



## Uglješa Šajtinac – Serbia

### *Sasvim skromni darovi (2011)*

Quite Modest Gifts

Publishing House **Arhipelag**

#### Biography

Uglješa Šajtinac was born in 1971 in Zrenjanin. He graduated in 1999 from the Department of Dramaturgy, Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. He won the Josip Kulundžić Award for the best student of dramaturgy, as well as the Slobodan Selenić Award for the best graduation text. Between 2003 and 2005, he was a dramaturge for the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad. He edited a collection of new dramatic texts by young authors, PROJEKAT 3, which were staged at the festival of the same name in May 2005 at the Serbian National Theatre. Since 2005, he has been teaching Dramaturgy at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad.

He has received the Biljana Jovanović literary award, the Vital Prize, and three screenplay awards (Novi Sad, Vrnjačka Banja and Warsaw). His drama *Hadersfeld (Huddersfield)* won the Jovan Sterija Popović Award for the best contemporary dramatic text at the Sterijino Pozorje Festival in 2005. He has been a member of the Serbian Literary Association since 2007.

#### Synopsis

*Quite Modest Gifts* is a novel that draws its power from immediate and passionate experience, marked by impressive energy and sincere emotions. It is an epistolary novel in which two brothers exchange emails about their seemingly ordinary, but essentially unusual and exciting existence in Serbia and the United States. Through a form of family chronicle, the novel intertwines numerous narratives about the personal experiences of individual characters, while raising a number of challenging questions about the world we live in. By insisting on the key importance of family as the source and the outcome, as man's elementary purpose, the author pushes to the background all other motives and problems, and reconciles all the opposites: from the generational gap to contrasts between the fervent centre, full of events, and the sleepy province; between the eastern cultural code and western mores, and between ideological differences and historical changes.

## *Sasvim skromni darovi*

### **Uglješa Šajtinac**

*Zaista, deco, mi bismo propali da već nismo propali.*

Temistokle

#### I

Dragi brate,

Negde sam na Brodveju, niže, kiša ne pada već udara u naletima. Ispod mokrih slušalica još čujem „Tri laka komada“ Džona Kejdža. Stao sam ispod tende i sad pokušavam da zapalim cigaretu. Starica se okreće za kišobranom koji joj je vetar istrkao iz ruku. Ona se samoj sebi smeje. Smejem se i ja. Iz potoka koji juri niz ulicu, tamo gde je nestao njen kišobran, sada iskače ogroman crni pas s povocem. Izgleda da je to tako ovde. Stvari se pretvaraju u bića a bića u predmete. Ovo i nije kiša, pre je oluja koja dolazi pravo sa okeana. Pušim i gledam u svoje čizme. Ja već stojim u vodi. Kao i svaki stranac, zamišljam da pored mene stoji neko ko razume jezik kojim govorim. Već imam duhove, da, red je da ti pomenem i to. Udišem kišu i „laki strajk“, ushićen kao ono kad smo bili mali, čujem Gordanin vrisak i vidim te kako nas skupljaš kao ćuriće ispred kapije. Otac je na poslu. Majka takođe. Tetka Juliška stoji na vratima i briše ruke kuhinjskom krpom. Ti nas uteruješ a ona nas hvata i govori nam da ne mrdamo iz predsoblja, pola na mađarskom, pola na srpskom. Gordana mi tegli majicu natopljenu vodom i smeje se. Posle negoduje dok nam tetka Juliška peškirom trlja glave a ti stojiš na pragu kuće i gledaš u dvorište. Onda si otrčao. Nikad nisam mogao

da pogodim kuda i zašto. Bio si stariji. Uvek si imao nešto više sopstvenih razloga od nas mlađih. Ti si tada već imao toliko stvari koje su samo tebe brinule. Tvoj bicikl, tvoji zečevi, tvoje baštenske instalacije kao onaj drveni avion-vetrenjača kojem se propeler na kljunu okretao kad duva vetar. Kako bi se sad klatio i okretao! Ako ne budem znao šta sa sobom više nego sada, jer ni sad ne znam, pokrenuću proizvodnju baš takvih aviona-vetrenjača jer to ovde nedostaje. Ni Menhetn nije savršen. Eno, našli su se gospodar i njegov pas. Sad čovek kleči u bari i mazi crno pseto kao da dodiruje važan deo sopstvene duše. Ti to razumeš. Nekad si bio bolećiv prema nemoćnima.

