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Cabaret Theatre in Communist Czechoslovakia (1960s–1980s) as Political Resistance: The Case of Milan Lasica and Július Satinský

Cabaret Theatre in Communist Czechoslovakia (1960s–1980s) as Political Resistance: The Case of Milan Lasica and Július Satinský. The article analyses the cabaret theatre of Milan Lasica (1940–) and Július Satinský (1941–2002), also known as L+S, in socialist Czechoslovakia in the 1960s–1980s as a form of resistance against communist totalitarianism. Rather than conventional political satire, which would have been impossible at the time, their texts subverted the political discourse by focusing on the word, the prime instrument of state propaganda, to expose its falseness through linguistic games and free play with associations. The essence of their satire, which can be most closely described as a mixture of theatre of the absurd and Dadaism, was in pointing to the meaninglessness of the language of communist ideology that bore no correspondence to reality, since the regime heavily invested in constructing and maintaining artificial realities and simulacra. However, their target was not high-ranking communists, but the common people, who internalized the discourses, values, and practices of the system and held it in place.

Keywords: anti-communist resistance, intellectual dissent in Czechoslovakia, Milan Lasica, Július Satinský, theatre of the absurd, Dadaism, existentialism, cabaret theatre

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Should anyone think that this is not political, that this is just comedy, he or she is mistaken. This IS political. All that is good is political!¹

1. Introduction

The comedy duo Milan Lasica (1940–) and Július Satinský (1941–2002), also known as L+S, has become a legend in Slovakia, their notoriety on a par with similar comedy double acts such as Laurel and Hardy or the Czech pre-World War II duo Voskovec and Werich, who also served as their major inspiration. Their hugely successful comedy shows in Bratislava starting from 1959, based on language games and puns, appeared on the surface as light-hearted joking, yet were underneath heavily political, as recognized early on by the bard of Czech avant-garde theatre, Jan Werich, cited in the epigraph above. It was their subtlety that managed to keep censorship at bay until 1969, and the two smuggled their political allusions into their performances even during the years 1970–1986 when their cabaret shows were banned. Their comic dialogues, which have entered Slovak popular culture, were among very few expressions of resistance against the communist regime in Slovakia. Despite heavy surveillance, they managed to get away with their humour for a considerable part of their careers, as it was based not on poking fun at the powerful, but at the common man. It was the common man, after all, who had created the dehumanising totalitarian regime and held it in place.

In *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule*, the editors identify four types of resistance in communist countries: national communism, intellectual dissent, armed resistance, and popular protest², all of which existed in Czechoslovakia at different times. The Czechoslovak Communist Party, elected to power in 1948, was from the beginning too loyal to Moscow, imitating its totalitarian style. The dissent that started soon from within the Party ranks was almost immediately crushed, the dissenters eliminated in show trials that were meant to demonstrate absolute party authority. After the revelation of Stalin's atrocities in 1956, the political atmosphere started to relax, culminating in the so-called Prague Spring of 1968 — the efforts led by Alexander Dubček to democratise the system. Dubček's vision, formulated as "socialism with a human face", was however stopped short by Moscow, which sent a five-hundred-thousand-strong Warsaw Pact Army to occupy the country. During the following period of repression also known as

¹ J. Werich, cited in: M. Porubjak, "Lasica & Satinský & My", [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, Levice 1996, p. 332. A. Plešu, "Rezistența prin cultură" (Resistance through Culture), *Dilema veche* 348, 14–20 Oct. 2010, <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/situatiunea/articol/rezistenta-cultura> (access: 10.10.2016). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

² *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule*, ed. K. McDermott, M. Stibbe, London 2006.

“normalization”, dissent in Czechoslovakia moved underground. Unlike in the Czech Republic, in Slovakia the dissidents did not manage to organize themselves into a unified group of resistance until November 1989. Alexander Dubček was a lonely figure³. Similarly to Poland and Hungary, anti-communist resistance in Slovakia was mainly Catholic, since it had the largest base of adherents to draw from and since the Catholic Church was the target of perhaps the heaviest communist repression starting from 1950, when monasteries were dissolved. The Underground or Secret Church organized religious sessions in private apartments, performed secret baptisms, and circulated samizdat religious texts. It was not until 1987 that a civil dissent group in Bratislava was created to bring attention to the hazardous industrial pollution in the capital. In this absence of non-religious cultural resistance, the art of Milan Lasica and Július Satinský occupied an important position, voicing criticism of the regime in a society that was mostly passively compliant with the system due to fear, intellectual laziness or lack of collective conscience and interest in public issues.

