

Père Gynt

Mendacity for the 21st Century

Branislav Jakovljević

I

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States missed by a mere few weeks the 120th anniversary of the opening night of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu the King* (10 December 1896). Numerous similarities between the 45th US president and the character that inaugurated the theatrical avantgarde didn't go unnoticed. The poet Charles Simic wrote that the "story of his presidency and the cast of characters he has assembled in the White House would easily fit into Jarry's play without a single word needing to be changed" (Simic 2017). British author Rosanna Hildyard had the same idea when she published her translation and adaptation of Jarry's play under a tell-all title: *Ubu Trump* (2017). And early in 2018, Paula Vogel organized a "National UBU ROI Bake-Off" in which she invited playwrights to compose skits featuring key "ingredients" from Jarry's play. So, on Presidents' Day (19 February 2018) theatres across the country performed pieces that ranged from a farce about Trump and Anthony Scaramucci, who briefly and scandalously held the position of White House communications director, to a monologue by an actor playing Melania Trump, to Ubu's funeral. More recently, in late February 2020, an advertisement from Verso Books for Hal Foster's new book *What Comes after Farce?* landed in my inbox. The blurb is spot on:

If farce follows tragedy, what follows farce? Where does the double predicament of a post-truth and post-shame politics leave artists and critics on the left? How to demystify a hegemonic order that dismisses its own contradictions? How to belittle a political elite that cannot be embarrassed, or to mock party leaders who thrive on the absurd? How to out-dada President Ubu? (Verso 2020)

Jarry's Ubu is the Count of Sandomir, a low-ranking noble in line for the Polish throne; he is base, greedy, cruel, treacherous, vengeful, stupid, foul-mouthed, cowardly, and shameless. He is also a caricature of imperial expansion. Resembling a cone-shaped spinning top, he is constantly on the move—from England, to Aragon, to Poland, to Denmark, to France—blasting geographical and literary boundaries that are in his path. If it was to be staged right now, how could anyone miss the relevance of his march through Ukraine and his inadequacy in the face of the Russian army? But, there is another, more important peculiarity about King Ubu: he is indestructible. During the melee that follows the assassination of King Wenceslas, young Buggerlas rips open Ubu, who then picks himself up and proceeds to take the throne (Jarry [1896] 1997:80). And in the battle with the Russians, a soldier fires a pistol at him from a close range. Ubu starts screaming and yelling, "Ouch! I've been wounded, they've filled me full of lead, they've perforated me, I've had my last rites, I'm dead and buried." But then he changes his mind ("Well, but really! Aha! Got you!"), and instead of dropping dead "he tears [the soldier] to pieces" (116). From his improbable run for presidency, to the Mueller report, to the impeachment by the US Congress and acquittal in the Senate, to his handling of a national health crisis plagued with mistakes caused by his political opportunism and crass selfishness, to

Branislav Jakovljević is Professor in the Department of Theater and Performance Studies at Stanford University. His most recent book, Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia 1945–1991 (2016), won the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Outstanding Book Award for 2017 and the 2016/17 Joe A. Callaway Award for the Best Book in Drama or Theatre from NYU. bjakov@stanford.edu

hiding in his bunker while riot police brutalize peaceful protesters in front of the White House, and heading toward the 2020 elections, the 45th president marches on.

Like its title character, the play itself is loose and chaotic, and as a result it easily accommodates all kinds of adaptations and directorial interventions. I can recall a number of memorable productions of *Ubu*. In 1992, Bosnian director Haris Pašović staged a version in which all kinds of abusive and vulgar types milled on a platform that resembled a combination soccer field and king-size bed. Amazingly, this unflattering portrayal of the ethical landscape that led to the war in Bosnia premiered the night before the war broke out. Then there was, of course, the famous rendering of Jarry's play by Jane Taylor and William Kentridge who set it in post-apartheid South Africa. In the US, only a couple of weeks after the election of George W. Bush, New York-based Synaesthetic Theatre opened their *Ubu 2000* in NADA Show World, a former strip club near Times Square. The kitschy environment of that adult entertainment center, with its walls and ceiling covered with mirrors, would work even better now with the current US president. Indeed, Hildyard had no problem incorporating sleazy imagery into her *Ubu Trump*. However, as pertinent as it appears to be for the current political moment, Jarry's farce hardly brings any new insight about Trump and Trumpism.