Da ti kukam, neću. Osim što nije dozvoljeno pušenje u lokalima koji prodaju kafu i alkohol, Njujork je dobar prema meni. Stigao sam pre tri dana. Na aerodromu me je sačekao Džoi, porodični čovek u ranim pedesetim godinama. On je koordinator projekta na koji smo pozvani, brine o tome da se snabdemo mapama, kartama za „sabvej“, novcem. Dobijaću sedam stotina zelembaća nedeljno! Uzimajući u obzir da smeštaj imamo, novac je tu da sebi obezbedimo hranu i piće. Zašto sam spominjao Džoija? Verovatno jer je on prva osoba s kojom sam pričao ovde. O japanskim automobilima. I on vozi „hondu“, nije patriota. Kad sam ga pitao kako je u Njujorku, on se nasmejao i rekao: „Nemam pojma, ja se dovezem na posao, odsedim pola dana u kancelariji i onda odem kući, ženi i deci u Konektikat.“ Tamo je priroda. A ti znaš da ne podnosim prirodu. Kad smo prošli naplatnu rampu i spustili se na Menhetn, srce mi je zaigralo od sreće.

Umalo da zaboravim! Uostalom, ako te bude zanimalo mogu potanko da ispričam kako smo se svi sakupili ovde u roku od dvadeset četiri časa. Dramski pisci iz istočne i srednje Evrope. Zanimljiva stvar se desila na putu ovamo, to ne smem da propustim. Sećaš se da mi je ona službenica

JAT-a rekla kako će se „potruditi da u Minhenu ne zakasnimo na avion koji leti za Njujork“. Dakle, izgrlili smo se tada i ti si me tešio kako će „sve biti okej čim napustim vazdušni prostor usrane otaDžbine“. Onda si se okrenuo i izašao sa aerodroma. Nekog si zvao mobilnim telefonom, stajao ispred. Gledao sam te sve dok nisi prešao put i izgubio se među automobilima na parkingu. Tu počinje moja avantura. Prvo, u Minhen smo sleteli sa zakašnjenjem. Tamošnji aerodrom je dugačak ali ne toliko glomazan da bi bio loše organizovan. Ipak, do terminala koji je vodio u letelicu za Njujork nije se moglo stići za pet minuta. Upravo smo toliko vremena imali, mi koji smo leteli dalje, da pokušamo. Bilo nas je troje. Jedan stariji čovek iz okoline Beograda, žena četrdesetih godina i ja. Uvidevši da smo u procepu, zaustavim stjuardesu JAT-a i pitam je: „Gospodo, kako mislite da mi stignemo do tamo za pet minuta?“ „Požurite, požurite“, rekla je unezvereno. Tabla s brojem terminala videla se u daljini, ali taj je broj bio toliko sitan da je postalo jasno da do nje nema manje od trista metara. Skoro da sam već potrčao, ali onda su nas zaustavile nemačke službenice. „Ne možete sad, terminal je već zatvoren“, govore su i već uspostavljale radio vezu s nekim. Stjuardesa JAT-a je bukvalno nestala iz aerodromske hale. Čovek, žena i ja gledali smo se bespomoćni. Onda je starina odlučio da kaže šta ima: „Šta mi, koji kurac, šalju kartu da idem da ih obilazim, lepo sam rekao da mene to ne zanima. Sedeo bih sad kod kuće i bio miran, jebem ti i decu i unučiće...“ Žena se vidno uzrujana primakla meni i čak me dohvatila za podlakticu: „Vi znate engleski, da, odlično, ja ne znam ni da beknem, dobro je, vi ćete nam pomoći?“ Posle nekoliko sekundi došla su dva policajca i sve troje smo privedeni u policijsku stanicu na aerodromu. Da, uhapsili su nas. Glupi, plavušni, germanski drot gegao se za nama kao