If we read the situation of Soviet satellite countries as colonial, with Moscow as the colonial centre⁴, then we can theorize the work of L+S in terms of postcolonial literary studies, which propose that writing (and related cultural forms) can be a form of resistance to dominant power if it exposes the cultural assumptions that underlie colonial narratives and can thus provide alternative readings to colonial hegemony. Richard Terdiman’s term counter-discourse, which he describes as the “confrontation between constituted reality and its subversion”⁵, has been adopted by postcolonial critics to describe the complex ways in which challenges to a dominant or established discourse (specifically those of the imperial centre) might be mounted from the periphery. Terdiman’s term is particularly useful to describe the art of L+S, which subverted the official discourse — the Stalinist vision of the world and its adoption by local leaders — through satire. Both Terdiman and Stuart Hall⁶ argue that even though counter-discourses disrupt mainstream ideology, they are incapable of transforming social relations of power, as they are condemned to remain marginal to the dominant, and this symbolic victory has little or no effect on the concrete material level. Even though the theatre of L+S did not, on its own, effect a revolution, I argue that it raised consciousness in Czechoslovakia about the way the communist discourse operated and cumulatively contributed to the political change of 1989. The regime certainly recognised the revolutionary potential of the art of L+S as it continually sought to ban them.

³ See J. Čarnogurský, “Mýty o protikomunistickom odboji”, *Impulz* 2009, no. 3, <http://www.impulzrevue.sk/article.php?466> (access: 28.01.2016).

⁴ I analyse the nuances of this comparison in the chapter “Trauma and Memory of Soviet Occupation in Slovak (Post-)Communist Literature”, [in:] *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, ed. D. Pucherová, R. Gáfrik, Boston 2015, pp. 139–159.

⁵ R. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Ithaca and London 1985.

⁶ S. Hall, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, London 1990.

2. The comedy of L+S as anti-communist resistance

The duo started performing already as students at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, where they both studied dramaturgy, but their fame soared with the opening of the show *Soirée* in the newly-founded Divadlo na Korze (“Pedestrian-zone theatre”) in Bratislava, a small basement theatre with 90 seats, in February 1968. The political liberalisation enabled the mushrooming of various small, experimental theatres in Czechoslovakia that strayed away from the traditional, realist theatre. As Satinský writes, “*Soirée* wasn’t a play. It was a meeting with the audience — a sequence of dialogues, skits, a fictive biography of two clowns interspersed with songs”⁷. From the beginning, it was clear that they were not interested in doing political satire in the conventional meaning of the word. They never directly commented on current events, named names or parodied politicians. Instead, their comic dialogues and songs parodied the way the communist discourse worked. By the communist discourse I do not mean the set of ideological dogmas of the Party, which hardly anyone believed in. Disbelief in all symptoms of official life was taken for granted and nose-thumbing the system was a national pastime. These spontaneous, private acts of resistance, or what James Scott calls the “hidden transcripts” of resistance, were underpinned by firm assumptions of cultural superiority to the USSR⁸. (This was different from British, French and Portuguese colonies, where epistemological assumptions about the cultural superiority of the colonizer were deeply and insidiously ingrained even as the colonized fought for their political and cultural self-determination.) L+S took this nose-thumbing to a higher level, deconstructing the ways in which people adopted the rules and assumptions of the system, performing rituals they did not really believe in because it was simpler than protest. The vehicle of these assumptions was language, the prime focus of the satire of L+S: the banality of phrases, the devaluation and the emptiness of everyday language which poured from the communist mass media at defenceless individuals.

Their poetics contained elements of Dadaism, theatre of the absurd, European cabaret, poetism, commedia dell’arte, music-hall, marketplace theatre, and the general feeling and atmosphere of their shows was tragicomic, often coupled with black comedy and gallows humour. In this sense, L+S were part of a larger post-World-War II Czechoslovak movement of small-form theatre that was much more developed in the Czech Republic and thrived especially in Prague and Brno; among notable names are the comic duo Jiří Šlitr and Jiří Suchý of Divadlo Semafor in Prague, the comedians Jan Werich and Miroslav Horníček of Divadlo ABC in Prague, or Bolek Polívka of Divadlo Husa na provázku in Brno. As Lasica explained in 1990, this style was specific to their generation,

⁷ J. Satinský, “Doslov”, [in:] *Lasica, Satinský a Vy*, Bratislava 1993, p. 53.