Jarry wrote the first version of his play while still a high school student as a parody of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. As Foster correctly recognizes, farce comes after tragedy. In *Ubu the King*, Jarry offers striking examples of abuses of power, but leaves the abuser shrouded behind his mask and pear-shaped costume. This blurring of the main character's features suggests an absence of reflexivity. Simply, there seems to be no thought process going on behind Ubu's mask, just basic impulses such as greed and aggression. Hence the reliance on the mechanics of plot. Actually, that is what the audience enjoys. Mocking Trump is surely fun. If nothing else, it establishes a distance between the ones who are laughing and the one who is laughed at. As Vogel said about her bake-off, "the most effective tool for despots and tyrants is ridicule" (in Steinkopf-Frank 2018). That, I'm afraid, is not enough anymore. The object of ridicule has outgrown the performances of mockery. Farce leads to an easy dismissal and doesn't offer much to anyone who is trying to understand the current political moment, not only in the US, but worldwide. Whereas in the past three decades Ubu-like autocrats have popped up randomly, here and there, without a clear pattern, in the past several years we have entered an Ubu storm. Ubu rules. He is everywhere. Besides Trump, he can be recognized in England's Boris Johnson and in leaders of central European illiberal democracies such as Viktor Orbán of Hungary or Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia; his ugly head rears up in Turkey with Recep Erdoğan, in Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, India's Narendra Modi, and the president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte; and need I mention the formal or informal reinstatement of lifetime rule in Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China? They are all nationalists, strongmen, and, above all, consummate liars. If *Ubu the King* falls short of going beyond mockery, then Jarry himself has pointed out a drama that can offer a much more penetrating engagement with these protagonists of post-truth politics.

After maneuvering his way into the position of secretary of the leading symbolist theatre venue in Paris, Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Jarry mounted a "conscious, pragmatic, and well organized" campaign to stage *Ubu the King* (Deak 1993:229). But, he had more on his agenda. Letters that he dispatched to the l'Oeuvre's director Aurélien Lugné-Poe during the summer prior to the 1896 fall theatre season indicate that he was pushing for staging not only his own play but also Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.¹ "You will return and we will rehearse *Peer Gynt*," he wrote: "That will be the best rebuttal to those who are arguing that this play is unstageable" (in Lugné-Poe 1931:168). Furthermore: "I think you will not get discouraged, and that we are going to mount *Peer Gynt*. This play, like Shakespeare, gains from a simple, even crude,

1. *Peer Gynt* was first published in 1867. Count Maurice Prozor's French translation came out in 1896.

production” (168). Once Lugné-Poe made up his mind and began rehearsing the play, he gave Jarry the role of the Dovre Master. He took on the task in earnest. The director recorded in his reminiscences of l’Oeuvre: “[Jarry] completely rearranges the troll scene in *Peer Gynt*, since its humor is so difficult to convey in French. He does not spare his imagination. Is there anyone else better suited than him for this play?” (170).²

And is any play better suited for Jarry than *Peer Gynt*? It delves into depths of the character that his own *Ubu* leaves merrily unexamined. Upon a closer look, *Gynt* can tell us much more about the character type that is nowadays conquering the world political stage than *Ubu* could ever do.

II

If the last presidential election missed the *Ubu Roi* anniversary by a mere few weeks, it almost perfectly coincided with that of the French premiere of *Peer Gynt*, which opened at l’Oeuvre on 12 November 1896. Already the opening line of the play resonates today. Aase, the protagonist’s old and frail mother, shrieks across the stage: “Peer, you’re a liar!” ([1867] 1972:255). It all begins with a rather innocent hunting story. As if to convince his mother that he is telling the truth, Peer puts on display his considerable talents as a storyteller with a tall tale about his ride on a buck that runs like the wind across high mountain ridges, and at one point leaves the ground in an improbable leap down the mountain side. He follows the story of the buck with his daydream of becoming an emperor, which prompts Aase’s stark remark that he has trapped himself in “a never-ending maze of lies” (262). At the other end of *Gynt*’s life arc, in the gut-wrenching fifth act, we learn that it was not a maze, but a progression of falsehoods. This is Peer at the end of his journey, settling scores with himself:

The pyramid is funded on
 Fantasy, dreams, and still-born knowledge;
 And over them the edifice
 Goes up and up in steps of lies.
 Truth scorned, repentance shunned,
 Flaunt like a banner at the summit,
 And sound the trump of doomsday with their
 Petrus Gyntus Caesar fecit! (398)

No longer a light-footed yarn-spinner, he is old, mean-spirited, and bitter.

