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**FETISHIZING VIOLENCE ON STAGE: PERFORMING,  
NARRATING AND "AESTHETICIZING" THE BALKAN  
WARS**

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*Narrating war in semi-documentary performances enables making sense of complicated and chaotic war development, but at its downside, power relations, stereotypes and mystification of survivors' positions have been easily manipulated by different sides. The proposed article aims to reveal narrations in four performances: Letter from 1920 (by Oliver Frlić), The bridge over the blood (by Damir Avdić) and Turbo Paradiso (by Andras Urban) and Crossing the line (by Dijana Milošević) in order to tackle and suppress potential stereotypes, partial representations and interpretations of the Balkan war. It investigates the intentions and approaches of interpreting war in theatre, and how those narrations contribute to remembering and social judgment toward or against war crimes during the war in Balkans in 90s. The fact that narratives are not neutral requires questioning their subjections and the position of the individual or the group who creates and disseminates them. The specific set of theatre images of victims/survivors and perpetrators in the proposed performances will be analyzed in order to outline the prevailing discourse and duties it serves, using it documentary or even testifying components, transforming them into performative art.*

**Key words / Ključne riječi:** Performing, violence, Balkan war, a(n)esthetization.

## Introduction

Similar to the movie industry, the events during the Balkan Wars in the 90s have become a big interest among different theatre artists and performers. Marina Abramović is not the only artist to symbolize the atrocities of the war through a stage installation in early 1997, *Balkan Baroque* a performance of rats killing each other; a series of other artists in the following years took their 'inspiration' from the violation of human dignity, questioning the politics and reflecting the state of war on the stage. In many cases, war performances go beyond art or aesthetic tendencies, and instead intersect with activism and public awareness.

The theatrical performance of war enables sense to be made of complicated and chaotic war developments that reaches a broader audience, and therefore, sends messages beyond the usual reach of social sciences. A downside, however, is that power relations, stereotypes, and the mystification of survivors' positions have been easily manipulated by different sides, due to the certain limitations of the theatrical form; the narrations can offer very specific and limited insight into the complex phenomena. The main concern thus, should reveal the theatre as a medium, becoming a center of numerous documenting and reporting productions that have been released in recent years. Those productions have been, with rare exceptions, based on documentary theatre narrations, and the spectators may not escape the strong intention toward performing the war and the suffering as it is in real life: with rare symbolism, raw aesthetics, and metaphors. Staging memories, as they are told by testifiers, and aiming to gain the audience's compassion is one of the main characteristics of these types of performances. What too often makes them simplified, and black and white, is best seen in a usual victim and perpetrator binary relation.

The analysis of stage images, representations, and narrations aims to reveal the specific, aestheticized knowledge that has been produced over all of these years, as well as questions the interests that have been raised on the phenomena of wars. So called "new wars",<sup>1</sup> where "most violence is directed against civilians", have put forward the civilians as the only heroes, survivors, and story holders. Civilians as survivors have become a focal point of the performances and their main protagonists. The following article examines the narrations of three performances: *The Letter from 1920* (by Oliver Frljić) will be analyzed from the perspective of a representation of socio-political narrations. Oliver Frljić, the director, does not seem to be interested in questioning what survival may mean to the survivor; he stages the collective narratives, war, and war crimes as part of the social contract and the enrollment of the political bodies and ideologies. His scripts could easily be modified and dramatically adjusted media reports. In contrast, *The Bridge over the*

*Blood* (by Damir Avdić), the second analyzed piece is a deeply personalized and selective story, and therefore, will be analyzed as the case of a subjective narrative; hereby Avdić draws strong connections between war as social phenomena and a personalized traumatic and catastrophic experience. These narrations frame the emotional engagement and potential of the audience's compassionate reception. In the last performance, *Crossing the Line* (by Dijana Milošević), the gender narratives are the main interest. The performance offers specific insight into the women's side of the war, however, it does not offer any alternative identity except the women as innocent victims.

Before the analysis, the introductory chapter discusses the modes of war-based narration in the theatre. Some questions such as the importance of staging wars and the ethics of witnessing the suffering, the role of testimonials, and creation of the characters are brought forward and some reflections are offered.

## Setting a war in the theatre: the difference between gazing and documenting

Conventionally, narratives of war crimes have been framed in a testimonial context, accompanied by the use of symbolism and metaphors. Hence, organizing war experiences in such narratives enables making sense of complicated and chaotic war developments, but the fact that narratives are not neutral requires questioning their motivations and the position of the individual or the group who creates and disseminates them.<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing Theodore Sarbin's idea,<sup>3</sup> "narrative allows the inclusion of the actors' reasons for their acts, as well as causes of happenings", narratives help the social world to impose a structure on the flow of experiences that one is confronted with on a daily basis, and to make sense of the complicated world around us.

In the theory of performance ethnography, Denzin<sup>4</sup> describes the need of art-based reflections of historical moments as a discipline that will "help people recover meaning in the face of senseless, brutal violence, violence that produces voiceless screams of terror and insanity." Setting historical and political conflicts on the stage does not "solicit the opinion of the people, but is about stressing the facts that people should think about", comments Oliver Frljić. The realism in his performance, *The Letter from 1920*:<sup>5</sup>

2 Molly ANDREWS, Shelley DAY SCLATTER, Corinne SQUIRE and Amal TREACHER, eds. *The Uses of Narrative: Explorations in Sociology, Psychology and Cultural Studies*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2004.

