

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

THEATRE FACULTY

Authorial Acting

Authorial Creation and Pedagogy

MASTER'S THESIS

Documentary theater in post-war communities

Outlining experiences as a spectator and author

in search for narratives

Lea Blaskó

Thesis advisor: Martin Pšenička

Examiner: Michaela Raisová

Date of thesis defense: January 15th , 2019

Academic title granted: MA in Authorial Acting

Prague, 2018

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE

DIVADELNÍ FAKULTA

Autorského Herectví

Autorské Tvorby a Pedagogiky

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Dokumentární divadlo v poválečných komunitách
náčrt zkušenosti diváka a autora při hledání narace

Lea Blaskó

Vedoucí práce: Martin Pšenička

Oponent prác: Michaela Raisová

Datum obhajob: 15.01.2019

Přidělovaný akademický titul: MgA Autorského Herectví

Praha, 2018

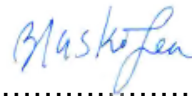
Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

Documentary theater in post-war communities
Outlining experiences as a spectator and author in search for narratives

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date: 28.12.2018.



.....

Signature of the candidate

Warning

The use and public application of the findings of this thesis or any other treatment thereof are permissible only on the basis of a licensing contract, i.e. the consent of the author and of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

Content

Acknowledgments.....	2
Abstract.....	3
In the role of the gazer.....	4
Undressing the expectations.....	7
Pieces of “industry”	11
Documentary theater – a short description.....	16
A laboratory “workshop”	17
First MA - introducing a delightful task.....	22
„Parallel” – glimpses of the epitome.....	25
Authorial acting MA.....	33
ParalleLite – outlining my own narrative.....	35
A decade of documentary theater making in the Balkans.....	42
In search for a narrative.....	53
Present.....	56
Literature.....	58
Endnotes.....	59

Acknowledgments

“Yes,
Us people are just poems
We're ninety percent metaphor ...

Ten percent literal...” says Ani DiFranco in her song ‘Self-Evident’.

I would like to thank all those who inspired me with their stories and lives, with their empathy and unconditional love.

Abstract

Documentary theater in post-war communities

outlining experiences as a spectator and author in search for narratives

In this thesis I explore the connection between documentary theater and its possible influence on various communities, focusing on the former Yugoslavian region that tends to use theater as a tool for facing its turbulent past. I reflect on my personal path and experiences regarding documentary theater, both as a spectator and as an author. For this reason, I examine the different approaches towards the fragile theme of war on stage; moreover, I am interested in the relationship between the authors and the topic itself. As a form of an empathetic documentation, hereby I discuss and highlight the importance of varying narratives in documentary theater.

Abstrakt

Dokumentární divadlo v poválečných komunitách

náčrt zkušenosti diváka a autora při hledání narace

V této diplomové práci zkoumám souvislost mezi dokumentárním divadlem a jeho možným vlivem na různé komunity, se zaměřením na bývalý Jugoslávský region, který tenduje k tomu pracovat s divadlem jakožto s nástrojem pro vyrovnávání se s náročnou minulostí. Reflektuji svou biografii a zkušenosti s dokumentárním divadlem, obé i jako divačka a jako autorka. Zkoumám rozdílné přístupy ke křehkému tématu války – na scéně; a co více, zajímá mě vztah mezi autorem a tématem jako takovým. Formou empatické dokumentace se takto pokouším diskutovat a zvýraznit podstatu různých způsobů narace v rámci dokumentárního divadla.

In the role of the gazer

I never imagined that I would end up falling in love with the world of theater. Although I was raised in a small town known in the past for its famous amateur theater troupe and a national amateur theater festival – very avant-garde, yet still successful considering the fact it existed in a socialist state – both became almost nonexistent after the fall of Yugoslavia. As I learned later, my grandfather was actively involved in the city's theater as a sound engineer, and my grandmother as an amateur actress during her high school years. Listening to their nostalgic stories partially felt like a sentimental play, but besides that I rarely had a chance to see theater in my childhood, while nostalgia towards something unknown to me – life before the war – reached its peak in my setting.

