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# Miro Gavran and Affirmative Absurd in His Play *The Doll*

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**M**iro Gavran was 22 years of age when his first drama, Creon's *Antigone* (1983), had a successful premiere at the renowned Zagreb Gavella theatre, and since then, he has managed to have a strong presence on the theatre stages both in Croatia and abroad. He has been living off writing for a long time – something uncommon for Croatia since almost all writers here have full-time jobs (such as TV and radio editors, professors, dramaturges, and journalists), considering writing as a hobby. Gavran is so dedicated to his work and believes in it so much that he decided to risk. As a young writer, he was the director of a theatre but he quickly left the position (he is the only person whom I know to have voluntarily left a management position) and never again accepted any management roles or a safe and secure wage.

Gavran's career has proven that he was right. During 35 years of his playwright career, he has written 50 dramas and comedies translated into 40 languages. With more than 300 premieres on all continents (except for Africa) his plays have been watched by over three million people. He has about 50 theatre premieres a year and his books – since he's a writer of novels and short stories – have had over 200 editions released worldwide. Two of the numerous awards he received are of particular importance: the prestigious Hungarian Central European Time for the Best Central European Playwright in 1999 and the Austrian Dr. Alois Mock Europa Preis in 2017. He is a member of respected art and science academies, Russian and Croatian, since 2014, and 2016 – Slavic Academy from Varna.

Along with the global success of his plays, there is one more phenomenon associated with Gavran: the only living European writer with an on-going festival dedicated only to

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his plays and organized outside of his own country. For 15 years, the international theatre festival GavranFest has been held in five European countries (Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, and Serbia (Nikčević 2017: 309–324). The festival is undoubtedly the best confirmation of Gavran as a central European writer understood by the world.

The secret of Gavran's success is that he has remained so popular on the theatre scene because of his huge talent. Moreover, he is a very hardworking professional, and theatre needs and loves him, thanks to several features of his work. – They are the foundation of good theatre as well:

- realistic and well-constructed characters;
- the story with the tension of a crime narrative;
- motions of warmth, empathy, and compassion in characters and audience,
- and the possibility of choice and the meaning of life as a message of the play (Nikčević 2016: 167–176).

## Realistic and Well-Constructed Characters from Distance

The basic characteristic of Gavran's plays is the creation of well-constructed, very realistic characters. In his series of dramas with historical characters (*Night of the Gods*, *George Washington's Loves*, *Chekhov Says Good-bye to Tolstoy*, *Maria Theresa's Longest Day*, *Shakespeare and Elizabeth*), Martha Washington, Molière, Louis IV, Shakespeare, Elizabeth, Maria Theresa, Chekhov, Tolstoy are not merely biographical portrayals, even though each of them carries the weight of their real personalities. Gavran does not go against the real figures; he adds a dimension usually difficult to access in historical public figures: the private one.

The famous historical names in the titles are not just to lure an audience that prefers watching plays about famous people. Elevated characters have always been an important part of those plays (according to Aristotle) that were separated from the viewers. So when some theoreticians, such as George Steiner, declared the *death of tragedy*, and the genre of tragedy was replaced by just serious drama, the need for different heroes remained. That is why Gavran occasionally uses historical figures. The historical distance provides a dimension of separation. At the same time, given how the characters are portrayed with their private problems – similar to all of us – they become close and understandable, namely, our contemporaries.

In *George Washington's Loves*, Gavran does not represent Washington fighting for American independence; he shows his wife and lover after the president's death instead. The drama's main theme is George as a human being and as a man in love, not a statesman. In *Shakespeare and Elizabeth*, Elizabeth is not portrayed in the context of her war-related decisions and the takeover of Scotland but rather in the light of her love for the writer. Similarly, Mary Theresa, in *Mary Theresa's Longest Day*, reveals that her cold relations with her husband are the result of a sexual affair many years earlier.

