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Lado Kralj as a Theatre Critic: The Influence of Jerzy Grotowski and the Development of the Slovenian Neo-Avantgarde

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Abstract:

Lado Kralj was a pivotal figure in Slovenian 20th-century theater, known as a theorist, critic, and later a novelist. His early engagement in drama started in the late 1950s, and he developed his theatrical poetics in the 1960s, influenced by avant-garde movements. His interest in socially engaged theater was evident in his critiques, where he emphasized the relevance of drama to contemporary society. A turning point came when Kralj spent a year in the U.S. (1970–1971), working with Richard Schechner and attending Jerzy Grotowski’s influential lecture in New York. This encounter deepened his understanding of “poor theatre” and ritualistic performance, shaping his work upon returning to Slovenia. He co-founded the avant-garde Pekarna Theatre, incorporating collective improvisation, ritual elements, and a rejection of traditional theatrical hierarchy. His post-1970 critiques and artistic practice reflect a shift toward experimental, group-oriented performance. However, unlike Grotowski, he maintained a distinction between actors and audiences. His work played a key role in the development of Slovenian neo-avant-garde theater, balancing radical performance techniques with an awareness of theater’s societal role. His legacy remains in experimental theater and critical thought on drama in Slovenia.

Key words:

Lado Kralj; Slovenian neo-avantgarde theatre; Jerzy Grotowski; Slovenian experimental theatre; theatre criticism; literary

Introduction

Lado Kralj was one of the most important theatrical figures of the twentieth century in Slovenia¹. Although today he is better known among students as a drama theorist, the author of the central Slovenian monograph on drama theory, and among the public as a novelist awarded with the Kresnik Prize, his deepest influence was likely in the field of theatrical practice. He began engaging with drama and particularly with theater during his student years, initially as a theater critic, and formed his poetics in the late 1950s and early 1960s while studying comparative literature and later working as an assistant at the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film, and Television (AGRFT) in Ljubljana.

At the turn of the 1970s, he spent a year in the United States, where he worked as an assistant to the theater innovator Richard Schechner, attended lectures by Michael Kirby, with whom he remained friends until Kirby's death, and most importantly, witnessed the legendary and inspiring multi-day farewell lecture by Jerzy Grotowski in front of Tammany Hall in New York. In the early 1970s, he co-founded two key avant-garde theaters in Slovenia, namely the Experimental Theatre Glej (Eksperimentalno geldališče Glej) and the avant-garde Pekarna Theatre (Gledališče Pekarna). He then took up a position as an assistant at the Department of Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, after which he left teaching for several years to focus on the artistic direction of the central Slovenian theatrical institution, the Slovene National Theatre Drama Ljubljana (SNG Drama). Finally, in the 1980s, he returned to the Department of Comparative Literature, where he taught until his retirement. Only after his retirement did he dedicate himself to writing fiction, winning Slovenia's most prestigious literary award, the Kresnik Prize, for his novel *Ne bom se več drsal na bajerju*.

The period that forms the core of this study is the 1960s and the early 1970s. This was a time of the formation of Kralj's poetics and a period of intensive development and refinement of his dramaturgical premises, which he remained committed to throughout his career in theater². The key research question of this study is how Kralj's confrontation with the inspiring and prophetic figure of Grotowski, whom he frequently referenced in his writings and interviews, shaped his views on theater, and consequently, his critical rigor and ultimately his creative activities, through which he significantly influenced Slovenian theatrical neo-avant-garde.

- 1 The paper is the result of the research program P6-0265 Intercultural Literary Studies, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).
- 2 The importance of Kralj's work for the Slovenian avant-garde movements in the seventies was researched in broader strokes by Tomaž Toporišič and Gašper Troha (2018) and by Tomaž Toporišič (2024). A more personal account of Kralj's involvement in the making of Glej and Pekarna was written by Ivo Svetina in his book *Gledališče Pekarna* (2016).

The methodological background of this study primarily consists of archival work, as it involves older texts published in student magazines and various biographical data that illuminate Kralj's theatrical poetics in the period before his departure to the United States and after his return to Ljubljana. The second methodological aspect of the article is the analysis of Kralj's theater critiques written between 1959 and 1968, along with other critical writings from the 1970s, and their comparison. I hope that I have gathered an adequate quantity and quality of data that not only allow me to answer the research question but also contribute to existing studies and testimonies on the development of Slovenian theatrical neo-avant-garde³.

Kralj's Theatrical Poetics Before 1970

Lado Kralj's biography, including numerous previously unknown details, is thoroughly described by Tone Smolej in an essay published in the recently released book *Treba se je odločiti*⁴, which contains a collection of Kralj's short theatrical essays along with three accompanying studies about his life and work. Smolej particularly highlights Kralj's bourgeois upbringing, which he received as a graduate of the classical gymnasium, where he studied Greek, Latin, German, and English. Among his classmates were the later lawyer Peter Čeferin, professors and ministers Andrej Umek and Lovro Šturm, and actress Irena Prosen⁵. Additionally, Kralj's father, Vladimir Kralj, was the author of the most important Slovenian work on dramaturgy, *Dramaturški vademekum*, and a professor at the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film, and Television, where he later became rector⁶. Thus, Kralj was already familiar with the world of theater before he began his formal studies.

After high school, Kralj initially studied economics, where he attended courses on economic history, mathematical economics, and bookkeeping. After a year, he switched to law, where he studied Roman law under Viktor Korošec and political economy under Aleksander Bajt. In the winter semester of 1959/60, he transferred to the Faculty of Arts, where he studied world literature and English⁷. For the formation

3 The most important studies on this period are those by Tomaž Toporišič and the exceptional document/book *Gledališče Pekarna* by Ivo Svetina, along with works by several other authors, particularly Taras Kermauner, as well as Dušan Jovanović in his essays, and others.

4 A significant portion of the archival and research work on which this article is based was conducted during my role as the editor of the aforementioned book. In this process, I received assistance from several colleagues, particularly Tone Smolej, Bojana Bajec, and Mojca Kranjc, to whom I extend my gratitude.

