive, threatening to others, subversive pseudo- or cyber-maternity, is also imposed from the outside by terrorist organisations. It, therefore, also involves the use of the „stage“ of the female body for institutionally controlled tasks and for the political spectacle of destruction.

The images recalled by the Woman Bomb of her mother „trapped“ in the delivery room as she was giving birth to her, and by this fact, she remained faithful to her assigned socio-cultural role, that is, her reproductive and educative function significant. By reconstructing her own birth in the imagination, the protagonist points to the imposed necessity, which is uncomfortable, painful and rejected by women.

I'll give birth like my mother who was terrified by the event. (...) She screamed and cried convinced I never should have come out of that crack between her legs. (...) Fat and bloated she squirmed on the hospital tiles. Then she ran into the toilet and locked the door. She yelled: „No! No!“ , until the doctor appeared. He knocked lightly and said in a gentle and urbane tone of voice: „You'll give birth. There is no going back now.“

Pregnancy and childbirth involve, in the protagonist's view, the repetition of the fate of women treated as a kind of controlled living incubator or, as the American journalist Gena Corea puts it, „The Mother Machine“ (Corea, 1985). Reproductive functions are a symbol of physical and psychological coercion and suffering passed on from generation to generation. The bomber entrusts her body to the organisers of the terrorist action, who remodel it and create a surrogate pregnancy which is a condition acceptable to her:

my bomb is a drum machine
(...)
I'm strapped with wires and tape
explosives caress my skin
explosives are under my breasts
stuck to my spine
shoved into my uterus
I'll give birth

Non-classical childbirth, more akin to removal, getting rid of a burden, expelling from the body what is expendable, was presented as a strictly mechanical process:

they stuck it inside me
fastened, hammered, glued, shoved in
I only have to squeeze it out
Without contractions like other women
without a legitimate father to encourage me and hold my hand
without a calm doctor to say that everything
is under control without labour pains
voiceless
I just have to drop it
like a fragile bubble that will burst in the air
like a short fart with an unusual sound
BOOM
B-OO-M

Ivana Sajko, referring to historical and current events of local and global dimensions (terrorism), illustrates how in an organism capable of transgression and subjected to processing, the urge for transgression is activated. In stage productions, the clash between the act of creation (with which motherhood is identified) and (self) destruction (with the use of props – attributes of a terrorist) is emphasised, also visually.



Figure 2. Michał Bartoszewicz, *Kobieta-bomba* [*Woman Bomb*], dir. Giovanni Castellanos, Teatr im. S. Jaracza w Olsztynie, Olsztyn (2009)

Physiology and philosophy of pregnancy – Landscape with the Fall by Ivana Sajko

Another example of the relationship between medicine, performative art and the female body is the chronologically later, also the non-classical text by Ivana Sajko *Landscape with the Fall* (*Krajolik s padom*, 2011)⁷, set on the borderline between drama and poetry. In this text, the author put much attention to the physiology and philosophy of pregnancy, and to the body of the future mother, she assigns the function of a mobile and dynamic theatrical stage on which a multi-level tragedy is played out. The central character in the drama, from whose perspective the world is presented, begins to carefully study her body's topography, which is getting out of control, its growth and adaptive metamorphoses. The pregnant woman also critically reflects on the idea and essence of motherhood and the socio-economic transformations taking place around it, which pose a threat to her and her child's future. An autobiographical moment is clearly present in Sajko's work: at the time of writing the drama the author was also pregnant.

7 I. Sajko, *Krajolik s padom*, In: *Nagrada Marin Držić. Hrvatska drama 2011*, Zagreb 2012, pp. 9-35. Quotations in our translation [M. K. & G. A.] are given according to this edition with page numbers in the main text. The premiere of the play *Landscape with the Fall* directed by Daniela Löffner was held in Staatstheater in Braunschweig in 2012.

Isolated in her experiences, the drama's protagonist – the future mother, can count on indirect telephone contact with her consultant doctor and occasional meetings with her busy partner. Her dramatic and lyrical confessions reveal elements of the world she perceives both on a micro-scale (the intracorporeal aspect) and on a macro-scale (the political and social aspect).

