THE PERFECT PARASITE LIVES IN APARTMENT BLOCK 176

ANXHELA ÇIKOPANO[1]

Abstract

This paper explores *Pallati 176* (*Apartment Block 176*), the most performed theatrical comedy in Albanian history, as a site of ideological and cultural subversion during late socialism. Premiering in 1986, the play's massive popularity—over 500 performances—can be attributed to its witty dialogue, naturalistic tone, and its central figure, Vani, portrayed masterfully by Roland Trebicka. Vani, a charming schemer, aspires to a storekeeper's post not for its responsibilities but for

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its comfort and power. Though not legally unemployed, his refusal of physical labor and pursuit of influence position him as a parasite-in-the-making—a figure deeply resonant with the regime's anxieties around idleness and bureaucratic privilege. Through Vani, the play stages a comedy of disruption: manipulating engagements, circulating gossip, and authoring an anonymous letter, he operates as what Michel Serres defines as a "parasite"—not merely a freeloader, but a system intruder who generates change through noise and interference. His eventual "punishment"—voluntary reeducation in a remote village—reads both as ideological closure and ironic triumph: a man expelled by the system only to reenter it through kinship and cunning. By placing Vani within the legal and ideological frameworks of Albania's 1973 and 1976 "parasite decrees", and comparing them to similar policies in the Soviet Union and GDR, the paper argues that the parasite was a figure of ambivalence—at once marginal and central to the socialist order's eventual unraveling. *Apartment Block 176* thus exemplifies how late socialist theater could conceal critique beneath laughter, embodying resistance not through overt protest, but through the comic art of survival—produced at a subconscious level.

Keywords: *Albanian theater, late socialism, parasite, ideological subversion, communist theater*

Paraziti i përkryer jeton në pallatin nr. 176

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Abstrakt

Ky punim shqyrton *Pallatin 176*, komedinë më të shfaqur në historinë e teatrit shqiptar, si një hapësirë përmbysjeje ideologjike dhe kulturore rreth fundit të socializmit shqiptar. Premiera e vitit 1986 dhe popullariteti masiv i shfaqjes (me mbi 500 të tilla), lidhen me batutën e shkathët, natyrshmërinë në vënien skenike dhe me personazhin kryesor, Vanin, të interpretuar mjeshtërisht nga Roland Trebicka. Vani, një marifetçi simpatik, aspiron postin e magazinierit jo për përgjegjësitë, por për rehatinë dhe pushtetin që sjell. Edhe pse teknikisht i punësuar, refuzimi i punës fizike dhe kërkimi i pushtetit e vendosin atë në kushtet e një aspiranti parazit: një figurë që përkon me ankthin ideologjik të regjimit ndaj dembelizmit dhe privilegjit burokratik. Përmes Vanit, shfaqja sjell një komedi thyerjesh: ai sajon fejesa, përhap thashetheme dhe shkruan një letër anonime. Kjo përkon me konceptin e Michel Serres-it për parazitin, jo si një përfitues pasiv, por si një ndërhyrës në sistem, që prodhon ndryshim përmes zhurmës dhe prishjes së rendit. "Dënimi" i tij përfundimtar, riedukim vullnetar në një fshat të largët, shfaqet si mbyllje ideologjike, por në thelb është një fitore ironike: një njeri i dëbuar nga sistemi që rihyn në të përmes lidhjeve familjare dhe marifeteve. Duke e vendosur Vanin në kontekstin e ligjshmërisë shqiptare për "parazitin" të

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viteve 1973 dhe 1976, si dhe duke e krahasuar me ligjshmëri të ngjashme në Bashkimin Sovjetik dhe në Republikën Demokratike të Gjermanisë, punimi argumenton se paraziti ishte një figurë dyplanëshe: sa e padobishme, aq edhe thelbësore për shpërbërjen e rendit socialist. *Pallati 176* përfaqëson kështu një shembull se si teatri i socializmit të vonë mund të fshihte kritikën pas së qeshurës, duke mishëruar rezistencën jo përmes protestës së hapur, por përmes artit komik të mbijetesës, ndonëse i prodhuar në një nivel të pavetëdijshëm.

Fjalë kyçe: *teatri shqiptar, socializmi i vonë, paraziti, përmbysje idologjike, teatër i komunizmit*

I. Introduction: What is this Apartment Block 176?

If read in Albanian, the mere mention of *Pallati 176* (*Apartment Block 176*) would immediately bring a smile to the face of many Albanians. Why? Because it is the best-selling comedy in Albanian theater history. Premiering on 18 March 1986 at the People's Theatre in Tirana, it counts over 500 performances,[3] which could be considered—in today's terms—a viral show, far surpassing other highly acclaimed and frequently attended plays such as *Cuca e maleve (The Girl of the Mountains*, dir. Pirro Mani, 1967) with 265 performances, *Toka jonë* (*Our Land*, dir. Pandi Stillu, 1954) with 283 performances, and *Fisheku në pajë* (*The Bullet in the Dowry*, dir. Serafin Fanko, 1967) with over 250 performances. Notably, those productions were heavily supported and backed by the Party, as they

[3] Personal interview with one of the directors, Alfred Bualoti, conducted for the purposes of this article.

promoted the political ideology and propaganda of their time,[4] but *Apartment Block 176* was something else entirely considered from a propaganda perspective. It is a comedy filled with endearing characters and memorable lines—so memorable, in fact, that many people still know them by heart and recite them just as the actors once did. Some of these lines have even become part of the cultural lexicon, passed down through generations.

When the play was first presented in the People's Theater, only a few believed it was a good piece, and no one seems to have anticipated the play's wildly successful run and lasting cultural and social impact. The Artistic Committee Meeting that followed the general reading rehearsal shows generally positive inclinations toward the play, although not all members were enthusiastic. [5] Some dismissed it as merely a comedy of misunderstandings blended with a comedy of characters, while others criticized the anonymous letter at the center of the plot—originally reflected in the play's working title, *The Anonymous Letter*—as unoriginal and derivative. Questions were also raised about the play's educational value or the lack of a positive hero at the center of the plot.[6] In an interview with *Ylli* magazine, the

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[4] Anxhela Çikopano, *Kode zakonore në dramaturgjinë shqipe* [*Customary Laws in Albanian Drama*], Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese Morava, 2020, p. 127.

[5] Personal interview with the author, Adelina Balashi, conducted for the purposes of this article.

[6] National Theater Archive, "Shënime të mbledhjes së Këshillit Artistik pas provës së përgjithshme të leximit" ["Artistic Committee Meeting Notes Following the General Reading Rehearsal"], 14 February 1986, Dossier 193, Diskutime *Letra anonime, Pallati 176* [Discussions, *The Anonymous Letter, Apartment Block 176*], pp. 1-6; "Analizë e shfaqjes" ["Analysis of the

director of the People's Theater at the time, Muharrem Shtylla, reported an above-average demand for performances of *Apartment Block 176*, noting that the play addressed a socially relevant and contemporary topic, and that both the directorial and acting levels were of a consistently high standard.[7] But the play's major success can be attributed even to its ideological lightness, its socially grounded focus on everyday issues rather than overt political themes,[8] the natural and non-heroic direction of the young directors Alfred Bualoti and Andon Qesari, in addition to

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Performance"], 2 May 1986, Dossier 193, Diskutime *Letra anonime, Pallati 176* [Discussions, *The Anonymous Letter, Apartment Block 176*], pp. 1-11.

