

Evald Flisar. *Collected Plays, I*. Introduced by the author and Susan Smith Nash. Translated (or written in English) by the author. New York: Texture Press, 2006. 623 pp. (illus.), \$42.00. ISBN: 0971206147.

In one of his short stories from the 1950s, the great Indonesian writer Pramoedya Toer (1925–2006) noted that the theater arts were dying out in the twentieth century; plays had simply become vehicles for ideologues from the left or the right, and people read other things, if anything. The first volume of Evald Flisar's *Collected Plays* is a strong antidote to this pessimism, however, as are numerous other recent publications by South Slavic playwrights including Goran Stefanovski, Dušan Kovačević, Dragica Potočnjak, and Tena Štivičić. The bigger issue seems to be that, in general, far too little literature from central and southeastern Europe is appearing in English translation these days. Poetry, plays, and essays tend to appear more frequently than novels and short stories, but what is really intriguing is that the Yugoslav successor states have developed varying profiles in the post-1991 period. Slovenes are best represented in the anglophone world in poetry, whereas Serbs have the most translated novels to their credit. The Croats, seemingly indifferent to the faintness of their international presence, hardly figure in either category, although the essays of Dubravka Ugrešić and Slavenka Drakulić are noteworthy. Bosnia continues to generate much interest in terms of novels, short stories, and essays, whereas Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo are largely absent from the realm of translations. Works by Croats do command a much larger audience in the German-speaking lands, and Macedonian authors have gained a foothold in French. Among anthologies, readers, and samplers, only the Slovenes and Serbs have won a significant foothold on North American bookshelves over the past two decades.

It is in this terrain, then, that Flisar's first volume of collected plays lands. This large collection contains seven plays, each with a brief introduction; there are also two brief essays about the works (one by Flisar himself), a brief chronology of premieres, and several photographs for each play. Flisar's plays have been performed in Serbia, the UK, Austria, Iceland, and Egypt, as well as in Slovenia. Many of these works were first staged in the 1990s.

The first play in the anthology, *The Chestnut Crown*, is also the oldest and, arguably, one of the best in the lot. The specificity of location, the date of the action, and the inclusion of historical realia are not terribly important in Flisar's works, which operate much more on the level of ideas and psychology. Nonetheless it is safe to say that *The Chestnut Crown* takes place in rural twentieth-century Slovenia. The spikey themes that it treats are strong medicine against one of the former bugbears of

Slovene literature, the valorization of village life and traditional values. Here, the main character is Janek, a kind of perpetual student that sports various aspects of Roma culture. He has had a long incestuous relationship with his mother, Aranka, and ends up implicated in the murder of her lover, the backwards woodsman Aloys Weiner. Both men are also drawn to the searing sexual energy and diligent flirtations of a young woman from the city, Selena. The play ends with Aranka supposedly pregnant, the visiting police inspector still pursuing Truth with matter-of-fact erudition, and Janek wandering from vision to vision.

The primitive setting dotted with representatives of priestly and police power is an ideal setting for Janek's aggressive and nearly occultic individuality to be turned loose on moral and judicial authority. Apart from the gripping themes, this play is also certainly noteworthy for its crisp, witty dialogue and effective staging directions that allow the profitable use of flashbacks. Through a series of conversations, Janek's history of receiving and doling out abuse comes to light.

Tomorrow, a less challenging but well-constructed and enjoyable play, takes place in a late Tsarist Russian courthouse in the midst of a Siberian winter. The characters bear the unusual names Rembrandt, Nijinsky, and Yessenin; their personality and behavior are beyond quirky—they seem quite mad and inhabit a flamboyant, pointless world of their own invention. A knock at the door brings their morning revelry to a halt; a new judge, Mishkin, has arrived on orders from St. Petersburg. The three locals attribute their isolation to the heavy snowfall. Meanwhile, Yessenin writes, Nijinsky dances, and Rembrandt paints, as Mishkin writes long letters to his mother. As a group they eat exotic, if hard-to-find, meats along with flour enriched with mouse droppings, and they speculate about their invisible servant, Nikita, and stage one “unforgettable and unrepeatable aesthetic event” (101) after another. Mishkin makes various attempts to bring order and a sense of duty to their existence, but neither time nor responsibility have any meaning in the hermetically sealed house. The mounting absurdity, though not humor, of the dialogue and plot of their sequestered existence eventually form a lampoon of authority, as well as a critique of our universal sense of reality: the characters chant, constantly and nonsensically, “Comfort is what we have” (101, 127, etc.).

All of the characters are very much concerned with their collective unconscious. Mishkin eventually seizes a gun and attempts to control the proceedings, but he fails, leaving him increasingly suicidal. The three original “judges” place Mishkin on trial for killing Nikita, who is now revealed as the mute, often absent Supreme Judge. Mishkin is found guilty and sentenced to the most fearsome punishment of all: the freedom to choose his future. At the end of the play he has taken over

Nikita's job and the four men are awaiting the arrival of another official visitor.

Another very strong play in the collection is *The Eleventh Planet*. This is the tale of three vagrants and their struggles for self-definition: is their identity collective, based on solidarity and rejection of middle-class values, or is it based on individualism and "respectability"? As Peter makes his break upward, eventually bringing Magdalene with him and trying to jettison Paul, this identity conflict sometimes boils down to "booze" versus "cash." The satire allows no room for the street people to be presented as victims, or even as likeable in any way; there is not even grudging admission of the value of counter-culture or its struggles here. There is only its grunginess and hypocrisy. However, the play is very smoothly written, with a number of scenes that are admirably creative or humorous. In a way, we have here a gloss on *Candide* and a recasting of the old debate between Quixote and Sancho Panza; philosophers, as well, can find material for meditation on the form and function of music.

