

The Engaged Theatrical Forms and The Concept of Political Correctness

1. *Definition in Context*

The term *political correctness*, while pervasive in everyday discourse, undergoes varied and subjective interpretations, often dependent on the context of use.

In the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the term *political correctness* is defined as "adaptation to a particular sociopolitical ideology or point of view, especially to a liberal point of view concerned with promoting tolerance and avoiding offense in matters of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation"¹. Tracing the term's definition, researchers unanimously agree that its origin is linked to leftist and neoliberal ideology. According to Richard Feldstein², it was initially popularized by members of the American left to label staunch adherents of communist ideologies. In this sense, the initial use of the term denotes someone who **follows and is in accordance with the political stance and ideology of the ruling authority**. Such a definition aligns closely with the meaning of the term *political conformity*, used during the time of Communist Party rule to denote obedience and adherence to the ideological-political matrix imposed by the Central Committee.

Subsequently, the term gained contemporary significance during the feminist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, often employed humorously to deride conservative viewpoints resistant to progressive change.³

The 1990s witnessed the zenith of the term's usage, primarily as a **linguistic corrective measure**. This idea first began in American colleges **as an attempt to rectify injustices** inflicted upon marginalized African Americans, as well as women and

¹ American Heritage Dictionary (Accessed 4 March 2024)
<https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=political+correctness>

² Richard Feldstein is an English language professor at "Rhode Island College".

³ Brown Alumni monthly (Accessed 4 March 2024)
<https://archive.org/details/brownalumnimonth922brow/page/37/mode/1up?view=theater>

homosexuals. However, *political correctness* implies not only **avoiding language offensive to certain social groups** but also **regulating codes of social behavior**. Croatian political scientist and publicist Radule Knežević⁴, analyzing political correctness as a field of political behavior, i.e., regulating codes of social behavior through the objectification of interpersonal relations defined by "formally established norms that exclude any contradictions," emphasizes that such an attempt separates individual behavior from the context, i.e., "excludes the interpretative dimension and rational dynamics." (Knezevic, 84) Interpersonal relations are conditioned not only by the individual characteristics of the person, such as education, socialization, and emotional intelligence, but also by the cultural and social contexts, tradition, customs, and the cultural code of each of us. The concept of political correctness as a field of political behavior imposes a standardized code of behavior detached from the socio-political milieu of a given territory. This raises questions regarding the implications of objectifying interpersonal relations within the realm of engaged theater, which grapples directly with portraying human behavior in society as inherently conflictual.

In tracing the definition of the term political correctness, discerning its initial usage, and observing the subsequent evolution of its meaning⁵, we ascertain **two diametrically opposed aspects of its significance: one lies within the connotation of political (un)conformity, while the other is articulated as a corrective in relation to social injustice.**

An examination of the usage of *political correctness* in the Macedonian theatrical context preceding this discourse reveals its infrequent occurrence in performance reception. In the years leading up to independence, the phrase "politically not conforming performance" was encountered. In several cases, critics used qualifiers that implied the existence of a certain "political incorrectness." In this regard, the present study will analyze several

⁴ Radule Knežević, a Croatian political scientist, editor, and owner of the publishing house "Political Culture". He has published several scholarly studies and books in the field of political science: "Freedom and Equality" (2003), "Anarchism" (2012), "Postmodern Political Theory" (2016), among others.

⁵ The term political correctness emerged in its modern sense in the latter half, more precisely towards the end, of the 20th century. From this perspective, Croatian political scientist Radule Knežević defines it as the "offspring of multiculturalism." By analyzing the political culture of multiculturalism, he argues that essentially, the concept of multiculturalism, understood as the acceptance of diversity within a community based on the right to respect and recognition, serves as an exemplar for political correctness. With the onset of the political crisis accompanying the transition from the modern to the postmodern condition, namely from the citizen and the collective to the individual and individuality, there arises a focus on difference/otherness. In such a context, the change in the meaning of the term political correctness becomes evident.

paradigmatic performances in the history of Macedonian theater, as well as recent theater experiences, through which this relationship can be observed.