As a woman in need of care and medical supervision, the protagonist is excluded from the mode of her previous activities and set, with her pregnancy, on the margins of social interest. She is advised to sleep, do yoga, calm down and ignore the violent world of politics, disconnect from the messages of TV and other mass media. To emphasise the trivialisation of the role of the pregnant woman, Sajko uses parallelism in an intertextual way, introducing ekphrasis. The painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by the Flemish painter Pieter Breugel from 1558, as the starting point of the drama (intertextually exposed already in the title), perfectly reflects the mood of a specific revolution and the absorbing monotony of life. The juxtaposition of the metaphor of the pregnant woman compared to a zeppelin flying over the town (image linked to the personal dimension of the woman's round body) and the scene of Icarus' aborted idealistic flight and his fall, to which nobody pays attention (social dimension), is an interesting artistic technique.

One cannot help feeling that the author emphasises here the too often depreciated role of women, including pregnant women, who should be particularly involved in socio-political issues, as subjects rather than objects, since it is they who create – give birth to and bring up – new people. However, this process, apart from its private or even intimate layer, has the status of a social event that is now institutionally controlled.

The woman in Sajko's text becomes a kind of slave of an altered state, and her body is perceived through the perspective of mythologised and idealised notions of motherhood. The doctor is a guide and leads her to the delivery, caring above all for the patient's emotional comfort:

„Your body is pure poetry“ – the doctor supported me,
 „Please find inspiration in yourself,
 use your bones as metaphors,
 make helicopters, planes and zeppelins out of your tissues,
 find gravity-proof gas chambers in your brain,
 turn a propeller and fly.“ (p. 12).

The doctor enhances her idea of pregnancy as a spiritual, elevating experience. The protagonist's body is a kind of autonomous construction that is difficult to control, but in her visions, it frees itself and enables her to change her perspective – it hovers

over the world like a zeppelin. This flow (the imagined transformation of the body into an aerostat) gives a new perspective of viewing oneself and social problems „from above“ or from a distance, deconstructs old and co-creates new myths of physiology and philosophy of pregnancy.

The physiological and psychological symptoms of pregnancy are downplayed by the protagonist's attending physician. In his view, the patient co-forms a common denominator of pregnant women behaving irrationally:

„My body is a pure tragedy“,
 That's what I told the doctor.
 He explained to me that I was going through a difficult time,
 that I wasn't able to make a realistic assessment
 And that my sudden mood swings would accompany me for the rest of my
 pregnancy,
 „You're exaggerating.
 It's scientifically proven,
 You're exaggerating your role in order to be the centre of attention,
 You get depressed and expect someone to save you,
 You give in to your whims to be more feminine,
 You make up reasons to be unhappy,
 You tell me about social injustice and discontentment on the streets,
 But what really gets to you is stage fright,
 You're scared of your own profile,
 You've lost control of your proportions,
 and now you're in despair over silly little things,
 Am I wrong?“ (p. 22).

The birth of a child (a watershed event for the woman, during which she is treated as an object by the staff) and the emergence of new social rules during the transition period are associated in the play with a metaphorical or concrete fall.

The doctor says this is a normal phase.
 The motif of the fall is a common symbol of the fear of failure.
 Depression and anxiety are common in advanced pregnancy.
 The mother is not sure if she will fulfil her role well.
 She does not believe in her physical strength and mental balance.
 She is tormented by fears about her parental responsibility.
 Traumas and unprocessed frustrations emerge from the subconscious
 In the form of daily hallucinations and disturbing dreams (p. 25).

As the author of the text herself points out in the stage directions, the drama is an arrangement of sequences that can be performed by an unlimited number of actors. The dramatic subject is changing, speaking in the first, second or third person singular, sometimes joining in the speech of groups or social strata. This compilation is set on a semi-permeable borderline between reality and fantasy. Selected elements of Breugel's compositions are part of this non-linear story, but they are also reproduced as a painting – a scenography emerging before the audience eyes.