After the war, having a functional theater even in a big city became almost a privilege. Naturally, culture gets on the bottom of the list of priorities whenever basic human needs are not fulfilled. Yet, entering the new millennium and for me personally, a philological grammar school, gave me a whole new insight into the world as such, and tools to examine the space and time in which I was living in.

My high school town became Subotica/Szabadka or Maria-Theresiopolis¹, a town where almost everybody speaks Hungarian, contrary to my hometown with a small percentage of ethnic Hungarians. Besides that, in the school I had a chance to study five other languages. From the first day the teachers were pointing out the importance of theater and they encouraged us, pupils, to be regular visitors and to discuss it in our classes, side-by-side with our school curriculum. Gradually, I became a passionate spectator.

At that time, I lived in a dorm and we did have a curfew. The only exception would be in case we had an organized theater visit with the school. So besides turning into a spectator I suddenly started grasping theater as an occasional form of freedom. This

¹in1779 Subotica was proclaimed a Free Royal Town by Maria Theresa, it is located in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, a northern province annexed to Serbia 100 years ago; home to 25 different ethnic groups, home to a big number of refugees

represented freedom for me not only in the physical sense, as it turned out later. My childhood memories connected to the outside world, the world beyond the state borders, were mostly associated with situations like waiting in long rows for a whole day to get a visa, and if lucky enough, later waiting at the border to get to that „other world”, where freedom of movement is a right, not a certain privilege of the chosen ones. My childhood years were in a way affected by the wars in the Balkans that had started around the time I was born², although as a kid I had little clue of facts. It was a very adventurous period for my family, because my parents acted as if everything was normal, therefore I was hardly affected by the war consciously. Yet, I comprehend that we all live in certain bubbles, especially in our adult lives. Our opinion is sometimes shaped by things we assume or poorly imagine, rather than by those that we have experienced or dreamed about vividly. Currently, my wish to look at things with my own two eyes, and chiefly to feel with my own heart and soul, makes me pierce all the bubbles of the world.

I spent my first days as a spectator in the National Theater and in the city theater called Kosztolányi Dezső, both located in Subotica. The National Theater was and still is performing primarily classical pieces and I found it relieving to sit in the audience, above all amazed and stunned by the hard working and crafty actors that formed the ensemble performing in the Hungarian language.

Soon I realized that socially engaged theater attracts me more than the one made predominantly for entertainment. Most of my peers were not interested in discussing historical events that resonated and still resonate in our surrounding, so I sensed that often the “partner” for discussing the themes I was keen on discussing was the piece I was carefully following from the auditorium. At that time, I was captivated with loud and aggressive staging, like the ones directed by András Urbán, the main director of the Kosztolányi theater. It might be due to the work of these theater makers that the Hungarian language is now, maybe more than ever present in the milieus of the Balkan’s theatrical community and beyond.

² 1992

The place where I entirely felt at home, and that at the same time contributed to forming my young adult self was indeed the progressive Kosztolányi Dezső Theater, named after a Hungarian poet and prose-writer born in Subotica/Szabadka. This city institution put an emphasis on contemporary theater, experimenting with different forms, quite new and fresh to the region that was under political and economic sanctions for many years. After each performance I was full of questions, questions concerning my identity, the world I live in and the past of the nations that I was unwittingly living with.

Since 2009, each November this theater organizes a theater and dance festival bringing numerous inventive productions to the city and “...it shows Subotica and the festival program in the contexts of their European identity, without putting aside the stereotyped fact that it [the festival] happens right on the border line between the Balkans and Europe, in a multi-ethnic environment.”³

I felt honored to see the work of some of the most astonishing artists of our time. I was introduced to the magical world of puppets by watching the Canadian puppeteers Les Sages Fous⁴. I was deeply inspired as a spectator by the work of József Nagy⁵ and Min Tanaka, both giving me insights to the anatomy of a human and the anatomy of the time. My associations of music in theater at the time existed only through American-style musicals or Hungarian operettas, but those were now complemented with the sound of Dakh Daughtersⁱ, for instance, a powerful group of female artists from Ukraine. Ivo Dimchev⁶, a Bulgarian performer showed me that theater is a seriously unserious game while drawing his own blood on stage and later doing an auction of the same.