3 Theodore R., SARBIN, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. New York: Praeger, 1986, 9.

4 Norman, DENZIN, *Performance Ethnography: The Call to Performance*, London, Sage Publications, 2003, 6.

5 Muharem, BAZDULJ, Nišan na licu angela, *Vreme*, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1014628> (20.

1 Julia BOLL, *The new war plays: From Kane to Harris*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.

No matter how the situation is pessimistic, social problems must be detected, because only from there we can start to make some changes. As long as we live in denial of reality, nothing will change.

However, at this point, Frljić underestimates the power of facts and that even if the performance is based on a collection of media reports, testimonies, interviews, and other 'real' materials, it is the narrative that is carefully and deliberately chosen by the author and the performers. The trap that emerges in every war performing piece, especially if grounded in a documentary theatre form, is its realism which can hide power relations and stereotypes and can be manipulated by the dominating groups to maintain the status quo and keep them in power. They can reveal and conceal, enable, and constrain. Narratives are not neutral. Rather, they are intrinsically subjective and communicate the position of the individual or the group who creates and disseminates them.<sup>6</sup>

Media resources on the wars in the Balkans are numerous, so are the historical and political analyses; therefore, it is the artist who either creates the narration of accusing or denying, revealing, emphasizing, or even fetishizing these through his materials. Through analysis of the testimonies of the survived victims, Inger Skjelsbaek figures out how the stories of victims should be told in order to serve different purposes. "The researcher defines the function of the story," she writes, "and the interviewee adjusts the narration of her experiences accordingly"<sup>7</sup> Every storytelling occurs in a specific context, which shapes and influences it. The socio-political surrounding of the storyteller defines what is told and how, which elements of the story are emphasized, and which ones are excluded. In contrast to scholarly text, performance art refers to its ability to "evoke and invoke shared emotional experience and understanding between performer and audience."<sup>8</sup> Those embodied, sensuous experiences create the conditions for understanding: "Thus performed experiences are the sites where emotion, memory, desire, and understanding come together."<sup>9</sup> With the rise of Shakespearean *Problem Play*, the social debate in a realistic context became a crucial part of theatre narrations; stressing the moral, philosophical, and political viewpoints, together with offering a great psychological insight into characters was no longer the question of social sciences and humanities. If the latter is about documenting and analyzing the

phenomena from different socio-political perspectives, then theatre tends to give a voice to the individuals' emotions and expressions. It embodies and individualizes the pain and suffering, and it lacks objectification. After Bochner and Ellis<sup>10</sup> the arts may provide the 'media' for 'personal and collective narratives'. In reviewing a collaboration with artists, they say that artists saw what was important about art was what it awakened or evoked in the spectator, how it created meaning, how it could heal, and what it could teach, incite, inspire, or provoke. Bochner and Ellis consider art as a 'mode of narrative inquiry'.<sup>11</sup>

The use of stories in war," claims Thompson, "is a strategy of those who aim to end conflicts as well as those who hope to maintain them – the war-objectors and the war-mongers."<sup>12</sup> Narratives were not created only during the war and for its purposes, but have been constantly reinterpreted and applied to the current socio-political situations and issues. After Girardet,<sup>13</sup> they always serve to explain the particular threat, or at least the imaginative feeling of that threat. It is not important, claims Girardet<sup>14</sup> "how real and big this threat is, and how it bases on the facts from reality." Existing narratives on war survivors may be explained as "an appreciated and irrational social established perception about the particular social situation"<sup>15</sup> and "has potentials of actions: it transmits encouraging, fateful messages, (...) create the impulse (...) for revolutions."<sup>16</sup> Thompson<sup>17</sup> believes that it is not "only the content of those stories that must be examined closely, but the structure of their telling and retelling." Every testimony in science analysis is succeeded by the argumentation of the author, what apparently contributes to the "process of shaping meaning out of the difficult to comprehend."<sup>18</sup> The narrator creates the reality, what gives the documentary theatre the uncertain power; as it blurs the line between the individual perception and historical facts, the spectator easily becomes the consumer of the narrator's ideological, political, and historical determinations. In documentary theatre, where narration of realistic situations are blurred with symbolic and aesthetic dimensions, the spectator is hit and affected with an act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, and a way of revealing agency. Performance becomes public pedagogy when it uses the aesthetic, the performance, to foreground the intersection of politics, institutional

10 Arthur BOCHNER and Carolyn ELLIS, An introduction to the arts and narrative research: Art as inquiry, *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (4), 2003, 506.

11 Brian ROBERTS, Performative Social Science: A consideration of Skills, Purpose and Context. *Qualitative Research* 9 (2), 2008, 11.

12 James THOMPSON, Digging up stories: applied theatre, performance and war, New York, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, 25.

13 Raoul GIRARDET, *Politički mitovi i mitologije*, Beograd, Biblioteka XX vek, 2000, 61.

14 Ibid.

15 Zoran Đ. SLAVUJEVIĆ, *Savremeni politički mit*. Beograd: Radnička štampa, 1986, 30.

16 GIRARDET, *Politički mitovi i mitologije*, 13.

17 THOMPSON, *Digging up stories: applied theatre, performance and war*, 24.

18 Ibid, 25.

September 2013).

6 Melanie ROHSE, From a Narrative Understanding of Conflict to a Narrative Resolution of Conflict: The Challenges of Storytelling in Conflict Transformation, In *The Many Facets of Storytelling: Global Reflections on Narrative complexity*, ed. Melanie ROHSE, Jennifer Jean INFANTI, Nina SABNANI and Mahesh NIVARGI, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 55.