Infertility and in vitro – Barren by Magdalena Lupi Alvir

The fourth problem related to reproduction and motherhood is presented from a different perspective by the Croatian playwright and director Magdalena Lupi Alvir.⁸ In *Barren (Jalova; 2011)*⁹, which is one of three views and poetics on the issue of (not) having offspring within the project of the same title (*Jalova*), the author exposes the body of a woman suffering from infertility. It is reduced to a social prop in the spectacle that is the political debate on the in vitro procedure. Magdalena Lupi Alvir, through a performative-theatrical project, wanted to show how the restrictive law limiting the procedure of artificial fertilisation in Croatia negatively affects society and the community. Expanding on the idea of the word “barren” scope and symbolic power, the playwright criticises the tendency to stigmatise childless women and to “blame” their bodies for physiological infertility. In this performance, the inability to get pregnant is shown as a medical problem and also as a socio-political-legal issue.

Authors of the *Barren* triptych (apart from Magdalena Lupi Alvir, the project initially executed in Slovenia¹⁰ was joined by Ivana Sajko¹¹, Jelena Kovačić and Anica

8 Magdalena Lupi Alvir (born in 1968, Banja Luka) graduated from the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana. Since 1993 she has been working as a dramaturge at the Ivan Zajc Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka. As a playwright she has collaborated with various theatre and film institutions. She is the co-founder and long-time artistic director of the TRAFIK independent theatre group (Transitory-Fictional Theatre) in Rijeka, whose members explore the limits of stage forms and their realisation. She publishes essays and papers in the field of theatre studies. She has won numerous awards for her work. Since 2016, she has been a director of the Rijeka Municipal Puppet Theatre.

9 M. Lupi Alvir, *Jalova*, 2012, unpublished text, made available to us electronically by the author, for which we wish to thank her here. Quotations are given in our translation [M. K. & G. A.]

10 The premiere of *Jalova*, directed by Magdalena Lupi Alvir, was held in Maribor as part of the European Capital of Culture 2012 and was created as a co-production of the Cultural and Artistic Association Borza (KUD Borza, Maribor) and the TRAFIK Transitory-Fictional Theatre (Rijeka).

11 Here, Ivana Sajko explores how cool and rational legal regulations attempt to normalise every member of society by trespassing into the intimate sphere of procreation against their will, and by stigmatising them if they do not conform to the template, inducing feelings of guilt and inferiority. Sajko talks about love as an intimate act that is never fruitless, unlike the actions of politicians. The performance has a form of a dialogue; Ivana Sajko is accompanied by a musician and performer Alen Sinkauz.

Tomić)¹² address issues closely related to female physiology and fertility and touch upon the problem of interference in the course of medical procedures which women undergo when trying to have children with their partners. In this way, they show that theatre should be a place of interventionist activism. It should break social taboos and sensitise and make the audience aware that such a serious problem exists and speak openly about it.

The inducement for creating the performance was the controversial Act of 2009¹³ (introduced by Minister of Health Darek Milinović and later amended in 2012) on Medically Assisted Fertilisation in the Republic of Croatia and the growing problem of infertility, because of which more and more desperate couples decided to go to private clinics specialised in IVF. They mainly went to Prague and Maribor in Slovenia, where the law on in vitro fertilisation was not that strict. The author confessed that although the idea of the project had been building up and maturing since 2010, her decision to write the text was influenced by her personal tragedy – another spontaneous loss of an IVF pregnancy produced at the Maribor Clinical Centre.

¹² Zagreb duo Jelena Kovačić and Anica Tomić wrote the script for the second segment of the performance and performed it with music by Nenad Kovačić. The performance alternates between performativity and theatricality, between documentary (the story of Aunt Danica, who could not have children but grew beautiful flowers in her garden) and fiction (intertextual reference to Andersen's fairy tale about Thumbelina). Using characteristic flows, the artists illustrate the archetype of infertility embedded in the collective consciousness.

¹³ The Act of 17 July 2009, Chapter V, Article 15 stated: "In the process of in vitro fertilization it is permissible to fertilize a maximum of three ova. During one procedure it is permissible to introduce into the woman's reproductive organs a maximum of three embryos. The surplus remaining germ cells are stored for use for a period not exceeding five years. The process of cryopreservation of embryos is in principle prohibited, being permitted in exceptional cases for medically justified reasons."