da u čmaru drži rezervnu konzervu „beksa“. U stanici su nas smestili u голу sobu s klupama, a onaj isti „Fric“ gledao nas je s vrata kao da smo tri iguane. Govorio je kroz groktaj, glasno i zadovoljno, s nekim koga nismo videli. Taj glas iz daleka već sam mogao da razaznam. Govorio je da treba pripremiti fotoaparata. Starina je sedeo na klupi s namerom da zapali cigaretu, ali ubrzo je odustao. Pušenje nije dozvoljeno ni van ove policijske stanice a kamoli nakon što ti se pogled susretne s pogledom bavarskog policajca. „Pitaj ti njih da li oni mene mogu da puste kući, jebeš ti ovo“, mrtav ozbiljan zamoli me starac. Nisam stigao da odgovorim jer su me već odvodili na slikanje. Tri poze, nemačkim aparatom, objektivom Karl Cajs moglo bi biti, jer, sad su opet ujedinjeni, Nemci! Nešto sam rekao na nemačkom u tom trenutku, recimo: „Zašto smo ovde?“ ili tako nešto, a onda je „Fric“ poskočio kao da je video verglaša s majmunom na ramenu. Doviknuo je „Hansa“ i mogao sam da razumem kako ponavlja: „Ovaj zna nemački“. Ima nečeg nesvarljivog u tome da te Nemci privode, pomislio sam. Prvo, meni stvarno nije bilo jasno zašto smo morali biti uslikani i to u prostorijama policije, drugo, slušati da ti Nemač nešto naređuje nije nimalo prijatno. „Da, znam nemački, učio sam ga u školi“, odgovorio sam. Ne govorim ga dovoljno dobro pa nisam u brzini mogao da ga pitam: „Zar je tolikim Jevrejima, od kojih je velika većina znala nemački, to znanje išta pomoglo onomad?“ A hteo sam. Onda su uslikali ženu i na kraju starca koji je tako vidno potonuo u nezadovoljstvo da sam pomislio da će oteti pištolj nekome od policajaca i sve nas poubijati. Uzeli su nam po dvadeset evra. Onda smo dobili po nalepnicu u pasoš i objašnjeno nam je da više nismo ilegalni imigranti i da sad imamo tranzitnu vizu za Nemačku. Do sledećeg aviona možemo mirno da negodujemo u aerodromskoj hali. Tako je i bilo.

Po svim pravilima dobro komponovanog epa, lepo je ubrzo zamenilo ružno. Počeli su da se izvinjavaju. Za nepunih pola sata bio sam u avionu za Frankfurt odakle će biti organizovan najbrži transfer ka Njujorku. Pride, nisam više sedeo već ležao u biznis klasi. „Lufthanzino“ iskupljenje je bilo potpuno. Za samo dvadeset evra, onih koji su završili u rukama germanskih pandura, što je svakako mnogo manje od razlike u ceni avionske karte u ekonomskoj i biznis klasi, sad sam leškario, imao u ruci daljinski za upravljanje video kanalima, ćebence. Pogledao sam dobro avionsku kartu kojom su zamenili moju, sada već sasvim beskorisnu. Recimo da je bila izdata nekoj ili nekom „Ramajani Upanišadi“, toliko sam skontao. Umesto nekog Indijca ili Indijke, moja slovenska barbarska telesina, moja skitska trupina, protezala se duž oborenih udobnih sedišta. Pronašao sam kanal klasične muzike na audio plejeru i uživao u adađu za gudače Semjuela Barbera. Kakav obrt! Animirana projekcija našeg aviona koji sledi putanju preko Atlantika šarenila se sa ekrana. Gledao sam i čekao da ukebam trenutak kad će mala letelica da se pomeri. Očajnički posao. Kad je došlo vreme klope bio sam upitan da li želim azijsku ili evropsku ponudu. Šta bi Orvel naručio? ! Verovatno slatki pasulj i dve prženice. Povrh svega, mene je oduševljavalo ćebence. Zgurio sam se pod njega i pokušao da spavam. Nije išlo. Pitao sam se i tada, i sad se pitam, dragi brate, čime sam ja ovo zaslužio. Ko je baš mene odabrao da iz Srbije dođem ovamo? Zašto? Nikad to nisam tražio. Nisam siguran ni da sam zaslužio. Sve je tako tajnovito i toliko neobavezno u isto vreme. Nije me pratila nikakva delegacija. Recimo, dramskih umetnika ili dramskih pisaca. Ne prenosim ničije poruke, nemam nikakav zadatak od opšte koristi. O ovome jedva da iko zna nešto tamo odakle dolazim. Zvanično, niko me nije ispratio, osim tebe. Hvala ti, uvek.

