

Biljana Dojčinović

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The bar which cannot be lowered

An interview with Svetlana Slapšak

Svetlana Slapšak was born in Belgrade, where she graduated from the Classical Gymnasium. She finished her undergraduate studies and her Ph.D. at the Department of Classical Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. She worked at the Institute for Literature and Art in Belgrade from 1972 to 1988, when she was dismissed after an internal self-governing trial organized at the Institute, even though she was acquitted that same year in court. She moved to Ljubljana in 1991. She taught at many Yugoslav, European and American universities. At the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana, she taught Serbian and Croatian literature at the Slavic Department (1985-1992) and Balkan Women within the Sociology of Culture program (1995-2012). Svetlana Slapšak has been the main editor of the journal *ProFemina* in Belgrade since 1994, the director of the Serbian Cultural Centre “Danilo Kiš” in Ljubljana (2009-2013), the art director of the SKC “Danilo Kiš” (since 2013), and the director of the Institute for Balkan and Mediterranean Studies and Cultures in Ljubljana (since 2009). She led European projects Marie Curie EST and GEMMA at ISH (Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis), and she also led the project Red Athena in the European network ATHENA 1-3. As a representative of ISH, she is a member of the Centre for the Humanities at Utrecht University and HUMED (Mediterranean Consortium of Humanities Institutes and Centers) at the University of Granada. Slapšak has published (written and/or edited) over 70 books and proceedings, more than 400 studies in linguistics, classical studies, comparative literature, Balkanology, gender studies, over 1,500 essays, one novel, two plays (on www.dkis.si), several plays for the shadow theater Karađoz (Karagöz), and translations from Greek, Modern Greek, Latin, French, English and Slovene. Since retiring in 2014, she has written studies, stories, plays, novels, travelogues, librettos. She

has participated in play productions, and translated and written books on the humanities (independently as well as in co-authorship with her former students). She has won numerous awards; the most recent include *Zlatni suncokret (The Golden Sunflower)* for her novel *Ravnoteža (Balance)*, in 2016; and an award of the women's board of the Slovene PEN – MIRA, in 2017. We talked about the history of the *ProFemina* journal, as well as writing for newspapers and her prose and drama works.

The first issue of ProFemina was published in the winter of 1994/1995. Why did you decide to start the journal? Tell us something about its editorial staff, associates, first issues.

That was Veran Matic and Sonja Liht's idea. They received the funds and they invited me to talk about establishing the journal. At that moment, I was in the USA, at Rutgers. I quite liked the idea, so I returned to Ljubljana during spring break. Then, I went to Belgrade by bus to meet them and discuss the idea. Mind you, in those days, that was a 24-hour journey. We agreed on the editorial staff very quickly – it was almost spontaneous, the way we decided on Ljiljana Đurić, Dubravka Đurić and Radmila Lazić. We also talked with some other colleagues, such as Jovica Aćin, but, aside from the four of us, no one lasted long in the editorial staff; thus, we remained an all-female team. We agreed on the columns and, from the very beginning, it was our belief that there should be something connected with the past – a portrait of a predecessor – aside from prose, poetry, reviews, essays and portraits of contemporaries. We also decided to have some kind of a book at the end of each issue: a drama, short novel, poetry collection, short stories, or a translation. Everything went incredibly smoothly and the first issue was published quite quickly. The collective “Škart” helped us with an excellent design which remained the same until the end.

In your editorial from the first issue, published at a time when refugees from Croatia are coming to Serbia, in the midst of armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

women's activism in the peace movement is emphasized and the (Serbian) nationalist ideology is criticized. How did that antiwar and antinationalist attitude reflect on editing the journal, that is, on the selection of associates and literary and theoretical/critical articles?

We did not include solely female authors; there were many male authors, as well. The journal was formed around a basic idea – the antiwar idea, and connecting with everyone we used to be connected with in the period before. The journal was supposed to represent the domestic scene which, it was clear back then, could not enter the nationally-inclined magazines. Many new male and female authors surfaced – we published a Romani female poet for the first time, which is something I am especially proud of; Albanian authors from Kosovo had their slot from the very beginning. Without any written program, the journal started functioning from the very beginning, in the worst possible conditions, and such cooperation continued for the next two-three years: I believe the best year was 1996, when we managed to publish an issue in English. I think the spirit of the time is quite evident when reading *ProFemina*, not as some ideological core, but as the result of the work of women who had their own stance.

Did that attitude reflect on the reception of the journal (primarily in the expert public)?