It is because Gavran does not portray his heroes through the lenses of the problems caused by their actions as historical figures but via the issues created by their hearts. Gavran *demystifies history* (Ljubić 2006: 246) because his characters are individuals who are left alone with their destinies and choices. The decisions they need to make and the situations they find themselves in are facts shared by people today – to choose love and friendship, to forgive, to correct an injustice, to resist temptation, to choose and live with the consequences of their choices. The main characters' historical actions, wealth, or names do not help in finding a resolution. Some figures (like Louis IV in *Night of the Gods*) must choose between having friends and absolute power. This has attracted audiences to theatre performances since its beginning: to see a recognizable dilemma that a king or a queen has had to struggle with since Antiquity.

Gavran knows how to do this today: his heroes are close to us, and their drama contains the perfect dose of the unknown and the familiar – something the audience likes because it is a promise of an experience that is at once exotic and understandable. So, he wisely uses intertextual dialog with history, myth, and literature (Babiak 2003: 184–185).

The main characters in the plays *Death of an Actor* and *Forget Hollywood* are contemporaries. Still, they seem isolated and intriguing because both plays occur in a theatre. This is just as exotic and appealing for a regular audience member as a French court. The modern play *All About Women* (which has had 51 premieres from New York and Los Angeles to Paris, Moscow, and Mumbai) has an unusual form: the interweaving and duplication of seemingly normal stories about love, friendship, deceit, and work – from preschool time to a nursing home. Here are 15 female characters impersonated by three actresses: each plays five roles, from a little girl to an old lady, showing the character's metamorphosis (Hansen Kokoruš 2006: 303). This form of broken-up and intertwined stories is also introduced in the comedy *All About Men* and the comedy *Couples*.

To summarize, Gavran's well-constructed characters are either from the past (history, theatre) or are contemporary but are always timeless (in terms of the human themes), i.e. close to us. They are presented from an exotic distance, some as historical figures, and some taken from the theatre or literary universe. Even in contemporary plays that depict ordinary life, he finds exotic distance as will be shown in later analysis of *The Doll*.

## The Story with the Tension of a Crime Narrative

Each of Gavran's pieces of writing presents a clear and interesting story that keeps the readers' or viewers' attention with the help of one or (most often) a few twists of action. The characters grow and fall throughout the story; they remove their masks and reveal human souls hidden underneath them, equally hurt regardless of their position or power.

However, it is not enough for a good play to have characters and twists. A theatrical story must be told using skilful dialogues, and Gavran is excellent at it; he is a true playwright. Sometimes, when just read, his dialogues look modest and 'too simple'. However, his artistry is that he can put onto paper only what has to be said; he leaves up the rest to the actors. His

dialogues are *concentrated* (Lederer 2001). This is the secret that makes so many performers all over the world fall in love with Gavran's plays.

## Emotions of Empathy and Compassion in Characters and Audience

However, the fundamental secret that explains the theatres' need for Gavran's plays is the basic spice in all of them – emotions. All his interesting stories and realistic characters are caught in a vortex of strong affects such as love, friendship, and devotion to one's work or country. Yet there is not much tragic passion in Gavran's plays. And it is so exactly because the emotion is placed inside the character. Also, when emotions come up to the surface, they are more suited to our modern times. Thus, following the aforementioned 'death of tragedy', it is more appropriate to leave a lover rather than kill him, or it is possible to be a queen and admit as well as correct one's mistake, or it is possible to build a relationship with your daughter or son despite all problems. And always, regardless of the type of problem and sadness portrayed through the characters (from deceived husbands and wives to angry children and left lovers and love for theatre), the emotions are warm. They provoke and inspire the same in us – empathy and compassion.