7 Inger SKJELLSBAEK, *Victim and survivor: narrated social identities of women who experienced rape during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, <http://fap.sagepub.com/content/16/4/373> (23 January 2012), 397.

8 DENZIN, *Performance Ethnography: The Call to Performance*, 13.

9 Ibid.

sites, and embodied experiences.<sup>19</sup>

Narrating war through aesthetics questions and puts into discourse all types of human senses: sensual and spiritual, the every day, and the sublime.<sup>20</sup> An actor may question himself and spectators about issues, which are not being questioned in the regular theatre since they are "implicative, presupposed, absolved,"<sup>21</sup> but do not cross the border of the spectators' ability. Therefore, an artist must research the space before entering it and accepting their ability to accept the question of social injustice and general issues; in that case it may "return push toward dominant discourses."<sup>22</sup> Still, if theatre is to affect the spectators in their unsafe, uncomfortable area, it has to exceed the conventional narrations and hegemonic discourses. "[Institutional] theatre is a prototype of social institution", writes Handke,<sup>23</sup> and as such not appropriate in changing the society. "It creates every single moment, movement, every unimportant detail, every word and every silence." All of these creations are compatible with hegemonic culture, politics and society, so if the artist wants to make a theatre a social action, he has to turn to a more suitable form; for the switch, "we need acting with the rejection."<sup>24</sup> And the second rejection should happen among the audience, its critical view of the performance, reflection, discussion, and distance.

During the war in Bosnia, a set of photos emerged portraying mutilated bodies and ruined houses, and while questioning their intention and ethics, Woolf stated, how those photos were taken "to vivify the condemnation of war, and may bring home, for a spell, a portion of its reality to those who have no experience of war at all."<sup>25</sup> When suffering is displayed, the questions about fetishism and ethics should be raised. What distinguishes the portrait of suffering in a performance or as a photo or video clip is that the same real situation is based on true stories and that there is no ambition in its narration moving the spectator into the fictional word; still the story is set in space, theatre space that is not real. Performing war, war crimes, rapes, suffering, and refugees in places where the war has happened, means portraying the past and the present, memorizing, reviving, even traumatizing. However, it is interesting that a number of artists (Marina Abramović, Oliver Frljić, Dijana Milošević etc.) have been interested in portraying the suffering and embodying of pain and the loss; staging pain offers a catharsis for the survivors, guilt for the passive observers, and a warning for new generations.

19 DENZIN, *Performance Ethnography: The Call to Performance*, 8.

20 Wolfgang, WELSCH, *Estetika in anestetika. Anthropos* 26 (1-3), 1994, 241.

21 Aldo MILOHNIĆ, *Artvizem. Maska, časopis za scenske umetnosti*, XX (1-2), 2005, 10.

22 Mateja FAJT and Mitja VELIKONJA, *Umetnost, aktivizem, spektakel: Ulice govori. Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljivo in novo antropologijo*, XXXIV, 2006, 23.

23 In Jan COHEN-CRUZ, *Radical street performance, an international anthology*, New York: Routledge, 1998, 9.

24 Ibid.

25 Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the pain of other*. New York: Picador Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 12.

## The Letter from 1920 and staging politics

As a documentary theatre piece, Oliver Frljić's *The Letter from 1920* reduces the aesthetics to its basics. Frljić is very elementary and his stage narrations are extremely realistic. At the beginning of the performance, we see the actors grabbing soil from a bag and scattering it around the stage space. After a while, the spectator can read the uppercase letters appearing on the screen on the side: BOSNIA. Actors dressed in camouflage soldiers' uniforms begin fighting, the soiled stage symbolically becomes the set of a trench and the four men start to crawl, run here and there, hide and shoot. The whole set becomes noisy and disturbing and the actors/soldiers laugh out loud while scattering the soil. In the scene that follows, four protagonists rearrange the soil into four graves, and they kneel behind the objects that clearly represent tombstone marks at the Muslim cemetery. These objects are after that taken and the four protagonists swing them in their arms as little babies until they use them as automatic rifles, supported by the bursts of loud noises. However, the audience soon witnesses the gunfire echo that apparently comes from the opposite side and the protagonists kill the actors, one after another.

In the second part, the torturing scenes of putting plastic bags on the actors' heads outlines the confessions of the committed crimes in the names of several political players who supposedly have had most of the benefits from the war. At the end of the scene, the short sound clip from the monodrama by Emir Hadzihafizbegovic is played and the actors' comment about Hadzihafizbegovic's enrollment into nationalistic rhetoric and politics carried through his arts. This specifically is a very interesting moment of Frljić's play: being himself an artist and creating the stage narratives, he offers through his play the critique and the insight of the politically motivated arts that have already been created.

The performance ends with a very dramatic scene, portraying topless actors behind the barbed wire that is nothing else, but the pure reproduction of Trnopolje from August 6th in 1992, when ITN first broadcasted the pictures and information on the concentration camp. Soaked by hatred in dialogues, basic journalistic inserts, raping animals and singing the former national anthem, Frljić establishes and reproduces metaphors of Bosnian fundamentals' destiny of war, post-war instability and traumas. He is not provocative in the symbolic sense, but performing pure facts is his way of addressing the audience for social action. "The reality on the stage," claims that Frljić<sup>26</sup> "doesn't mean anything as it needs appropriate artistic design. At the same time, the fiction itself, if not connected to reality, doesn't have any sense."