2. *The Concept of Engagement, Political Engagement, and Political Correctness*

As this research focuses on engaged theater forms, it is essential to initially establish a definition of engagement as a constituent category within the realm of theatrical art, followed by an examination of the relationship between engaged theater and the concept of political correctness.

For an artistic work to be defined as engaged, it must direct its interest towards current social movements and be "marked by unequivocal social, political, and ideological views of the world and those expressing individual or collective aspirations for either support or radical change in the social order" (*Glossary of Literary Theory*, 2007: 33). From this definition, one can discern the three principal attributes of an engaged piece: **actuality, thesis or assertion (standpoint), and awakeness**, signifying the inclination to raise awareness of a specific problem in order to act towards its resolution. In this context, by engaged theatrical forms, I refer to those theatrical practices that can be attributed with actuality, public character/massiveness, critical intention, and societal role and a desire to participate in reality, aiming to change it (*The 1970s in Macedonian Drama and Theater*, 2020).

Engaged theater is essentially political theater⁶. Politics, understood in its broadest sense, is a social activity that governs, conditions and shapes human relations. In this regard, **politically engaged theater is one that is provocative and engages in an open dialogue with socio-political current events** by promoting them as its fundamental theme but also as its ultimate goal (Ibid, 2020). This means that engaged theater has a societal role; **its primary intention is to challenge the existing socio-political scene for change**. In order to provoke change, or primarily to indicate that change is necessary, it must be harsh, realistic, and sincere in presenting the dialectics of existence. Not only in terms of the topics it addresses but also in the way it presents them. Explicitly political theater forms and practices include: the Soviet theatrical avant-garde, Piscator's political theater, Brecht's epic/dialectical theater, Boal's forum theater, the theater of the absurd, existentialist drama as a form of social

⁶ The term "political theater" can be understood in both its narrower and broader semantic delineations. In its narrower sense as a theatrical genre, political theater is associated with the avant-garde practices of Piscator and Brecht in the 1920s. The broader sense of the term attests to the inherent relationship that has always existed between theater and politics.

engagement, and the avant-garde movements of American theater in the second half of the 20th century.

Writing about the four types of theater, Peter Brook situates such engaged, political theater in the category of so-called *rough* theater (*The Empty Space*, 1995). According to Brook, rough theater aims to confront society with its own hypocrisy and self-righteousness, thus provoking it to change. Therefore, rough theater does not seek to "fake it" and portray things as they are not. **The aesthetics of rough theater are the aesthetics of the volcano, the vulgar, and the indecent.** Its energy, says Brook, is **militant, revolutionary; sometimes it is the energy of rage, and sometimes that of hatred** (Ibid, 85).

Taking into account the definition that Brook gives for this type of theater, it can be concluded that there is no place in engaged stage expression for the use of political correctness as a linguistic corrective, nor for its articulation through actor plasticity and gesture.

If politics is defined as an activity that conditions and shapes human relations, then political theater identifies and portrays these relations on stage, inviting politics into an open dialogue. At the core of the *political* lies constant provocation and critical reevaluation, a reassessment of the established order. Politics, according to contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière, is a utopian space because it involves dissensus, or disagreement. Accordingly, engaged theater cannot depict human relations as ideal or *as they ought to be*. Such an idea may only serve as its ultimate goal rather than being explicitly incorporated into the text of the performance itself. The only conceivable way to present these relations in an ideal light may be through the use of the grotesque or as a means to achieve the necessary distance to stimulate critical thinking in the audience. If the dynamics of human relations on stage are portrayed utopically, or politically correct towards those groups we daily witness as being marginalized from societal mainstreams, then there is no room for any revolutionary reaction. The existentialist philosopher Sartre best represents conflictual human relations through his so-called *theater of situations*. One of his most famous lines illustrating conflicting human relations is - "Hell is other people!" According to Sartre, there is no *universal morality*; there are no universally accepted or acceptable moral norms. Man is condemned to freedom and placed in a certain situation; he has the choice to respond and to take risks. Freedom means responsibility. Man is condemned to freedom, but he is also condemned to responsibility. **In this absolute free activism, morality and values are absolutely relative and subjective categories.** In his commitment to realize his plans, man encounters others who are also trying to realize their own and perhaps in that collision,

mutually endanger each other. Such free moral activism clashes with the rigidity and normativity of political correctness.