Peer Gynt might have been recognized as the greatest tragedy of a liar in the Western dramatic canon were it not for the critics who have downplayed *Gynt*’s lies as flights of imagination or, at worst, his youthful fantasies.³ Indicative of this approach is literary scholar Henri Logeman, who in his copious commentaries on *Peer Gynt* suggested that the protagonist’s lies are a carryover from the folk tale on which the play was based. *Gynt*’s lies are a particular kind of lie that is based on the appropriation of other people’s narratives, which Logeman brands “skipper-lies” (Logeman’s literal translation of the Norwegian “skipperløgner”) (1917:5).

2. Jarry’s fascination with *Peer Gynt* was not just a passing fancy: two years later, in 1898, he named the title character of his novel *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, the Pataphysician* by combining Goethe’s Faust and Ibsen’s troll. That same year, he completed *Ubu Cuckolded*, another play from what became his “Ubu cycle,” in which Memnon, one of the characters from the phantasmagoric fourth act of *Peer Gynt*, plays a significant role.

3. The catalogue of plays about liars in Western dramatic literature is surprisingly slim. It includes Ruiz de Alarcón’s *The Truth Suspected* (1619), Corneille’s *The Liar* (1642), Richard Steele’s *The Lying Lover* (1703), Carlo Goldoni’s and Samuel Foote’s plays of the same title, *The Liar* (1703 and 1762, respectively), and, of course, Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1664).

Indeed, there is a tradition of dramatic criticism that sees Peer Gynt more as a storyteller than a liar. Reading Ibsen's play in the Trump era requires a more serious consideration of Gynt's ethics.

As Eric Alterman abundantly demonstrated in his 2004 book *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences*, American presidents have routinely lied to their citizens, and that has been especially true in the past several decades (Anna Merlan's 2019 *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power* qualifies as a Trump-era counterpart to Alterman's book). It would be interesting to consider the current president in relation to the strategies of deception that Bill Clinton devised during his impeachment trial, or to compare his techniques with the lethal machinery of falsification that George W. Bush deployed in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. The first thing that stands out is the change of tone. While Clinton tried to outsmart even his own conscience and W. played stupid, Trump is lying furiously. His lies are mixed with rage, and so are those of his imitators and allies worldwide. His supporters easily relate to this affect and embrace it as their own. This is the kind of lying that comes from the experience that Max Scheler, following Nietzsche, identified as resentment, "a self-poisoning of the mind" and a "lasting mental attitude" marked by emotions of "revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite" (1961:46). Resentment is a hostility that goes easily beyond individual targets and leads to a "falsification of the worldview." Here, lying is not a technique used occasionally, but a constitutive feature of personality. Scheler sets it apart from other kinds of lying:

Beyond all conscious lying and falsifying, there is a deeper "organic mendacity." Here falsification is not formed in consciousness, but at the same stage of the mental process as the impressions and value feelings themselves: *on the road* of experience to consciousness. There is "organic mendacity" whenever a man's mind admits only those impressions which serve his "interest" or his instinctive attitude. Already in the process of mental reproduction and recollection, the contents of his experience are modified in this direction. He who is "mendacious" has no need to lie! (78)

Ibsen's name for this organic mendacity is the "Gyntian self." We find it on full display in the phantasmagoric fourth act, which has traditionally been a challenge for stage directors and literary scholars. Today, it appears surprisingly clear and coherent.

By the time we get to this dark heart of Ibsen's drama, Gynt has reached his midlife years and became a wealthy capitalist. We find him in a company of others, who are no different than him. He has no problem confessing to them that he is self-educated, that he has a patchy knowledge of history, but also boasts that he is in "excellent health" ([1867] 1972:329). In this world, what's more important than anything else is his wealth: he boasts with great pride that he is "the Croesus of the Charleston traders" (328). He also brags that he had built his enormous wealth through enterprises that are "on the border-line of the permissible" (329). Gynt is a trafficker in human flesh, a slave merchant and slave owner. Willing to take risks, he also trades in arms, nudging enemies against each other in order to increase his profits. The ultimate purpose of this "dance around [his] Golden Calf" is the exaltation of the "Gyntian self" which he sees in terms of an unabashed narcissism:

The world behind the curve of my brow
Which demonstrates that I'm no one else
But Me, as God is not the Devil. (333)

Full of itself, this Self leaves no space for others, who, in turn, feel no obligation towards it. Left stranded by his "arse-licking friends," he does the only logical thing and proclaims himself a prophet (338). This *filthy* rich capitalist is the prophet of himself, dreaming of his own (business) empire of Gyntiana, crowned by the shining city Peeropolis (345). What used to be a wild boyish daydream has become an obsessive imperial desire.