⁸ See J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT 1990.

marked by the 1956 exposure of Stalin by Khrushchev and the consequent distaste for pathos, big words, emotional outbursts or even big ideas. It was our disillusionment from the revolutionary zeal of the first half of the 1950s, which went hand in hand with political processes. We realised not to trust big words, because behind them might be big crimes, that we must express ourselves matter-of-factly, and that when we do theatre, we should not do it pathetically and pompously, but we must turn inside the individual, I mean the actor, who represents the individual⁹.

According to theatre director Martin Porubjak, their style was a satire of “artificiality, pomposity, Slovak pseudo-nation-lovers”¹⁰. In this sense, there was nothing elitist about it, just the opposite; in fact, their audiences ranged “from university professors to mechanics”¹¹.

So what was the cardinal innovation of the cabaret shows of Lasica and Satinský? First of all, as Porubjak writes, “they did not ‘hide’ behind dramatic characters and did not seek a pretext for humour in a dramatic narrative, but stepped on the stage as themselves to openly convey to the audiences their opinion, attitude towards current events, way of thinking, their sense for open play, and their sense of humour”¹². It was precisely this openness and the acceptance of the members of the audience as equal partners that distinguished their work from the previous theatrical tradition as well as the socio-political atmosphere of the time, marked by secretiveness, hierarchy, double-speak, pretending, and taboo topics. According to Porubjak, in the midst of the communist repression, L+S went back to the humour of some 19th-century Slovak satirical writers such as Jonáš Záborský, who had represented the Slovak mentality and the “national character” without the romanticising attitude typical for the time¹³. In this sense, their humour was less directed at the regime and more at the common man and was full of self-irony and self-criticism. Their style, however, was much closer to the theatre of the absurd and has been compared to that of Eugene Ionesco, Sławomir Mrożek, and Václav Havel¹⁴. Their satires contained important truths about humanity and the human experience that the communist regime suppressed. Inevitably, there was sadness in it, but it was conveyed through humour, which for the generation brought up in the socialist era of pompous culture indicated freedom.

Lasica and Satinský, like all comic duos, emphasised their real-life differences on stage to create distinctive, opposite types: Lasica was the elegant, sharp, pessimist intellectual in a tweed jacket, with a taste for citing from classic works of literature and whisky with ice; Satinský was a bustling, robust, uneducated “common” type, dressed in working-class clothes, down-to-earth and optimist, always carrying a vodka bottle. Even when they created characters with assumed names and costumes, they

⁹ D. Vizár, “O voze aj o koze s Milanom Lasicom”, *Javisko* 2009, no. 11, pp. 655–660.

¹⁰ M. Porubjak, op. cit., p. 332.

¹¹ J. Satinský, op. cit., p. 53.

¹² M. Porubjak, op. cit., p. 328.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ M. Mistrík, *Slovenská absurdná dráma*, Bratislava 2002, p. 119.

were simultaneously present as themselves, their basic characters not changing. According to Porubjak, “Their transformation into character was never a ‘character transformation’ — on the contrary, their strong personalities would take over the dramatic character”¹⁵. In other words, as their colleague Kornel Földvári writes, “resisting transformation into character became their acting principle. ... They were constantly commenting upon their dramatic character, being simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘out’ of character. ... They played themselves, Julo and Milan, untiring rivals in discussion and polemics, irreconcilable and mutually teasing each other”¹⁶.

The source of dramatic tension in their shows was never a dramatic conflict; it was the word. They rebelled against the principles of socialist realism, which put emphasis on the didactic and the political aspect of theatre, by putting emphasis on the aesthetic: the word, the symbol and the sign. The essence of their humour was in pointing out the emptiness of language under communism — the meaninglessness of language that bears no correspondence to reality, since the regime heavily invested in constructing and maintaining a make-believe reality in which no country in the world, apart from the Soviet Union, was a better place to be:

S: Yes. We have collective property. But it should be equally and justly distributed. Nobody knows which part of collective property is his and which belongs to others.

L: You are speaking my mind. For example, the collective property of the railway. Nobody has a feeling of owning it. But if they told me: on kilometer 179 between the villages of Velké Trmošany — Sydneyovce I own three meters of tracks and two wooden sleepers — that is where I would take my family on Sundays, I would treasure my bit of the railway, polish it. We would lie on our section of the tracks and sunbathe.