## The Possibility of Choice and the Meaning of Life

Gavran's work contains many more issues than characters caught up in a tense story's emotions. There is always a fundamental idea in all of his pieces of writing. There are three dominant themes: manipulation, art, and love. The first one has developed from the plays where the abuse of power is presented (i.e. *Creon's Antigone*, *The Conspirators*, *Night of the Gods*, *Royalty and Rogues*) to the later plays where manipulation is present solely on an individual or family/private level (i.e. *Parallel Worlds*, *Greta Garbo's Secret*). The topic of art/theatre is central for *Forget Hollywood*, *Death of an Actor*; *Everything Will Be Alright*, *Chekhov Says Goodbye to Tolstoy*, *Shakespeare, and Elizabeth*, and *The Craziest Show in the World*. As for the issue of love, the comedies dealing with male-female romantic relationships have dominated Gavran's writing during the last few years. In these *marriage comedies* (Nikčević 2008: 110–137) or *comedies of privacy* (Muzaferija 2005: 95), the main focus is on the desire to enter into marriage (*Wanted – A New Husband*, *Hotel Babylon*) or on the partnership fatigue and the attempt to escape it (*The Merry Rectangle*, *Laughing Prohibited*, *The Henpecked*, *Pandora's Little Box*, *The Doll*). The plays may be in a fragmented form, portraying one hero throughout her entire life (*Ice Cream*, *Beer*), or built by a few short stories with several figures (*All About Women*, *All About*

*Men, Couples*), yet they all still dominantly discuss the characters' need for love and happiness.

Of course, these three themes interweave because they are of constant interest to the author. For instance, in *Forget Hollywood*, the professor wants to manipulate the student; *Night of the Gods* is about the emotion of friendship and theatre; in *Royalty and Rogues* the desire for power through emotions is explored; and in *All About Women*, the main issues are family, love, domination, and manipulation.

Even though all of Gavran's dramas are deeply individualistic, meaning that they deal with the issue of individual choice, Social issues are also present there (Ljubić 2016: 99). However, it is never 'a formless historical force that destroys the helpless figure rather than that it is a collection of individuals and their decisions. All have freedom of choice from the top to the bottom of society, like Louis IV, Molière, and Luda in *Night of the Gods*. A drunk friendship might separate them all. Still, they all made their own life decisions – Louis became a tyrant who subordinates everybody to himself, Molière risked his life making fun of the king, and Luda... she won't give that away.

The fact that Gavran's characters have the chance to act freely and even correct a wrong decision (like Mary Theresa, Elizabeth, Chekhov, the daughter from *Ice Cream* or Marko from *The Doll*, and many husbands and wives from the newest Gavran's comedies) is an indication that positive thoughts and predisposition form the basis of the Croatian playwright work. His fundamental belief is that life has a deep sense and that drama helps us uncover (and confirm) it. That is the reason why people go to the theatre. In other words, Gavran advocates the fundamental values in life and theatre.

The playwright's philosophy is most obvious in the drama *Death of an Actor*, where Tom states his (i.e., the playwright's) credo: the foundation of theatre art is the actor who pronounces the writer's sentences; everything is subordinated to the public, and the director is only a welcome modest friend there. Gavran does not accept the incomprehensible, pretentious, cold, and empty type of theatre that serves as a mere exhibition place for directors who use the actors and the audience only to prove their concepts.

By affirming some moral and emotional values, Gavran can leave us feeling elation even after all of us cried at the end of *George Washington's Loves*, where the wrong choices result in three love tragedies. That is why Gavran's characters – especially if history did not allow them to correct their mistakes – lose in a markedly honourable manner (like Washington, Petar Zrinski or Krsto Frankopan, or Molière). Their loss does not evoke hopelessness and meaninglessness of life; rather, it claims moral victories and underlines the significance of virtues and idealistic choices. Even when Louis IV decides against his affects, we all know that he made the wrong decision for which he will later make amends. This is because Gavran can convince us that, despite the misfortune we are watching on stage, happiness is possible, and positive emotions and good decisions in life exist, so we should believe in them and wait for them or seek them. In brief, the emotions he brings to us and evokes are positive and warm.