5 SMOLEJ, Tone: *Lado Kralj, med gledališčem in komparativistiko (1965–1987)*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 15.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid. 16.

of his theatrical poetics in the 1960s, his bourgeois upbringing and classical education were therefore of primary significance, as he began publishing theater critiques the same year he transferred to the Faculty of Arts, at a time when his studies had not yet had a decisive influence on his perspectives. He recalls that one day, on his way to the Faculty of Arts, he passed by the Slovene National Theatre Drama Ljubljana and saw a poster with the name BITEF (Belgrade International Theatre Festival), which intrigued him. This prompted him to educate himself about this famous Belgrade theater festival, which he soon attended⁸. In contrast to what he had known from the Slovene National Theatre Drama and the Ljubljana City Theatre—which he found “old-fashioned and conservative”—what he saw at BITEF seemed “extraordinarily interesting”. His earliest text on the *Angry Young Men* of John Osborne, which he published in 1959 in one of the first issues of the renowned student magazine *Tribuna*, already reveals a strong interest in contemporary drama that addresses current social issues and seeks to highlight essential, structural, provocative—later he would say ritual—elements.

Kralj’s perspective on *Look Back in Anger* is a critical commentary on Osborne’s text, where he does not focus on its aesthetic or linguistic qualities but rather on its thematic concerns. The core of the article is social: it raises the question of the relevance of the problems addressed not only by Osborne but by an entire generation of creators, “whose works are more or less rebellious, more or less extravagant.” Osborne, in Kralj’s view, surpasses them in “venomousness”, meaning he sees him as a sharper and more direct commentator and critic of contemporary society, particularly of specific British social conditions, including the struggle “against the exclusivity of the English upper class, against its dominance, and against the conformity of social engagement”⁹.

This text was written at the very beginning of Kralj’s studies at the Faculty of Arts, indicating that he had already formed a partially developed view of what is important in drama. We also see that he does not yet use sophisticated literary terminology or methodology but instead focuses on the urgency of the issues addressed by the play. This approach remains central to his later critique of dramatic texts and their performances.

His first theater critique, *Mire Štefanac: “Včeraj popoldne”, Prva letošnja uprizoritev Mestnega gledališča v Ljubljani* (*Mire Štefanac: “Yesterday Afternoon”, The First Production of the Season at the Ljubljana City Theatre*), begins as follows: “First and foremost, recognition to the author for the choice of subject matter. The theme is

8 That was right at the beginning of this famous Belgrade festival, which first took place in 1967. Kralj also met Richard Schechner at this festival in 1969, when he performed there with the play *Dionysus in 69*.

9 KRALJ, Lado: *Jezni mladeniči*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 48.

distinctly contemporary [...]”. By “contemporary”, he means that the play tackles the conflict between personal ambition and social responsibility: “The pursuit of a better life can become an uncontrolled chase for money. Unlimited freedom can turn into anarchy. Striving for personal happiness can be a selfish escape from one’s duty to society”¹⁰. While he praises the thematic structure, he criticizes the execution, describing the drama as “boring” and “repetitive”¹¹. This already demonstrates his understanding of dramatic conflict as essential for maintaining theatrical tension.

Kralj’s early critiques often dealt with individualism and existentialism, concepts that shaped Slovenian drama in the early 1960s. His professor Dušan Pirjevec, a key figure in Slovenian literary studies, introduced him to the ideas of Albert Camus and the theory of the absurd, which influenced his analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Condemned of Altona*, staged at SNG Drama Ljubljana in 1960. He saw Sartre’s thesis drama as a way of questioning responsibility and moral choices, aligning with existentialist views prevalent in Slovenia at the time. This was the same intellectual climate in which Dominik Smole’s *Antigone*—the most significant Slovenian postwar drama—was premiered in the 1960/61 theater season.

By 1964, when Kralj reviewed Silvano Ambrogi’s *Birocratosaurii*, he had already completed his undergraduate studies in English. In this critique, he polemicized against the SNG Drama for staging the play, criticizing its lack of social awareness: “There is an absence of any necessary, socially aware relationship to theater”¹². He was particularly critical of the director’s excessive reverence for the text, marking a turning point in his thinking: instead of asking whether a drama is socially relevant, he began asking how it communicates its relevance to the audience. One of the directors Kralj followed and praised was Mile Korun, known for his innovative interpretations of Ivan Cankar. Reviewing Korun’s 1967 production of *Za narodov blagor*, Kralj noted that simply modernizing a classic text wasn’t enough; a production needed to be “aimed directly at those in power”¹³. However, the public’s enthusiastic reaction to the production surprised him: “A true triumph! The excitement did not subside as with *King Lear*, but grew from act to act, erupting into wild applause”¹⁴. To explain this, Kralj invoked existentialist freedom: “Artistic action, in this case, does not appeal to the audience’s freedom and independent judgment but instead reinforces a collective mythological

10 KRALJ, Lado: *Mire Štefanac: Včeraj popoldne, Prva letošnja uprizoritev Mestnega gledališča v Ljubljani*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 50.

11 Ibid. 51.

12 KRALJ, Lado: *Birozavri*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 54.

13 KRALJ, Lado: *Za narodov blagor*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 57.

14 Ibid. 61.

non-freedom”¹⁵. Here, theater’s role was to challenge collective historical myths, which he believed distinguished it from literature. He called this “the mass ritual nature of theatre”—a concept he later refined under Jerzy Grotowski’s influence.

Kralj’s first review of an international festival, which best reflects his theatrical perspective before 1970, is his report from the International Festival of Student Theaters in Zagreb (1964). He attended it towards the end of his undergraduate studies, and because it was a festival of student theaters, both his interest and the festival’s focus were directed towards “the ideological structure of students as a social phenomenon”¹⁶. The real subject of these “notes”, as the subtitle of the article published in the journal *Sodobnost* indicates, is thus a reflection on the generation to which Kralj himself belonged, its goals, its ideological foundations, its relationship to social reality—in short, its essence and its “essence of existence in society”¹⁷.

