

RADOVAN THE LAST

Political correctness and the law of comedy

Political correctness: is it preference to inclusive language and avoidance of language or behavior that can be seen as excluding, marginalizing, or insulting to groups of people disadvantaged or discriminated against, particularly groups defined by ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation - or tendency to impose someone's ideology on the rest of society through "newspeak", that is, introduce censorship and limit freedom of speech? Our intention in this short essay is to analyze how the conventions of political correctness call into question or limit ambiguity, irony and paradox as the main features of the comedy genre, using the example of Dušan Kovačević's comedy *Radovan Treći (Radovan The Third)*, a cult piece of new Serbian dramaturgy.

The hero of Kovačević's play is Radovan, a 50-year-old immigrant from the village with an unspecified occupation, retired at the age of 30, who has not civilized himself for several decades of living in the urban environment. His primitivism is shown in the way in which, as a pater familias, he arranges relationships in his bizarre and dysfunctional family, composed mostly of women. On the other hand, his irrationality is reflected in the fact that he leads that family in a conflict with the neighboring Vilotić family – a war whose cause is groundless hatred, inherited from a common rural homeland. The only comfort in life, and at the same time the only weakness of the hero, is the obsessive watching of a trash crime TV series, whose main character, the robber George, Radovan adores to such an extent that he identifies with him.

Kovačević bases the plot of the comedy primarily on the repression that the hero carries out against the female members of the family: his wife Rumenka and daughters Georgina and Katica. In the relationship with Rumenka – who tends to compensate for the monotony of a housewife's life and the absence of sexual contact with her husband by daydreaming about becoming a "fashion designer" (she even takes the "artistic name" Ru-Stanislavs) - Radovan applies both verbal (scorn) and physical violence (slaps):

RADOVAN: ...Even street dogs are more respected than you.

RUMENKA: Indeed!

RADOVAN: And it's nicer to hear about the plague than about you.

RUMENKA: Yes it is!

RADOVAN (slaps the woman): I'm just listening to you insulting me!

(The woman crawls under the quilt. She is whimpering quietly)

While Rumenka treats Radovan mostly submissively (or at least tries to appear so), the younger daughter Georgina's reaction to her father's violence is complete passivity. Namely, after Georgina gets pregnant after one love affair, Radovan forbids her to give birth (out of wedlock) for five years:

RADOVAN: What kind of child? Whose child? I will not hear about the child! Until you get married, I already told you, there is no child. Foolish girl! I will not blush in front of people! Find someone, get married, and then give birth like a bunny!

Unlike these two women, in the case of Katica, the older daughter, the father's repression causes the opposite result – complete activism and aggressiveness: since her father (regretting that he does not have a son) raised and raised her as a man, Katica works as an intercontinental truck driver, drinks, curses and fights in a pub with men:

RADOVAN: She against me? Katica?

RUMENKA: Are you stronger than Katica?

RADOVAN: I knocked her hand off before the trip.

RUMENKA: You did, you knocked her down, because the child was drunk!

In a word, in his relations with female characters, Radovan formally advocates patriarchal, misogynistic and sexist attitudes: he threatens the principle of equality between spouses (Rumenka), denies the gender identity of women (Katica) and denies them the right to motherhood (Georgina). But since Kovačević portrays these relationships using comic methods of exaggeration, distortion and absurdity, this "threat" turns into its opposite: in other words, it turns into a means of criticizing precisely that primitive and authoritarian mentality (of the hero). This interpretation is confirmed by two additional elements of the comic plot: the motif of Radovan's origin (and previous life), as well as the motif of the "war" with the Vilotić family.

First, the very name of the hero – Radovan the Third – suggests a lack of authenticity: Radovan is not an individual, but, first and foremost, the bearer of a family name – a mere male extension of patriarchal power. Second, although Radovan refers to his rural "homeland" as an ideal, boasts that he built a factory there and threatens to return there, to "his roots", it will turn out that he has been exiled from that homeland – as a catastrophically incompetent manager:

BROCKET: They are getting ready to take terrible revenge on you. That factory destroyed the river, and the river poisoned the fields... In order to somehow save homeland, a lake was made from the river and a hydroelectric plant was built. However, there was not enough water, so the plant stopped working even before it was put into operation. Then, in order to remove the damage, they drained the lake and left only mud, so that people could sow rice, which did not succeed because the climate is cold and at the same time warm...

An equally important proof of the main character's inauthenticity is his obsession with the protagonist of the crime TV series. From his point of view, the bandit George possesses all those qualities that Radovan himself lacks, although he tries to convince the family otherwise:

RADOVAN: For example: what are my most characteristic features? Let's take only the most expressive ones: honesty, courage, clairvoyance, love for the people, and the people for me...

George is not only an ideal projection, role model and the highest value, but also a paradoxical double, a virtual Super-Ego of the hero. This is confirmed precisely in the scene of their "breakup": when George (that is, the actor who plays him) appears at the door of Radovan's apartment, Radovan refuses to meet him – since George was labeled as an "enemy appearance" on the state television news. Another crucial move in the unraveling of Radovan's greatness is the rebellion of Georgina – who decides to give birth to a child despite her father's prohibition: on the level of metaphor, this means that Radovan loses control over childbirth – as the production of male offspring.

Finally, the end of the conflict with the Vilotići shows the final collapse of the hero's authority: faced with a massive attack by the neighbors on their apartment, the family members surrender one by one and join the Vilotići in attacking Radovan. The comic deconstruction effectively ends with Radovan himself going over to the side of the enemy, leading the charge against himself:

RADOVAN: Stop! They are stepping up! They are indestructible! They divide and reproduce! They are getting bigger! One makes two! But we will not allow them to defeat us, because we have the feeling that we are the only ones around us!

Such an outcome most convincingly explains, among other things, the subtitle of Kovačević's piece: "painful comedy about self-betrayal": violence turns against its bearer, that is, collective repression ends in self-destruction. Using legitimate comic strategies such as irony, paradox and absurdity, the author of "Radovan the Third" shows how the patriarchal idea of male dominance in the face of reality is exposed as a phantasm, and its representative

– as a comic, absurd and inauthentic figure. At the same time, this usage convincingly proves that, in the context of the ambiguity and openness that the genre of comedy implies and, moreover, requires, the conventions of "political correctness" represent an unacceptable limitation.