



Ivica Djikić

„Even though that in Djikić’s first novel the reviewers found influences of Fellini and Kusturica, it is much more likely that it is about the mark of the middle European writers, such as Ödon von Horvath.”

– El Pais

“Ivica Djikić lets the questions of truth and morality fly around ‘en passant’, the way danger and bullets do.”

– Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Ivica Djikić (Tomislavgrad, 1977) has funneled all his experience as a journalist into novels with its sophisticated, razor-sharp prose. He began working at the *Slobodna Dalmacija* newspaper when he was only sixteen, going on to work at the *Feral Tribune*, *Novi List* and now as director of the weekly magazine *Novosti*, in addition to authoring and co-authoring biographies on both former Croatian president Stipe Mesić, former general Ante Gotovina and the Turkish millionaire Şarik Tara.

Academy Award winner Danis Tanović directed a movie ‘Cirkus Columbia’ (2010) made after Djikić’s novel and with Djikić as a co-screenwriter.

Everything he writes is based on real cases and real people, but as the opening lines of his second novel *I Dreamed of Elephants* express, in a quote from Saramago (*The Elephant’s Journey*), “In truth, I say to you, it is better to be a novelist, a fiction writer, a liar.” His novels *Cirkus Columbia* and *I Dreamed of Elephants* are translated into German, Italian, Spanish and Hungarian.

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MAIN WORKS:

Circus Columbia (*Cirkus Columbia*), novel – **award Meša Selimović for the best fiction book in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro in 2003**

Patriotic turnaround political biography of Stipe Mesić (*Domovinski obrat*), biography

Gotovina – Reality and Myth (*Gotovina – stvarnost i mit*), biography

I Dreamed of Elephants (*Sanjao sam slonove*), novel – **Croatian Telekom Award for the best novel in 2011**

Rest of the World (*Ostatak svijeta*), poetry

Šarik Tara – A Life (*Šarik Tara – život*), biography

Repetition – A Love Story (*Ponavljanje – ljubavni roman*), novel

“Djikić carefully builds a novel about the remnants of the past hiding behind the facade of today’s Croatia.”

– Literaturkritik.de

TRANSLATIONS:

Circus Columbia: Italy (Zandonai), Spain (Sajalin)

I Dreamed of Elephants: Germany (Antje Kunstmann Verlag), Hungary (Európa Kiadó)

“Djikić’s storytelling is riveting and clever.”

– Deutschlandradio

“Ivica Djikić tells a story of personal and collective dramas in a sarcastic voice.”

– Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso

Ivica Djikić: Circus Columbia

(excerpt from a novel)

I

Bonny

1.

It's scorching this summer in this small town and people do nothing but talk about the heat, when this drought might end, and when this soil might be sprinkled by a little rainfall. A day goes by quickly with this gentle banter usually narrated in shady gardens, banter habitually accompanied by home-made brandy and strong coffee, a piece of cheese or slices of watermelon. Then comes the evening, not made for you to be working as it is, so people relocate from their gardens to tavern gardens, or sit on some wall along the main street and scrutinize people passing by. They scrutinize and pass remarks, make hushed comments and gossip...

Apart from that, evenings are meant for visiting the cinema. In the front row of the cinema there is always Junuz Bećin, with his buddies sitting around him. When a movie is on, they pass loud remarks, fart, curse, drink beer and eat. When they're full, they start throwing leftover chevaps, chicken breasts and bureks. After a show, Junus and his bunch go out in the town and walk around from the church to the police station until midnight, sometimes going down towards the primary school as well, looking for someone to pick a fight with, but not finding regular customers very often.

In the evenings Andrija Jukić and Afan Šišić get smashed with brandy and it takes them two hours to cross the three-hundred-and-something-meter length of the Đuro Pucar Stari Street. And while they're doing it, they're always singing the same song - - "L'jepi li su mostarski dućani" (*Oh, How Beautiful The Mostar Stores Are*). And there's no one in the Đuro Pucar Stari Street - tots to cripples - who doesn't know the song by heart, and only a few who aren't sick and tired of both Mostar and its stores.