[7] "Si do të jetë sivjet repertori në Teatrin Popullor?" ["What Is Going to Be this Year's Repertoire at the People's Theatre?"], *Ylli* [*The Star*] no. 6, 1986, p. 16. The same features were emphasized in contemporary press coverage: Aida Shehu, "Pas dritareve të një pallati" ["Beyond the Windows of an Apartment Block"], *Shqiptarja e Re* [*New Albanian Woman*] no. 8, 1986, pp. 19-20; Petraq Xhillari, "Realizim në të gjithë përbërësit" ["An Achievement in All Its Components"], *Drita* [*The Light*], 30 March 1986; Z. Gurakuqi, "'Pallati 176' një komedi e mirëpritur në skenën e Teatrit Popullor", ["'Apartment Block 176' a Welcome Comedy on the Stage of the People's Theatre"], *Nëntori* [*November*] no. 7, 1986, pp. 208-210; Sokol Angjeli, "Bashkëpunim i frutshëm i autorëve të një premiere" ["Fruitful Collaboration of the Authors of a Premiere"], *Zëri i Popullit* [*The People's Voice*], 23 April 1986; "'Pallati 176' në skenën e Teatrit Popullor" ["'Apartment Block 176' on the Stage of the People's Theater"], *Bashkimi* [*The Union*], 27 March 1986; "Shfaqja e 250-të e 'Pallatit 176'" ["250th performance of 'Apartment Block 176'"], *Drita* [*The Light*], 17 January 1988.

[8] The first version of the play was published in the periodical *Teatër* [*Theatre*] and adopted a more explicitly political approach than the staged version, which is almost devoid of such elements. Nevertheless, as the title suggests, Vani was already at the center of the play. See: Adelina Balashi, "Vani dhe të tjerë" ["Vani *et al*"], *Teatër* [*Theatre*] no. 4, 1985, pp. 5-81.

the appeal of the music score and the dynamic stage design, and to the mastery of the acting troupe—especially Roland Trebicka, who delivered what would become his landmark role.[9] *Apartment Block 176* was staged with double casts,[10] and it appears that one particular performance—the one now available as a recording[11]—was especially well-received by the public. The playwright herself favored Roland Trebicka's portrayal, feeling that he truly captured the essence of the protagonist, Jovan "Vani" Bregu, more convincingly than the other interpretations she had seen—whether performed by the alternate cast actor or in a separate staging by an amateur troupe,[12] because

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[9] Interview with Alfred Bualoti.

[10] For clarity, I will refer to them from now on as Cast 1 and Cast 2. The actors of Cast 1 were: Vani – Roland Trebicka; Marjeta – Elida Janushi; Perikli – Anastas Kristofori; Liri – Pavlina Mani; Elsa – Eva Alikaj; Fredi – Gëzim Rudi; Rita – Violeta Manushi; Sandri – Ilir Bezhani; Irena – Rajmonda Bulku. The actors of Cast 2 were: Vani – Mërkur Bozgo; Marjeta – Margarita Xhepa; Perikli – Xhemil Tagani; Liri – Antoneta Papapavli; Elsa – Elvira Diamanti; Fredi – Ndriçim Xhepa; Rita – Luiza Hajati; Sandri – Andon Koço; Irena – Merita Zoto. The recorded version features Cast 1, with one exception: Rajmonda Bulku was replaced by Merita Zoto, as the original actress was unavailable due to film commitments. It should be noted that the stage design was created by Kristo Çala, while the original song was composed by Ardit Gjebrea and performed by Justina Aliaj.

[11] *Pallati 176* (Telekomedi/Telecomedy), directed by Alfred Bualoti and Andon Qesari (1986; YouTube video, 1:54:20), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMtzKhicfT8 [last accessed on 10 July 2025].

[12] Interview with Adelina Balashi. The amateur troupe performance that Balashi refers to is the one given by Ndërmarrja e M. M. S. "Hamit Shijaku" (Enterprise E. S. E. "Hamit Shijaku") during the 1985 Theater Week of Professional and Amateur Troupes of Tirana. It was titled *Një letër anonime*

Roland Trebicka's "Vani" applied more of what the theater scholar Eli Rozik calls "comic acting"—a way of performing in an exaggerated, crooked and bold physical gesture, particularly grimace, and distorted intonation.[13] Rozik also claims that comedy is characterized by much use of base means such as trickery, deception, secrecy and eavesdropping, and that is the lifting of an inhibition (I will return to this aspect at the end) by a character which produces anxiety, and explains its high potential to produce laughter.[14] To that one can add "dramatic irony", which gives the author and the audience the advantage of understanding the character's world, while "ironically contemplating" what happens in the fictional world, both worlds being separated by an ontological gap.[15]

Do all these features of comedy apply to *Apartment Block 176*? Let's peel back the layers and see. A young couple, Elsa and Fredi, are in love; however, they live in a society in which public displays of affection prior to official engagement were regarded as "illicit love", compelling them to conceal their relationship from their families until they are prepared to

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[*An Anonymous Letter*], and was directed by Qenan Toro, stage design by Kujtim Sadushi, and cast: Vani – Naum Shundi; Marjeta – Meleqe Alushi; Perikliu – Agim Demi; Liria – Alma Reçi; Fredi – Artan Sejko; Elsa – Elvira Diamanti; Sandri – Andon Koço; Irena – Diana Pilkati; Rita – Xhulieta Gjerko; Tomi – Pëllumb Resuli; The Woman – Esmeralda Sirixhiu; Her Husband – Ardian Bejko. Information obtained by a leaflet found in the National Theater Archive.

[13] Eli Rozik, *Comedy: A critical introduction*, United Kingdom, Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2011, p. 75.

[14] Ibid., p. 76.

[15] Ibid., pp. 31-62.

formalize it through engagement. Elsa is a first-year engineering student; Fredi has completed vocational training in construction, and, after a period of unemployment, has recently applied for a job at a state construction enterprise. The play opens with one of their semi-secret meetings. Their meeting spot is outside the building where they both live: apartment block 176. As they speak, a woman passes by—Rita, first cousin of Fredi's father, Vani. She sees them together, and Fredi is certain that this sighting alone will be enough to fuel rumors within the family. In the performed version of the show (though not in the original play), Vani himself also passes by and sees them, but Fredi manages to hide—so Vani fails to recognize that his neighbor's daughter is meeting in secret with his own son.[16]

Vani enters his apartment and finds his wife, Marjeta, cleaning their new home. They have recently moved into this building, which was constructed through the "voluntary efforts" of workers from the same state enterprise where Vani is employed. As such, it is assumed that most—if not all—of the residents are employees from that same enterprise. This explains why Vani now lives one floor below Perikli, the director of the enterprise—a common arrangement during the final decades of communism in Albania. In fact, many people at the time worked (without pay) on two or three such buildings before they could "earn" the right to their own apartment, whereas enterprise directors and party secretaries would simply have their names registered as voluntary workers and receive an apartment without ever lifting a finger. Returning to the story: it's payday, and Vani comes home with less money than expected—having spent a

[16] *Pallati 176*, 5:30 [last accessed on 10 July 2025].

considerable amount on a lavish lunch at one of the most expensive state-run hotel restaurants with the brother-in-law of his boss Perikli's brother. Vani believed that he could help persuade Perikli to appoint Vani to the position of storekeeper—a position he dreams of (more on why later). However, by the end of this grand lunch, the man bluntly informs Vani that the position is not for him. Meanwhile, his cousin Rita arrives at the apartment, deeply worried about her brother Sandri, who is the chief engineer at the same state enterprise. Sandri is talented, hardworking—and still single. At the time, it was common practice for the Party to regularly relocate technical and bureaucratic personnel, particularly engineers, to remote construction or industrial sites. A new hydroelectric plant is being built in the north, and since Sandri has no personal attachments like a wife or children, he is a likely candidate for transfer. Alarmed by this, Rita insists that Sandri must be engaged immediately. She has heard rumors and, based on what she believes is a brilliant idea, proposes arranging an engagement with Perikli's daughter—completely unaware that this girl is the same one she saw earlier meeting with Fredi.