S: But what if there was a train coming? Wouldn't it block the sun away? I would much rather take my bit of railway home. You can never be sure enough¹⁷.

Working with the method of free associations, their seemingly banal dialogues about commonplace issues form unexpected connections to create paradoxes and contrasts pointing to the untruth and absurdity of the communist dogma. To understand the comedy of L+S, one must pay attention to the subtext. This necessitates intimate knowledge of the social, cultural, and political context, since their chief signifying modes were understatement and allusion, conveyed through linguistic, meta-linguistic and extra-linguistic vehicles — puns and other language games pointing to language as such, inter-textual references (such as parody of well-known sentences from world drama), haphazard use of foreign languages and dialects, tone of voice and articulation, facial expressions, gestures, body language. It is also important to note that L+S improvised a lot: no show was identical to another. This gave them freedom to play and create new meanings. Indeed, spontaneous play was essential to their art as it challenged the arrogance of power and recovered the humanity that had been obliterated by the totalitarian regime.

¹⁵ M. Porubjak, op. cit., p. 340.

¹⁶ K. Földvári, “Skúška humorom”, [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 2, Levice 1998, p. 227.

¹⁷ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Majetkové skutočnosti”, [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, p. 80.

The skit “The telephone” is a series of banal, illogical and even absurd exchanges. During the five-minute dialogue, the two callers manage to exchange no information at all. Seemingly absent-minded, hard-of-hearing or even senile, their true intentions come through the tone of voice and facial expressions: each believes that the other is an informer seeking to find out compromising information about him:

S: So how's it going?
 L: You know. Always the same. And you?
 S: Nothing new. What are you doing?
 L: Nothing. I am canning fruit.
 S: You are canning fruit?
 L: Yes, I am canning fruit. And you? Are you also canning fruit?
 S: No. I am just sitting. I am bored. Are you not bored?
 L: No. I am canning.
 S: You are canning? I wonder where you get the energy.
 L: What should I do? I am bored. So I am canning.
 S: What?
 L: I-am can-ning.
 S: Don't shout, I can hear you.
 L: Why do you ask, then?
 S: I am asking WHAT you are canning.
 L: (with apprehension) Why?
 S: I'm just curious.
 L: I see. What's new?
 S: Nothing. What were you doing yesterday?
 L: I was canning.
 S: What?
 L: I-was can-ning.
 S: WHAT were you canning?
 L: Can't remember. I think cherries. Or plums. And you?
 S: I was not canning.
 L: No? And what were you doing?
 S: When?
 L: Yesterday.
 S: Why?
 L: No reason.
 S: Yesterday?
 L: Yesterday.
 S: Wait...yesterday...aha, now I remember!
 L: What?
 S: I went to the cinema.
 L: The cinema?
 S: Uh-hm.
 L: Which cinema?
 S: A normal cinema.
 L: Really?
 S: Uh-hm.
 L: What was I gonna ask... oh, what were they showing?
 S: Where?
 L: In the cinema.

S: In the cinema?
 L: Uh-hm.
 S: I don't know.
 L: And was it good?¹⁸

Földvári has described their dialogic situation as “the impossibility of communication, the obliteration of dialogue and understanding and its replacement by multiple monologues”¹⁹. Comedy arises through hyperbole: the commonplace activity of canning fruit is used as a “cover-up”, while the character played by Lasica is afraid that even this might be used against him. Underneath however, is a Beckettian sense of disorientation and anxiety in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. For Porubjak, “Lasica and Satinský are an incarnation of Vladimir and Estragon, even though they never played those two desperate clowns of Beckett”²⁰. He called their humour “concretised absurdity — but not just their acting, but their essentially personal view of the world. Beneath their humour always pulsed an existential anxiety, which they sought to disguise with lively clowning”²¹.