We were believed to be so marginal, that no one put any particular effort into destroying us. I wonder at that myself – no one jeopardized us. It was only one time that the police raided Radio B92 and seized all *ProFemina* issues, so we had a problem of reconstructing certain things. The second phase started in 1999, when there was less and less money; however, after the so-called change in 2000, it became positively terrible. *ProFemina* has not been published for several years, and the award “Biljana Jovanović” was appropriated by others.

Despite all the torments, Ljiljana and Dubravka worked incredibly hard on publishing the journal. However, then we were faced with the situation in which many

non-governmental organizations find themselves. The new *ProFemina* has not been around for years, the journal cannot even be published in an electronic form because neither I, nor the other editors, have the institutions which would provide the funds for such a form of publishing. You simply cannot work without such support.

How do you perceive the place and the role of printed feminist (and other critical) newspapers in Serbia and the region today?

Although there are several such newspapers today, they have very little influence on the wider audience, due to the prevailing sexism. I am still flabbergasted when I see the level of professional editing in feminist magazines, unlike some truly stitched-up and patched-up literary magazines that, of course, do not lack state funding...

How would you describe the link between the University and the general public, especially when it comes to gender equality and feminist engagement? Are, in your opinion, academic feminist magazines present in the public eye in this day and age? How do you perceive their role?

The richness and diversity of academic feminist magazines in the world, both printed and electronic, is exceptional, and they are important even beyond their elementary field. Very few researchers in humanities dare to present any phenomenon without invoking feminist research on the matter. This is a young discipline, which has swiftly and thoroughly taken its place in the academic world. At the same time, such magazines are more present when we look at their political and social engagement... the academia looks different today because of them. As for the situation in Serbia, almost nothing of that is seen in academic publications, even though feminist conferences, articles and books created a very impressive space.

How did you devise the “Predecessor Portrait” column, which is the basis of every research on women’s creative work in the area, including Knjiženstvo? The text on

Danica Marković, which included her work as well as texts written about her, was published in the first issue.

Every one of us had some predecessors that were important to us. Ljiljana and I, for instance, were obsessed with Danica Marković, as well as with some other women. Those are mostly memories of Belgrade women of their predecessors. We had no prejudice: one of our plans was also to create a collection on Mir-Jam. Sadly, we did not manage to do that. Zagreb women have, for example, completely “revamped” Zagorka. Nothing is completed on any of the women, there is still more to say.

The idea was to explore every woman, more or less spontaneously and randomly; some woman we remembered or we were reminded of. We started with a list of women predecessors. The list was so vast that there are still enough names for some sixty issues on it. Doctors, medical workers, architects, women in music, ballet, fashion.

The whole thing was born from the fact that there were almost no women in the then latest histories of literature – Palavestra’s, Deretić’s. Or rather, the women I had already been reading for quite some time were described with only one, mostly semi-negative sentence. Julka Hlapec Đorđević was irrelevant in those histories, and I wonder what would happen today – today, in 2017, if someone were to publish the two books of her feminist essays in Belgrade?! Can we imagine that? Who would publish them?

What proved to be a great discovery for me was the book of Vlastoje Aleksijević on Serbian women authors – a small book of some sixty pages, holding precious content, written in an unusually precise and laudatory way. We published it in the first issue of *ProFemina*.

Then, the book of Zorka Janković, the panorama of world feminism which I found in an antique store, much like the previous one. It was from that book that I first learnt, for example, that there had been Swiss feminism. All national feminisms are listed and described in the book, and it was written by a woman in Novi Sad on the eve of World War I.

Why was Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja not included among the predecessors in ProFemina? Milica was extremely important, but deeply misused in the nineties – is the

latter the reason?

The column on Milica was on our predecessor list, but we never got to publishing it and that is the only reason. Milica was very important to us, because there is always something else surfacing through her writing. It was important to see what she was truly writing about when she wrote about Fruška gora, and even in her poetry; precisely because her name was used in such a way in the nineties. It would be necessary to explore everything that happened in her life; in doing so, we would also need to take the novel by Milica Mičić Dimovska, which is splendid, into consideration. On the other hand, we need to examine the visual effects of her photographs and finally, create a subtle analysis of her writing and poetry. She is a rich source of emotions which are turned into words. Milica's correspondence with Vuk is extraordinary. And Vuk is, to me, the first Serbian feminist – we can see that in his divisions of oral poetry – he does not divide by genre, but by gender. That is also clear from his biography, where there are many signs of a completely new, French, revolutionary rationalism, together with a new feminism.