Vani finds this an excellent idea, because such an engagement would make him an in-law of the director of the state enterprise, so he might benefit from favoritism in order to get the storekeeper position. He must first remove Irena, Sandri's co-worker and love interest, from the equation though. Vani (correctly) perceives that Sandri and Irena are verging toward some romantic relationship, which might end in an unwanted engagement. Disapproving of Vani's proposed methods for arranging the desired engagement, which Rita agrees to, Marjeta

leaves the house. Being left alone, Rita tells Vani that she saw his son with a girl, which implies that the boy has a lover. As soon as she shares this information with Vani, Fredi enters the house, thus facing the rumor head-on. While they are discussing the matter, it comes out that despite Vani's efforts to fix his son a high-earning job,[17] Fredi has applied to work in a construction enterprise, with the intention of later attending university part-time and becoming an engineer, but neither Vani, nor Rita are happy with his choice of working place. When asked about the girl, Fredi—predictably—observes that his father is clearly flattered by the fact that the girl's father holds a leadership position in a workplace or institution, and that she is an only child—qualities Vani had just praised moments earlier while discussing Sandri's potential engagement. Yet as soon as he learns that the girl is in her first year of studies, and it will require four more years before she can start working and earning a wage, he immediately disapproves of his son's choice. Ironically, it never even occurs to him that Fredi's girlfriend might be the very same girl they had just been considering for Sandri.

The next tableau takes place in Sandri's office, where he and his colleague, the economist Irena, share a quiet moment of flirtation. Although it is clear that both are interested in one another, they are equally shy and awkward, hesitant to take the next step. Suddenly, Vani appears at the office door, clearly an unwelcome presence. As Sandri is called away for urgent work matters, Vani seizes the opportunity to speak "casually" with

[17] Only in the working copy of the play is mentioned that he wants to fix him a bartender position, where he can earn four times more than an engineer, not in the show.

Irena. He paints a grim picture of Sandri's household, portraying the women in the family as overbearing "man-eaters", and adds that Sandri is incapable of managing romantic matters on his own—hence, the family is arranging an engagement for him. Vani goes on to praise the other "candidate", speaking highly of her, but is forced to cut the conversation short when Sandri returns. Having accomplished his mission, Vani leaves the office, while Irena remains behind, visibly shaken. Convinced that Sandri is not who she thought he was, she now struggles to even look him in the eye, feeling as though she has been deceived by an impostor.

Jumping ahead to several days later in Vani's home, the original play opens the scene with Vani, Marjeta, and Fredi. Fredi is preparing to leave for a retirement party, visibly happy because he has just brought home his first paycheck. After he leaves, Marjeta and Vani begin discussing the plan to arrange Sandri's engagement—until they are interrupted by Rita's arrival. In the performed version, however, the scene opens differently: Vani returns home carrying groceries [18] and immediately begins arguing with Marjeta over the clumsy and morally questionable way he and Rita are handling Sandri's would-be engagement to Elsa. Although she finds the plan distasteful, Marjeta admits that, at its core, the match does make sense—the young man and the young woman seem to suit each other well. Their argument is interrupted when Rita enters and halts the dispute. After reviewing the situation, it becomes clear that neither Vani nor Rita has succeeded in persuading Elsa's parents, who refuse to

[18] *Pallati 176*, 37:45, [last accessed on 10 July 2025].

even consider an engagement before their daughter has finished university. At this point, Vani triumphantly claims success in sabotaging Sandri's budding romance with Irena. Eager to advance their plan, he proposes sending an anonymous letter to Perikli, alleging that Elsa is secretly seeing an unsuitable boy. The aim is to pressure Perikli and his wife, Liri, into quickly arranging Elsa's engagement—with the "good match" they already have in mind. Vani and Rita are energized by this manipulative strategy, while Marjeta, disapproving of such lies, leaves them alone to carry out their plan.

Upon reading the anonymous letter that has been pushed under their front door, Liri is nearly frantic, pacing the apartment in frustration as she waits for Perikli to return home. The note, supposedly written by "a friend who has their best interests at heart", reads as follows:

> "Dear comrade Perikli! Your daughter is being followed around by a young man—a vagabond, a fraud, a liar who has neither a job, nor a trade. He clings to her and doesn't leave your daughter in peace for even a minute. And his family—what can I say—especially the father, is a swindler and schemer like no other. The problem is that your daughter seems to have started liking this scoundrel. That's why, before it's too late… you know best, of course, but in situations like this, the best remedy is to engage her to a good man, someone worthy of your family. Please forgive the intrusion, but I wish you well—I think of your daughter as if she were my own, and that's why I wrote you this letter."[19]

[19] Adelina Balashi, *Pallati 176* [*Apartment Block 176*], working copy of the play (courtesy of the playwright), 1986, pp. 21-22.

Totally shocked, Liri and Perikli decide to confront their daughter, who has just returned from a study session with a friend. Step by step, they draw the truth out of her: she is in love with the son of their neighbor, Vani. Perikli is stunned by the revelation—especially since he has been planning to send Vani away for reeducation in a remote village called Borizan (a topic to be explored in more detail later). Ironically, the anonymous letter turns out to be partially true: although Fredi is no longer unemployed, he was until recently, which—at least in Perikli's eyes—justifies calling him a "parasite". Such a display of "illicit love" threatens the family's honor and reputation and must be stopped immediately. Determined to take control of the situation, Perikli proposes Sandri as a potential suitor for Elsa. But Elsa firmly opposes the idea, leading to a heated family argument—one that closes the scene, both in the play and the show, with music playing over their discussions.

In the next scene, Elsa meets Fredi and desperately tells him they can no longer see each other. She reveals everything about the anonymous letter and the pressure from her parents. When Fredi asks whether someone else has been proposed for her hand, she hesitantly mentions Sandri. Fredi, in turn, points out the absurdity of the situation: Sandri belongs to the same "dissolute" family as his own—after all, they are first cousins through his father, Vani. The following day (or scene), Vani shows up uninvited at Sandri and Irena's office. Impatient, Sandri tells Vani to go speak with Perikli, the director of the enterprise, noting that his son, Fredi, had been there earlier—though Sandri has no idea what is truly going on. Irena quietly leaves the room, and Sandri is visibly troubled by her cold and distant behavior.

In the play, his friend Tomi enters the office shortly after, asking whether Sandri has finally confessed his feelings to Irena, but Sandri, bewildered by the sudden distance between them, explains the strange estrangement that has taken root—something he can't make sense of. In the performed version, this entire conversation is condensed into a phone call between Sandri and Tomi, where Sandri's side of the conversation conveys the same confusion and frustration.[20] Just as he is talking about Irena, she enters the office and overhears him. A heated argument ensues between the two. In the midst of their quarrel, Elsa unexpectedly bursts into the office. She ignores Irena's sarcastic remarks toward Sandri and immediately confronts him, accusing him of patriarchal arrogance for going behind her back and asking her father for her hand in marriage—thus, in her view, sabotaging her happiness. Stunned, Sandri openly and sincerely clarifies that he has no idea who she even is. He then fearlessly declares that the only woman he has ever loved is Irena. This moment marks a turning point in the story: Sandri and Irena reconcile, and Elsa, realizing the misunderstanding and the manipulation behind it all, apologizes and quietly leaves.

Elsa heads straight home and confronts her mother, telling her that she has spoken directly to Sandri—and even threatens to go to Vani's family to reveal the truth about the anonymous letter, claiming that her and Fredi are in love and there is nothing they can do about it. After making her point, she storms out, leaving Liri anxious and increasingly agitated. The moment Perikli returns home, she informs him of Elsa's threat, but he adds that Fredi, too, had confronted him earlier about the

[20] *Pallati 176*, 1:16:30, [last accessed on 10 July 2025].

situation. Alarmed by the mounting pressure and fearing that their secret may be exposed, Liri urges Perikli to pay a visit to Vani's apartment under the pretense of congratulating them on their new home. In truth, the visit is meant to uncover whether Elsa and Fredi have been there and whether Vani's family knows anything about this story.