Here, for the first time, we find Kralj’s definition of the difference between a professional actor and an amateur actor, where the former is characterized by “attachment to his own work” and the latter by a kind of “psychological necessity”¹⁸ for performance and theater. Between these two positions, Kralj sees the role of the actor (and of theater itself), where he identifies its “social correlate, correspondence with social existence”¹⁹. In the continuation of the text, we find even more philosophical—phenomenological and existentialist—terminology and issues, such as discussions of the proximity of social being, reality, and direct presence in society. As a key fact and characteristic of the theater groups participating in the festival, he notes their attitude toward theater, which “is neither merely a profession nor merely a means of personal fulfillment, but an inseparable part of their direct presence in society”²⁰. Such an attitude towards theater also enables a particular kind of performance or even a specific kind of theater altogether, which he calls “experimental” theater. The first characteristic of this theater, according to Kralj, is that it is not professionalized, from which its freedom in experimenting with new theatrical elements arises, including “a synthesis of deromanticization and poeticism, parody and rational analysis, morality play, commedia dell’arte, and acrobatics”²¹.

Thus, Kralj, with the language and concepts available to him at the time expresses the theatrical tendencies of the era in a very clear way, although it seems that

15 Ibid. 61–62.

16 KRALJ, Lado: *Mednarodni Festival Študentskih gledališč v Zagrebu: Zapiski*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 85.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. 86.

21 Ibid.

something is still missing from his expression. The reason is that phenomenological and existentialist perspectives do not fully provide adequate concepts to describe what is actually emerging in contemporary theatrical production, its new approaches, and tools. At the same time, through this framework, Kralj effectively articulates the specificity of theater's social role and, ultimately, the individual's role in theater.

The theatrical approaches he highlights and admires in these "notes" all systematically desacralize the great myths of the twentieth century, including nationalism, power, and historical inevitability, which are expressed in performances by so-called Eastern European theaters (Slovak, Polish, Czech groups). These productions were also more or less socially critical, whereas the same did not apply to the so-called "Western" groups, including English, Italian, French, and Swedish groups, which focused primarily on "the effort to find the most appropriate interpretations of avant-garde theater works"²². Among these, Kralj specifically highlights the English production of James Saunders's *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, in which he observes numerous elements that he also advocated in his other critiques from the 1960s, such as the assessment that the text is "a grotesque treatise on the inadequacy of traditional conceptions of theater, of the subject-object relationship" and that it concludes with the realization of "the morality of the unjustifiability of the traditional conception of drama"²³.

The most interesting part of Kralj's account of the festival, however, is his description of the different views on theater among the groups present. On one side was a group that included Kralj himself, advocating for "the authenticity of the dramatist's response to his existence in society"²⁴, and on the other side were the so-called "Leningraders", who argued that drama must be "in accordance with the ideological and aesthetic norms codified by a 'healthy society' for its own self-preservation"²⁵. He assessed their performance as "a complete totalitarianization of the given, immutable social state"²⁶, which of course did not align with his or, as his account suggests, with the majority perspective among festival participants regarding the role of theater and contemporary staging methods.

For the period of Kralj's formation of his theatrical poetics, it is therefore characteristic that he gradually absorbed phenomenological and existentialist terminology and problems. However, in most of his early texts, which can be broadly categorized as "critiques", the central focus remained the question of the contemporary

22 Ibid. 88.

23 Ibid. 89.

24 Ibid. 90.

25 Ibid. 91.

26 Ibid.

relevance of a play or performance to a specific social reality. This was the crucial question of the period, which found important support in the issues addressed by experimental theaters across Europe and in the United States at that time. This question was then linked to another key issue that he discussed directly or indirectly in almost all his critiques: the role of theater and also the role of the actor in contemporary society. He consistently supported the adaptation of classical, even canonized texts to new realities, but for him, merely staging avant-garde texts without fundamentally adapting them to the specific environment—practically even to a specific theater and its ensemble—was not sufficient.

This is where the fundamental common ground between Kralj's poetics of the 1960s and Grotowski's approach lies. In almost the same period (1959–1969), Grotowski developed and popularized his distinctive vision of theater before ultimately leaving it behind at the end of this phase. Both emphasized the significance of theater for its immediate social environment as well as for the actors performing it. As a result, they shared the same attitude toward the dramatic text, seeing it as merely a point of departure rather than the ultimate goal or meaning of a performance. However, while for Grotowski, the essence of theater was not a static state but a process of dialectical interaction between actor and audience—"of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*), Kralj's poetics of the 1960s cannot be attributed the same dimensions as those achieved by Grotowski in the same period. By 1970, Grotowski had already created all of his major theatrical productions, and his multi-day sit-in in 1970 in front of Tammany Hall in New York, which Lado Kralj attended, was not only a farewell to New York but also a farewell to theater itself.

In 1964, when Kralj wrote about *Bircratosaurii* by Silvano Ambrogi, he had already completed his undergraduate studies in English. In this text, he confidently polemicalizes with the leadership of the central Slovenian theater, which staged the drama, particularly criticizing "the absence of any necessary, socially conscious relationship to theater"²⁷. In the drama itself, he misses social relevance and most of all criticizes the director's excessive reverence for the text. This is an additional conceptual dimension that builds upon his previous views but advances them towards a critique of directorial approaches. While his earlier writings focused on whether a drama was socially relevant, his focus now shifted to the question of how a drama can effectively engage with contemporary audiences. He expresses an interest in the practical role of theater in society, which "must never function on the principle of

27 KRALJ, Lado: *Birozavri*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 54.

eclectic informing of the audience”²⁸. On the contrary, he sees the role of theater in its social criticality, which should directly engage the audience in its actual being.