26 RTV Slovenija, *Nov Frljićev spopad s posledicami razpada Jugoslavije*, <http://ava.rtvlo.si/predvajaj/nov-frljicev-spopad-s-posledicami-razpada-jugoslavije/ava2.161840958/> (10 October 2013).

*The Letter from 1920* is very concrete, but yet too simplified to allow the spectrum of viewpoints and understanding; along with narrations, built up on media reports and public opinion, the performance tries to equalize the responsibility and guilt from all the involved sides. Performing war within these narrations means creating “theatrical representation that either simulates war or offers a powerful, propagandistic portrayal of the effects of war.”<sup>27</sup> Gray, who has analyzed war drama productions on the radio, describes similar approaches where creators use authentic sound effects to simulate aircrafts and weaponry. “For war of the radio to be credible,” states Gray, “it must incite the listener to feel the same emotions that he would feel if he were to see the scene happening before him on a battlefield.”<sup>28</sup> Spectators of *The Letter in 1920* get the impression of how it was, and the narration determines the exact direction of understanding. Similar balancing is introduced in the set of Frljić’s scenes, where the conversation between the biggest ‘scapegoats’, is not anymore just the matter of YNA (Yugoslav National Army) and Serbian paramilitary forces; now the spectator may equally hear of the crimes, committed by the HVO (Croatian Defense Council) and the BH Army. In this way, the performance again overlaps with the characteristics of documentary theatre. The latter is used to promote understanding between people and to reveal the developments of certain historical or ongoing events. As war photography and reportage go, it attempts to portray different aspects of a certain event, usually through interviews with victims, witnesses or other active participants, but adds an emotional dimension and the possibility of empathizing.

Frljić with his stage poetics does not enable any other interpretations, but pure realism. Since the narrations aim to be realistic and raw in their symbolic connotations, they easily influence not solely emphatic or ethical responses of spectators, but also ideological and common sense opinions. Frljić, with his purified stage realism approaches media representation and as such troubles the spectators’ minds and hearts “because they make us aware that the visuals depict some real flesh-and-blood human suffering.”<sup>29</sup> But just observing this suffering does not mean sharing it; “it is a uniquely private experience that cannot be shared”<sup>30</sup> One could easily understand the message as Bosnia equals war, and to underline it Frljić, as director and author of the performance, speaks to the audience through speakers, announcing:

I am Oliver Frljić, the director of this performance. (...) Bosnia

27 Richard GRAY, “Performing War: Vichyite Ideology from Across the Sea in Camille Morel’s Poetic Radio Dramatic Work ‘France!..Présent!.. Poème épique Radiophonique et Théâtral en un acte et deux tableaux’”, *InterCulture* 5 (3), 2008, 206.

28 Ibid.

29 Pramod K. NAYAR, Scar Cultures: Media, Spectacle, Suffering, *Journal of Creative Communications* 4, 2009, 150.

30 Ibid, 148.

is the land of hate. I was born in Bosnia, in Travnik. I left Bosnia at the beginning of the war (...). You will hate the performance; you will hate me and the actors who act in this performance. But I prefer to have an audience that hates, than an apathetic audience. This performance is considered by your hate.

He clearly states how for Bosnians hate is the only thing, they know how to handle it, and that Frljić personally came back to make money out of this passion. Nevertheless, if “the drama is what the writer writes” and “the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance,” the performance, states Hwang,<sup>31</sup> “is the whole event, including the audience and performers”. However, even if the performance is based on the collection of “real” materials, it is the final narration to be questioned. As social scientists using art for data collection, the potential dangers in art acquisition from social science’s observations, media reports and testimonies may result in projections or idealizations: “The ‘artist’ or ‘performer’ may appear to be an attractive figure, the arts more creative, intuitive, or representing ‘reality’ in some more ‘truthful’ manner.”<sup>32</sup>

But could one at this point apply the “death of the author” by Roland Barthes,<sup>33</sup> and paraphrase the reader into the performer? If the performance is read by a spectator, the latest “liberates the text from interpretive tyranny” and the primary meaning of the performance depends on the understandings of the spectators, rather than the author’s ideological, social, economic etc. background. After Barthes, “a text’s unity lies not in its origins or its creator, but in its destination and its audience.”<sup>34</sup> Assuming that spectators have lived the facts performed on stage, a reading of the performance has numerous understandings, and thus, the message no longer solely relies on creators and performers. Actors as well as spectators may question themselves about issues, which are not being questioned in the regular theatrical sense since they are “implicative, presupposed, and absolved”<sup>35</sup> but they do not cross the border of the spectator’s ability. Therefore, an artist must research the space before entering it, their ability to accept the question of social injustice and general issues; in that case, it may “return push toward dominant discourses.”<sup>36</sup> Still, if theatre is to affect the spectator in his unsafe, uncomfortable area, it has to exceed the conventional narrations and hegemonic discourses. “[Institutional]

31 Pao I. HWANG, Performing the Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence in Ian McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers*, *EurAmerica* 39 (2), 2009, 229.

32 ROBERTS, Performative Social Science: A consideration of Skills, Purpose and Context, 21.

33 Ronald, BARTHES, *The Death of the Author*, <http://www.deathoftheauthor.com/articles.Php?page=Critical-Authority> (10 October 2013).