Perikli and Liri's visit comes as a complete surprise to Marjeta and Vani. Vani had purposely avoided going to the director's office earlier, unsure of what might have transpired from his son's unexpected visit. Perikli and Liri realize that Fredi is not at home—and there are no apparent signs that either Marjeta or Vani knows anything about the relationship between Fredi and Elsa. Then comes the bombshell: Perikli, blunt and to the point, says, "To cut a long story short, your son is in love with our daughter".[21] The words hit Vani like a thunderclap. In that moment, he realizes that all the scheming, gossip, and slander he had initiated are now backfiring on him—and, what is worse, on his son. The mention of the anonymous letter only deepens his discomfort. Just as Vani struggles to process this unexpected reversal, Rita storms into the living room, unaware of the guests' identity. Furious and emotional, she launches into a tirade against Vani, exposing everything: the lies he told Irena about Sandri's family, the manipulative tactics he used, and—most shockingly—that he was the author of the anonymous letter aimed at disgracing Perikli's daughter. This revelation is now a bombshell for Perikli and Liri. Vani, caught in the act, openly confesses that he orchestrated everything himself. Perikli, clearly

[21] Balashi, *Pallati 176*, p. 43.

displeased, admits he was already preparing to send Vani to a remote village as part of a reeducation assignment, due to numerous complaints filed against him at the enterprise, but now they might become in-laws. In a sudden twist, Vani promises to change—he even volunteers to go to the remote village, all for the sake of preserving the love between the two young people. And they all lived happily ever after.

II. Why would reeducation in a remote village be a happy ending for such a comedy?

As I mentioned earlier, there are several points that require further elaboration, such as: 1) Vani's dreams of becoming a storekeeper, and 2) Perikli's plans to send Vani away for reeducation in a remote village. The author, Adelina Balashi, in an interview conducted for the purposes of this article, explained that when she wrote the play in 1985, she did not intend to address a social or political issue directly. Her primary concern lay in family dynamics, which she viewed as a rich source of themes to explore. According to her, the character of Vani was conceived not as a villain or thief, but rather as a trickster—a smooth operator who seeks to benefit from any opportunity with minimal effort. Balashi described him as the kind of person who takes advantage of a crumbling state system, as many people did at the time. A telling example occurs when Vani returns home with two cans of oil paint. Marjeta refuses to accept them, believing they are stolen. Vani, however, using his usual smooth-talking tactics, insists they are simply "savings". He claims to be answering the state's call to economize by applying only one coat of enterprise-supplied paint to a timber roof truss, thus "saving"

two cans for himself.[22] Furthermore, at one point in the play, Vani admits he doesn't like working much—but no one can accuse him of being dishonest.[23] This is the kind of trickster Balashi had in mind—not a petty criminal, but someone who bends the system for personal gain.[24] This also explains why Vani dreams of becoming a storekeeper. As he himself puts it:

> "I gain the warehouseman's job, you little brat! I gain the comfort, the money, the influence. Everyone's going to need me. Vani over here, Vani over there. And Vani... will be sitting pretty, hat pulled down, not a care in the world."[25]

Actually, Vani has been pursuing Perikli for the past two years for that position, because he no longer wants to work as an installer. He is tired of physical labor—even though Marjeta insists he was never much of a hard worker to begin with, not even in his youth.[26] As noted in the quoted passage, the position of storekeeper comes with additional income and influence. Vani's ambition is to transition into what historian Artan R. Hoxha describes in his article "First 'Circulating' and Later 'Educating': Enver Hoxha and the Disempowerment of the Techno-Bureaucratic Establishment in Communist Albania" as

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[22] Balashi, *Pallati 176*, p. 5. Please note that this scene appears only in the written version of the working copy of the play and was not included in the staged performance.

[23] Ibid., p. 44.

[24] Interview with Adelina Balashi.

[25] Balashi, *Pallati 176*, p. 17.

[26] Ibid., p. 4.

"a distinct group tied to paperwork and the use of the pen".[27] This raises a question tied to the title of this article: Why is Vani considered a parasite simply for aspiring to a more comfortable life—rather than for abandoning work altogether, which is what *the law* actually defined as parasitic behavior? Yes, the law. On 29 June 1973, a decree titled "Mbi detyrimin e parazitëve në punë" ("On the Compulsory Employment of Parasites") was issued and stated:

"Article 1: Male persons[28] who have reached the age of 15

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[27] Artan R. Hoxha, "First 'Circulating' and Later 'Educating': Enver Hoxha and the Disempowerment of the Techno-Bureaucratic Establishment in Communist Albania", in Mihaela Martin, Michael Daniel Sagatis and Dallas Michelbacher, eds., *Deportation in East Central Europe in the 20th Century: Snapshots of Invisible Incarceration*, New York: Peter Lang USA, 2024, pp. 47-70 (p. 55).

[28] On 3 January 1981, in "Raport mbi zbatimin e Dekretit Nr. 5072, datë 29 qershor 1973, 'Mbi detyrimin e parazitëve në punë'" ["Report on the Implementation of Decree No. 5072, dated 29 June 1973, 'On the Compulsory Employment of Parasites'"], the chairman of the Legal Commission, Aranit Çela, after consultations across various districts, suggested amending the law to include the compulsory employment of women who refused to work and displayed poor moral conduct. However, a second report issued on 14 January 1981, recommended dropping this proposal, as the commission expressed hesitation regarding its implementation. Central State Archive, "Raport mbi zbatimin e Dekretit Nr. 5072, datë 29 qershor 1973, 'Mbi detyrimin e parazitëve në punë'" ["Report on the Implementation of Decree No. 5072, dated 29 June 1973, 'On the Compulsory Employment of Parasites'"], Fund 489 / The Presidium of the People's Assembly, Year 1981, Dossier 18, sheets 1-11. Such a concern was also raised on 31 January 1974 by the Bureau of Information within the Council of Ministers' apparatus, in a report on the situation of so-called "parasites" and their integration into the workforce. The report stated also that, within the seven months since the decree had come into effect, not a single parasite—as defined by the legal specification—had been

and, despite having been provided the conditions to work according to their ability [and training] avoid socially useful labor and live at the expense of other family members, or secure means of livelihood through profiteering, practicing a profession without a license, or through any other similar activity—when such conduct does not constitute a crime—shall be placed in compulsory labor.

Article 2: Upon the request of social organizations, state authorities, judicial organs, or the people's police, individuals who lead a parasitic lifestyle shall be warned by the executive committee of the people's council of their place of residence to enter into employment. If the aforementioned individuals do not agree to enter employment within 15 days from the date of the warning, they shall be assigned to work by decision of the executive committee of the district people's council, according to their ability [and training] in a job deemed reasonable, either within or outside their district of residence. The decision of the executive committee of the district people's council shall determine the duration of compulsory employment, which may not exceed three years.

Article 3: A person placed in compulsory labor shall

identified in Gramsh, Kolonjë, Mirditë, or Skrapar. Meanwhile, in 22 other districts, 1,357 individuals had been identified, 561 of them in urban areas and 796 in rural areas. Central State Archive, "Raport mbi situatën e parazitëve dhe integrimin e tyre në fuqinë punëtore" ["Report on the Situation of Parasites and Their Integration into the Workforce"], Fund 490 / The Council of Ministers, Year 1974, Dossier 440, sheets 1-2.

enjoy all the rights and obligations under the applicable legal provisions governing employment relations.

Article 4: If the person placed in compulsory labor, without justified reason, avoids the execution of the decision of the executive committee of the district people's council or abandons the assigned work, or seriously violates work discipline, he shall be penalized for a misdemeanor with a fine of up to 500 lek and, in case of repetition, with a criminal sentence of corrective labor or imprisonment of up to two years.

Article 5: The executive committee of the district people's council, on its own initiative or upon the proposal of the workplace where the person has been placed in compulsory labor, may decide to release him before the assigned term is completed, if his behavior and attitude toward work and society show that he has definitively renounced the parasitic way of life."[29]

The bracketed sections in Articles 1 and 2 of the 1973 decree were removed in 1976, when a new decree was issued: "Mbi amendime të dekretit Nr. 5072, të datës 29 qershor 1973, 'Mbi detyrimin e parazitëve në punë'" ("On Some Amendments to Decree No. 5072, Dated 29 June 1973, 'On the Compulsory Employment of Parasites'").[30] These changes were based on a report stating that it was impractical to place such individuals in jobs matching their training, especially when they were assigned

[29] *Gazeta Zyrtare e Republikës Popullore të Shqipërisë* [*Official Gazette of the People's Republic of Albania*] no. 3, 9 July 1973, p. 34.