This same belief forms the core of the directorial vision of one of the directors Kralj most frequently analyzed in his writings, Mile Korun, particularly in his staging of Ivan Cankar’s *Za narodov blagor* (1967). While in the sixties and even more so in the seventies, Kralj strongly advocated for non-institutional, even non-repertory theaters—a stance likely influenced by his journey to the United States and his encounter with Grotowski—it is nonetheless interesting, though not surprising, that he followed and favorably evaluated the work of Mile Korun, who was always an institutional director. The first reason Kralj cites for this, already in his 1967 critique, is of course that Korun’s intent was to update Cankar’s work, but he argues that this alone is not sufficient. He insists that it is also important how the text is updated on stage, specifically in a way that “it will most directly hit its target today, that is, it will be as pointed as possible against those who hold all the power”²⁹. The staging achieved this, but the outcome, Kralj reports, was quite different from what he expected. He describes the premiere as follows: “A completely different outcome occurred. A journalist from *Slovenski narod* reported on the premiere: ‘It was a true triumph, the excitement did not subside as it did with *King Lear*, but grew from act to act, spontaneously erupting into stormy applause’”³⁰.

To explain such a reaction, Kralj introduces an existentialist conception of freedom: “In this case, the artistic act does not address the viewer’s freedom, their free judgment, but rather their mythological non-freedom, and thus the artistic act itself loses its freedom and transforms into an instrument through which hatred and desire operate on the viewer. And in this way, it integrates into the broader mythological non-freedom of the historical events of a certain world”³¹. Freedom, therefore, lies in judgment and decision-making, which also means taking responsibility at the individual level, while the inability to do so signifies collective, what Kralj calls mythological, non-freedom or being trapped in historical patterns of repetition. He sees addressing this societal issue as the domain of theater, which distinguishes it from poetry and prose—he calls it “the mass ritual character of theater”³². However, he does not yet understand this ritual nature in the same sense as he later would under Grotowski’s influence but as the social embeddedness of theater, which is never intended solely for private reading by an individual but is always a public, social, collective event. In this light,

28 Ibid. 55.

29 KRALJ, Lado: *Za narodov blagor*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 57.

30 Ibid. 61.

31 Ibid. 61–62.

32 Ibid. 62.

Kralj considered the significance of Cankar's *Za narodov blagor* and drama in general, leading him to conclude that Korun's staging "preserves and confirms the fundamental non-free structure of the world, the world of the production and use of ideals, which remains ideal despite daily degraded ideals [...]"³³.

A similar theoretical basis can be seen in Kralj's critique of the staging of Miha Remec's *Delavnica oblakov* (*Workshop of Clouds*), also directed by Mile Korun. Again, the core of the critique is an analysis of the relationship between the individual and society, and especially the role of theater within this relationship. He sees the viewer as someone who, while watching this drama, decides between a world of values that represents a past, idealized world and a world without values, which he recognizes as "today's, present, existing, real, and tangible world: our world"³⁴. This decision, he ultimately perceives as a collective ritual, almost a "magical incantation", in which "all together, the author, stage interpreters, and viewers"³⁵ are involved and which cannot end otherwise than in the existence or affirmation of the desire for a truer world. However, it is precisely this desire that serves as a means by which the real world is maintained, revealing the fundamental paradox of this drama. Kralj assesses the staging as exceptionally positive, with the central idea of his critique being: there is a situation when one must decide against all odds.

Clearer contours of Kralj's critical and dramaturgical poetics before 1970 can also be seen in his critique of two productions of *Hlapci* (*The Serfs*) by Ivan Cankar in 1967. *Hlapci* is, of course, an integral, even constitutive text of Slovenian culture, the most frequently staged, commented upon, and the most important Slovenian drama of the twentieth century. Kralj evaluates the stagings by two giants of Slovenian theater, Slavko Jan (SNG Drama Ljubljana) and Mile Korun (SLG Celje), focusing particularly on Korun's direction, as he found it more ideologically aligned with his own views. The purpose of Korun's staging, he argues, is to reveal "the present-day face of the truth of Cankar's *Hlapci*, which in the end is only one of the explications of the degraded, desanctified value model"³⁶. On the other hand, he sees the purpose of Jan's staging as an attempt to confront "the mythological value model, which needs to be dismantled and, in the light of the present moment, its mythological nature revealed"³⁷. Thus, Korun's Jerman, the protagonist of the drama, is "a degraded and comical conclusion of an intellectual position that, in its beginning, in the literary text,

33 Ibid. 65.

34 KRALJ, Lado: Miha Remec: *Delavnica oblakov*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 69.

35 Ibid. 71.

36 KRALJ, Lado: *Ivan Cankar, Hlapci, SLG Celje*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 75.

37 Ibid.

is conceived as tragic³⁸. This assessment reflects two things: the spirit of the late 1960s, which no longer believed in Jerman's voluntaristic enthusiasm, and Kralj's conviction that, beyond the possible historical significance of the drama, its usefulness in the contemporary world was of greater importance. This means that Kralj, even in the 1960s and in relation to the most important Slovenian dramatist, supported directorial interventions that could completely transform not only the literary characters but also the fundamental nature of the text itself. This focus is also evident in Kralj's last critique of individual productions, specifically Brecht's *Schweik in the Second World War* under the direction of Franci Križaj. Regarding Brecht, he notes that "he has appeared on Slovenian stages by chance, unplanned and without the kind of connection with the foundations of Slovenian theater that one would expect in a socialist country after the victory of the proletarian revolution", meaning that the audience did not receive Brecht's works with "the predisposed knowledge and inclination toward sanctity, as they do with Cankar, Shakespeare, Rostand, or Molière"³⁹.

Therefore, his assessment of the essential changes in the intent of the text in the staging at the SLG Celje is positive: "In this light, it is understandable why the Celje ensemble abandoned a Brechtian depiction of Brecht's text [...] and instead emphasized the sensory, naive, plebeian, practical, irreverent, humorous dimension of the play [...]"⁴⁰. What Kralj finds particularly important is the emphasis on elements of folk theater, specifically in the direction of "a particular relationship of today's theatrical situation to ideology and the specific position of ideology in today's space"⁴¹. It seems that the play in Celje largely avoided the ideological charge of Brecht's original text and perhaps even leaned somewhat on the narrative foundation of Jaroslav Hašek, in which the protagonist is not portrayed as morally responsible for the war but rather as a clever trickster engaging in a witty struggle against negatively depicted antagonists.