It appears that the dramaturgical and theatrical achievements of Croatian women authors reflect to a large extent the specificity of Polish reality, and many issues addressed in texts written a few or even more than a dozen years ago in a different geopolitical area, find their analogies in the Polish public sphere. The element which links these seemingly distant spaces is the discourse of body, which in Poland is gaining particular strength due to events such as, among others, the termination by the Polish Ministry of Health of the in vitro procedure funding or the introduction of the "Pro Life" programme, changes concerning the standards of perinatal care, and above all, parliamentary disputes around drafts of the anti-abortion law, including one draconian provision introducing an absolute ban on abortion and the accompanying black marches (Black Monday – 3/10/2016). This near-total abortion ban was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic in autumn 2020 and caused from 22 October 2020 till 27 January 2021 the waves of anti-government demonstrations and mass protests organised by Women's Strike (Strajk Kobiet) movement in Poland. On 22 October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland, consisting mainly of judges appointed by the Law and Justice ruling party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), declared the law authorising abortions for malformed fetuses to be unconstitutional, effectively banning most of the small number of official abortions carried out in Poland. Abortion is now allowed only in cases of rape or incest or when the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother. But the ruling made almost all cases of abortion illegal, including those cases in which the fetus had a severe and permanent disability, or an incurable and life-threatening disease.

Magdalena Lupi Alvir, the author of the last, most intimate segment, created an autobiographical and self-ironic retrospective monodrama in which she recalls the scenes, experiences and emotions that accompanied her during the nine-year battle with the diagnosis included in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems as code N 97 – female infertility.

SHE: In hospital waiting rooms, my generation and I.

Everywhere a comrade in arms, a warrior, it looks like this will be our toughest battle yet. Together we declare war on the N 97 code form.

Then: a truce.

And again: war.

Onwards, weary warriors. War is better than truce!

SONG: PTPs – ICSI – IVF – AIH – ET

PMS – IVF – AIH, IVF – ICSI...

The fragment closes with a protest song loaded with abbreviations referring to the in vitro procedure, which from now on determine the rhythm of the protagonist's life.¹⁴

It should be noted that Lupi – the initiator of the project and author of the text – did not choose to appear in the stage production and play the leading character herself. She explained that it was still too painful for her¹⁵; however, she saw cathartic potential in the project. She asked a well-known Croatian actress Daria Lorenci Flatz to help her bring her manifesto to the stage, and the latter created a touching interpretation. She perfectly got into the character of a woman who described the process of diagnosing infertility, methods of assisted reproduction, various stages of complex treatment: from the qualifying visit to the transfer of embryos and waiting for test results, the great hope

14 These abbreviations stand for respectively: PTPs – protein tyrosine phosphatases, enzymes that have found application in clinical diagnostics; PMS – premenstrual syndrome; ICSI – intracytoplasmic sperm injection – a type of in vitro fertilization procedure involving the introduction of a sperm into the cytoplasm of an egg; IVF - in vitro fertilisation, (Latin: “within the glass”)– a fertilisation method consisting in bringing together an egg cell and a sperm cell in laboratory conditions, outside the female reproductive system; ET – embryo transfer – transfer of an embryo created outside the woman's body into the uterus; AIH – artificial insemination by husband – intrauterine insemination, when the sperm given to the patient comes from her husband or partner.

15 The project was developed while Lupi was still trying unsuccessfully to have a child. However, two years ago she gave birth to a daughter and today enjoys her role as a mother. The play also lived on after Maribor ceased to hold the title of European Capital of Culture – it was enjoyed by audiences in many Croatian cities. Furthermore, in 2013 there was a radio drama *Jalova*, directed by Mislav Brečić, where the male role is significantly expanded, and in addition there are fragments of documentary-like recordings and commentaries. The idea presented in *Jalova* moved on and resulted in the separate project – *Jalova 2*, where the author Mila Čuljak – a performer and choreographer from Rijeka, as well as the mother of a boy with trisomy 21 – speaks about the tightened regulations on medical care and social assistance.

after a successful procedure and the equally great tragedy of miscarriage and curettage of the uterus. The performance also features the author's husband, Marin Alvir, who plays a practically silent role of himself – demanding and difficult – and illustrates the story with the music he composed himself.

