

Fatos Lubonja
The final slaughter
[*Ploja e mbrame*].
Tiranë. Marin Barleti. 1994. 172 pages

In its hundred years of existence, Albanian drama has produced virtually nothing of exceptional interest. Early twentieth-century theatre offered little more than tear-jerking nationalist melodramas and superficial farces, and the post-war plays of socialist realism were uniformly trite to the point of boredom or acute nausea. It is thus a pleasant surprise that Fatos Lubonja has chosen this genre for his first literary publication.

'The final slaughter', subtitled 'a novel in the guise of a play', is a compellingly imaginative re-interpretation of the Oedipus legend of ancient Thebes, in which the mute horror of Stalinist Albania seems to have taken root. The power-hungry and isolated Oedipus does not go blind, but rather falls victim to intrigue and self-deception, which ultimately lead to his downfall. Foreshadowing the final slaughter are raging torrents that lash the city and a long ensuing drought. It is a sombre play, devoid of hope and sanguine expectation, and one befitting the tragic fate of its author.

Fatos Lubonja was born in Tiranë in 1951, son of the well-known Todi Lubonja, head of Albanian radio and television and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the early years. After the 1973 purge of the liberals, both father and son found themselves in concentration camps. Fatos himself, a student of theoretical physics at the time, was sentenced to a total of 21 years in prison, ostensibly for a hidden novel in diary form, which was discovered by the *Sigurimi*. It was in the infamous Burrel prison in 1988-1989 that he wrote *Ploja e mbrame*, circumstances which more than help to explain the pessimistic undertone of the play. Carefully hidden from the boorish prison guards, the drama was pencilled minutely onto one hundred thin leaves of cigarette paper which the author, to our good fortune, managed to preserve until his release on 17 March 1991.

Despite its pensive mood and indeed mournful message, 'The final slaughter' conveys an atmosphere of exalted dignity, due in good part to its language. The author has consciously chosen to borrow many expressions and archaic linguistic elements from the pre-war Scutarine authors of the north, in particular from Gjon Shllaku's noted translation into Geg dialect of the Iliad. The text does not make for easy reading, especially for Albanians from the south, but is more than worth the effort.

First published in: World Literature Today 69.2 (spring 1995)