Even more than in these eight critical writings, which frequently deal more with texts than with actual productions, Kralj's critical poetics of the 1960s are revealed in his report from the International Festival of Student Theaters in Zagreb (1964). He attended the festival toward the end of his undergraduate studies, and since this was a festival of student theaters, his primary focus, as well as that of the festival itself, was "the ideological structure of students as a social phenomenon"⁴². The true subject of these "notes", as the article's subtitle suggests, published in the journal

38 Ibid. 76.

39 KRALJ, Lado: *Švejk v drugi svetovni vojni*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 79.

40 Ibid. 81.

41 Ibid.

42 KRALJ, Lado: *Mednarodni Festival Študentskih gledališč v Zagrebu: Zapiski*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 85.

Sodobnost, is therefore a reflection on the generation to which Kralj himself belonged, its goals, ideological backgrounds, its relationship to social reality—in short, its essence and “the essence of being in society”⁴³. Here, for the first time, Kralj articulates a distinction between professional and amateur actors, with the former characterized by “a commitment to their own work” and the latter by a “psychological necessity”⁴⁴ for acting and theater. Between these positions, Kralj sees the place of the actor (and of theater in general), where one can find its “social correlate, correspondence with social being”⁴⁵.

The following passages contain even more philosophical—phenomenological and existentialist—terminology and discussion, including considerations on proximity to social being, authenticity, and immediate presence in society. The crucial fact and characteristic of the theatrical groups performing at the festival, according to Kralj, is their attitude toward theater, which “is neither merely a profession nor merely a means of personal realization but an inalienable part of their direct presence in society”⁴⁶.

Grotowski, Schechner, Kralj, and Svetina

Lado Kralj spent part of 1970 and until the fall of 1971 living in New York, working as an assistant to Richard Schechner, particularly on his famous production *Comune*, in which Kralj significantly contributed to the conclusion of the play. In New York, Kralj also attended Michael Kirby’s lectures on the history of modern drama and studied modern theater history with Schechner. However, the most influential event for him was the lecture—actually, the multi-day sit-in—by Jerzy Grotowski in front of Tammany Hall in 1970.

Kralj and other figures of the Slovenian and Yugoslav theatrical avant-garde of the 1960s (Dušan Jovanović, Ivo Svetina, Milan Jesih, Ljubiša Ristić, and others) were, of course, aware of and influenced by contemporary international developments, as evidenced by Kralj’s articles from that period. For instance, his already mentioned report from the Zagreb Festival of Student Theaters and a slightly later article in the AGRFT theater journal (1968), where he references avant-garde theater, listing Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Living Theatre, Open Theatre, Richard Schechner, and others⁴⁷. Ivo Svetina, who co-founded the avant-garde Pekarna Theatre with Kralj,

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid. 86.

47 See KRALJ, Lado: *Gledališče akcije, gledališče magije*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 177.

also discusses this in detail. It should be noted that Grotowski's seminal text from his first period of work (*Towards a Poor Theatre*) was published in *Scena* (1965) in Novi Sad.

In an interview about the contemporary theatrical situation—at that time, he was an assistant at the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film, and Television—Kralj explicitly highlighted the contrast between bourgeois repertory theater and what he saw as missing from it, namely “the element of festivity, religiosity, ritual [...]”⁴⁸. This indicates a well-developed understanding of contemporary theatrical theory and practice, as well as familiarity with Grotowski and his concept of poor theater⁴⁹.

When Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* was performed at the Belgrade theater festival BITEF in 1968, Kralj was present, and it was their meeting that led to his invitation to work with Schechner in New York in 1970/71. If key figures in Slovenian (and Yugoslav) theater were already familiar with Grotowski and other theatrical innovators and were staging experimental performances (such as *Pupilija, papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki*, 1968, directed by Dušan Jovanović), the question arises: why is Kralj's visit to the United States considered so significant that contemporary researchers of Slovenian neo-avant-garde theater (Tomaž Toporišič) and some of its direct participants (Ivo Svetina) describe it as a turning point? The answer is likely multifaceted and includes the influence of Richard Schechner and the concrete experiences Kralj gained working on Schechner's productions, as well as the unique impact of Grotowski's methods and ideas. Richard Schechner himself, in his preface to *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, highlights Grotowski's personal presence and charisma, which profoundly affected those who listened to him and worked with him: “Grotowski's effects on the theatre will not be through the establishment of a method of actor training, an approach to *mise-en-scène*, or an insistence on a dramaturgy of political purpose. Grotowski will affect theatre through the influence he had on the people with whom he interacted on a personal, even intimate level”⁵⁰. This suggests that beyond the content of his ideas, Grotowski's impact lay in the way he communicated them and his direct engagement with people. His concepts were undoubtedly contemporary, though not entirely unique, as they aligned with

48 KERMAVNER, Taras, KORUZA, Jože, KOS, Janko, KRALJ, Lado, PREDAN, Vasja, TREKMAN, Borut, VIDMAR, Josip: Slovenska gledališka situacija. *Sodobnost*, 1960, nr 6 (17), p. 591.

49 “By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion”. GROTOWSKI, Jerzy: *Towards a Poor Theatre*. In *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Edited by Eugenio Berba. New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 19.

50 SCHECHNER, Richard: *Preface*. In: *Grotowski Sourcebook*. Edited by Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford. New York and London: Routledge, 1997, p. 24.

the broader post-war trajectory of theatrical neo-avant-garde, experimental theater, and performativity.

Kralj's first acknowledged reference point is Richard Schechner⁵¹, as he himself stated that he learned a great deal from him. However, he also noted that Schechner derived the fundamental principles of his Performance Group (founded in 1967) from Grotowski. This is why Kralj, in numerous interviews and in the foreword to Ivo Svetina's book about Pekarna Theatre (2016), speaks primarily about Grotowski and surprisingly little about Schechner. He was especially impressed by Grotowski's presence and by what he had to say. What surprised him was not the theses that Grotowski presented—since by that time, Kralj was already familiar with the principles of poor theatre—but rather the way Grotowski spoke (his multi-day sit-in) and the manner in which he defended or justified his revolutionary ideas.