Your text in the Predecessor Portrait dedicated to Jelena Dimitrijević “Haremi, nomadi” (Harems, Nomads) opened new perspectives of interpreting this author and had a crucial influence on the renewed interest in her work. How did you learn of Jelena Dimitrijević? We know you asked Slobodanka Peković to write the accompanying text for the new edition of the Letters from Niš on Harems. Was that reprint your idea? What is the place of this author in Serbian culture?

I read Jelena Dimitrijević while I was still in high school. I found her novel *Nove* in the antique shop of the SKZ, and I was fascinated by it. It was not I who suggested the reprint of the *Letters from Niš* – we received the manuscript from Ljiljana Đurđić and that is how our women's cooperation started. Jelena Dimitrijević had been banished from Serbian literature and it was high time she returned.

Do you have any data or at least assumptions on the readers of ProFemina (their

numbers, education, age...)?

ProFemina was passed around from one person to another. We did not see any particular sales, even though it was on display in some bookstores in Belgrade. Perhaps the biggest step was when the English issue appeared in the window of the De Femme bookstore in Paris. That bookstore does not exist anymore, though. The biggest problem in the country was that *ProFemina* had a difficult time reaching places outside of Belgrade. It reached Zagreb, even Sarajevo, but it was nowhere to be found in the Serbian province.

For 19 years, you have been writing a column for the Maribor-based paper Večer which goes out on Saturdays. What does that type of text mean to you?

I have never stopped writing for newspapers. I lived a nomadic life between 1975 and 1991, between Ljubljana and Belgrade. At that period, I constantly cooperated with some newspapers: first it was *Književna reč*, then I wrote very briefly for *Start*, then for *Vreme* at the end of the nineties, and for *Teleks* in Ljubljana for several years. When the war started, I wrote for *Nezavisni* from Novi Sad, and then for some short-lived Slovene magazines, and, finally, for *Večer* in Maribor. My basic assignment has always been minimalist – basic human rights, nothing else. That is the bar which cannot be lowered. Sometimes it is a very fragile bar, but it is the bare minimum. I also wrote when I finally got to Ljubljana to stay there, but I was not able to publish anything until mid-nineties. I was under attack, as I am now; such attacks are always quite primitive, and exclusively on a national basis.

In any case, my writing stems from the phenomenon we have all recognized: something that is implied, something that is our heritage and the heritage of previous generations going back to, let's say, 200 years ago, is jeopardized – human rights, women's rights which are more recent, some legal bases we considered pivotal and a feeling for which I pay tribute to the socialist system, and that is the feeling of equality. That was ingrained in us; we lost all that and realized we have to renew it.

Was the novel Ravnoteža created from the desire to preserve the memory of the time twenty years ago in a special, artistic manner? What can be done in a novel that cannot be done in an essay?

The history of the novel is quite entertaining: I wrote it between 1994 and 1996. One part of it was published in *ProFemina* in 1996 and I did not alter that chapter now. I tried to publish it in several places, but I did not succeed. When I retired, I came into contact with Jasmina Radojčić, an extraordinary young woman, an editor in “Laguna.” She asked me if I had anything to suggest for print. I had a novel which I had written in 2014, which will be printed now. The other novel, that is, the first novel, was called *Jednomesečici*. Jasmina came up with the title *Ravnoteža*: she wanted to publish that novel first, so I returned to it, added some parts and left out some other.

I can do a lot of things in a novel that I cannot do in an essay. First of all, I can state things more clearly. The novel which is in print now was pure therapy – when I was forced to retire and when I was left without means, without the institution we had created for twenty years; when I was deprived of many things, I suddenly had enough time and started writing to save myself, realizing I could finish things I had never managed to finish before.

The premiere of the chamber opera “Julka and Janez” about Julka Hlapec Dorđević was at the beginning of 2017. When was the libretto created? What about other dramas?

I wrote the libretto in 2005, when I was asked to do that, but the play production was slow, which happens often. The premiere was in January 2017. There were several performances and each time the audience would fill the hall... The Slovene audience clearly enjoyed the story about an emancipated Serbian feminist and a Slovene trapped in a Catholic family very much. The best part of the opera is the duet they perform when they finally meet and revive their young love: the text of the aria is actually a poem by Dučić, which is sung in Serbian. The audience always greeted this part with applause.

I also wrote some short, comical texts for the shadow theatre, which we ran intensively from 2011 to 2014. Among them, there is a play on Zagorka that was performed in Zagreb, and the audience loved it. It is about a famous episode when Zagorka got arrested, but since all the prison cells were full, they put the protesting feminist in a broom closet. The play follows her thoughts; in the end, of course, Gordana comes and the two of them leave on a broom. I enjoyed those dramas and the libretto; those were truly new areas of freedom.