Pokušaću da odspavam malo. Pišem ti iz male sobe koja ima dva kompjutera i koja je posvećena sećanju na mladog dramskog pisca koji je prerano napustio ovaj svet. Njegovi roditelji su dali da se uredi mali studio i nazove njegovim imenom. Danju je ovde gužva a sada, u pola noći, nema nikog i oni koji su smešteni u samoj zgradi instituta već odavno spavaju. Odavde ću ti pisati tokom ove tri nedelje. Nerviraš me tim odbijanjem da instaliraš „skajp“, onda bismo mogli da se čujemo i pričamo do mile volje. Gordanu sam zvao telefonom. Jako je srećna zbog mene. Kaže, da vidim ima li načina da ostanem ovde, njoj se čini da je to dobra šansa za mene. Malo je tužna ispod svega, rekao bih. Da li se vas dvoje uopšte čujete nekad? Možda postoji nešto čime neće da me opterećuje. Molim te, proveri i porazgovaraj s njom. Zvao sam i roditelje. Dedi je zvučao okej, mađa malo umorno. On predlaže da nađem neku ribu ovde, klasika. Keva je zaposlena, to sam shvatio. Nije mi pominjala rešenje za penziju, to je verovatno boli. Kako ti vidiš sve to? Jebi ga, setio sam se. Mislim, to što ne mogu da nađem odgovore zašto sam ja zaslužio da me jedna američka institucija dramskih pisaca poziva da tri nedelje o njenom trošku tumaram centrom sveta. Samom sebi ne izgledam dovoljno dobar za tako nešto. To nije doživeo ni naš baba, nisi ni ti. Za mene su keva i on heroji, heroj si ti. Gordana je najsvetlija duša, pa eno je gde već deset godina živi kao podstanar, putuje na posao u neku selendru, ponižavajuće.

Oprosti mi ovakav kraj, a sad stvarno idem da legnem jer već sviće. Napiši mi šta da ti kupim. Pravim spisak. Stežem ti ruku i volim te.

Tvoj brat Vukašin, plod čreva iste matere!

# Quite Modest Gifts

**Uglješa Šajtinac**

*Translated from the Serbian by Professor Randall Mayor*

*Indeed, my sons, we would fail if we had not already.*

Themistocles

## I

My dear brother,

I'm somewhere on Broadway, further on down, and the rain is not just falling but is rather pelting me intermittently. Even so, in my wet earphones, I can still hear 'Three Easy Pieces' by John Cage. I've stopped under an awning and I'm trying to light a cigarette. An old woman turns after her umbrella which the wind has ripped from her hands. She's laughing at herself. I'm laughing too. From the stream rushing down the street, over where her umbrella disappeared, a huge black dog on a leash now leaps out. That's just how things are here, it seems. Things turn into beings, and beings turn into things. This actually isn't just rain, it's more like a tempest coming in from the ocean. I'm smoking and looking at my boots. The water has already covered them. Like every other foreigner, I imagine that there is someone standing next to me who understands the language I speak. I do have ghosts, yes, it's only fair that I mention it to you. I inhale the rain and my Lucky Strike, as excited as when we were little and I heard Gordana's voice and I see you gathering us like a flock of turkeys in front of the gate. Father is at work. Mother, too. Aunt Juliška is standing in the doorway and wiping her hands on a dishtowel.