“He spoke and spoke, sometimes pausing for long moments before continuing. For hours and hours. He had a bottle of plain water and a glass; from time to time, he took a sip. Later, at night, when he grew tired, he wrapped himself in a sleeping bag, lay down on the ground, and fell asleep. The listeners imitated him. After an hour, he awoke, took a few steps back and forth, then sat down and continued speaking. This lasted for three or four days. He primarily described his years-long process of reducing theatrical performance to its essence, which he identified as the ritual event. He gradually eliminated dramatic action and dramatic character, the theatrical hall and the stage—ritual should take place in the most ordinary space, where performers and audience members are randomly dispersed. Naturally, he also eliminated scenery, costumes, and props”⁵².

Kralj describes his experience of Grotowski at Tammany Hall in 1970 as follows: “It was a terrifying thing for me to listen to: if you eliminate dramatic character and dramatic action, then where does theater remain? Then he explained that these were elements that had been historically justified but that today had become somewhat obsolete and outdated, and that it was necessary to find a ritual event or an event of rapture, obsession, almost madness, and that if one were to use a traditional text, it should be cut and structured in a way that emphasizes this ritual event”⁵³.

In New York, Kralj participated in the creation of the now-famous production *Comune* (1970), where he played a decisive role in shaping its conclusion. Schechner

51 Compare to Toporišič, TOPORIŠIČ, Tomaž: *Lado Kralj, reformator gledališke teorije in prakse*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 36–37 and SVETINA, Ivo. *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2016, 19–26.

52 KRALJ, Lado: *Text on book flap*. In: Ivo Svetina: *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*, Ljubljana: Mladinsko gledališče, 2016.

53 KRALJ, Lado: *Pogovor s prof. dr. Ladom Kraljem (Interview)*. Društvo gledaliških kritikov in teatrologov. Internet 10. 2. 2025.

himself recalled: ‘After our first open rehearsal at Goddard, Lado said: ‘The ending must stay as it is!’ I explained that the freeze was a stop-gap. ‘No, no,’ Lado insisted, ‘you have no answers to the questions of the play, why pretend? You are against pretending, yes? Throw the questions back to the audience!’ Reluctantly, I accepted his judgment”⁵⁴. Without a doubt, Kralj gained practical experience in leading and operating a theatrical group with Schechner, but it seems that his ideological and artistic framework—the purpose and goal of such work—was primarily shaped by Grotowski. Therefore, it is not surprising that for Kralj, Grotowski is the ideological father of the theatrical efforts he himself undertook, particularly with the production of *Potohodec* (1972) and with the establishment of his own theatrical group. The ideological background of this production, which marked the premiere staging of the second lyrical drama by one of the most important Slovenian poets of the twentieth century, Dane Zajc⁵⁵, was explained by Kralj during Pekarna’s performance at the International Festival of Student Theaters (IFSK) in Zagreb in 1973. Ivo Svetina places this in a broader context of the entire creative process behind the performance and its significance in both the Slovenian and Yugoslav cultural landscapes. In their Festschrift celebrating Kralj’s 80th birthday Tomaž Toporišič and Gašper Troha wrote: “Kralj (of course, not without similarities to Grotowski) fundamentally established the ideology of ritual theater as theater primarily engaging with itself, its own development, and its own auto-therapeutic experience, which is oriented toward a collective mode of creation and transcends the logic of productivity. He was more interested in the process than in the final result, in the experiment ‘on the essence of acting and human imitation, on the relationship between the physical and the psychological’”⁵⁶

Writing with sufficient historical distance (in 2016) and as a co-creator of the production, Svetina observes that Kralj preserved only “approximately 30 percent of Zajc’s text”, that the production was centered on “exploring the boundaries of acting”, primarily through attention to “dreams, nightmares, visions, fantasies, memories, etc.” of the actors, as well as through “the magic of the word”⁵⁷, combined with improvisation as “a free surrender to one’s inner impulses.” The resulting performance, Kralj states, “was not situated within such a [bourgeois] theatrical aesthetic at all”⁵⁸.

54 SCHECHNER, Richard: *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1973, p. 306.

55 It is interesting to note that the first Slovenian avant-garde theater, *Oder 57*, also staged a play by Zajc as its first production, namely *Otroka reke*. See also SVETINA, Ivo. *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2016, 50.

56 TOPORIŠIČ, Tomaž and TROHA, Gašper: Lado Kralj med gledališko teorijo in prakso. *Primerjalna književnost*, 2018, nr 3 (41), p. 4.

57 SVETINA, Ivo. *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2016, 60–66.

58 *Ibid.* 63.

Co-creator and actor in the performance, Janez Vrečko, recalls that “in *Potohodec*, it was difficult to synchronize the music with the acting”⁵⁹, because, as Svetina explains, a unique connection, a kind of “brotherhood, a pact that was in no way arbitrary”, was formed between the actor and the audience⁶⁰. Svetina also highlights the importance of space in the performance, where the audience had to walk across the stage to reach their seats due to the smallness of the venue. Since the actors performed barefoot, to prevent dirtying the stage, the audience members had to put on giant slippers—Svetina calls them “skates”. All these elements are rightly linked by Svetina to the influence of Richard Schechner and his principles of theatrical creation, explained in *Environmental Theatre* (1973). Certainly, the fact that actors performed barefoot and that spectators were already involved in the performance simply by entering the space are features particularly characteristic of Schechner. However, in nearly all these elements—perhaps with the exception of the specific use of performance space—we can recognize features of theatrical practices either borrowed by Schechner from Grotowski or part of the general repertoire of experimental theater techniques developed in the 1960s.

Janez Vrečko⁶¹ states that he joined “Kralj’s group in Pekarna because Samo Smišič, Pavle Rakovec, and I had a Grotowski Studio in Kazina”⁶², which indicates that he and Kralj shared a similar vision of theater, rooted in Grotowski. The key question that emerges is what aspects of Grotowski’s influence—whether direct (through personal contact with Grotowski or reading his texts) or indirect (through Schechner or the general experimental theater milieu)—Kralj retained in his theatrical poetics, and which aspects he modified or abandoned in light of his own ideas. This question can be partially clarified through an analysis of Kralj’s critical writings from 1972 and 1973. Ivo Svetina, regarding *Potohodec* and the broader first phase of Pekarna, which he estimates lasted less than two years, states that it was a form of ritual theater, and most importantly, a theater which, according to the assessment of the New York

59 VREČKO, Janez: Email correspondence with the author of the article. 31. 1. 2025. The text was enacted through the movement and interactions of actors, there were no spoken dialogues. In addition to that the atmosphere of the play was produced by the actors singing traditional Venetian songs.