34 Ibid.

35 MILOHNIĆ, *Artvizem*, 10.

36 FAJT and VELIKONJA, *Umetnost, aktivizem, spektakel: Ulice govori*, 23.

theatre is prototype of social institution”, writes Handke,<sup>37</sup> and as such not appropriate in changing the society. “It creates every single moment, movement, every unimportant detail, every word and every silence.” All these creations are compatible with hegemonic culture, politics and society, so if the artist wants to make a theatre a social action, he has to turn to a more suitable form; for the switch, “we need acting with the rejection.”<sup>38</sup> And the second rejection should happen among the audience, its critical view of the performance, reflection, discussion and distance.

However, encountering the local audiences with uncomfortable topics is for sure Frljić’s motivation as a political theatre artist. But opposed to Jacques Rancière,<sup>39</sup> for whom

aesthetics means the constitution of a sphere of autonomy, where artworks are isolated in a world of their own, where they only fall under criteria of form, or beauty, or ‘truth to medium’.

Frljić’s documentarist style does not create an autonomic world, Frljić rather takes the reality and stages it; he addresses the current events as they have happened in real life. The spectator is very aware that the protagonist and antagonist are not simple bearers of the universal message: they are real world characters and are very much alive. Frljić aims to reconstruct the entire picture of what has occurred, rather than offering several perspectives or outlining his own position toward the content staged. The only strong moment of his reflection happens at the very end of the performance when he takes over the refugee’s role in the society, exaggerating the collective guilt. This is also a very intentional moment; the spectator is clear that Frljić does not take this collective guilt on his shoulders, but tries to establish a critical position as being involved as an individual in this, which he shows a few steps before: one big political game of manipulations. With his narrative style, Frljić highlights the actions and the perspectives of war that carry the meaningful message for him as an author; for sure, witnessing violence and aggression on the stage, transforms people’s sense of themselves and places it into the context of post-war society, regardless of whether they share the experience of war or not. The medium of theatre allows the spectators to rewind certain events, not necessarily by triggering traumatic memories, but rather offering the space for the reflection and understanding of what has actually happened.

37 In COHEN-CRUZ, *Radical street performance, an international anthology*, 9.

38 Ibid.

39 Jacques RANCIERE, *The politics of Aesthetics*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.

## The bridge over the Blood – a narrative of one survivor

Contrary to Frljić’s narratives, Damir Avdić stages the story of different faces of sadness, agony, anger and despair; the storyline is not clear and does not have clear narration. The stage is practically empty (except for a little yellow bulb) and his costume is barely noticed by the spectators. His mosaic of emotions introduces the audience into the reflections on raw survival and basic human needs. The spectators witness the public therapeutic session: the protagonist, Avdić himself, expresses his pain and his hopeless post-war state, and the spectators listen silently and without response. While representing the personalized narrative of suffering, this piece gives a voice to “those who suffer, while alerting us, witnesses, to the need to alleviate such suffering and attempt to reorder the conditions in which suffering takes place.”<sup>40</sup> In *The Bridge over the Blood*, Damir Avdić as the protagonist narrator personalizes the war with very intimate insight into one’s suffering. In comparison to others, Avdić’s narrations are direct, but veiled in gentle metaphors; as an actor, he stands in the middle of the stage, telling a story of killing, torture, loss, trauma, and fear. He uses the language of excessive cursing or vulgar analogies in order to create his specific a(n)esthetic poetry to hit the spectator, for instance:

They robbed everything. They snatched the mother’s milk from the babies.

*The Bridge over the Blood* is a biographical testimony that starts during the war and so it ends. As spectators we do not meet the protagonist out of the war context. The only comparison one can witness is between *before-better*, and *now-worst*. The narrator’s self is split into ‘before and after’ or and ‘old life’ before the moment of paralysis and the ‘new life’ that characterizes the change in all aspects of daily existence following the traumatic event.<sup>41</sup> The whole narration is about experiencing the war and sharing the emotional perspective of the protagonist’s situation and the revealing of trauma is one of the main leading focuses. Including testimony into the theatre piece brings the spectator closer to the credibility of the reconstructed reality; the narrator aims to produce the emphatic connection rather than knowledge and awareness. Not only does the performer only break the silence of the crime and violations, but uses a testimony

Necessarily implies sharing with the reader (...) subjective experience of the implications of having publicly narrated (...) experience of (...) aggression in order to legitimize and promote

40 NAYAR, *Scar Cultures: Media, Spectacle, Suffering*, 148.

41 EMMOT, Catherine, ““Split Selves” in Fiction and in Medical “Life Stories””, in Elena SEMINO and Jonathan CULPEPER eds. *Cognitive Stylistics*, Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2002, 168.

its use as a liberating action.<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned above, the personalized narrative of Damir Avdić in *The Bridge over the Blood* is affected by the excessive use of vulgar and curse words; sometimes in quantities that the sentences do not have meaning any more, but support the expression of the author's anger, sorrow, and sometimes even hate.

They behave toward us as we would be livestock. They fuck our cunts.//Adnan in the mercy of the cunt.//Drina was my cunt.// A mound. Always. As a shit. On a mound. But the shit is good.// Bullet is fired. As dick in a cunt.//His words were meaningful. As fetus is full of sperm.//Stars, the stupid mother fuckers. They didn't blink us even once (Avdić, *The Bridge over the Blood*).