The reconstruction of events, set on the boundaries of theatre, performance and documentary, is an open protest against the synthesis of the triad: state – Church – medicine. It refers to discussions among politicians and clergymen, but it also presents (rather negatively) the problems of underinvestment in the state health care, inadequate equipment in hospitals and surgeries (e.g., the lack or failures of cryopreservation freezers), and the attitude of Croatian doctors – powerless, blocked by routine, regulations and lack of competence.

The doctor, essentially patient and kind, had the problem that she mumbled something under her breath and it was difficult for me to understand what she was really saying. After consulting her, I was exhausted from trying to hear, grasp, understand and, worst of all, remember anything at all, and out of fear, I kept picking out the wrong information and storing it on a memory card in my head. The only thing I remembered was the statement that I was still young, even though I was already 34 and didn't feel particularly young, that I was healthy, which was nice to hear, and that my precious was....

HE: „...like from an anatomy atlas.“

SHE: Just what is wrong with that atlas?

Barren is an account of a journey through the intimate map of the female body, but also a report on visits to a clinic in „better Europe“, i.e., Slovenia (at the time when the production was made, Croatia was not yet a member of the EU, it only became one in 2013), whose staff is presented in an idealised way as a staff of kind-hearted specialists fulfilling the dreams of many childless couples. Their approach to the patient and to the problem, which is so different from the local one, is heartening, but it does not make the protagonist's task any easier. That is perfectly illustrated by the description of how hormone stimulation is conducted:

SHE: We seek help from the world's foremost specialist – on the Internet. And there we find some Swedish woman giving injections with pleasant music in the background. And... Look at her, she's smiling!

HE: Förbered sprutan. (*He shows a piece of paper saying: Prepare a syringe*)

SHE: (*holding her belly*): Phew, I'm sweating.

HE: För in nolen. (*Sheet: Insert the needle*)

SHE: My hands are shaking.

HE: Ta tag i skinkorna (*Sheet: Firmly grasp the tissue*)

SHE: There is plenty of material to get into.

HE: Injicera inehal (*Sheet: Inject the preparation*)

SHE: Fucking ampoule, I cut my finger.

HE: Ta bort nolen. (*Sheet: Remove the needle*)

SHE: I think a small piece of glass went in.

HE: Lee. (*Sheet: Smile*)

SHE: Don't worry, a piece of glass won't do me any harm.

HE: Slut. (*Sheet: The end*)

(*After „presentation“, He creates the background by playing the same melody from the commercial and singing).*

The lack of scenography in *Barren* is a perverse move. The conspicuous absence, or, in other words, the presence of engulfing darkness, represents the overwhelming sense of absence or emptiness and the eponymous „barrenness“ and ideological callousness with which politics intervenes in matters of procreation. The only dynamic, contrasting point is the performer's figure, faced with an extremely difficult task: to build a character and attract the audience's interest using only her own body, movement, gesture, and voice. Fragments of political speeches and protest songs are also woven into the confessional statement, including John Lennon's iconic composition, *Give Peace a Chance*, which closes the play.

This skilfully constructed message, even with its modest musical setting and play of light, provokes empathy. Moreover, it opens one's eyes to many issues connected with *in vitro* – it presents basic medical information, thanks to which one can realise how many procedures patients of infertility treatment clinics go through (it describes, among others, preparation for the procedure, collection of egg and sperm, the laboratory stage and implantation). The medicalised female body is treated as a prop requiring examination, improvement, filling and purification. Magdalena Lupi Alvir turns it into a speaking and feeling subject. Apart from medical issues, the author brilliantly sketches the dilemmas of a woman suspended between the socio-political context and the overwhelming desire to have a child. She also shows the futility of politics and restrictive, even violent laws concerning women's bodies.