In the context of this free moral activism, Rancière argues that every participant in society should be involved in the struggle and act for the change they seek to achieve. Therefore, Rancière thinks of **equality in an active and creative way**, that equality comes from the subject itself. It is not a social predisposition, but a search, a struggle. In the concept of political correctness, there is a certain degree of victimization, where one speaks on behalf of marginalized groups. Therefore, taking this viewpoint of Rancière as a theoretical basis, but also the explication of engagement in a theatrical context, it can be concluded that political correctness in theater, defined as an attempt to raise awareness of the problems facing members of marginalized groups, should not be sought in the narrative, but in the structure, as well as in the concept/idea of the performance/drama. This means giving more space to marginalized groups as characters in the drama, as actors on the stage, and addressing topics that highlight their position in society.

3. Analysis and interpretation

Given its inherent tendency to critically address the contemporary socio-political landscape, engaged political theater is frequently subject to censorship. The history of political theater can be documented as a history of prohibitions or a history of the intertwining of politics with theater (Melchinger, 1971). Consequently, censorship is an inevitable aspect when identifying engaged theatrical forms that are in some form of dissent or disagreement with official policy.

The history of Macedonian theater records several such exceptional cases. Two of them even faced legal proceedings: one through a public debate where differing viewpoints were dramatized as a court trial, presented as "accusations" and "defense," and the other, absurdly yet truly, ended up in the defendant's seat in court.

Particularly notable regarding censorship is the period of so-called socialist realism in theater. This phase in Macedonian theater history was marked by the efforts of Macedonian authors to create a "new," realistic drama, closely monitored by government officials, specifically the AGITPROP of the Communist Party of Macedonia. One such example is the play "Cooperation" („Задруга“) by Kole Chashule, an author who would later develop a powerful and socially engaged dramatic style. This style repeatedly provoked Ljubiša

Georgievski, the most radically politically engaged director in Macedonia, to stage his works. It is important to note that the mentioned play is not engaged in its formal-stylistic characteristics. It represents a "veristic authorial approach (a combination of the long Macedonian folkloristic/narrative dramatic tradition and 'truthful'/realistic depiction of reality)" (Luzhina in *Drami* K. Chashule, 2002:9). The play "Cooperation" was removed from the repertoire of the Macedonian National Theater by political decision after its sole performance on April 30 1950, because, according to the critic D. Mitrev, it "did not correspond to reality" (Ibid). **We mention the "Cooperation" case here as a paradoxical example of the authorities censoring a text that, from today's perspective, literally follows their ideological framework.** The play's engagement is evident only in the fact that it addresses an important and current issue, the formation of the cooperation at that time. What likely caught the attention of the AGITPROP members was that Chashule constructed the primary conflict in the play by profiling characters, among others, who did not accept the new socialist relations in the village with the necessary enthusiasm but instead sharply opposed and challenged them. Appealingly, there were two versions of this play: one with a "happy ending" and another, evidently less politically acceptable, ending with the wounding of the cooperative's advocate, thereby granting victory to the opposing side. Considering the contextuality of the agitprop engagement or "art in the service of politics" of that era, the version with the "happy ending" was performed on stage. The fact that the author had multiple versions of the play not only speaks to his thoroughness and his relationship to his poetics but also to how, in the "new era," there were no longer **"suggestions from the authorities" for a "happy" resolution and solving of problems** (Jovan Boshkovski in Luzhina, *Teatralika*, 2000).