[30] *Gazeta Zyrtare e Republikës Popullore të Shqipërisë* [*Official Gazette of the People's Republic of Albania*] no. 1, 14 February 1976, p. 4.

to work in village cooperatives.[31] Meanwhile, in Article 3 was added as part of the same amendments: "Those who are assigned to work in agricultural cooperatives are compensated according to the standard regulation 'On the Organization and Compensation of Labor in Agricultural Cooperatives'", because if these individuals were not going to be compensated according to "The Organization and Compensation of Labor in Agricultural Cooperatives", they would have had to be paid more than the other farmers and granted paid annual leave—benefits that did not apply to cooperative members, who were compensated based on the number of working days they completed.[32]

The parasite law was not unique to Albania but had precedents across the Eastern bloc. A notable example is the concept of the *asozialen* (asocials) in post-fascist Germany—both in the East and West. Despite its troubling legacy from the Nazi era,[33] during the 1950s, in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) these individuals were increasingly seen as available

[31] Central State Archive, "Mbi amendime të dekretit Nr. 5072, të datës 29 qershor 1973, 'Mbi detyrimin e parazitëve në punë'", ["On Some Amendments to Decree No. 5072, Dated 29 June 1973, 'On the Compulsory Employment of Parasites'"], Fund 489 / The Presidium of the People's Assembly, Year 1976, Dossier 25, sheets 5-6.

[32] Central State Archive (2 February 1974), "Sqarime mbi zbatimin e masave të punësimit të detyruar të parazitëve" ["Clarification on the Implementation of Provisions Regarding the Compulsory Employment of Parasites"], Fund 490 / Council of Ministers, Year 1974, Dossier 187, sheets 1-4.

[33] Andreas Musolff, "From Social to Biological Parasites and Back: The Conceptual Career of a Metaphor", *Contributions to the History of Concepts* vol. 9, no. 2, Winter 2014, pp. 18-32 (p. 25): https://www.jstor.org/stable/43610971 [last accessed on 15 July 2025].

labor resources within the context of socialist reconstruction and were subject to a de facto obligation to work. Beyond criminals and those openly defying social norms, the category of *asozialen* also included migrants from the Federal Republic, as well as juvenile "rowdies" whose nonconformist behavior—shaped by Western or politically "negative" influences—drew attention.[34] Beginning in August 1961, the GDR applied labor reeducation more broadly, particularly targeting so-called "work-shy" individuals. Courts ordered such persons to take on specific jobs as part of their reeducation. The concept, developed by John Lekschas and Joachim Renneberg, contributors to the development of socialist criminal law in the GDR, involved in discussions about the legal treatment of "asocial" individuals within the context of the state's authority and social discipline in 1961, held that asociality constituted a way of life fundamentally incompatible with socialism, and thus, in extreme cases, warranted punishment. This framing remained largely unchanged until the end of the GDR.[35]

A similar process unfolded in the Soviet Union with the creation of its own parasite law, which was the result of four years of internal debate and discussion.[36] Eventually, in May

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[34] Thomas Lindenberger, "'Asoziale Lebensweise': Herrschaftslegitimation, Sozialdisziplinierung und die Konstruktion eines 'negativen Milieus' in der SED-Diktatur", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* vol. 31, no. 2, April-June 2005, pp. 227-254 (p. 230): https://www.jstor.org/stable/40186227 [last accessed on 15 July 2025].

[35] Ibid., p. 237.

[36] Reinhold Beermann, "The Parasite Law in the Soviet Union", *The British Journal of Criminology* vol. 3, no. 1, July 1962, pp. 71-80: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23634828 [last accessed on 15 July 2025].

1961, the law was officially decreed under the title "On Strengthening the Struggle with Persons Avoiding Socially Useful Work and Leading a Parasitical Way of Life", where, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes:

> "[…] in a remarkable but characteristically Khrushchevian jump, […] the maximum penalty had metamorphosed from 5 years exile (under the draft anti-parasite law) to death (under the law on especially important economic crimes of 5 May I960)."[37]

This law targeted individuals engaged in "forbidden trades, private entrepreneurial activity, [and] speculation", as well as those who used their dachas, living spaces, or private cars to generate so-called "unearned" income.[38] As Fitzpatrick explains, the parasite could take many forms: "[…] an embezzler, plundering socialist property, a bribe-taker, a swindler, a speculator. Or a young idler, a flea-market trader. Or a college or technical school graduate who refuses his work assignment after graduation".[39] Robert Beermann deems this law "interesting" precisely because it reveals that the most prosperous categories were not necessarily idle—rather, they were testing new boundaries of personal and economical freedom, which was morally and potentially legally at odds with the core principles of

[37] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism", *Cahiers du Monde russe* vol. 47, nos. 1-2, January-June 2006, pp. 377-408 (p. 388): https://www.jstor.org/stable/20175002 [last accessed on 15 July 2025].
[38] Ibid., p. 389.
[39] Ibid.

Soviet doctrine.[40]

In the case of Albania, as political scientist, Sofokli Meksi, has shown in his article "Papërshtatshmëria e paradigmës totalitare në përpjekjen për të shpjeguar natyrën dhe dinamikën e regjimit stalinist shqiptar në vitet 1960-1962" ("The Inadequacy of the Totalitarian Paradigm in Attempting to Explain the Nature and Dynamics of the Albanian Stalinist Regime in 1960-1962"), even though the state boasted of having full control over production and society, the fact is that thefts, embezzlement, and misappropriation were so rampant that it became a primary criminal priority for the regime and a fully private economy flourished in secret, relying on the informal practices and benefits of certain groups within the socialist economic sector.[41]

Already since the late 1940s, economic crimes such as theft, embezzlement, and misappropriation, had often been treated as crimes against the state, which meant that their perpetrators were often considered as enemies of the people,[42] leading to what cultural theorist Jonida Gashi has described in a recent presentation as a key "development in the evolution of the figure of the class enemy", a figure that henceforth "came to denote a

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[40] Beermann, "The Parasite Law in the Soviet Union", p. 75.

[41] Sofokli Meksi, "Papërshtatshmëria e paradigmës totalitare në përpjekjen për të shpjeguar natyrën dhe dinamikën e regjimit stalinist shqiptar në vitet 1960-1962" ["The Inadequacy of the Totalitarian Paradigm in Attempting to Explain the Nature and Dynamics of the Albanian Stalinist Regime in 1960-1962"], *Politikja* [*The Political*] no. 2, 2017, pp. 7-39.

[42] Jonida Gashi, *Kinemaja para gjyqit: nga kinokronikat e gjyqeve të popullit te filmat e vigjilencës revolucionare të masave* [*Cinema on Trial: From the Newsreels of the Communist Show Trials to the Revolutionary Vigilance Films*], Tiranë: Pika pa sipërfaqe, 2025, pp. 17-18.

parasite in two—seemingly opposed—senses of the word: insofar as s/he represented a leftover of the 'overthrown classes' (*klasat e përmbysura*) that had exploited the sweat and toil of the people for their own benefit in the past (before the socialist revolution); and also insofar as s/he represented the forces that posed a threat to the construction of socialism in the present (after the socialist revolution but before the attainment of the classless society)".[43]

Thus, as long as Vani seeks to gain a position through which he will exploit the system for his own benefit, this aspiration alone is enough to provoke the concern of the state apparatus.[44] It is precisely this tendency—this drift toward comfort and personal convenience—that the law sought to prevent in a period marked by the waning of revolutionary fervor.[45] By sending Vani away for "reeducation" in a remote village, Perikli takes preventive action, essentially protecting himself before the state intervenes or before Vani commits a punishable offense. Theft in state-owned enterprises and warehouses rose sharply during the

[43] Jonida Gashi, "Irradicable Evil: Representations of the Enemy in Late Socialist Albanian Cinema", presentation given at "The Many Ethnographic Faces of the Parasite" workshop, held at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), University of Cambridge, 15 March 2024. I thank the author for sharing the manuscript with me.

[44] Please note that earlier in this article, the playwright defines Vani as "a smooth operator who seeks to benefit from any opportunity with minimal effort; someone who bends the system for personal gain; a trickster" and inadvertently she is depicting exactly a parasite.