Figure 3. Author's Archive. *Jalova [Barren]*, dir. Magdalena Lupi Alvir, KUD Borza and Kazalište TRAFIK, Maribor (2012)

Conclusions

Croatian culture, including theatre, is a space where projects interweaving medicine and art play an essential role. A significant segment of the relationship between medicine and theatre is gynaecological problems, more specifically femininity shown in the mirror of procreation. The female body is presented as a medium for both deconstructing existing myths and their social preservation by the conservative state and a stage provoking political abuse. The women playwrights, revising common beliefs, signal and articulate topics which have been tabooed so far.

Although written in a socially engaged way, the dramas have a limited (because individual, readerly) impact. As a text, however, they become a strong score for presenting on stage. All the presented texts have been performed in the theatre more than once, which increases their field of social and artistic transmission (also in the international space). Theatre becomes a territory of combat and expression of disagreement against a restrictive reality, a place where one can present their views and undertake socio-political polemics or even protest. It is also evident that the medical component, medical disorders, and physiology provide many interesting symbols and artistically operative metaphors (or „matrophoras“ as mentioned above).

Moreover, the autobiographical factor is vital in the creation of medical texts and performances (as in the case of Ivana Sajko and Magdalena Lupi Alvir). That gives the productions a special flavour and strongly confirms the belief that theatre in Croatia and Slovenia has become a place of activism and social intervention.

REFERENCES:

1. Corea, Gena. 1985. *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs*. New York: Harper and Row, after: Czarnecka, Mirosława. 2004. *Wieszczki. Rekonstrukcja kobiecej genealogii w historii niemieckiej literatury kobiecej od połowy XIX do końca XX wieku*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
2. Dakin Quinn, Rebecca. 1997. „An Open Letter to Institutional Mother.“ In: Devoney Looser and Ann E. Kaplan (eds.): *Generations – Academic Feminists in Dialogue*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
3. Kaštelan, Lada. 2007. „Prije sna.“ In: Leo Rafolt (ed.): *Odbrojanje. Antologija suvremene hrvatske drame*. Zagreb: Zagrebačka Slavistička Škola.
4. Lupi Alvir, Magdalena. 2012. *Jalova* [electronic version provided by the author].
5. Rafolt, Leo. 2011. *Priučeni na tumačenje – deset čitanja*. Zagreb: Zagrebačka slavistička škola.
6. Sajko, Ivana. *Woman Bomb*. Vanda Butkovic (trans.) [electronic version provided by the author].
7. Sajko, Ivana. 2004. „Žena-bomba.“ In: Ivana Sajko: *Žena-bomba*. Zagreb: Meandar Media.
8. Sajko, Ivana. 2012. „Krajolik s padom.“ In: *Nagrada Marin Držić. Hrvatska drama 2011*. Zagreb: Disput.

Diskurs ženskog tela u savremenoj hrvatskoj ženskoj dramaturgiji i pozorištu

Apstrakt: Cilj ovog članka je da prikaže odabrane aspekte medikalizacije i politizacije ženskog tela kao teme u savremenoj hrvatskoj drami i pozorištu. Rad se bavi analizom umetničkih predloga koji govore o ženskim reproduktivnim funkcijama i disfunkcijama (kao što su patologija trudnoće, destruktivna moć metafore trudnoće, fiziologija i filozofija trudnoće, neplodnost i in vitro) ilustrovanim četirima dramama koje su napisale hrvatske dramaturginje. Reč je o skraćenom pregledu najreprezentativnijih tekstualno-pozorišnih strategija u društveno i politički angažovanim „ginodramama”. Tri cenjene spisateljice i rediteljke, Lada Kaštelan (*Prije sna*, 2005), Ivana Sajko (*Žena-bomba*, 2003; *Krajolik s padom*, 2011) i Magdalena Lupi Alvir (*Jalova*, 2011), bave se fundamentalnim pitanjima egzistencije žene, kombinujući elemente umetnosti i medicine. U radu se analiziraju neke matrofore, odnosno metafore majčinstva i odnosa majke i deteta koje demistifikuju i reinterpretiraju žensku fiziologiju.

Ključne reči: hrvatska drama i pozorište, diskurs ženskog tela, trudnoća, neplodnost, in vitro