The only refreshment comes with the winds that sometimes blow down from the mountains around the city in summer evenings. The winds, when they're good, blow away the stillness the city chokes in. For a few of those hours a little life that sleeps in a shadow near some creek during the day flows through the town neighborhoods - from the church to the police station, from the Moslem to the Catholic cemetery.

2.

It was July 14, 1991, dusk, and a little mountain wind had just blown when a big white *Mercedes* with German plates solemnly rolled up into the Đuro Pucar Stari Street. The first out of the vehicle was an elderly man, with a straw hat on his head. Elderly means that he was around sixty-five years old. Except the straw hat, he also had a dappled short-sleeved shirt and white shorts. After the man, a woman followed, who could have been around forty years old. She had a big white hat with a curved brim, her torso was strapped in a white shirt, and a white skirt was flapping around her butt. After the man and the woman, a fat black cat lazily strolled out from the Mercedes. The man's name was Divko, surname Buntić, the woman's name was Azra, and the fat black tomcat's name was Bonny. That is to say, that's what his massive silver collar read. When the news of these three spread around, the residents of the Đuro Pucar Stari Street established the following facts: Divko finally returned home and has a new wife, and the two of them have a black cat as big as a smallish lamb. Furthermore, some of the residents noticed that Divko's latest wife was - a Moslem.

3.

Everybody in town knew who Dinko Buntić was. He had been digging canals across Germany, saved up some money, built two houses in the town, bought a big white *Mercedes* and now came home to enjoy the fruits of his labor. He had a nice pension and Divko planned to rest his soul until the end of his days. The very same soul with which he had once loved Lucija, his ex-wife and a woman of extraordinary beauty in her days. She was fifteen years younger than Divko and also lived in the Đuro Pucar Stari Street. She lived in a house which he had left her,

and their only son Martin, who turned twenty-five that summer, shared the household with her; he had recently graduated our language and literature in Sarajevo and decided to come back home and wait for a job in one of the local schools. Principally for Martin's sake did Divko leave the house to Lucija, and it should be mentioned that he did it against the grain.

The town hated Lucija, and she hated the town. For years she would come out to her window every morning and shout: "Fuck you all!" In the beginning people would stop and start endless quarrels with Lucija, but soon they got used to her peculiar welcoming of a new day and the town, which categorized her as one of those people you should laugh at from time to time, but never take seriously. Divko and Lucija divorced in the early eighties, and the reason for their divorce were the rumors Divko had been receiving in Frankfurt: wicked people, who take more pleasure in harming others than benefiting themselves, were saying that Lucija slept with a different guy every night, and after a while he couldn't bare to cope with these rumors, so one Christmas he came home and told her that she wasn't his wife anymore.

"Have you gone out of your wits, you poor soul?" she told him.

"No I ain't, it just like I done told you. Just like that, no other way."

"Whatta you mean, you dumb fool?"

He didn't answer, but forced his fist into her teeth. When she fell on the floor, he kept on kicking her, left, right, left, right, resembling a wading robot from some science-fiction movie. The entire street heard Lucija's screaming and yelling, but nobody even considered taking any action. A man has the right to pummel his wife, the town thought, and if he pummeled her, she must have deserved it, because nobody is crazy enough to kick the shit out of his own wife for no reason. And even if he was that crazy, it would be best not to get involved.

"Look people what this son of a bitch did to me," blood-spattered Lucija shouted a few moments later, walking down the street. "He beat me black and blue for no reason, broke my ribs, knocked out my teeth, oh, cursed be his bones, let crows peck out his dead eyes, let flesh fall off his bones, let mangy ducks eat him alive..."