You herd us in and she grabs us and tells us, half in Hungarian, half in Serbian, not to leave the entranceway. Gordana pulls at my t-shirt soaked in water and laughs. Later, she grumbles when Aunt Juliška rubs our heads with a towel, and you stand at the threshold and look out into the yard. Then you ran off. I could never guess where to or why. You were older. You always had more of your own reasons than we, the younger ones, did. Even back then you had so many things which worried only you. Your bicycle, your rabbits, your inventions in the garden, like that wooden airplane-windmill, whose propeller spun on its shaft when the wind blew. How it would be rocking and spinning in this storm! If I ever don't know what to do with myself more than now, because even now I don't know, I'll start producing just such airplane-windmills because they don't have them here. Not even Manhattan is perfect. There, the dog and its master have found each other. Now the man is kneeling in a puddle and petting his dog as if he is touching an important part of his own soul. You understand that. You used to have a weakness for the powerless.

I don't mean to gripe. Except for the fact that smoking is not allowed in places where they sell coffee and alcohol, New York is good to me. I arrived three days ago. I was met at the airport by Joey, a family man in his early fifties. He's the coordinator of the project we've been invited to participate in, and he makes sure we have maps, subway tickets, money and so on. I'll get 700 bucks a week! Taking into account the fact that our rooms are provided, they give us the money so we can eat and drink. Why did I mention Joey? Probably because he's the first person I spoke to here. About Japanese automobiles. He also drives a Honda, he's not a patriot. When I asked him how life is in New York, he smiled and said, "I have no idea, I drive in to work, sit half a day in the office and then go

home to my wife and kids in Connecticut.” There is a lot of nature in Connecticut. You know I can’t stand nature. When we went through the toll booth and glided into Manhattan, my heart jumped with joy.

I almost forgot! Among other things, if you’re interested, I can tell you in detail about how we all gathered here within 24 hours. Playwrights from Eastern and Central Europe. An interesting thing happened on the way here, I mustn’t forget to tell you about that. You remember that the JAT check-in clerk told me, “in Munich, try not to be late for your connection to New York.” Remember, we hugged and then you comforted me that “everything will be all right as soon as you leave the airspace of this shitty country you call a homeland.” Then you turned and went outside the terminal. You called someone on your cell, standing in front of the building. I kept watching you until you crossed the street and disappeared among the cars in the parking lot. That’s when my adventure began. First, we landed late in Munich. The terminal there is a long one, but it’s not so spread out that it is poorly organized. Even so, there was no way in five minutes to get to the terminal that led to the plane for New York. That was precisely how much time we had to try, those of us who were travelling on. There were three of us. An older man from outside Belgrade, a woman of fortysomething, and me. Seeing that we were in a tight spot, I stopped a JAT flight attendant and asked, “Pardon me, Ma’am, but how do you expect us to get there in five minutes?” “Hurry, hurry,” she said haggardly. The board with the terminal number could be seen in the distance, but the number was so tiny it became clear that it was at least 300 yards away. I was on the verge of running, but then some German attendants stopped us. “You can’t make it now, the gate is already closed,” they said and called in over

the walkie-talkie to someone. The JAT stewardess had literally disappeared from the airport terminal. The man, woman and I all looked on helplessly. Then the old fellow decided to say what was on his mind. “Why, why the hell, did they send me a ticket to visit them, I told them I didn’t really care. Right now I’d be sitting at home in peace and quiet, goddamn kids and grandkids.” The woman, visibly upset, moved closer to me and even grabbed me by the forearm, “You speak English, yes, great, I don’t know a word, it’s good, you’ll help us, right?” A couple of seconds later, two policemen came up and all three of us were taken to the police station at the airport. Yes, they arrested us. A stupid, blond, Germanic cop stomped after us as if he had a spare can of Beck’s stuck up his anus. At the station they put us in a bare room with benches, and that selfsame ‘Fritz’ watched us from the door as if we were three iguanas. He spoke with a rasp, loud and happy, to someone we couldn’t see. I could make out the other voice down the hall. It said that they needed to get the camera ready. The old man sat down on a bench in order to light a cigarette, but he quickly changed his mind. Smoking is not allowed even outside the police station, much less after a Bavarian policeman gives you one of his looks. “Ask them if they can just let me go home, screw this,” the old man asked me dead seriously. I didn’t get to answer him because they were already taking me off to photograph me. Three poses, with a German camera, it might have been a Carl Zeiss lens, because they’re united again, the Germans! I said something in German at that moment, something like, “Why are we here?” or something like that, which made ‘Fritz’ jolt like he had just seen an organ grinder with a monkey on his shoulder. He called out to ‘Hans’ and I understood him as he repeated, “This guy speaks German?” It doesn’t sit well when the Germans arrest