Indirect allusions to the socialist system can be found in most of their texts. For example, in the play *Soirée* they would thank the audience for visiting their theatre, since “their options to choose from were wide: La Scala, Metropolitan Opera, or the Old Vic”, world-famous theatres which were of course beyond the reach of most Czechoslovak citizens due to state-controlled travel. In the skit “In front of the native house”, performed in 1969, political allusions are clear but the target of satire is the common man rather than the big politician:

S: Are you happy where you are? You could join my team if you want. I am directing a new department. I think it is metallurgical, or for sea navigation.
 L: But as far as I know sea navigation is under Imro.
 S: You are right! But it does not matter. Join us! I will give you 4800 gross-net, all together. You will be in good company: me, George, Charles and Andy. We are only worried about Andy. He has stopped going fishing with us. But he knows everything. He was in an anti-alcoholic rehab three times, and they didn't get him!
 L: I will see. They are offering me the ministry of education, too.
 S: As you like. But you won't accomplish anything there. It is not possible in this country. We lack people, the experts. There are only the two of us for everything²².

The dialogue satirises a number of things simultaneously: widespread Slovak alcoholism, communist corruption, nepotism and political nominations for important expert positions, the socialist style of delegating work onto one's inferiors and the

¹⁸ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Telefón”, [in:] *L&S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, pp. 82–86.

¹⁹ Cited in: P. Zajac, “Neskoro ale predsa (M. Lasica, J. Satinský: *Tri hry*)”, *Slovenské pohľady*, 1988, no. 12, p. 39.

²⁰ M. Porubjak, op. cit., p. 341. However, L+S wrote a parody of Beckett, *Nečakanie na Godota* (Not waiting for Godot), 1968.

²¹ M. Porubjak, op. cit., pp. 340–341.

²² M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Pred rodným domom”, [in:] *L&S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, pp. 90–91.

lack of professional responsibility. It also alludes to the fact that many experts were in fact not allowed to perform their jobs. The text also contains absurd humour: the quip about sea navigation makes no sense in a land-locked country such as Czechoslovakia. This type of slapstick comedy, with two fumbling, laughable characters, could only with difficulty be targeted by censorship, as it reeled away into absurdity, never serious enough, always making fun less of the system and more of the common people who maintained the system in place through their ignorance, passivity, collaboration or habit.

L+S enjoyed satirising the Slovak mentality and provincial Slovak life (“provincial” from both a European and Czechoslovak perspective). Their traditional Slovak character is typically a simple, uncultured, rural farmer or shepherd, bound with nature, an alcoholic and a domestic tyrant. This echoes some 19th-century Slovak writers such as Záborský, J. G. Tajovský or Timrava, who satirised the backwardness of Slovak peasants. If we however take seriously the previous suggestion by Földvári that Lasica and Satinský always played themselves, then we can suppose that they played these roles so well because they partly identified with them, and therefore their satire should not be seen as an expression of class elitism. Indeed, they always played these characters with a touch of affection.

The skit “The opera” from the early 1980s presents collective farmers producing opera as part of their “supplementary production”. The production however runs into problems as their only soloist, invited from Italy, refuses his pay in kind (potatoes) and, moreover, nobody attends the shows. The dialogue mocks the chronic ineffectiveness of collective farms, the theatrical culture of the socialist system that forces the workers to perform its rituals for no extra pay (such as organising special cultural events at various socialist anniversaries), food shortages and insufficient housing. The central, unspoken target of satire, however, is the communist biased system of meritocracy which filled professional positions according to political loyalty rather than training or talent. Thus, while in real life intellectuals and artists were forced to do manual labour, in the skit by L+S manual labourers are forced to create high art:

Farm manager (Lasica): Albín, what were you doing in the cow barn again?

Farmer (Satinský): I can't help it. I went by, so I peeked inside...

Farm manager: You peeked inside? Pull yourself together! Didn't I move you from livestock production?

Farmer: You did.

Farm manager: And where did I move you to?

Farmer: To the opera.

Farm manager: Yes. And it has been in trouble ever since.

Farmer: The livestock production?

Farm manager: No, the opera. Livestock production has been in trouble for much longer. But we know how to fix it.

...

Farmer: He (the Italian soloist) is not happy with his honorarium.

Farm manager: How much do you give him?

Farmer: Twenty kilo for a show, five kilo for a rehearsal.

Farm manager: If potatoes are not enough for him, add some vegetables.

Famer: And where do I get them? In a vegetable store? Ha-ha-ha!

Farm manager (takes a cauliflower from his desk drawer): This should pacify him and then we will see²³.