The most absurd case of censorship and the suppression of artistic freedom in Macedonian theater history is the removal of the play "Mara's Wedding" from the Bitola Theater's repertoire and the performance ban imposed by the District Public Prosecutor in Bitola. The director, Ljubiša Georgievski, who also adapted Vladimir Kostov's novel of the same name, faced legal proceedings as a result. It is important to emphasize that the authorities not only banned the play and removed it from the repertoire but also literally put the director on trial, with a potential sentence ranging from two to ten years in prison. The play premiered on October 20, 1976, and was banned on the day of its fourth performance (Luzhina, 2017:129). In an interview discussing the right to free speech in the context of oppressive regimes, Georgievski specifically cites the case of "Mara's Wedding." According to his recollections, the indictment accused him of "undermining the foundations of socialist

society, corrupting the youth, and causing offense." The subtle irony with which Kostov's novel addresses Mara's altruism—sheltering various societal "outcasts"—is translated by Georgievski into an engaged stage production that breaks the "fourth wall" between the audience and actors. As Ivan Mazov notes in his review, the central idea, or "metaphor," of the play culminates in what he describes as having a "slogan-like resonance" by the end (Mazov, 1982:288). This is reflected in Mara's line, "Long live people of all meridians, races, and ideologies." What Mazov perceived as "slogan-like," lonely, worn-out, empty words, was likely a sharp critique towards the contemporary communist society, where "brotherhood and unity" were gradually disintegrating, but its echo continued to resonate.

Fortunately, the ban was short-lived (from November 4, 1976, to December 14, 1976), and the play was reinstated due to "public pressure" (Kostov, 2015:11) and the defense by poet and critic Mateja Matevski. It returned to the repertoire and won awards at the most prestigious theater festivals across Yugoslavia.

The analysis of these two examples demonstrates how **ensorship and the reduction of art to a form of *general morality* (Sartre), with an emphasis on "purity" and "ideological correctness," can cause significant harm and have serious consequences for its development.**

In 1989, directed by Vladimir Milčín, the play "Spiro Crne" premiered at the National Theater in Prilep as part of the "Vojdan Chernodrinski" festival. Two years earlier, the play by the same name, written by Blagoja Risteski Platnar, had been published in the Prilep magazine "Stremež". After the performance, during the mandatory Round Table discussions, initial complaints arose despite numerous praises and general acclaim for the production. The debate then moved to periodicals, gaining significant public attention. Three Prilep societies—the Society for Science and Art, the Society of Historians, and the Society for the Macedonian Language and Literature—along with the Union of Veterans from Prilep, joined the discussion. They described the play with terms such as "**anti-Macedonian**," "**incompetent and irrelevant**," and claimed it "**dishonors the illustrious figures of our history**," among other criticisms. Consequently, a segment of the public regarded the play as politically incorrect, as their strong reactions indicated it offended Macedonian national feelings and integrity.

To understand the reception and significance of this play in a broader social context, a fundamental analysis is required. This specific and sensitive historical moment coincided with the impending dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The member states were proposing reforms to gain greater sovereignty. In this context, the push for

increased independence among the republics was also part of the political climate in Macedonia. The drive to reaffirm national histories in neighboring countries was intensifying, and nationalist provocations were paving the way for military conflict. Although Macedonia exhibited a tendency towards greater independence, it did not experience a strong nationalist eruption. Given these upheavals, it was expected that presenting a well-known historical figure in a manner different from the traditional heroic portrayal would provoke strong objections.

The public's reaction, which included demands to remove the play from the repertoire, was largely due to the different portrayal of the character Spiro Crne. Spiro Crne is a legendary figure from Prilep, celebrated for rescuing the people from the Turkish oppressor Kucuk Suleiman, who terrorized the region. He is celebrated as a great hero and protector of the people. As early as 1903, Marko Cepenkov wrote a play titled "Crne Voivode," dramatizing Spiro's killing of Kucuk Suleiman with the help of Gjorgija Lazhot. In Platnar's play, however, Spiro Crne is depicted with entirely different characteristics, demythologizing the figure. He is portrayed as a hajduk in a completely different light: a gambler and debtor, a disenchanting hero who even pawned his weapon, the most sacred item for a hero, prioritizing profit over honor. This portrayal, which alludes to contemporary revolutionary apathy and self-betrayal as a curse of the Macedonian people, was not recognized by part of the critics. They saw it as a tarnishing of national history. For director Vladimir Milčin, the interest in this text lay in "the actuality that emerged from the grotesque perspective with which the author treated an event from Macedonia's past" (*Mitot, istorijata i dramata* [The Myth, History, and Drama] in *Prilozi za istorijata na makedonskiot teatar*, 2000:137).