# The Comedies about Serious Problems

Even though Gavran's first plays were dramas, he has written predominantly comedies, melodramas, and librettos for musicals during the last few years. Moreover, he has been known to deal with difficult themes in comedies. In *Dr. Freud's Patient*, Hitler tries to solve his girlfriend's sexual issues, not realising that he himself is the cause of the problems – something which will later result in him trying to compensate for it by attempting to gain absolute power. In *Beer* and *Ice Cream*, Gavran follows the relationships of a father and a son and a mother and a daughter, respectively, in a humorous way. He often deals with the themes of marriage triangles and even love rectangles in his comedies (*The Merry Rectangle*). However, even if he mostly speaks about the fundamental motivation of human behaviour, the yearning for marriage, family, happiness, and Goodness is the only resolution that can save people and make them happy. When the husband in *The Henpecked* returns from jail, he experiences a sort of conversion and is grateful to be sleeping on the couch and to be free, even though his wife has remarried in the meantime and the new husband lives with them. It is his goodness that leads to a happy ending. In brief, Gavran writes his comedies out of the conviction that the basic characteristic of the comic genre, with serious problems, laughter, and joy, is the affirmation of the meaning of life which we feel while watching a happy ending that puts things back to their rightful place. That is why he named a collection of his plays *Laughter and Tears. Bitterly Melodramas* (Gavran 2015, well analysed in Muhoberac 2015: 435–456).

He also wrote three monodramas in a comedic style, and they are ideal for some real acting fireworks because, in all three pieces, a single person plays about ten roles. In *Everything Will Be Alright*, the leader of a Renaissance theatre company acts out an entire play in front of us (with love and sword fighting) and explains how he was left without his troupe. In *Hotel Babylon*, a gallery of characters in a court attempt to explain why a young Slovakian girl shot a Croatian seducer, while in *The Craziest Show in the World*, one actress impersonates all of the figures taking part in the preparation of a very modern play, where she discovers the emptiness of 'modern theatre'. In the latter, the author's wife Mladena Gavran acted out a spectacular scene where she simultaneously performs four heroes, two of them males, switching between characters by just moving her head or just changing her voice.

## The Return of Catharsis: The Sympathy and Purification of the Audience's Emotions

That yearning for happiness, which Gavran's characters feel and try to achieve in different ways, is precisely what we recognise in them. So in the dramas, we cry with them (because they do not manage to make amends), and in the comedies, we laugh together (because

they do make amends). Nevertheless, we have sympathy for all his figures. This means that in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Gavran achieved what Aristotle determined to be the aim of theatre: catharsis, the purification of emotions via watching characters on a stage and sympathising with them. The Croatian playwright also 'listened' to the way Aristotle constructed characters – recognisable but slightly elevated or distant from the familiar problems that are close to us. He does so intense stories with a clear sense of the meaning of life and the figure's (and ours) purpose and place in the world. That is why the audience always feels good after leaving the theatre. Gavran succeeds in that his intriguing distance makes the surroundings for the characters absurd. However, opposite to the Theatre of the Absurd of Ionesco and Beckett, Gavran creates an affirmative absurd, in which all senseless situations are set in a place at the and because in his plays, the world has a meaning and characters get some satisfaction – either on this, earthly level of lives, either on some transcendent level where basic human values still exist as Plato's ideas or God-image.

The mainstream of European theatre has gotten rid of this catharsis (together with positive emotions, the affirmations of goodness or other fundamental human values, especially God's image) and has labelled it as 'kitsch'; the so-called director-author's theatre has to a large extent cast aside the characters that we recognize and the story itself (Nikčević 2005: 255–272). However, the audience urgently needs all of this, especially for catharsis. That is why artists around the world have staged Gavran's plays. That is why GavranFest was established without government support but out of the theatre's need to show excellent plays that give spectators joy and confirm the meaning of life. The international success once again proves that Aristotle was correct when he said that catharsis is necessary for theatre, even today.