The dialogue works with hyperbole (the farm is so dysfunctional that vegetables have become luxury goods, such as American cigarettes were in real life), caricature (farmers, officially celebrated by the regime as the backbone of the system alongside the industrial workers, are shown here as desperately dim-witted), irony (the ideological censor bans the production of *La Bohème* as the name of the author, Puccini, sounds suspicious), and the absurd (opera on a farm). On stage, the characters evoke not just laughter, but also pity: the acting of Lasica and Satinský moves the audience to empathise with the naïve farm manager who thinks that producing opera requires only managerial skills, just like producing milk or potatoes, and the frustrated farmer who desires nothing but only to look after his cows.

Parodying the linguistic and discursive conventions of the communist system was the best way to point to its hypocritical view of the world, based on pretending and lies, which created a double reality and simulacra. In this sense, we could say in terms of the postcolonial discourse that L+S were “writing back to the centre”²⁴ by subversively getting hold of the linguistic register of the coloniser that kept it in power and turning it against him: the double-speak, hyperbole, pathos and euphemism of the communist discourse. However, rather than targeting high politicians, they focused closely on the common individual, who upheld the system through his disingenuous adoption of the discourse, passivity and willingness to live a lie. This brought the satire intimately close and implicated everyone in it, the politicians, the audience and the actors themselves. So, for example, when they mocked the official culture that hypocritically prided itself on respecting the woman and banned all kinds of sexualised representations of women, including beauty pageants, striptease, as well as prostitution, deemed as expressing the “moral decadence of the capitalist West”, the implication was that living under communism with patriarchal husbands was even worse for Czechoslovak women: forced to work outside the home (for very little pay), they also remained traditionally responsible for all domestic work and child care:

PESSIMIST: Women are not for sale in our country! Definitely not! And even if they were, you would not get it out of me.

OPTIMIST: Of course not. And even if they are... they are not. Because we respect the woman. We do not need the woman just for a moment of pleasure. Smooch-smooch, here is a hundred Deutschmarks... and farewell... no... we need a woman who will freely... cook, wash, iron... in other words, develop²⁵.

²³ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Opera”, [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 2, pp. 123–127.

²⁴ See B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, London and New York 1989.

²⁵ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Deň radosti”, [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, p. 275.

The added irony is that in the mid-1980s, when this skit was staged, a hundred Deutschmarks was more than an average Czechoslovak woman earned in a month. The idea of being able to earn such an amount in a few moments reverses the explicit meaning of the dialogue and portrays the capitalist West as a desirable place for women. The official idealisation of life under socialism and the demonisation of capitalism is reversed to satirise the economic underdevelopment of Czechoslovakia as a result of the socialist centralised economy:

OPTIMIST: A woman walks down the street, looks into a shop window and what does she see?

PESSIMIST: Nothing.

OPTIMIST: You are very wrong. It is quite obvious that you have spent too much time performing abroad. She walks down the street, looks into a shop window and sees a handbag. She walks into the shop and buys it. She treats herself²⁶.

The further level of irony is that of course both know that the OPTIMIST is telling a lie, but have bought into the system of pretending and role-playing in order to maintain the illusion of socialist success. Playing along the system had become so internalised that it had become normal — Zygmunt Bauman calls it mass-produced hypocrisy²⁷. This is often parodied through ironic reversal: the two would compete at who is better at pretending and the skill is always valued highly in their skits²⁸. On a further level, this alludes to the fact that duplicity was indeed an important survival skill in a regime that punished citizens for their identities, such as class origin, ethnicity, property, social contacts abroad, and often unpredictably for anything at all. L+S laugh at a system where the most favourable social profile was working-class origin, no property, little education, no experience of foreign travel, and a manual job:

S: You must have had a very hard life.

L: But why? I was born in department...

S: You mean to say apartment.

L: ...in Department Sur la Pont Avignon. It was a dewy sunny morning. I remember it as if it were today. We breakfasted caviar, oysters, then they brought Beaujolais...

S: I don't like bozholeh. They are greasy.

L: I was born as the only son of Count de Pible Pabigneu and his wife, a countess of Polish origin Elizabeth Goralu Czyci ne žal.

S: I pity you! In the morning mayonnaise with chicken, lunch in a white tie, dinner in tail-coat.... Did you have to sleep in pyjamas?²⁹

This dialogue is an excellent example of their method of quick, spontaneous stream of associations, which turn everyday life into an absurd but meaningful patchwork. The socialist propaganda about life in the West as morally decadent, hard and dangerous is parodied *ad absurdum* to reveal the lie behind this propaganda. The

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Z. Bauman, "Intellectuals in East-Central Europe: Continuity and Change", *East European Politics & Societies*, March 1987, no. 1, pp. 162–186.