Using aggressive and vulgar narratives may "overthrow the normalized images of violence, to reveal some of the psychology and consequences behind violent acts, and possibly to put moral sensitivity back into the visualization of violence."<sup>43</sup> *The Bridge over the Blood* affects the spectator with the personalized and very intimate didactic and thus, attempts to provide a better understanding of violence as personal experiences and not as an abstract fact. Aesthetics make the violence less dreadful and the facts happen to be lost in his storyline. Thus, *The Bridge over the Blood* relieves the spectators' gaze through the concept of anesthetic. After Welsch,<sup>44</sup> it indicates the situation in which the elemental aesthetic circumstances, – i.e., the ability of sensation, are absent.

While aesthetics strengthen and promote a variety of human senses, the anesthetic problematizes insensitivity and senselessness in terms of a limited loss, interruption or inability of sensing; this happens at all levels from the purely physical to the spiritual apathy.<sup>45</sup> In such cases, "aesthetics function as narcotic", says Welsch: it impacts the "spectators in sense of stupefaction and apathy."<sup>46</sup> Describing the blood from dead bodies that were floating on the water's surface, Avdić shouts as "I could hear how it [Drina] flows, with the color that seems beautiful only on flowers". If Adorno<sup>47</sup> explicitly emphasizes the importance of ugly in art, it seems that Avdić aestheticizes the ugly and painful with transforming it to beautiful, to his poetics; even the aggressive revealing of the pain becomes the act of aesthetics.

42 Katherine, ANGUEIRA, To Make the Personal Political: The Use of Testimony as a Consciousness-Raising Tool against Sexual Aggression in Puerto Rico, *The Oral History Review* 16 (2), 1988, 67.

43 HWANG, Performing the Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, 235.

44 WELSCH, *Estetika in anestetika*, 241.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, 242.

47 For more see: Peter UWE HOHENDAHL, *Aesthetic Violence: The Concept of the Ugly in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, *Cultural Critique* 60, 2005.

## Crossing the Line – women's voices and gender narratives

Opposed to the previously analyzed text, *Crossing the Line* is not a personalized play, the testimony with the identity, but it rather aims to raise the compassion of the audience by bringing in the women's side of war. *Crossing the Line* is a theatrical representation of the prevailing image of women in the war that has been discussed in numerous studies and research pieces over the last twenty years.<sup>48</sup> This specific image of innocent and passive victim that is portrayed in *Crossing the Line*, has been highly criticized by feminist writers<sup>49</sup> and from this perspective, the theatre contributes in maintaining a mainstream narrative, rather than breaking it down or searching for alternatives.

The emphasis of the whole performance is on the specific perspective of women as passive observers, as those who stay at home and receive letters from the frontline. The narrator in the storyline could be every woman enrolled in war, not just as a direct victim, but also as a distant and powerless observer. It clear that the three protagonist women are victims, but interestingly they take part in the aggressor's side: as the mother, the daughter, and the wife. The spectators first witness a letter being sent to a woman in Belgrade, telling the story of the survivor from the siege of Sarajevo. Another wife's letter is sent to her husband, who at the same time is a perpetrator for some and victim for another– he is already dead at the time the letter is written. In one of the next scenes, three women pronounce different words as they sound in Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian. Since the languages are very similar, the differences in the words in love, child, bread, milk, pretty, mother, are very slight and nearly imperceptible. At one point, actresses all turn to each other and say out loud the war, the word that is pronounced in the same way.

Rather than a historical moment set into theatre, the performance is the active appeal toward peace building and reconciliation, what makes it significantly different from the previous two pieces. More than the other two plays, it tackles the importance of accepting one's guilt and confession of mistakes caused by all sides, in order to proceed and overcome and solve the conflict. It seems that the facts and storytelling in the performance serve to awaken the audience to the grand finale, when the necessity of attempts toward direct action is expressed by the actresses. *Crossing the Line* communicates gently; its narrations are not intrusive, blaming, or attacking to the spectator. Still, it addresses the spectator and leaves

48 See for more: Svetlana, SLAPŠAK, *War Discourse, Women's Discourse: essays and case-studies from Yugoslavia and Russia*, 2000, Ljubljana: Topos, 17–69; Inger SKJELSBÆK, *Victim and survivor: narrated social identities of women who experienced rape during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, <http://fap.sagepub.com/content/16/4/373> (23 January 2012); Vesna NIKOLIĆ-RISTANOVIĆ, *Women, violence and war: wartime victimization of refugees in the Balkans*, 2000, Budapest: CEU Press.