This is a solitary endeavor. Peer is a self-made man, something that Fred Trump's golden boy would like to convince everyone about himself. That is, in part, the reason why Jarry's plot mechanics simply don't apply here. *Ubu the King* inherits from *Macbeth* a wife-husband dynamic. The modern-day Père Ubu doesn't need Ma Ubu to coax him to "reach out and grab the White House by the balls" (Hildyard 2017:13). These kinds of plot devices are just as foreign to Ibsen's play. Indeed, what kind of père would Gynt make? The answer is right there, in the second act:

WOMAN in GREEN: Peer, before the year's at an end,
You'll be a father.

PEER: Open the doors!
Let me get out. ([1867] 1972:300)

Fittingly, his only willing acceptance of paternity is his claim that he "behaved like a father" to his slaves (329). No wonder that one of the sequels Jarry wrote to *Ubu Roi* was *Ubu, Colonialist* (1901), which is set in Egypt. Jarry was not the only playwright who picked up on themes that Ibsen initiated in *Peer Gynt*. In his early play *Lucky Per's Journey* (1881), which he so directly based on Ibsen's play that it was often referred to as the "Swedish *Peer Gynt*," August Strindberg provides this character with additional details. Some of them are profoundly relevant today.

ATTORNEY: Your grace can no longer be regarded as a private citizen. Whenever anyone, through wealth, rises to the pinnacles of society, he belongs to the public,

PER: And so he is placed outside the law...

ATTORNEY (*smiles, looks around*): Above the law, Your Grace! ([1881] 1965:37)

Gynt is incapable of establishing any meaningful human relationships. His love life is one of violence and betrayal: he steals Ingrid from her wedding in act 1; impregnates Dovre Master's daughter in act 2; abandons Solveig in act 3; and in act 4, upon meeting Anitra, he all but follows the strategy Trump laid out in the *Access Hollywood* tape. He is an eternal bachelor, incapable of committing to anything or anyone, except himself. It's worth remembering that he had received the secret of the Gyntian self from none other than Dovre Master, the role mastered by Alfred Jarry:

Out there, under the radiant sky,
They say "To thine own self be true."
But here, in the world of trolls, we say
"To thine own self be—all-sufficient." (295)

Unable to adapt to the world, Gynt wants to force the world to adjust to him. He is ready to proclaim as "sham" and "fake" everything that doesn't comply with his resentment-driven worldview.

Peer's conquest ends with a cry: "Reason is dead. Long live Peer Gynt" (367). This slogan, more devastating than any irony Ubu could produce, comes from Begriffenfeldt, the director of a mental asylum in act 4. Apparently, that was the only way Ibsen could imagine a world ruled by organic mendacity:

The self full sail, full speed ahead
Each one shut up in the cask of self,
Immersed in a fermentation of self,
Hermetically sealed with the bung of self,
The barrel pickled in a bath of self.
No one has tears for other men's pain;
No one accepts other men's notions. (368)

The mental asylum scene has given a headache to many a director. Not anymore. A paradoxical community of narcissists in which the exchange of ideas has been replaced by their amplification, and self-understanding with self-gratification, is no longer a figment of the imagination. It exists, organized and run by boy-men, not unlike Gynt himself, and enabling the Gyntian self to rule the day. Every affect finds a medium in which it can perfectly express itself. Long after Scheler wrote about resentment, it has finally found a home for its falsified worldview in Facebook, Twitter, and other so-called social media. In Ibsen's play, an inmate suffering from a delusion that he is a pen cuts his own throat in a vain attempt to confirm his reality. This signing of the contract in blood is no longer necessary in a world where this bond has been always already signed, with a simple click on "I agree" as the basic condition of (online) existence. Peer, not Ubu, knows how to take advantage of this world exposed to falsification.

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