60 SVETINA, Ivo. *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2016, 66.

61 At the time, Janez Vrečko was a student of dramatic acting at AGRFT. Later, he turned to the study of comparative literature and literary theory and became Kralj’s colleague at the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, where he still teaches today. Vrečko also recalls that the rehearsals for *Potohodec* were extremely intense, even exhausting. Svetina notes that in “the early Pekarna productions [...] they used improvisation methods as recorded by Viola Spolin in 1970 [...] which Lado Kralj introduced us to” (SVETINA, Ivo. *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2016, 98).

62 VREČKO, Janez: Email correspondence with the author of the article. 31. 1. 2025. Kazina Palace is a famous building in the Centre of Ljubljana where today the Academy for Music is situated.

professor Dean Isaac, was “unique and exceptional, as good as the current work of Jerzy Grotowski, if not even better”⁶³. Although Isaac wrote this in the mid-1970s when Grotowski was no longer staging performances for the public, this is nevertheless a great recognition of Pekarna and its creators. More importantly, it clarifies the position of Kralj’s theatrical poetics in relation to similar experimental practices of the time.

Kralj’s Theatrical Poetics and Sterijino Pozorje

Lado Kralj, after 1968, wrote almost no more theatrical critiques, as he had become the leader of his own theater group and had also taken a position as an assistant at the Faculty of Arts (1971). He devoted himself to academic work, focusing on expressionism and Slavko Grum⁶⁴, while also engaging in artistic production as the head of Pekarna Theatre. The only exceptions are two reports from the most important Yugoslav theater festival at the time, which he wrote in 1972 and 1973, when he was also a jury member at the festival. Existing studies of Slovenian theater in the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s have primarily examined repertoires, individual productions, and contemporary Slovenian drama. However, Kralj’s critical poetics as an indicator of the changes he introduced to this space after returning from the United States have not yet been analyzed in detail. These texts, which were essentially rediscovered with the editing of the book *Treba se je odločiti*, had previously been available only in the archives of the National and University Library (NUK) and AGRFT. The central question regarding these critiques is: What do they reveal about the evolution of Kralj’s theatrical poetics after 1970? And more specifically, do they contain clear traces of Grotowski’s influence?

Certainly, in Kralj’s terminology before and after his stay in the U.S., we can detect significant changes, reflecting conceptual differences as well. The first of these, completely in line with Grotowski’s ideas and his *poor theatre*, is the use of the term “performers” instead of “actors”. Additionally, in his report on the 1972 performance of *Apel za večnost* by Boda Marković, he immediately emphasizes his role as an audience member in relation to the performance: “I had to begin constructing the performance myself, directing my attention first to this group, then to that individual [...] I myself had to participate in the exercise and engage with it according to my own dispositions and inclinations”⁶⁵.

63 SVETINA, Ivo. *Gledališče Pekarna (1971–1978)*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2016, 137.

64 Slavko Grum is the most important Slovenian expressionist playwright, His most famous work is *Dogodek v mestu Gogi* (1930).

65 KRALJ, Lado. *Sterijino pozorje 1972*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 115–115.

The second concept he introduces in connection with this production is *ritual*. This was a concept he rarely used before 1970, yet it occupies a central place in his explanation of the performance's impact in his 1972 report. Specifically, the connection between performers and spectators, which transforms into a "congregation", is the way Kralj understands ritual theater as an act of "ritual devotion"⁶⁶ uniting actors and audience members in a ritual event. This purpose of the performance is further reinforced by the empty stage and the lack of a clear boundary between the stage and the audience area, requiring spectators to first orient themselves in the space—a process that Kralj sees as an integral part of the performance itself.

The third concept he introduces, which was previously absent from his writing, is "group play". He uses it in his second critical report on *Sterijino pozorje* (1973), titled *Meddobje, še en pogled na Sterijino pozorje 1973 (Interlude, Another Look at Sterijino Pozorje 1973)*, to describe a new kind of performance where individual actors do not dominate, but rather the entire ensemble functions as a collective unit. He links this term to other names for the kind of theater he advocated: "poor, open, group, or ritual theater"⁶⁷. Here, we can see the strongest parallel to Grotowski, though Kralj integrates Grotowski's terminology within a broader context of contemporary theatrical trends.

Alongside the new terminology he employs, it is also interesting to observe the shift in Kralj's focus from the relationship between theater (or a specific performance) and its social reality to the relationship between theater (or a specific performance) and its connections with international theatrical trends. Because the festival's selector, Georgij Paro, opened the event to marginal theaters and theater groups, Kralj believes that the festival finally approached "the contemporary global theatrical situation"⁶⁸. He particularly emphasizes the professional discussions in which he participated as a member of the festival jury. These discussions addressed the role of actors in theater, the position of the text within the modern theater, and the role of the director and direction. From all three perspectives, it is possible to see Kralj's position, which is strongly influenced by Grotowski, although he explicitly states that his approach does not adhere strictly to any single acting method—be it Stanislavski, Grotowski, or Brecht—but rather aims for "the actor's exploration of the boundary between acting and non-acting"⁶⁹, a process of transition that Grotowski was actively pursuing around 1970 with his paratheatrical experiments⁷⁰.

66 Ibid. 116.

67 KRALJ, Lado: *Meddobje, še en pogled na Sterijino pozorje 1973*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 124.

