

Theatre review

Belgrade production of *They Live* exposes corruption of Serbia's political parties

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In Belgrade, Maja Pelevic and Milan Markovic recently performed their play, *They Live* (Oni Zive), which exposes the hollowness of the political set-up in Serbia. The theatre piece was performed just prior to the May 6 parliamentary and presidential elections and laid bare each of the major Serbian political parties as unprincipled, corrupt and rife with favouritism and nepotism.

The elections themselves confirmed that such negative sentiment is rife. The two major parties, the ruling Democratic Party and the Serbian Progressive Party, will take part in the May 20 second round to decide the presidency. But voter participation was only 58 percent and there were allegations of electoral fraud. Notably, without a popular alternative, almost 5 percent cast invalid votes as a protest.

They Live was staged at Belgrade's Dom Omladine youth centre after it was cancelled at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre's Studio, Maja Pelevic explained, on the grounds that it "wasn't structured and [was] provocative".

"This kind of soft censorship is present every day on the cultural scene, when politically unsuitable projects are turned down for alleged artistic irrelevance", she added.

The play portrays the playwrights' real experiences after joining, as part of their artistic project, all the parties that were to win seats in the elections—the Serbian Progressive Party, the Democratic Party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, the Democratic Party of Serbia, the Liberal Democratic Party and the United Regions of Serbia.

Revealing the utter lack of principle in these empty shells, the artists were able to rise to senior positions within the space of a few days or weeks, becoming members of culture boards and candidates for various other committees and councils.

The artists' application letters to the various parties offered to develop a new cultural marketing approach called "Idea-Strategy-Movement", although no one in the various organisations recognised it as based on Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels 1928 speech, "Knowledge and Propaganda". The excerpts they used presented Goebbels' "theory of propaganda" and the power of "creative ideas" to indoctrinate people and unite them. Only three words were changed in the text—"political marketing" replaced "propaganda", "national socialism" became "democracy, socialism or liberal democracy", in line with each party's proclaimed ideology, respectively, and "Hitler" was replaced with the name of the actual party leader in every case.

"Everyone reacted positively", Pelevic explained. "The nationalists and conservatives were the most open to us, as they have few young people in their parties. Others put us on their 'cadre lists'".

Milan Markovic explained to the weekly magazine *Vreme* that they chose Goebbels' speech because it is, "most of all, about the need for a kind of unscrupulous propaganda. It is 'non-ideological' in a similar way today's parties in Serbia advocate 'non-ideological', post-ideological positions".

The play takes its title from the 1988 John Carpenter science fiction film of the same name, in which the Earth has been covertly subdued by aliens who can only be seen as they really (and monstrosly) are through special sunglasses. In tribute to the Carpenter

movie, *They Live* featured Pelevic and Markovic wearing dark suits and dark glasses, seated at a desk, reading a selection of their e-mails and other documents, re-enacting party meetings, etc., and explaining how the project started and developed and their own impressions of the process. This was coupled with audio-visual materials, including photographs, copies of correspondence with the parties, their application forms and the reactions of the different organisations to the whole affair. The original performance can be seen here.

The playwrights say that they wanted to use the piece to attack political patronage and highlight the social crisis and cuts. They explained that “political parties have taken over the space for performing arts and have contributed to the fact that there is almost no budget for culture. In these circumstances, when theatres face bankruptcy, and the independent scene lacks financial support, we decided to turn political parties into our space for performing arts”.

Pelevic and Markovic have both had several of their dramas staged in the past, but since Belgrade theatres had their budgets halved it has become much harder to find work. Pelevic worked for two years in one theatre, before being dismissed when the managing director was replaced by another who began staffing the theatre with members and supporters of a different political party. “We wanted material proof that as a party member you can have a job, and a position, and advance, all the things you cannot get regularly. Without party support you cannot be an art director, not even a playwright”, she explained.

Markovic wanted to concentrate on the fact that “there is no left political platform. That we have allowed the nationalist right ... to take over social issues”.

The playwrights explained how they feel “under direct occupation. Fascists are patrolling the city. People have nothing to eat, and the politics is formed in marketing agencies. On the one side, the pressure of the crowbar and [jack]boots; on the other, the pressure of markets”.

Markovic rejects the rationale behind the austerity measures, saying, “The argument that there’s simply no money doesn’t hold water, because the question is never asked, ‘why is there no money?’”

He denounces various charity campaigns as “pure

ideological struggle”, aimed at prolonging “the system that makes millions of people live on the edge of poverty”. While charity may help a small number of people in the short term, it leaves “no longer any room to ask why people are starving in the first place”.

The *They Live* project shows that a more honest and perceptive layer of artists appears to be emerging in Serbia that has fresh insight into contemporary public and political life. But it also, in my opinion, shows the limits of where art alone can get you, decoupled from scientific, historical analysis.

These limits are most evident in the final act. For example, at one point Markovic muses “Why is [the situation] here shitty?” and complains that “it’s always also the consequences of our [own] doing, and not doing”. This gets close to blaming the population for what are, in the last analysis, the consequences of imperialist oppression aided by corrupt local ruling elites and their political representatives.

This impressionistic, superficial view of “the people” as passive and apathetic is echoed by Pelevic, when he comments that “after all the revolutions and bullshits ... I think we have grown into a very calculating people in the 2000s”. Such remarks abound.

The play cannot therefore adequately challenge those who argue that the crisis in Serbia and the Balkans more widely is simply the legacy of Stalinist cronyism and that once the latter is eliminated the future will be rosy.

Despite its limitations, however, *They Live* shows a serious degree of social consciousness, artistic initiative and political courage.



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