²⁸ See e.g. the dialogues "Pretvárka", "Životopisy", and "Hamlet".

²⁹ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, "Pretvárka", [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, p. 53.

first pun plays on the Slovak pronunciation of “Beaujolais”, which sounds as a plural noun. The common-man character, played by Satinský, has no idea what Beaujolais is, but seeks to pretend worldly sophistication; since the noun follows after “oysters”, he assumes it is a similar type of seafood. In addition, the phrases “Sur la Pont Avignon” and “Goralu Czyci ne žal” are titles of a French and a Polish song, respectively, making Lasica’s character’s claim about his origin a transparent lie and the entire dialogue absurd. This dialogue shows that L+S were in general more interested in play than in politics and if political meanings emerged, they often did so from the interaction between the actors and the audience. As Lasica remembers, “Sometimes the audience found politics in completely innocent, unrelated sentences, because that is how they felt it”³⁰. This shows the importance of the interactive aspect of the performances of L+S, which were not conventional theatre, but true “meetings with audiences”, as they described it.

The power of the anti-totalitarian dissent of L+S was in the ease with which they moved between allusions and their ability to imitate the various genres of the socialist discourse that penetrated popular consciousness through the mass media, especially in the 1960s when television became widespread in Czechoslovak households, such as various propaganda documentaries and talk shows about “socialist progress”, melodramatic television films, advertising, etc. These parodies not only pointed to dogmatism of party propaganda, but also made fun of the grandiosity and pretension of its discourse:

L: The advantage of this elevator is that even when you install it in a five-storey house, it can take you up to the thirty-second floor.

S: But how is that possible?

L: Very simply — I installed 32 buttons into it. And that is only a short step before the conquest of the universe! A few more buttons and we will have made it!

S: Now that is something! To conquer the universe in an elevator! (They are suddenly sitting in a space ship.) Stratosphere, ionosphere, hemisphere...oh my god... (He continues in Russian.) I feel very good! (He falls off his chair).

L: And this is how we could have floated in the universe, if only they had allowed me to install the elevator in our house³¹.

Of course, the USSR, its propaganda and the Russian character as such, were among the favourite targets of the satire of L+S. Especially after the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviets, this type of humour was demanded by the audiences. It proved to be a fertile ground for subversion conveyed in the form of innocent allusions that could dodge censorship. The dialogue below, first performed in April 1969, portrays two Russian peasants reminiscing about their visit to Austria in the mid-18th century:

³⁰ E. Andrejčáková, “Milan Lasica: Viete o dobrom hercovi ktorého nikto nepozná?”, *SME*, 29 January 2015, <http://kultura.sme.sk/c/7616673/milan-lasica-viete-o-dobrom-hercovi-ktoreho-ni-kto-nepozna.html> (accessed: 28.01.2016).

³¹ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Životopisy”, [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, p. 60.

S: We walked in the streets and looked at houses. You enter a house, and there is no ladder! But instead a hill made of stones. They were placed one upon the other, you could walk on it.

L: Did you?

S: We didn't. But we saw one Austrian do it. ...

L: And we saw a well in one town.

S: Was there a bucket, too?

L: No bucket! All kinds of animals made of stone sprouted water from their mouths. We drank and laughed a lot.

S: Their women are stupid. They grab your shirt, trousers, and throw it into water. They rub it with a slimy brick, the brick foams like when his Majesty opens a champagne. I tasted it. As if the devil had got hold of me — I spat rainbow bubbles³².

The skit parodies the underdevelopment of 18th-century Russia, which, by analogy, points to the notorious economic mismanagement of the USSR in the 1960s (as witnessed by Czechoslovaks who visited there) that was masked by Soviet propaganda about the eminence of its science, industry, agriculture, the arts, etc. Czechoslovakia, like every USSR satellite, was filled with this propaganda promoting Soviet life. The dialogue is thus an excellent example of anti-colonial resistance — the subversion of colonial authority, the discourses that kept it in power.