49 For the critic of this image see: Helms, Ellisa. 2013. *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*.

them completely powerless, even lost. As it would put the suffering and the pain on display and let the spectator offer the solution to deal with the legacy. Narrating without an aggressive approach toward the audience and leaving spectators does not make the performance less powerful or effective in transmitting the message. Theatre maintains the war in spectators; as active participants, powerless observers, and angry observers. It encourages them, again and again, to reflect upon the war, to revive it, to maintain ideologies and memories, pain and loss. It aims toward oblivion in its positive and negative senses. Being limited by space and time, the creation of the performance is submitted to simplifying and reducing the complexity of the historical events along with stereotyping victims and perpetrators and the relations among the two. By unwritten rule, the victim is with almost no exception, a good character with a good story. But, as Rohse states<sup>50</sup> “some stories are ‘bad enough’ so that they ‘continue to support the conflict and the schism between the groups’ instead of contributing toward reconciliation.” This phenomena is most obvious in portraying the protagonists, good guys (in many cases victims); and antagonists, bad guys (embodied in perpetrators or personalized subjects as war, conflict, system, politics). As in war based novels and feature movies,<sup>51</sup> characters in theatre performances do not deviate from established and attributed features such as being aggressive, idiots, narrow-minded, smelly (especially in the context of rape in war) when portraying the perpetrators; and vulnerable, kind, understandable, silent, passive, and broad-minded for the portrayal of the victims. The perpetrators are usually portrayed as bad characters, antagonists, with no attempt or interest in discovering their background. What those performances lack are alternative narrations, not exposing only the general or the most experienced and repeating stories, but questioning and digging out the unusual and not so binary situations as reverse positions for instance: what could be a dramatic structure if a current victim would be given a weapon that would be taken away from the perpetrator? Or the question of abusing power as a little man? What is the change of identities, the values, way of life, social norms? In her non-fiction novel, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*, Slavenka Drakulić has made a great step in deconstructing the war criminals as definite psychopathological characters, and therefore, has suggested the alternative and more complex insight into understanding perpetrators and/or victims. Last but not least, it is easier to gain compassion from the audience by black-and-white portrayals, where there is no chance to build the protagonist characteristics in the antagonist or vice versa. As stated by Hwang, it could be the shock, as proved to be very marketable:<sup>52</sup> “Since moralizing works are not popular

50 ROHSE, From a Narrative Understanding of Conflict to a Narrative Resolution of Conflict: The Challenges of Storytelling in Conflict Transformation, 56.

51 See for instance: *As if I am not there* by Slavenka Drakulić; *In the Land of Blood and Honey* by Angelina Jolie.

52 Pao I. HWANG, Performing the Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence in Ian McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers*, 246.

nowadays, it is much more difficult to employ violence for didactic purposes.” As every theatre piece has to follow certain dramatic structures, the narration in war-based performances has to create the space, where the spectator can empathize with the character. It is obvious that a victim with negative characteristics would be harder to empathize with or the perpetrator that kills in order to protect his baby would confuse the spectator. This way, it is clear that the play, *Crossing the Line*, speaks in the voice of victims and for the voice of victims. There is no attempt or even desire for the balanced reflection or questioning of the individual roles and background influence in the war. As it is clear and absolute who is to be blamed and who remains innocent. Thus, performing war in *Crossing the Line* shares mainstream narratives as feature movies, novels and other popular culture pieces do; the violence maintains the domain of perpetrators, the suffering the story of victims. Apparently, it aims to give a voice to the voiceless. But what kind of empowerment is there through giving a voice if the representation maintains the image of a voiceless victim?

However, the interesting point of the performance is in staging women who are supposedly wives, daughters, and sisters of perpetrators-war criminals; the play shows women as indirect victims, therefore not raped and abused women, but women who hopelessly observe the war from the distance. At one point, actresses express pride that their sons and husbands, brothers and fathers were “never criminals”. In spite of this exception, artists do not offer the space for questioning or elaborating why the same husband, brother, and father sent to war and perceived as a victim, across the border appear as perpetrators. The statement itself would be great material to discover the alternative narratives in theatre. Unfortunately, besides documenting, narrators rarely step out of shocking, affecting or empathizing dimensions. While watching the performance, the spectator questions their own moralities, values, and the meaning of the world, their world. Theatre images enable people to decode the world and understand it; and this can be accomplished through the identification of the performers and the characters. Maintaining narratives that have been established throughout the time mean a great loss for the theatre, which could go beyond the accepted, beyond the established, and at the very last, beyond what has been said so many times before.

## Closing Thoughts

As in the film industry, war drama in theaters ‘inspired’ by the recent turbulent Balkan era, have recently become a popular cultural hit, and the three pieces analyzed in this text are only three representatives in the wide range of productions narrating war, suffering, torture and politics in the 90s in the Balkans.

Three plays presented in the text might be wrapped up in three types of productions that emerge on the field of war drama; Frljić's *The Letter from 1920* (another example could be *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!* and *Generation 91-95*) is a political theatre, narrating war as political mythology and ideology, and has a focus in war as socio-political phenomena. Hereby, it is not the individual who suffers in the war, but the society as such; performance is the critic, the reflection, the story of the system that does not work. This is the story about the loser and the winner, but never in a personalized form.

*The Bridge over the Blood* (and *East Side Story* as another example) could frame the set of a performance that is more poetic and less realistic; here the spectator can follow the individual, personalized story, from the beginning to the end, with one conflict and one (or none) solution. It is not about a general perspective on war or a bunch of individualized perspectives on war, but one simple story subjectified and therefore, very unique. Due to their individualized narrations, these performances are far more emotional, embodied, painful, and even tragic.

*Crossing the Line* (other similar pieces are *The War and the Memories* and *It was a Beautiful and Sunny Day*) on the other hand consists of fragments or a series of stories, reconstructions of events, emotions and experiences, but characters are still anonymous, either no names at all, no holding of a group identity (as victims, perpetrators, refugees) or using initial letters in order to perform the story of 'a human'; the one who finds himself in the storm of the war.