[45] Hoxha, "First 'Circulating' and Later 'Educating'", p. 52.

final decade of communist rule[46]—a trend also reflected in contemporary cinematography, with films such as *Hije që mbeten pas* (*The Shadows Left Behind*, dir. Esat Musliu, 1985), *Të mos heshtësh* (*Speak Out*, dir. Spartak Pecani, 1985), *Hetimi vazhdon* (*The Investigation Continues*, dir. Mark Topallaj, 1988), and *Kush është vrasësi* (*Who Is the Killer*, Mark Topallaj, 1989).

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[46] Among other documents: Central State Archive, "Mbi çështjen penale që i përket Naxhije Lukës e shokë" ["On the Criminal Case Concerning Naxhije Luka and Associates"], Fund 493 / The High Court, Year 1980, Dossier 63, sheets 1-2; Central State Archive, "Mbi gjendjen e çështjeve të pezulluara për veprat penale në dëm të pronës socialiste, puna hetimore-operative për vitin 1985 dhe 3-mujorin e parë të vitit 1986" ["On the status of Suspended Cases Related to Criminal Offenses Against Socialist Property, and on the Investigative-Operative Work for the Year 1985 and the First Quarter of 1986"], Fund 492 / The General Prosecutor's Office, Year 1986, Dossier 117, sheets 2-16; Central State Archive, "Për ruajtjen e objekteve të tregtisë nga vjedhjet e jashtme" ["On the Protection of Commercial Establishments from External Thefts"], Fund 976 / The Ministry of Internal Trade, Year 1982, Dossier 208, sheets 4-6; Central State Archive, "Mbi disa probleme që dalin nga gjykimi i veprave penale të përvetesimit të pasurisë socialiste, vjedhjet e pasurisë së shtetasve dhe vrasjet e plagosjet" ["On Certain Issues Arising From the Adjudication of Criminal Offenses Related to the Misappropriation of Socialist Property, Theft of Citizens' Property, and Cases of Murder and Injury"], Fund 493 / The High Court, Year 1985, Dossier 238, sheets 1-12. I would like to cite from the last document: "If we look at the misappropriation of socialist property in the first half of this year, an increase is observed compared to the previous year. What is troubling is that this increase is seen year after year. […] An increase is noted both in large-scale misappropriations and in those of lesser value, although in the latter there have been numerous differentiations. This type of criminality becomes even more concerning when we consider that many of the misappropriations are committed by employees who administer material and monetary assets, since these offenses are carried out from within, gradually and discreetly, making them difficult to detect."

In such a climate, a person like Vani was undoubtedly a risk-bearer for the system, therefore he should not be considered a positive hero.

Yet, at the end of the play, when stepping back from his pursuit of the storekeeper position and by voluntarily offering to go to the remote village, Vani satisfies the formal expectations[47] of the political regime for a happy ending. But the subtext, even though not intended originally by the directors, is clear to both Perikli and the audience: Vani knows that becoming the in-law of the enterprise director, or of anyone well-connected, will eventually work to his advantage. The audience, too, understands that Vani's reeducation will likely be shorter and far less severe than what such punishments typically entailed. This explains why, during the meeting of the Artistic Committee of the People's Theatre on 14 January 1986, it was suggested that Vani should receive a harsher punishment,[48] rather than being allowed to emerge as a greater "winner", rewarded with an even closer relationship to the director. It is interesting to note that in the published version of the play in 1985, Perikli, the director, is reassigned to a remote village[49] due to the party's bureaucratic circulation policy, which makes him a less desirable "prize" to attain. However, a year later, when the play was staged, he

[47] Interview with Adelina Balashi.

[48] National Theater Archive, "Shënime nga mbledhja e komisionit të repertorit dhe e komisionit artistik" ["Repertoire Commission and Artistic Committee Meeting Notes"], 14 January 1986, Dossier 193, Diskutime *Letra anonime, Pallati 176* [Discussions, *The Anonymous Letter*, *Apartment Block 176*), p. 1-6.

[49] Adelina Balashi, "Vani dhe të tjerë" ("Vani *et al*"), pp. 37-38.

retained his position as director and punished Vani by sending him to the remote village. It should also be remembered that 1985 was the year of the dictator's death, and although Albania continued to be ruled with a heavy hand, the following five years would witness the gradual unraveling of the regime.

III. Conclusion: It is hard work being a perfect parasite

How much work does it take to avoid working at all?[50] To turn into something that has long been stigmatized and burdened with negative connotations throughout history such as the word "parasite"?[51] But in 1982, Michel Serres enters the world of the parasite with a new conceptual approach—one that is not necessarily negative, or at least so broadly redefined that it loses its exclusively pejorative framing. According to Serres, a parasite is someone who introduces noise or interference into a system in an effort to recode that system for personal gain.[52] In Vani's case, that interference takes a classical form: the anonymous letter. He

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[50] In the Albanian Dictionary a parasite is *1. (biol.)* An animal or plant that lives on or inside another living being and develops by drawing nutrients from it; 2. *(fig., pejorative.)* A person who lives at the expense of someone else or of society. Jani Thomai *et al*, *Fjalor i gjuhës shqipe* [*Dictionary of the Albanian Language*], Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2006, p. 1012.

[51] To read more on the history of how and when the term was coined and interchanged from human behavior (specifically from theater) to biology and then back to human behavior see: Andreas Musolff, "From Social to Biological Parasites and Back: The Conceptual Career of a Metaphor." *Contributions to the History of Concepts* vol. 9, no. 2, Winter 2014, pp. 18-32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43610971 [last accessed on 15 July 2025].

[52] Michel Serres, *The Parasite*. Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, p. 14.

has tried persistently to gain the position he desires—offering lavish lunches to people he believes might be useful[53]—only to discover they are, in fact, useless and ungrateful, such as in the case of the brother-in-law of the brother of his enterprise director, Perikli.[54] So, Vani turns to information: he tries to produce and manipulate a narrative that might elevate his status, allowing him to rise from the ground he stands on to something closer to a "lion's den". The storekeeper role, after all, is defined by taking without giving in exchange.[55] Vani is a low-tier parasite aspiring to move higher within the parasitic hierarchy, closer to the director of the enterprise—what we earlier referred to as the distinct group tied to paperwork and the use of the pen. Serres claims that parasites operate in silence,[56] and Vani is no exception to the rule—he operates in silence and is easily unsettled by noises, disruptions beyond his control. This is exactly what happens when Perikli summons Vani to his office after Fredi has confronted him (Perikli): Vani never shows up.[57] Or when Rita exposes him in front of Perikli. And yet, Vani kept working. He was creative, constantly inventing new things. After eagerly pursuing the storekeeper position, he begins to introduce a series of new "noises": people acting as intermediaries to arrange the engagement, the stories he fabricates to keep Irena away—all culminating in the anonymous letter. Because it takes

[53] Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 31.
[54] Balashi, *Pallati 176*, p. 4.
[55] This is Serres' defition of the "lion's den". Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 26.
[56] Ibid., p. 52.
[57] Balashi, *Pallati 176*, pp. 31-32, 43.

effort—it takes real labor—to manipulate others' energies[58] and to become a perfect parasite. As Sergei Kuryokhin, Russian composer, pianist, music director, experimental artist, film actor, writer, and political figure states in an interview with the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, "the parasite forces the system to change in order to accommodate or expel it",[59] therefore they interact. What makes this process even more interesting is the activity of the parasite in that moment—when the system tries to expel it:

> "Chase the parasite—he comes galloping back, accompanied, just like the demons of an exorcism, with a thousand like him, but more ferocious, hungrier, all bellowing, roaring, clamoring. Have I described the elementary link of a system of knowledge or its pathology? I do not know. Anyway, it makes work, gives sustenance. One parasite drives out another."[60]

So, only a parasite can drive out another parasite. And here, I'd like to highlight the claim with which Sheila Fitzpatrick concludes her article "Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism":

> "Perhaps a better characterization of the country's

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[58] Serres, *The Parasite*, pp. 35-36.