³ “About the festival” *Desiré central station*, 5 Nov. 2018, http://desirefestival.eu/?langswitch_lang=en

⁴ “Les Sages Fous?” *Les Sages Fous company official presentation*, 5 Nov. 2018, http://www.sagesfous.com/qui_en.html

⁵ “Paso Doble - Miquel Barceló and Josef Nadj - Dance – Review” *The New York Times*, Published 17 Sept. 2007, 11 Dec. 2018,

https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/17/arts/dance/17paso.html?_r=1&scp=7&sq=Miquel+Barcelo&st=cse

⁶ “Ivo Dimchev - physical theatre artist” *Ivo Dimchev official*, 08. Nov 2018, <http://ivodimchev.com/bio.htm>

Unexpectedly, I was fully drawn to the world of theater. This festival also meant hearing what people from neighboring countries have to say, filling up the yawning chasm caused by our histories. Furthermore, I was able to make and maintain an actual connection with my other motherland, Hungary, which up until then, only represented an almost unknown place for me, a place I knew only as a kid, a place where we partially lived in as dissidents. Furthermore, many theater companies from Hungary (like Pintér Béla's Company⁷) did vanish my prejudice that Hungarian theater is strict and calculated. Meantime, the Serbian performances that I had a chance to see proved that there is a new generation of actors who approach theater as authors and in various creative ways that do not include drinking rakija before getting on the stage, which is a quite romantic and bohemian picture of artists that still lives on in the Serbian culture.

Through the theater festival suddenly the whole world was in my high school town, and the artists mentioned above were among those who made me think of theater as my future platform of expression. Now, ten years later, I am a passionate spectator, but also a curious theater maker who would like to contribute to the rich history of theater making.

Undressing the expectations

For a long time, it seemed to me that everybody knows what they want to be when they grow up. I remember that once I wanted to be an archeologist for a month. I only wanted to be a ballerina while listening to the song called 'Desperado' by the band Eagles that my father liked a lot, but as the song ended, my ballet dance-like moves stopped as well, and I was more delighted building a Lego house. I attended music school, but I did not like the piano at all. In sixth grade I found the only thing that attracted my attention: singing. I sang in the choir, I attended opera singing classes and, in the meantime, secretly (my opera teacher did not like the idea) jazz singing classes. Most of my high school mates went on chasing diplomatic careers or

⁷ "About us" *Pinter Bela and Company official*, 5 Nov. 2018, <http://pbest.hu/english>

they became English teachers, lawyers, historians, among other things. In 2011, while writing my graduation thesis about the 90's feminist punk movement in the United States called 'Riot grrrls'⁸, I still did not know where I should apply to. I was dreaming of an electro-disco-punk band and wished to be a teenager somewhere in Seattle, Portland or San Francisco in the nineties, imagining it as the ultimate form of fun. However, I was a teenager in the 2000's in Serbia, a country that I did not like at all, a country that seemed grey and so undefined for me at the time.

I chose to apply to the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. I chose to study acting in Hungarian language, my second language, my "father-tongue". One of the reasons behind my choice was that I wanted to have a perfect pronunciation of Hungarian, a language that I find exceptionally beautiful. I wanted to spend time with that language without moving to Hungary. The other reason was that I thought there I would be able to spend time working on my voice. It turned out to be partially true. Also, I never attended any sports before and I spent a lot of time writing and reading without acknowledging the importance of movement, therefore I knew I will be forced in a way to move, but creatively, through dance and acrobatics. It was indeed like that. My motivation was, however, not to become an actor, but, to paraphrase professor Ivan Vyskočil, the founder of the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, I wanted to notice, "cognize"ⁱⁱ and play with something completely new.

In the United States, while being an exchange student for a year, I had a chance to work on a musical with disabled kids. Also, in my American school I was a member of a performing arts group that combined the art of spoken word, dance, music and theater. Those were my only concrete theater experiences if we exclude the awkward piano concerts that I had to do while in music school, and numerous competitions with my successful elementary school choir, which was a beautiful

⁸ "Riot Grrrl Manifesto" *History is a weapon*, 5 Nov. 2018, <http://historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/riotgrrrlmanifesto.html>

period of my life that thought me how magical it can be to be part of a community that has much faith and trust in what it is devoted to.

