

Postcommunist, Postmodern, Postmortem:  
Images of Dogs, Women, and Children in the  
Drama of Biljana Srbljanovi.

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Postcommunist, Postmodern, *Postmortem*:  
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In the last two decades, Serbia has transitioned from a socialist republic with a leading role in supranational Yugoslavia to an independent and unstable democratic state where liberalism and nationalism, as well as intellectualism and savage capitalism, conflict on the smoldering “battlefield” of the 1990’s ethnic wars. The political transition in this Balkan country and its unsettling relationship with post-Cold War Europe find an illuminating and original interpretation in the plays of Biljana Srbljanović<sup>1</sup>—one of the few internationally known names in the post-Yugoslav theatre. Some critics have largely observed in her works a dialectical shift from the chaotic, deconstructive *hyper-reality* in the 1990s to a woman-centered *poesis* at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Naum Panovski, for one, comments that the playwrights who emerged during the Yugoslav wars have shown “less optimism, fewer utopian images and more postmodern nihilism and cynicism. Their plays and productions are self-oriented and self-confined products that correspond with their own reality.”<sup>2</sup> By “their own reality” Panovski understands the postmodern exaggeration or even *simulation* of the socio-political environment that manifests itself through objectified violence and individual escapism. The critic concludes that the post-Yugoslavian generation<sup>3</sup>—compellingly represented [End Page 91] by Srbljanović—has “lost the opportunity to build a theatre that heals wounds and brings reconciliation to their own ‘new’ world.”<sup>4</sup> In 2009 Serbian theatre critic Ivan Medenica noticed a significant change in the form and subject of contemporary Serbian drama. He declared Srbljanović’s play *Barbelo, on Dogs and Children* (2007), a precursor to a new wave of allegorical and monologic writings by women-playwrights who address “female subjects.”<sup>5</sup> In this article, *Barbelo* will be compared with Srbljanović’s most produced earlier play, *Family Stories* (1998).<sup>6</sup> Written almost ten years apart, the two texts appear to construct the stylistic paradigm outlined by Panovski and Medenica: the cold theatricalization and postmodern representation of the brutal reality,

explicit in *Family Stories*, contrast sharply with the reconstitution of the narrative and cathartic agencies in *Barbelo*. This comparative analysis will look deeper into Srbljanović's texts in order to identify specific dramatic techniques and meanings, as well as to reexamine the negotiations between postcommunism and aesthetic postmodernism. It will identify in the plays structure-building, postdramatic theatrical signs as categorized in Hans-Thies Lehmann's seminal theory,<sup>7</sup> but also their complications and further development. The focus will fall on recurrent images of dogs, children, and women in *Family Stories* and *Barbelo*, which altogether create a rich inter-textual dialog between the two plays and between the texts and their specific contexts of postcommunist and globalizing processes.

## *Family Stories*: Ritualization of the Traumatic

When *Family Stories*, Srbljanović's second play, opened at Atelier 212 in 1998, directed by Jagoš Marković, the political upheaval in Belgrade was reaching its crest. Following the breakaway of Slovenia from the Yugoslavian federation in 1991 and the ethnic wars in Croatia and Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, the communist and populist regime of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević was gathering strength for a military resistance to the Kosovar-Albanian secession. The violence escalated in Kosovo between 1995 and 1998, **[End Page 92]** culminating in the Serbian-led massacre in the village of Prekaz. The events contributed to Serbia's isolation from and censure by the international community, and, ultimately, prompted NATO's intervention in March 1999. Up until the end of the decade, the mounting nationalist propaganda and engulfing economic crisis in Serbia had produced a significant political resistance to the communist party hard-liners and the Balkan wars.<sup>8</sup> Theatre in the much reduced Yugoslav Federation, including only Serbia, Montenegro, and the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, carried a rather pacifist opposition to the communist left, and failed to openly confront the maladies in society.<sup>9</sup> *Family Stories* builds on the confusion in this period and addresses the problems of federalist disillusionment, radical nationalism, unemployment, escalation of crime, and black market

economy.

The play features four children ages ten to twelve, played by adult actors, who reenact bleak scenarios...

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<sup>1</sup> Srbljanović's success came with her debut play *The Belgrade Trilogy* (1997) and continued with *Family Stories*, for which she received the highest national and international awards. Her subsequent plays were: *The Fall*, *Supermarket*, *America: Part Two*, *Locusts*, and *Barbala, on Dogs and Children* and, the latest, *Death is Not a Bicycle (To be Stolen)*. Srbljanović is the recipient of Premio Europa New Theatrical Realities Prize (2007), the Freedom Prize (2003), and Erna Toller Prize (1999). Her plays have been produced in 23 countries.

<sup>2</sup> Naum Panovski, "New Old Times in the Balkans: The Search for a Cultural Identity," *PAJ* 25, no. 2 (2006): 61–74, at 68.

<sup>3</sup> The new post-Yugoslav generation in drama is also represented by Dejan Đukovski, Žanina Mirčević, Almir Imamović, Ivana Sajko, Filip Šovagović, Lydia Scheurman Hodak, and Milena Marković, among others.



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