## *The Doll*, a Perfect Robot as a Woman: From Subjection to Feminism

Gavran's *The Doll*<sup>1</sup> is good proof that confirms the previously stated arguments. The comedy has premiered in 2012 in New York. Until today (2021), it has had twenty theatre premieres in the most diverse cultural centres: the Americas (New York, San Pedro, Los Angeles, Cuba), Europe (Slovenia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Germany, Serbia, Denmark, Austria, Hungary), Asia (Mumbai, India) and Australia (Sydney). It is about male-female relationships and the desire for happiness with another person, set in a contemporary environment but with an element of distance (a robot performing the role of a woman). It also has a lot of recognizable characters that we can identify and sympathise with, a plot twist, some humour, and a universal value. Finally, it allows the respective actors and actresses to play excellent roles.

When Mark's girlfriend leaves him after their seven-year relationship, he orders a woman-doll named Stella, a perfect android created to satisfy male desire. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Full text in Croatian, English and Slovak on: <http://www.mirogavran.com/the-doll/>. Croatian version published in: Gavran Miro 2017. *Odabrane komedije*. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska (pp. 7–51).

doll has been constructed by a female scientist left by her husband so that she also has her view of the world and its own needs. During six months of living together – shown in nine scenes – the main characters (a young man and the woman-doll) go through all of the phases of a male-female relationship, which help the young man realise his mistake he had made being with the real woman who left him. Even though it appears to be science fiction (the perfect robot), all of the play's situations are similar to what modern men and women go through in a relationship. The humour comes from the uncommonness of the naive but honest doll and her opinions. For instance, her attempt to use logic to understand male feelings and needs, as well as the world around her (STELLA: "I have just analysed our conversation and I have concluded that you are angry at me." MARK: "That's a sound conclusion!"). Moreover, she criticizes the man's personality and actions (STELLA: „If you were like this with her, it is no wonder that she left you!"). Later on, she gives spontaneously to his wishes, when Mark gets angry (STELLA: "Do you want sex now to calm you down? I am programmed to offer sex to an agitated man. You are simple creatures and sex makes you feel better."). Or she rejects some jobs and her feminist points of view; for example, when he asks to help him carry the box that she came in, the doll says: "I am not programmed to carry heavy loads, I will tell the centre that you are abusing me".

Watching the problems between a man and a doll created to please him, the audience laughs and also gets taught a lesson about how to behave towards their partners (STELLA: "You decided on a doll, and not a real woman, because you thought that you would have no obligations to a doll, and as a selfish and egoistic man you do not want any obligations, you want to gratify only yourself, and that means that you do not know what real love is. Love is giving, and not receiving; love is when we are happy because of the happiness of the person we love, and not because of our happiness"). And one quote more from Stella's words at the end: "Yes, I am a doll, because that is how you treated me, as a doll. If you had treated me as a princess – I would have been a princess – and I would have given a positive report on you tomorrow. That's the lesson every man should learn – your partner reflects how you behave towards her".

This comedy about love deals with a serious problem: a failure in a relationship and loneliness in a post-modern and trans-humanistic society. It represents the manipulation as a serious battle over the position of power in male-female ties. In this recognisable contemporary situation, Gavran puts the element of distance – the artificial woman – and creates a sort of absurd situation that is, however, opposite to Ionesco and his *Lesson*. Since the playwright is keeping the meaning of life as a frame – the absurd in the picture serves not just an intriguing view of human life but also opens a lot of space for humour, especially when showing the transformation of a doll. The metamorphosis occurs in Mark's character, too, but in a positive way because Gavran allows his characters to take a second chance. Although Marko made several wrong choices, he is not captured forever in it. With an unexpected twist, the final allows him to put things in the right place. However, who will go into the box and enter into marriage.... you will find out for yourself if you read the play. You will also find how writing an affirmative absurd play today is possible.



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