People who apply for the Academy of Arts to study acting often have experience in amateur theaters or they are known for being good in reciting, for example. People who apply to study acting usually crave to become part of the established theater community – they know all the actors on the scene, they know all the plays and they are well prepared for the long-awaited moment – the audition.

In my case it was completely different. Firstly, I had little self-esteem and I had big troubles memorizing the texts. Furthermore, my Serbian accent made me even less sure that I am choosing the good path. I do not even remember what I chose for the audition and I won't try to recall it because I believe that those were some of the worst days in my life. Yet, if I leave out the self-judgment, I could say that there is a big amount of humor in that experience. I did not know where I am going to, neither who are the professors "examining" my talents, still I took this situation way too seriously.

There were six of us on the audition. This was a surprising moment in the forty year history of the Hungarian drama department that was established in Novi Sad, the second largest city in Serbia. Beforehand at least twenty pupils auditioned for the acting program in the Hungarian language, and more that 150 applied for acting in the Serbian language. The fact that there were only twenty of us was a surprising evidence that our country is getting empty. The Hungarian community too is slowly vanishing. However, I never felt that I would make theater only to save a community, but rather because I have something to say to the ones that want to listen.

After a weeklong audition I was sure that I am not going to get in, but surprisingly enough I did. I was sad and disappointed because of this. I felt ashamed to appear in the school few months later when the school year started. I still do not know what made my future teacher accept me, but today I am happy and sort of thankful that he did.

Our class consisted of only four people, of two girls and two boys. Our “master” was a successful theater director named György Hernyák and his assistant was one of the greatest actors, actively involved in the scene, Ervin Pálfi. In our last year of study, Margareta Táborosi joined as the assistant, an emerging choreographer/actress who studied in Novi Sad and who prior to her pedagogical work studied in Budapest. The team of three completely different characters, coming from various theater backgrounds gave us, as a group, a wider outlook so to say, as we experienced various methods and worked with different aesthetics. None of my classmates turned out to be a conventional actor and they luckily all had various interests other than theater; they were and still are thinking humans with inspiring characters and identities that go beyond their roles as only actors.

As I’ve already mentioned, although studying in what is considered a “classical” school, our teachers were often noting chunks of approaches by Grotowski, Barba, Brook, Brecht. Even so, in our own autonomous method we tried to grasp our knowledge about Pina Bausch, Martha Graham, DV8 and many more artists, probably in the lack of constant experiencing of our bodies as engines, together with our voices and mimics.

Our teacher was known as an eccentric one even in the circle of his own colleagues. There have been legends of his exercises where he makes the students undress. All four of us knew that that moment is going to come. And it came. Suddenly, we found ourselves crawling on the floor on all four in a circle, looking at each other’s butts. Let me point out that this concrete exercise is not the outcome of our teacher’s perversity, but rather of his experience as a pedagogue and experimental theater maker in his early career. It does seem unusual, but through exercises like this we really became a group. We built our world of trust and we perceived each other as brothers and sisters. Our first year was not only about getting naked on the stage, of course. Our first year passed mainly in the spirit of authorial work on stage. The authorial texts being in focus, we were writing a lot, mostly about ourselves. Throughout all four years it was expected from us to direct our own scenes, whereas some other classes of students were predominantly directed by their own teachers.

All of us had to learn to play an instrument and we had to compose our 'introduction' songs in the first semester. We worked hard as the school became our second home, though it sometimes felt like a prison.

My years at the academy were crucial years both considering the so-called profession and my own independent personality. I became aware of things that I would use in my future life. This period was important for understanding what a challenge is, what it means to take a risk, to suffer (especially), to examine the limits, to take situations (too) seriously, to learn to be expressive (which I was absolutely not before entering the academy), to obey and resist, to find ways to be distinctive even inside an unchangeable system, to produce effectively, to be prepared to enter the cruel world of the theater industry. Moreover, as time passed I felt that the industry might not be a place for me, nevertheless, it was a life changing experience to dive into the "professional world" and I cannot imagine it differently. If I did not get to know it, I would not be able to talk about it now.

Pieces of "industry"

In this chapter I will address my engagement in the professional/institutional theater in Vojvodina, Serbia, with a special focus on an "inherited role" within a performance that luckily amazed me as a spectator as well, prior to the offered chance to join the team of actors and play another forty performances of the same with them.