68 KRALJ, Lado: *Sterijino pozorje 1972*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 117.

69 Ibid. 118.

70 For Grotowski's poetics around 1970, see: WOLFORD, Lisa: *Ariadne's Thread: Grotowsky's Journey*

Another aspect of Kralj's critique is his analysis of the texts that were staged. He finds only two productions particularly commendable: *Norci* by Dušan Jovanović and *Predstava Hamleta v vasi Mrduša Donja, občina Blatuša* by Ivo Brešan. In both cases, he highlights the same strength, which aligns completely with his earlier critical perspectives: "Neither of them fully defines their dramatic characters nor follows a consistent psychological logic; instead, they deliberately leave the development of their characters incomplete, intentionally fragmented. In doing so, both authors allow the ensemble to shape the performance beyond the text's boundaries [...]"⁷¹. The openness of the text to performance, then, signifies variability and volatility in the text itself and is nearly identical to his earlier views, which consistently opposed excessive reverence for dramatic texts or their idolization. All of this aligns with Kralj's own artistic work in *Potohodec* and, of course, with Grotowski's approach to dramatic texts.

The counterpart to this conviction is Kralj's attitude toward stage direction. Unsurprisingly, he favors productions that "demonstrate a significant shift in the relationship between the performance and the audience: they encourage a transformed horizon of theatrical perception, where the actor becomes a performer, and the audience becomes participants"⁷². This vision of the relationship between the audience and actors is undoubtedly found in *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Grotowski, but it is even more characteristic of Schechner, who actively involved audience members in the performance, while Grotowski, around 1970, was moving toward abandoning the distinction between audience and actors altogether, transitioning into what he himself defined as something beyond theater—paratheater.

Kralj's assessment of the festival is extremely positive, primarily due to the performances but also because of the discussions that accompanied them. He reflects on both with a sense of nostalgia in his critical report on the same festival the following year. He describes the atmosphere of the 1972 festival as "euphoric", yet already with a one-year distance and the experience of the 1973 festival, which had a completely different character, he notes a shift: "Some attempted to question or even condemn experimental direction, arguing that it had betrayed Krleža"⁷³ [...]"⁷⁴. The selector of the festival in 1973 was again Georgij Paro, and Kralj agrees with his selection, as it

Through the Theatre. In: Grotowski Sourcebook. Edited by Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford. New York and London: Routledge, 1997, p. 1–21; SALATA, Kris: *Toward the Non-(Re)presentational Actor: From Grotowski to Richards*. The Drama Review, 2008, nr 2 (52), p. 110; SCHECHNER, Richard: Grotowski and the Grotowskian. The drama Review, 2008, nr 2 (52), p. 11.

71 KRALJ, Lado: *Sterijino pozorje 1972*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 119.

72 Ibid. 120.

73 Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981) is one of the most important Croatian authors of the 20th century.

74 KRALJ, Lado: *Meddobje, še en pogled na Sterijino pozorje 1973*. In: KRALJ, Lado: *Treba se je odločiti*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024, p. 122.

offered a comprehensive overview of contemporary Yugoslav theatrical production. However, the problem, in his view, was the state of Yugoslav theater itself, which, as he states, “relies primarily on actors, while direction and dramatic poetry have become its weaker points”⁷⁵. The shift toward contemporary staging practices, he believes, was absent, and in his text, he explicitly states what he considers these contemporary practices to be: “a move toward total theatrical expression, to the activation of all possible theatrical means, to group play, ritual elements, the testing of the limits of theatricality [...]”⁷⁶. In fact, what he missed at the 1973 festival, in comparison to what he saw in 1972, aligns even more closely with Grotowski’s ideas than his analyses of specific experimental productions, as it engages with broader ideological and conceptual questions.

The analysis of Kralj’s theatrical critiques from the 1960s, in comparison with his critical reports from the *Sterijino pozorje* festival in 1972 and 1973, demonstrates that a significant transformation occurred in his poetics during the intervening period. The differences in terminology reflect conceptual differences as well, which are further confirmed by his critical stance toward traditional theatrical forms in his 1973 festival report and his practical work at Pekarna Theatre, especially in his first production (*Potohodec*), which he directed. Undoubtedly, this was an attempt to establish ritual theater in Grotowski’s sense—an exploration of essential, archetypal events and actions, both on the level of individual human behavior and in a broader social context. However, ritual theater cannot exist within an institutional framework; it requires a “group” of people who are not necessarily professional actors but are often students and other amateur performers. Additionally, the group in Pekarna, as described by Svetina and Vrečko, was characterized by intense, physically demanding rehearsals, with the performance itself emerging from this process. Correspondingly, in his critiques, Kralj advocates a horizontal approach to directing, which allows performers rather than actors to explore and express archetypes, ultimately shaping the performance as a ritual.

All these principles link Kralj to Grotowski and distance him from Slovenian experimental theater of the 1960s, as well as from the Experimental Theatre Glej (1970), which he co-founded just a year before Pekarna Theatre (1971). However, a closer examination of his theatrical critiques from the 1960s and 1970s also reveals a continuity in Kralj’s critical poetics, suggesting an evolution of his ideas rather than a radical rupture. His central concern—exploring the boundaries of theater—remains at the core of his critical and creative poetics even after his return from the United States. The specific methods he employed changed—his work shifted from a repertory

75 Ibid. 124.

76 Ibid.

theater model to a theater group structure, from an ensemble-based working method to an intensive, collaborative process of rehearsals, and from traditional dramaturgy to one based on collective exploration. However, the fundamental principles he shared with various avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements, from Antonin Artaud to Grotowski, remained unchanged. These include a rejection of representation as a mode of theatrical performance, an emphasis on montage techniques, expressive acting, the adaptation of dramatic texts to contemporary realities, and, most importantly, the belief in the social role of theater.

In this sense, Kralj never fully embraced the idea of withdrawing from theater or eliminating the distinction between actors and spectators, as Grotowski did in 1970. Instead, he focused on questioning the function of theatrical space, much as he had seen in Schechner's work. However, he came closest to this within the Slovenian theatrical neo-avant-garde, both in theory—where he speaks of performers rather than actors and of groups rather than ensembles—and in practice, through his work with amateur performers, collective creation, and his vision of theater as a group experience. In doing so, he set the parameters for the development of Slovenian theatrical neo-avant-garde and defined the significance and societal role of experimental theater and contemporary approaches to drama.

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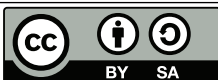
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