But the people closed their windows, pulled their curtains and waited until Lucija got fed up with crying and cursing. Tears she ran out of, but curses and profanities she didn't. She hasn't run out of those to this day and she never will, because there is no heart and emotions in cursing, it's all become a ritual without which Lucija or the town would never be what they are. If it wasn't for her, mothers would never be able to say to their foolish daughters "you sit down now, for the life of me, you ain't gonna turn Lucija Divkova."

4.

You might do what you will, you might achieve god knows what, but it's all worthless until the town sees it. There are people who left the town long time ago, went to, say, Germany, worked hard, married there, built castles and palaces, but they never felt at ease. Because the town never saw these castles and palaces. Many of them would have given it all up just to have been able to move their villas from Munich or Zagreb to a village or a small town of their birth. All the riches of this world don't mean squat until the person you shared your poverty with doesn't see it! The point of getting rich must be that someone might witness it, notice it, so that people talk about it and feel envy. And to admit it. So that the neighborhood says: "Christ Almighty, Divko made it, and nobody can't deny. Look at them two houses in the town, look at that *Mercedes*, look at all that money in the bank, look at that lady of his..." That's precisely what the neighborhood was saying, but not for long. The town can only admire someone's success for so long; our people can't praise for long and can't find someone attractive for too long. After a short-lived praise and admiration a time will come when they'll be horrendously jealous, and then - one should never doubt it - someone will spread a rumor and everyone will believe it, and the one whose success they praised until yesterday will become a thief, an outlaw, a whoremaster, a miser, a punk, not seen from here to Mostar, and maybe even farther. Only a stroke of bad luck might save such a man from this destiny, when people would take false pity; or he could be saved by life itself, void of anything someone might envy.

5.

"Boy, how will you sleep under the same roof with that fool who beat me up like that? Even today, I can feel my bones hurt when I remember how he kicked my ribs... How will you, you poor soul, sleep under the same roof with that whore and her cat..." Lucija was telling her son Martin when he told her he was going to sleep a few nights over at his dad's.

"Ma, let it go... He's my dad. Why wouldn't I sleep at his house? It ain't much of a thing! He's my dad, what can I do..."

“Dog, not dad! Dog! Dog!”

“Ma, don’t piss me off! What’s gotten into you? Uh? What would the town say if word got out that I wouldn’t sleep two nights over at my dad’s? Ain’t no devil, ma, and I don’t want the town to talk!”

“Let’em talk, let’em talk what they will, a mother wept to the one who cared what the town talked...”

“Ain’t no devil! I know it all, but ain’t no devil... Come on, brother... I’ll go there for two nights and I’ll be right back.”

“Tell him that Lucija Slavina fucked his mother hundredfold...”

6.

The fifth evening after Divko’s arrival into town, now, Martin, Azra and Divko were sitting at a table. They were eating. Divko was quiet. He didn’t know what to say to his son, so - from time to time - he would just put on a dull smile. Azra was refrained, but very nice to Martin. But, it wasn’t up to her to strike up a conversation. Bonny was apathetically lying on a chair.

“You got a girl?” father asked him just to make conversation.

“No...”

“Oh... How come, boy!?”

“Just like that, I don’t!”

“What are you getting pissed for, fucking shit. Like it matters much...”

“No, I’m not getting pissed, but don’t ask. How old is he?” Martine asked Azra, turning his eyes at Bonny. He asked just to change the subject.

“Six years,” Azra answered, briefly and cordially.

“You like him?” Divko interfered.

“He ain’t bad, what do I know... I don’t know much about cats.”

“Well, you see, I know all about them, and I can tell you that you can’t find a finer-looking cat than my Bonny for miles around. From here to Frankfurt there’s no cat that’s better-looking, no, by Golly! And even if there was, I would’ve found it and poisoned it, so Bonny would be the best-looking again.”