The key to interpreting the performance lies precisely in these words of the director: **actuality and grotesque**. Platnar's drama, unlike Cepenkov's, is not a historical drama, meaning its primary aim is not to address historical truth. Milčin recognizes this in the dramatic text and realizes a performance that engages in a dialogue with the current social reality. The evidence for this is the intense reactions from part of the audience. Later, in an essay where he problematizes the relationship between the historical and the mythical, he himself writes: "Our history is a cursed circle. Its verticals are the disasters, our dignity is suicide, we are incapable of completing the task, traitors are among us, we are our own gravediggers." (Ibid) In the debate surrounding the performance, Professor Kosta Kostov's observation is particularly noteworthy. Identifying the essence of Milčin's performance in the theme of betrayal, he states: "Betrayal is also when certain issues are silenced or ignored. For example: what does it mean that the issue of the Macedonian minority in neighboring

countries is not raised at these Yugoslav government conferences? What does it mean if the Macedonian leadership remains silent on this?" (*Ekran*, no. 973, 1989:10-12)

Some perceive the performance as politically incorrect, offensive, and irrelevant to historical truth, while others see it as “resonating with contemporary issues, particularly given the current situation in Macedonia and its territory.” (Ibid) This production by Milčin, with all the controversy over its reception, exemplifies **the relativity of political (in)correctness. It shows that political (in)correctness should not be sought in the text of the performance but in its function, conception, and purpose.**

Despite the intense reactions, the performance has not been banned or removed from the repertoire.

4. Politically Correct Theatre - Contemporary Perspectives

Rancière’s assertion, mentioned earlier, that political and social equality must be achieved by the subject themselves, meaning the individual must be involved in the struggle to effect change, is most evident in the poetics of forum theater. Forum theater is a form in which conflicts are presented in an open or unresolved manner, inviting the audience to offer potential solutions. This type of theater provides a platform for those who are oppressed and marginalized in a community to openly and directly express their perspectives and the repression they face. This form of theater most strongly incorporates political correctness understood as a corrective to social injustice within the structure of its stage expression.

In Macedonia, contemporary alternative theater practices are increasingly adopting forum theater and documentary theatrical expressions. A notable recent example of a performance with a strong, direct, and rough narrative—deeply engaged—is "GLUMiCI" by the theater company "Artopia." Premiering on December 26, 2021, in the "25th of May" Hall at the Youth Cultural Center in Skopje, the performance is collectively authored by the performers themselves. The performance primarily focuses on the vulnerable group of actresses, although it also addresses actors. However, the use of various symbols, primarily stockings and makeup, broadens this focus to encompass women in general and their position in society. The tearing of stockings is a powerful gesture and a particularly merciless, harsh, and direct audiovisual symbol of male dominance over women, highlighting the use of force prior to all struggles for equality. In the performance, although explicit scenes of psychological and physical harassment are presented in a humorous and ironic tone, this does

not lessen the impact. Instead, such vulgar portrayal intensifies the necessary and inevitable "slap" that theater can deliver to society to raise awareness of certain social anomalies. One scene places a part of the female audience in an uncomfortable situation. The dominant male voice of an actor calls for female volunteers from the audience who are in the acting profession and asks them to start undressing. The shame and insult from such a command are palpable not only on stage but also among the audience. This politically incorrect act, involving public and direct offense towards women, serves as the loudest cry for women's rights from the theatrical stage. Despite the so-called political incorrectness in the text and gestures on stage, the direct interaction with the audience, defining the engaged poetics of the performance, fully embodies political correctness understood as a corrective to social injustice. It does so by giving women in the audience the opportunity to address and rectify the injustice, thus actively/ creatively involving the affected subject.