In *Uncle from America*, a rambling and conflict-ridden Slovene family awaits the return of Uncle Johnny, who has reportedly amassed a fortune in the United States and is coming back to the Old Country to marry his old sweetheart, restore the "Austro-Hungarian mansion in Black Forest" (386), and generally take care of everybody and everything. This play, like *The Chestnut Crown*, has dialogue and plot twists that are engaging because they are inventive; the work also seems rather germane in much of the world today because of its depiction of the difficulties faced by the "sandwich generation" in taking care of older relatives.

Alenka, Johnny's past and present love, is an artist that can only follow her own vision of material and sexual fulfillment. When Johnny loses his money in a "black Monday" stock market crash, the rifts in this little cash-fueled utopia grow at an alarming rate. The grandfather ends up winning a considerable sum in the Slovene lottery, and he hopes to buy peace, quiet, and care from his children. The grandfather decides to fund the restoration of the mansion so that he, too, can live there, but only after severely humiliating the family, including his estranged wife, with his obscene behavior on his eighty-eighth birthday.

Alenka washes out as an artist and impresario, and Johnny finally reveals that, although he had founded a family in America, he never had much money there. The play ends with a detective's visit to clear up a crime, although Johnny poignantly misapprehends the nature of the offense.

As is the case with one of Drago Jančar's best plays, Flisar's *What about Leonardo?* is set in an asylum. This long play features the

interactions of various inmates, some of them prodigiously gifted, with each other and with their doctors, Hoffman and da Silva. Their antics and ailments are disconcerting, or unnerving, as one would expect; and sometimes they are impishly amusing. The doctors debate the physical versus psychological causes of the patients' conditions; as a result, there is a rivalry over therapies. The text is richly allusive and studded with some memorable scenes, such as a caterpillar joke and a martial arts match. (Readers will recall these but will doubtless have their own favorites.) As one of the patients emerges as a polyglot supergenius, the question is posed whether empathy and experience can turn individualism into universal humanism. There are parallels to the play *Tomorrow* here, as definitions of happiness beyond the borders of an isolated, Petri-dish setting are revealed as unalluring. In *The Nymph Dies*, an interrogation of romantic love with spiritual pretensions, we encounter a sort of updated and globalized version of the myth of Tristan and Isolde. There are erotic scenes that happily avoid the twin extremes of both coyness and gratuitousness, thus demonstrating Flisar's facility with poignant vignettes that drive home key points. All in all, this play leaves a rollicking but somewhat turgid impression on the reader. *Nora, Nora* is billed as both an homage to Ibsen and a continuation of the perils of romantic love that Flisar initiated in *The Nymph Dies*; to this reviewer, it also seems very much like a New Age, high-tech take on Edward Albee. Two couples interact and intersect with increasing rancor and violence; the play highlights the perils of sexual and social equality with an increasingly apocalyptic touch. Along the way, there is a scene with a post-mortem and a toy pistol that ordinary mortals will be unable to forget.

Two themes that run through many of these plays, and provide a basis for interpretation, are authority and the state of nature. Authority figures—the police, other government officials, priests, reference works, great composers, philosophers, and musicians—are regularly invoked and their power put to the test. The states of nature, which are the distant, isolated sites or landscapes with which Flisar works, include houses in the forest, Siberian outposts in winter, a coven of street people, and mental hospitals. They grant characters some of the breathing room they need to explore altered states and alternative views, and new modes of expression, ranging from folklore to exotic, unintelligible language and outrageous acts. Where these two themes dovetail is in the concern of Flisar's characters with preserving the identity and autonomy of the individual on traditional—"normal," as the author might say—playing fields where the rules are already set in stone and social hierarchies in place. Other repeating elements in the corpus of plays as a whole include recitations of foreign languages and gibberish (probably coded and pregnant with meaning), hypochondria, chickens, and Freudianism.

Flisar's internal structures are consistent and thoughtful, although it will be up to viewers and readers to apply any philosophical or ethical lessons to our broader common world because these works are not particularly *engagé*. Proponents of this approach to literature will argue that this makes his works timeless and universal; literature driven by characters and psychological concern is loved by actors, students, and audiences alike. Others will miss politics or humanitarianism; still others will simply be relieved that issues of nationalism and national identity are absent. The translations themselves are quite readable and effective, although the usual quotients of malapropisms and typographical errors are present.

The volume is well produced in general. The plays themselves are engaging and thought-provoking; they are deserving of both wider readership and more frequent production. Flisar, by dint of his four volumes now available in English, is coming to occupy the same entrepreneurial spot in international Slovene letters that Miro Gavran occupies in the Croatian world. On a minor note, it is a shame that the text lacks diacritical marks; Flisar's other recent volume from Texture Press, an edited anthology of Slovene literature entitled *From the Heart of Europe*, is properly equipped with them. If the critical apparatus were tightened up and expanded (i.e., more essays, less mention of prize nominations, complete citations for critics' comments, and details of production history), the book would be more useful to scholars. Nonetheless, this work is without doubt an important one, presenting such a large amount of high-quality contemporary Slovene literature to us in English. This reviewer, for one, is very much looking forward to the anticipated second volume of Flisar's plays.

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