3. L+S and censorship

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 21st, 1968 drastically affected the careers of Lasica and Satinský. As Satinský remembers,

Already on January 18 (1969) Jan Palach³³ immolated himself in protest, and on January 25, at his funeral, we in Bratislava also held a minute of silence. Solidarity was still there. We read his obituary before the show. ... On the houses shone bright neon signs SOVIET RAILWAYS — OUR MODEL, WORLD PEACE, and other irresistible things. ... With a group of friends ... we published ten issues of the humouristic magazine INFARKT. ... After the ten issues the comrades became more attentive and chastised us. Hammers and sickles started falling on Bratislava and gradually there was a heavy communist downpour³⁴.

In 1969, Lasica and Satinský were banned from performing their authorial shows in Slovakia. After a year of secret performing in the Czech Republic, the only stage where the two could perform was the operetta stage of *Nová scéna* in Bratislava, where they received supporting roles. Asked whether he could imagine a more absurd idea, Lasica replied: “Yes — if they had asked to join the ballet”³⁵. In the

³² M. Lasica, J. Satinský, “Nech boh ochraňuje báťušku. Voľne podľa Saltykova a Ščedrina”, [in:] *L+S, Súborné dielo*, vol. 1, p. 100.

³³ A Czech student who immolated himself in Prague in protest of the Soviet invasion and became its symbol.

³⁴ J. Satinský, “1969: Na Bratislavu začali padať kosy a kladivá”, *Staromestské noviny*, 28 August 1999, no. 15–16.

³⁵ K. Földvári, op. cit., p. 225.

early 1980s, the duo was finally allowed to return to a dramatic stage in the newly renovated, 200-seat Štúdio S theatre in Bratislava (nowadays Štúdio L+S), but it was not until 1986 that they were allowed again to perform their own authorial plays. As Milan Lasica reminisced soon after the Velvet Revolution,

I have counted thirty bans and banishments in thirty years. Bans short-term and long-term, definitive banishments. It could be said that bans and banishments were an important part of our career. In such a situation there are only two options: either it crushes you, or you take it as part of the game. On the outside, we took it as part of the game, as a business risk, but I can't say it did not trouble us. Sometimes I had a very intense feeling that we should send it all to hell and ... and that was the question. And what? Flush ourselves down the toilet? Change names and join the Party? Start making fun of the Americans? Interestingly, I never considered emigrating. It has only occurred to me now, that it had never occurred to me back then³⁶.

As this analysis has made clear, the essence of the humour of L+S was disagreement with the political, social, aesthetic, and ethical *status quo*. Their major strength, however, was their talent for comedy. According to Kornel Földvári, who was the dramaturgist of Divadlo na Korze in 1968–1970, “The power of Lasica and Satinský was from the beginning in their non-conformity, brazenness, with which they spoke of taboo things. They radiated freedom and especially in the worst times of depression they gave strength to the audiences, who in their desperate helplessness sought their humour”³⁷. For Földvári, the true reason why L+S were banned during the “normalisation” period of the 1970s and early 1980s were not their satirical dialogues, whose political allusions were too subtle for the censors to care about, but the feeling of freedom and optimism that their shows manifested and inspired, especially after the 1968 occupation. The people sought and expected a message in their work, something that would encourage them and give them hope.

Július Satinský wrote of their work: “Lasica and I have lived in constant seizures of laughter. ... Laughter is always the same. First it seizes you, weakens you, and then purifies you. It strengthens your human dignity. Those who have no sense of humour are trying to compromise our human dignity. And laughter is the spray (Freon-free!) which sprays them away into their dark caves”³⁸. Satinský describes here the enormous subversive and liberating power of laughter, whose discursive meaning has been discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness, but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness³⁹.

³⁶ M. Lasica, J. Satinský, op. cit., p. 338.

³⁷ K. Földvári, op. cit., p. 229.

³⁸ J. Satinský, “Doslov”, p. 54.

³⁹ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky, Bloomington 1984, pp. 122–123.

The power of laughter to expose the fragility of the communist dogma and the madness of its fanaticism was precisely what the communist regime feared and it constantly sought to limit their work. Satinský believed that they managed to stay together for so long — over 40 years — because of the persecution, which made them stick together and draw strength from their togetherness:

Perhaps we held out for so long because we were persecuted. That always unites people, lovers as well as partners in professional life. Those who bullied us and were banning us all the time of course hoped that we would not be able to resist those injuries and split up — that was their aim, after all. But ... we did not split up, on the contrary, the oppression drew us closer and in this unity we managed to survive all those difficulties⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ J. Satinský, *Momentálne som mŕtvy, zavolajte neskôr*, Bratislava 2003, p. 33.