What all those theatre productions have in common is the need to keep the war alive; the spectator is offered to experience a war that is already over. The war dramas reflect the acts of violence in times of peace, and moreover use violence as a call toward peace and reconciliation. Assuming that a spectator is not 'dead', and they observe the performances critically and individually, setting the war in theatre, in a 'safe' environment, might be therapeutic and also be able to provoke a social change; spectators can easily find themselves in the stories, but do not need to tell them on their own. As drama therapist Phil Jones states, "Theatre form enables the expression of projection, but does not necessarily allow for the experience to be explicit, to be worked with or resolved."<sup>53</sup> While embodying costumes and set designs, light settings, and narrations, it brings the war back to the life and it ensures that the war will be 'gone' immediately when the doors of the theatre are closed. Telling and reviving the stories in the theatre can raise the awareness, call to reconciliation and contribute in building the respectful social attitude toward the victims. This makes the suffering real, brings reality closer to the spectator, to their empathy, understanding and reflection. No matter how much of a documentary the performance is, as the spectator enters the theatre, they are in a place of

53 Phil JONES, *Drama as Therapy: Theory, Practice and Research*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 14.

fiction. They know, roughly, what will happen and how. They know that the same performance can be repeated every time they return to watch it. If not experimental theatre or a one-night performance, once they see it, they know the dramaturgy, the beginning and the ending. They know that, theoretically, they can leave the space. They know that a performance is happening, lasting temporarily, and once it is completed the spectator can leave it behind. They can take particular fragments, can agree on it, deny it, criticize it, hate it or love it. Theatre is a predetermined and organized set of images, generated and based on the established dramatic triangle. In order for it to work out, it needs to consist of action and conflict, a protagonist and antagonist, good guys and bad guys. Thus, the scenes are concentrated, simplified, and exaggerated. What occurs out of theatre, in 'reality', is reflected and squeezed in a theatre piece as its trailer, a shorter version. All those demands for dynamics and structural rules dictate the principle of what and how the war in theatre is to be shown. It is why sometimes, artists – in this text we could read it in Oliver Frljić's *The Letter from 1920*, follow the In-yer-face theatre: as defined by New Oxford English Dictionary (1998), the phrase 'in your-face', describes the principle of "blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid". In this manner, In-yer-face Theatre, as *The Letter from 1920* and as well as *The Bridge over the Blood*, both aim to shock audiences by their extremism either in their language – as it was shown by Damir Avdić who uses vulgar language and curses as the essence of his performance; or in its images: Frljić sets on the stage the famous image from Trnopolje that just cannot be ignored by any spectator who was in any way involved in the wars in the 90s.

To sum up, staging war is just another means of representing, reflecting, or even reproducing it and experiencing it. As any other cultural production, displaying any of the social phenomena means creating a space for ideologies, stereotypes or aiming toward breaking them. Since the war itself is a political phenomenon, any kind of performing it, makes the production a political act; especially in the case of documentary theatre that claims to be based on facts and 'reality'. An artist does not just re-present the story as it was, but the dramaturgy itself demands subjectification and artist's subjective preferences of what to show and how to show them. Hunger or suffering on stage is meaningless. The 'real' form needs a specific dramatic creation, fire and ice, the negative and positive. And even if an artist tends to be 'balanced' and perform a justice, it is simply an illusion. Especially in cases, when the artist himself was personally engaged in war: as a victim, a refugee or even a perpetrator. It is why the cases of documentary theatre on the Balkan wars are not about another anonymous testimony or historical document, but rather an emotional and embodied reproduction of war as how it was experienced by the author. As for the conclusion, too often the performances give the impression of authors being afraid of their own media; as if they have

forgotten the power of imagination overlapped by the real life, the speculation of the real life, and above all, the strong, unpleasant questioning of the real world. Too often, the spectators get 'just' the real life. But theatre should be also about the alternatives. Especially when trying to humanize the war, it should avoid the pleasant, mainstream narratives. At least from an ethical perspective, staging war should aim to go beyond simple portrayal and represent the established images. It should be able to engage and encourage the audience. Nevertheless, it is obvious how the production of knowledge and awareness raising against political manipulation and power abuse is important for the authors. Still, they very much decide to stay more or less on the safe side.

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## SAŽETAK

### FETIŠIZAM NASILJA NA POZORNICI: PREDSTAVE, NARACIJE I „ESTETIZACIJA“ BALKANSKIH RATOVA

Nena MOČNIK

Naracija o ratu kroz polu-dokumentarne predstave omogućuje smislenu shvaćanje kompliciranih i kaotičnih ratnih situacija, ali također, kao negativnu konotaciju vidi relacije moći, stereotipe i mistifikaciju položaja preživjelih, koje su lako izmanipulirane od raznih strana. Predloženi članak cilja iznijeti naracije u četiri predstave: Pismo iz 1920. (Oliver Frljić), Most na krvi (Damir Avdić), Turbo Paradiso (Andras Urban) te Prelazeći liniju (Dijana Milošević) kako bi se suočili sa i potisnuli potencijalne stereotipe, nepotpuni opis i interpretacije rata na Balkanu. Istražuje intencije i pristupe interpretacijama rata u kazalištu te kako ove naracije doprinose sjećanju i društvenoj osudi ratnih zlodjela tijekom rata na Balkanu 90-tih.

Činjenica da naracije nisu neutralne zahtjeva preispitivanje njihovih subjektivnosti te položaja pojedinca ili grupe koji ih stvaraju i šire. Posebna postava kazališnih scena žrtava/preživjelih i kršitelja u predloženim predstavama bit će analizirana radi skiciranja prevladavajućeg diskursa i obaveza kojima služi, koristeći njihove dokumentarističke ili čak svjedočanstvene komponente i preobraćujući ih u performansu.