“Come on, Divko, quit yappin’!” Azra was a little embarrassed, but Divko paid no heed: he continued saying that he wouldn’t give up Bonny even for ten thousand Deutsch marks, and people offered, too; that he and ‘his kid’ spoke to each other like real people and that nobody’s ever proven a better speaking companion than his cat; that no one could understand a man like better than an animal; and that he would have gone crazy in Germany if there wasn’t for Bonny...

Azra knew that the story was meant for her and she knew that she should speak a word. If she learned anything in these seven or eight years living with Divko, she learned how to keep her mouth shut. Many a night she thought about her silence, and this one was such a night: Martin left to his room, Divko fell asleep quickly, and she kept her eyes open, listening to locusts, dogs barking, and Andrija Jukić’s and Afan Šišić’s drunken song. She thought of her destiny which led her to a man who gave her peace only when he would be sleeping, and he couldn’t sleep very much. If she spent another three hundred years lying in this bed, she wouldn’t grasp the idea why she had decided to live with this bitter man of rough appearance, a man averse to other people and joking. Since she met him and soon thereafter started to live with him, she’s been fending off all kinds of companies, because who would want to sit with Divko: he had the ability to drag any story into a black hole with a hopeless, rotten bottom, and our man (no matter where in the world he lived) loves those conversations led only for the purpose of talking hot air. That’s how Divko scared people away and how Azra spent her days, silent most of the time, and after ten silent years she wished for some laughter and those long picnics that don’t make you any smarter, but soothe the burden on your soul that was given to you at birth in these parts where a bit of luck is as precious as a nugget of gold.

7.

In the morning the news spread around with incredible speed, compared only to spreading the news of someone’s death: Divko’s Bonny was missing! Along with the breaking news, the town also quickly learned the details: Divko has a habit to let his cat wander around the house all night, and Martin has a habit to get up and go piss at some time every night; that’s just what happened last night, and since Martin didn’t close the door behind him when he used the bathroom, Bonny entered his room, saw that the window was open, and set off into the

darkness. Divko figured all of that out after a speedy investigation, immediately upon realization that his pet was not in the house.

“Fucking Mother of God,” he was thundering at his freshly awakened son, “and fuck your kidneys, and your pissing in the middle of the night. Why didn’t you piss before you went to bed?”

“I did, but I had to go again in my sleep...”

“Go get a treatment if you have to piss every ten minutes. It’s not normal!”

“What’s not normal?”

“It’s not normal to piss so much! Boy, you’re a sick man and go get a treatment,” Divko was still yelling, “but I don’t know where to find treatment for people who never learned to control themselves and who never learned to close the door behind them when they leave the room. And who keeps his window open when he sleeps? If you’re hot, go and take your pillow out on the balcony and sleep there, but don’t keep my window open during the night, you get it?”

“Well, dad, it’s summer, the heat...”

“I told you what to do when you’re hot... What will I do now? Poor me, what will I do without my Bonnie?”

“Well, he’ll be back, Divko, he’ll be back for sure,” Azra tried to calm the situation, but it aggravated Divko even more. As if he was waiting for her to say something...

“How will he be back, fuck the blood of Christ!? Tell me now - how? Is Bonnie here for the first time? Yes! Does he know anything about this town? No! Just like you don’t know nothin’, and how would you, since you came here five or six days ago! Like I didn’t know anything when I first came to Frankfurt, and I would’ve starved to death if it hadn’t been for my cousin Stipe, God bless his soul. Does Bonnie know how to stop someone in the street and ask for directions to Divko Buntić’s house? No! Does he know how to get to the police and report that he’s lost? No! Well, tell me then, how will he be back for sure? Come on, tell me!”

“Well, someone will see him and bring him back. There’s only one such cat in the town,” Martin said, and Divko blew up again: “Ain’t nobody gonna bring him, you’re gonna go and look for him. Right away! And you’re gonna go with him,” he ordered Azra. There was no objection, nor could there be one.

Translated from Croatian by Neven Cvitaš