Besides the "Artopia" collective, the Macedonian theater scene also sees the use of research and documentary approaches in productions by the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture - ATO, directed by Jovan Ristovski. This is evident in the plays "Are You Mad?" and "8%." Both plays focus on marginalized and discriminated groups. "Are You Mad?" is the first professional play performed in sign language, dramatizing social injustices against individuals with hearing impairments. By using their language, the play becomes highly engaged. The central conflict arises from overt, politically incorrect behavior towards the character representing this discriminated group. This approach is essential for creating identification and highlighting the contrast between justice and injustice. "8%" is a documentary play based on research and interviews with individuals who have experienced domestic violence, discrimination, and systemic oppression. These examples underscore the idea that political correctness in theater—understood as raising awareness of marginalized groups' issues—should be found not in the narrative but in the theater production's policies, structure, and concept.

A significant stride in this regard can be made through what is known as *inclusive theater*. This form of theater incorporates marginalized groups not only as part of the audience (as in the case of performances accessible to individuals with hearing impairments) or by addressing their issues thematically, but also by involving them actively in the theater-making process. An example of such an approach is Theatre "Pi," an independent theater in Skopje that collaborates with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

5. Conclusion

Theater undoubtedly operates under different rules than those that govern our daily lives. Therefore, applying the concept of political correctness in theater functions differently. The core of engaged theater is to represent, uncover, or portray the marginalized or endangered side and to express a viewpoint on the socio-political situation. In this sense, it is inherently always politically correct. This is achieved through its social role, namely an aesthetic approach aimed at examining political reality, rather than through careful word choice. To create conflict, there must be a protagonist and an antagonist. For theater to be a mirror reflecting reality or a hammer shaping it, it cannot use "soft," subtle language, nor can it self-censor. Otherwise, it would not reflect reality, but rather an idea of reality. An insult uttered on stage is not meant to offend but to raise awareness of certain societal behaviors.

The aim of this study was to ascertain the potential incorporation and implications of political correctness within the framework of engaged theatrical aesthetics. To fulfill this objective, three emblematic performances from the Macedonian theatrical history, which were subject to prohibition and censorship, were meticulously analyzed and interpreted: "Cooperation" by Kole Chashule, "Mara's Wedding" directed and dramatized by Ljubiša Georgievski, and "Spiro Crne" directed by Vladimir Milchin. The analysis highlighted that critiques categorizing these works as politically unsuitable or incorrect predominantly assessed them at a superficial level, focusing only on what was heard at the moment from the stage, without considering the context and the relationship of these works to the current moment. The analysis of "Spiro Crne" and "Cooperation" demonstrated how the interpretation and labeling of a production as politically correct or not can be relative and subjective judgment, while the analysis of "Mara's Wedding" proves how insisting on a certain "general morality" can be detrimental to art and how absurd any ban in the name of that morality can be.

Today, the concept of political correctness is approached with a dual perspective. On one hand, it is embraced as a means to promote equality and amplify the rights of marginalized groups, while on the other hand, it is perceived as an ultimate threat to freedom of speech. The analysis of these performances suggests that any extreme stance leads to regression. However progressive the notion of political correctness may be, if improperly applied, it can morph into a conservative ideological tool. Political correctness cannot be

integrated into stage discourse and narrative, nor can it become part of the actor's portrayal and reflect in the dynamics between protagonist and antagonist on stage. Yet, it can often be a component of the concept, embodying the central idea of the production and its societal function.

Furthermore, the research briefly reflects on contemporary theatrical production, which is characterized by engagement, aiming to showcase an alternative, creative approach to seeking political correctness in theater. The analysis of the new, postmodernist theatrical impulse demonstrates that inclusive theater, forum theater, and documentary theater are ultimate examples of engaged political theater. Not only do they represent marginalized groups in their narratives, but they also provide them with the opportunity and platform to articulate their struggles and speak out against injustices.

In conclusion, the possibility of committing some ethical transgression, the possibility of being "politically incorrect" towards someone while advocating for and defending the rights of another, always exists. What is crucial is to speak out loud, to engage in discussion, and to open up public debate.

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