[59] Alexei Yurchak, "A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kuryokhin Proved that Lenin Was a Mushroom", *Slavic Review* vol. 70, no. 2, Summer 2011, pp. 307-333 (p. 328): https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5612/slavicreview.70.2.0307. [last accessed on 11 October 2025].

[60] Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 18.

> trajectory, in light of what was to come, would be that even in the late 1950s and early 1960s the Soviet Union was already sidling into capitalism – 'parasites' in the vanguard."[61]

Here Fitzpatrick is essentially repeating one of the main accusations directed at the Soviet Union by countries like Albania and China at the time of the Sino-Soviet split, namely, that in the Soviet Union there had formed a privileged bureaucratic class which had all the makings of a socialist bourgeoise, a class that sooner or later would pave the way toward the restauration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. Interestingly, according to Meksi, such a privileged class already existed in the People's Republic of Albania at the outset of the 1960s as well:

> "[…] alongside the working class, one can distinguish a bureaucratic caste in a hegemonic political position with control over the means of production, as well as a class of small peasants and artisans, largely organized in production cooperatives. There was also a small caste of intellectuals, notable for their subordinate position relative to the bureaucratic caste. The stance of these groups toward the system, and the system's stance toward them, exhibited pronounced conjunctural variations."[62]

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[61] Fitzpatrick, "Social Parasites", p. 408.

[62] Meksi, "Papërshtatshmëria e paradigmës totalitare në përpjekjen për të shpjeguar natyrën dhe dinamikën e regjimit stalinist shqiptar në vitet 1960-1962", p. 35.

Although the Albanian communist regime would not have admitted as much at the time, in the second half of the decade, it would stress the importance of preventing the conditions for the formation of such a class in the country, leading to a period of upheaval in the form of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution. Notably, the latter began with a wide-ranging campaign against bureaucratism in 1966 and, as Gashi argues, "targeted phenomena that were explicitly framed as being of a parasitical nature—such as bureaucratism, religion, 'backward customs' (*zakone prapanike*), and 'alien influences' (*ndikime të huaja*)".[63] Thus, what the socialist projects feared during the Soviet Thaw of the 1960s was the overgrowth of parasites, and that led to the cultural revolutions in Albania and China.[64] The opposition to bureaucratism and parasites was a struggle for cohesiveness because, as previously argued, parasites occupy new spaces—of freedom and of economy—and introduce noise into the system. Ultimately, it is this very accumulation of disruptive, disorganized noise that unsettles the system and leads to the emergence of a new order.[65]

This suggests that the system would not remain indifferent to the growing popularity of this "perfect parasite". And indeed, it did react. Two years after the premiere—and only a few months after the celebration of the play's 250th performance—in November 1988, Arshin Xhego, editor-in-chief of the leading

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[63] Gashi, "Irradicable Evil", p. 5.

[64] On the cultural revolutions in Albania and China you can read more in Ylber Marku, "Socialism in Action: Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution and the Lessons from History", *Art Studies* no. 21, 2022, pp. 39-88.

[65] Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 55.

newspaper of the time, *Zëri i popullit*, concerned about the growing popularity of *Apartment Block 176* and other artistic works with a weaker ideological stance, commissioned an article inspired by the concerns of the head of state, Ramiz Alia, regarding the creative responsibilities on the shaping of public taste. The result was the article "Duke kërkuar përgjegjësi për formimin e shijeve" ("Calling for Responsibility in the Shaping of Public Taste"), written by Mimoza Ahmeti, who leaves the theater after the performance of *Apartment Block 176* with a feeling of pity for a comedy that, in her view, is dying out—lacking substantial artistic value; a "much ado about nothing" ending in a kind of magical harmony. After noticing that people keep laughing throughout the performance, even after 250 showings, and the performance keeps being sold out—ironic for a "dying out" show—she claims that:

> "The identification of the comic with laughter is typical of formalist art; realist art has regarded, and continues to regard, comic phenomena not one-dimensionally—not merely for their humorous aspect, but also for the danger they embody, thereby exposing their low and ugly core. A work that merely shows but does not inform, that speaks but says nothing—emphasized Comrade Ramiz Alia at the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party—such works may be anything, but they are not works of art."[66]

[66] Mimoza Ahmeti, "Duke kërkuar përgjegjësi për formimin e shijeve" ["Calling for Responsibility in the Shaping of Public Taste"], *Zëri i Popullit* [*The People's Voice*], 4 September 1988.

Furthermore, in a report on this article, Arshin Xhego expresses concern that Vani, instead of being considered a punishable and unappealing character is portrayed as likable, active, and successful, with the audience delighting in his achievements. Xhego is also troubled that the positive heroes—namely, the young couple—fail to challenge the old mentality with their new ideals, remaining peripheral rather than central to the comedy. He further noted the problematic inversion of moral order, whereby Vani, a beloved negative character, is "punished" (in effect, rewarded) by marrying the director's daughter—and that the audience, rather than rejecting him, embraces his triumph. [67]

Since the characters in comedy provide spectators with an opportunity to explore the possible consequences of disregarding inhibitions,[68] *Apartment Block 176* can be seen as anticipating the collapse of the communist system in Albania, subtly suggesting that those who defy the system and disregard its inhibitions in a "parasitic" manner (that is, by finding or creating spaces of freedom) might ultimately prevail. At the same time, the ever-increasing multiplication of parasites can be seen as contributing to the eventual fall of communism by also anticipating the rise of a new capitalist, entrepreneurial class. From this perspective, *Apartment Block 176* reveals a deeply ambivalent attitude toward both the end of socialism and the

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[67] Central State Archive, "Argumente mbi kritikën (mes të tjerave) të komedisë 'Pallati 176'" ["Arguments on the criticism—among others—of the comedy 'Apartment Block 176'"], Fund 14 / APSTR, Year 1988, Dossier 1430, sheets 1-5.

[68] Rozik, *Comedy: A critical introduction*, p. 254.

capitalist world to come. However, one should not be misled into thinking that this awareness, later translated into active resistance against the system. The eager crowds, the persistent enthusiasm to attend the play, and the shared appreciation of its subtext in the happy ending of a perfect parasite were closely linked to the atypical characters who escaped the confines of Albanian socialist realism, to the ideological lightness of the comedy, to the freshness of its new elements, and to the high-energy portrayal of a "turbo-Vani".[69]

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[69] This is the term used by the playwriter to describe Roland Trebicka's embodiment of the character. Interview with Adelina Balashi.

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Interviews

Personal interview with one of the directors, Alfred Bualoti, for this article.

Personal interview with the author, Adelina Balashi, for this article.

Videos

Pallati 176 (Telekomedi/Telecomedy), directed by Alfred Bualoti and Andon Qesari (1986; YouTube video, 1:54:20), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMtzKhicfT8, [accessed on 10 July 2025]

Tableau 1 – Vani "Helping" Marjeta – Cast 1
All images related to the show are courtesy of ©AlbanianNational Theater Archive.