you, I thought. First of all, it really wasn't clear to me why we had to be photographed in the offices of the police at that, and second, hearing a German giving you orders isn't pleasant in the least. "Yes, I speak German, I learned it in school," I told him. I don't speak well enough so that I could quickly ask him, "Did the fact that so many Jews knew German help any of them, you know, back then?" And I wanted to. Then they photographed the woman and finally the old man, who had sunk so deeply into his dissatisfaction that I thought he might grab one of the policemen's guns and kill us all. They took 20 euros from each of us. Then they put a sticker in each of our passports and told us that we were no longer illegal immigrants and that we now had a transit visa for Germany. We were free to complain all the way to our next airplane in the airport terminal. And so we did.

Like in the principles of a well-composed epic poem, the beautiful quickly replaced the ugly. They began apologizing. In less than half an hour I was on a plane for Frankfurt, where the quickest possible transfer to New York was to be organized. Moreover, I was no longer sitting, but reclining in business class. Lufthansa's redemption was complete. For just 20 euros, those that ended up in the clutches of the Germanic cops – which was certainly a lot less than the difference in price between an airplane ticket in economy and business class – I was now lounging about, I had a remote control to change the video channels, a blanket. I looked carefully at the plane ticket they used to replace mine, now quite useless. It was issued to some man or woman called 'Ramayana Upanishad' as far as I could tell. Instead of some man or woman from India, my Slavic barbarian bulk, my Scythian hulk, was stretched out on the comfortable reclining seat. I found a classical music channel on the audio player and lavished in

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. What a turnabout! An animated representation of our airplane following its path across the Atlantic flickered on the screen. I watched and waited to catch the moment when the tiny aircraft would move. A desperate job. When mealtime came, I was asked if I preferred an Asian or a European selection. What would Orwell order? ! Probably baked beans and two slices of French toast. Above all, I was enthralled with the blanket. I huddled beneath it and tried to sleep. Without success. I wondered then, and I wonder now, my dear brother, what I did to deserve this. Who was it that chose my humble self to come here? Why? That's something I never asked. I'm also not sure I deserved it. It's all so mysterious and so laid-back at the same time. I was not accompanied by, say, any sort of delegation of playwrights. I'm not carrying anyone's message; I have no real worthwhile task to do. Back where I come from, hardly anyone knows about all of this. Officially, no one saw me off, except you. Thanks, as always.

I'll try to go and sleep for a while now. I'm writing to you from a small room which has two computers and which is dedicated to the memory of a young playwright who died before his time. His parents donated the money to set up a small studio which bears his name. During the day it's crowded, in the middle of the night there's no one, and those staying in the building of the institute have long since gone to bed. I will write you over the next three weeks from here. You irritate me with your refusal to install Skype, because then we could see each other and talk as much as we wanted. I called Gordana on the phone. She's quite happy for me. She says that I should try to find a way to stay here, she thinks it's a good opportunity for me. She's a little sad deep inside, I would say. Do the two of you ever talk at all? Maybe there's something that she

doesn't want to bother me with. Please, check it out and talk with her. I also called our parents. Daddy sounded all right, if a little tired. He suggested I find myself a girl over here, the classic tale. Mom is really busy, I got that. She didn't even mention her retirement settlement, it probably hurts her feelings. What is your take on all that? Shit, I just remembered. I mean the fact that I can't find an answer to why it was I who deserved to have an American institution of playwrights invite me to spend three weeks on their tab to wander around the centre of the world. To myself, I don't seem to be good enough for something like that. Our dad didn't get to do that, nor did you. To me, he and mom are heroes, you are the hero. Gordana is the brightest of souls, and yet there she's been for the last 10 years living as a tenant, traveling to work in some backwater village, it's humiliating.

Forgive me for ending this way, but now I really must go off to sleep because dawn is breaking. Write me what you want me to buy for you. I'm making a list. I grasp you by the hand and I love you.

Your brother,

Vukašin, the fruit of the womb of the same mother!



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