Tableau 1 – Vani Giving the Wage to Marjeta – Cast 1

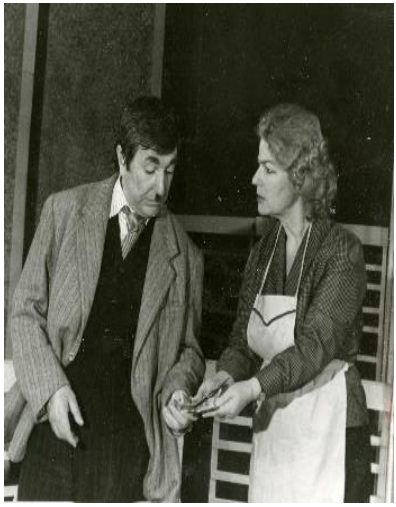


Tableau 1 – Vani Giving the Wage to Marjeta – Cast 2

Tableau 2 – Sandri Giving a Chocolate to Irena – Cast 1

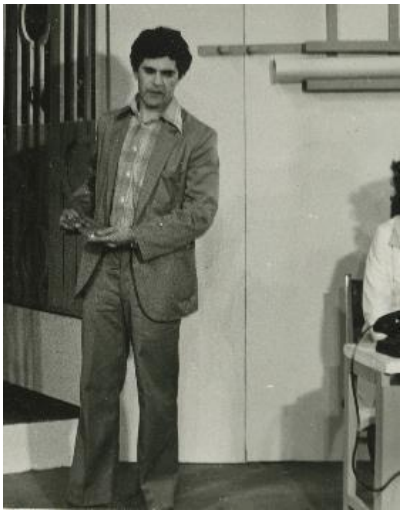


Tableau 2 – Sandri Giving a Chocolate to Irena – Cast 2

Tableau 2 – Sandri Giving a Chocolate to Irena; Vani Appears Unexpectedly – Cast 2

Tableau 2 – Vani Talking to Irena – Cast 1

Tableau 2 – Vani Talking to Irena – Cast 2

Tableau 3 – Vani Carrying Groceries – Cast 2

Tableau 3 – Vani and Rita Writing the Anonymous Letter; Marjeta Openly Disapproves – Cast 2

Tableau 4 – Liri Showing the Letter to Perikli – Cast 2

Tableau 4 – Liri and Perikli Confronting Elsa – Cast 1

Tableau 4 – Liri and Perikli Confronting Elsa – Cast 2

Tableau 4 – Perikli Talking to Elsa – Cast 1

Tableau 6 – Elsa Confronts Sandri, Who Tells Irena He Loves Her – Cast 1

Tableau 6 – Elsa Confronts Sandri, Who Tells Irena He Loves Her – Cast 2

Tableau 6 – Irena and Sandri Reconcile – Cast 2

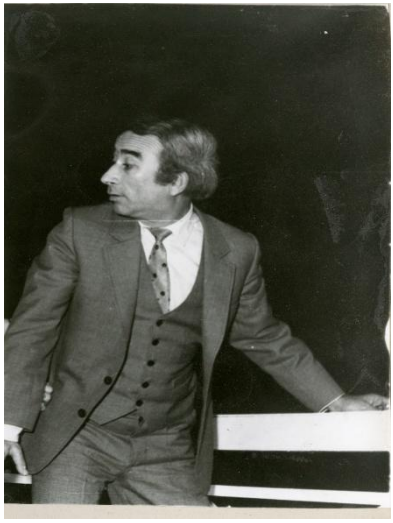


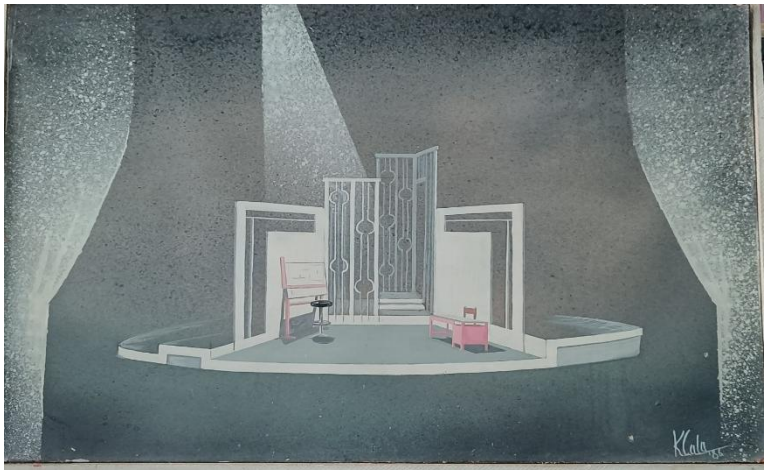
Tableau 7 – Perikli is Mad at Elsa – Cast 1

Tableau 7 – Liri Tries to Stop Him – Cast 1

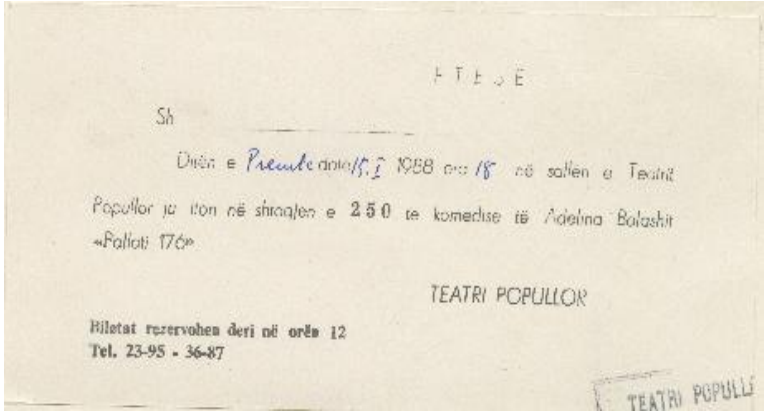
Tableau 8 – Perikli and Liri Inform Vani and Marjeta That Their Children Are in Love – Cast 2

Tableau 8 – Rita Storms the House and Exposes the Truth – Cast 2

Tableau 8 – End of the Play – Cast 1



Stage design of *Apartment Block 176*



F T E S E

Sh

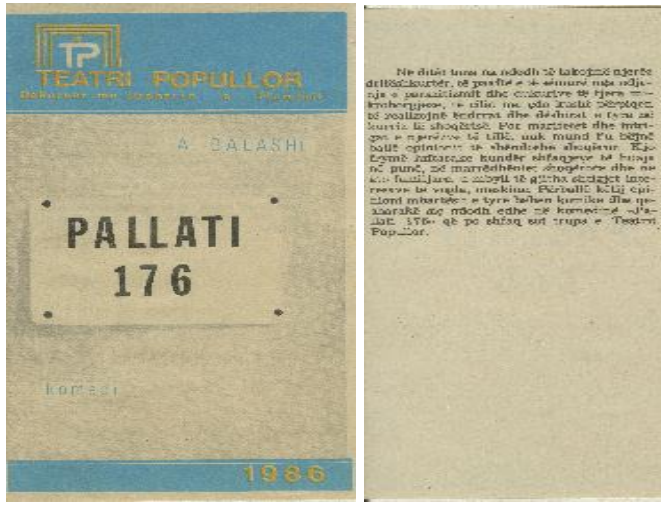
Ditën e Premte data 15.I 1988 ora 18 në sallen e Teatrit Popullor ju fton në shtagjen e 250 te komedise të Adelina Balashit «Pallati 176»

TEATRI POPULLOR

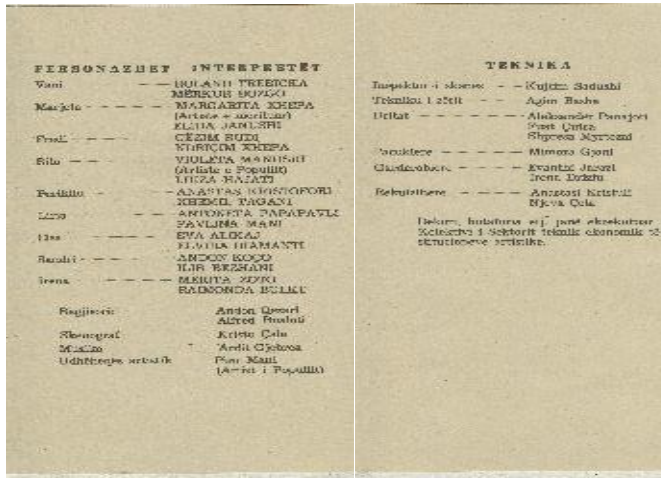
Biletat rezervohen deri në orën 12
Tel. 23-95 - 36-87

TEATRI POPULL

Special Invitation for the 250th Performance of *Apartment Block 176*



Leaflet of *Apartment Block 176* – The poster has the same design



Leaflet of *Apartment Block 176*

Costume of Vani – Both Casts

Costume of Perikli – Both Casts

Costume of Elsa – Cast 2

Costume of Liri – Both casts

Costume of Marjeta – Cast 1

Costume of Marjeta – Cast 2

Costume of Rita – Cast 2

Costume of Rita – Cast 1

Costume of Irena – Cast 2

Costume of Sandri – Both Casts

Costume of Fredi – Both Casts