Each generation of actors in Hungarian language spends a semester in Budapest at the Faculty of Film and Theater. After returning, filled with approaches and experiences different from the ones in our own community, most of the students slowly start to play in the only Hungarian language theater in town, the Novi Sad Theater. As for me, those days could be described as commuting between the academy and the theater, with little sleep. I was spending most of my time rehearsing and it felt stressful and exhausting, yet full of an unknown kind of adrenaline. My first experience "on a big stage" was while staging a contemporary version of the 'Csárdáskirálynő' or 'The Czardas Princess', also translated as 'The

Gypsy Princess', an operetta in 3 acts by Emmerich Kalman directed by one of our teachers, Margaréta Táborosi. Us, the students played small roles, binding contemporary dance and singing in the choir. After that I had offers to play in few other productions at the same theater, which I naturally accepted for the sake of the experience.

Namely, the performance that was particularly important for me was called '**Neoplanta**'. The play has been on the repertoire for a while already, therefore I was able to experience it as a spectator, and when one of the actresses decided to leave the theater, the artistic director at the time thought I could be the one taking over her role. Taking somebody else's role without being directly involved in the process of making meant a huge challenge. I faced some of my biggest fears while "jumping" into this role. First, the play already won the prestigious "Sterija Award" and there were big expectations from all sides and levels. Secondly, the performance toured a lot. I learned the text in one week, which also included the task to learn the Communist manifesto in German. Part of my family is Danube Swabian, but I was never attached to this language.

My first appearance in this performance was on a festival in Podgorica, Montenegro. Later, we played on big stages in Macedonia, Croatia, Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia. 'Neoplanta', which is also the Latin name of Novi Sad was special to me because it was about the city where I was born. The play was based on a novel written by a Serbian born Hungarian writer, László Végelⁱⁱⁱ. It examines the chaotic historical past of the city, its multicultural environment, and its current confusing present. The play was directed by András Urbán, so one could say that it was a dream come true for me to play in a performance directed by a director whose work I followed from the beginning of my "spectator life". I was the youngest member of the team and I felt indescribable happiness to be part of this hard working, renowned group. I learned so many things from my colleagues and I had huge support from their side, though I was sure I missed the most important part of this process: the making. I remember this period as the most stressful and challenging period of my life, but especially because the play was partially authorial and its

theme close to my heart, I felt lucky to be part of it. My aim is not to introduce you to the whole performance, but rather, I will point out some thoughts that arose because of being involved in it.

The play is performed in such way that the audience as well sits on the stage, on a constructed auditorium. While filling up the seats, the spectators are facing the original auditorium behind the actors. Before the actual start of the performance, the curtain goes down. The spectator sees the red curtain from behind while the action is taking place in the inner side of the curtain. Therefore, the theater space is used in an untraditional way, which I point out as a subtle metaphor that comes back at the end of the performance. The authors seem to believe in the audiences' power of imagination.

In the last scene, which was built up from many improvisations during the process, the actors sit at one table and discuss questions of identity, freedom and future. As I learned from my colleagues, the lines that each actor got at the end of the process were not the ones that he/she said originally. I find this fact essential because it helps in distancing from our, in this case, their own opinions on stage. The sentences⁹ that I "inherited" argued and questioned my inner emotions and thoughts at the time. In the closing scene^{iv} of 'Neoplanta' the spectator can hear sentences (not in chronological order and from different parts of the scene) like:

- I would like my children to speak Hungarian.
- C'mon, in few years, here there will be no Hungarians at all.

- **Why is it so much better for you to talk about you being a minority? and discriminated, you want to leave *this* to your children?**

- I can't do whatever a Serb does...they could beat me on the street...
- Don't shit around, what can't you do...?

⁹ Marked in bold

- Imagine a Hungarian wedding where we drag our pistols in the same way as the Serbs, and we start shooting. What do you think the Serb neighbor would say? How *normal* this is, right?
- **Come on, do you even know what Europe is about? It's about getting all sorts of idiotic laws, for example: your dog can not shit in front of your house, even if you are in a village, because he is "polluting" the public space. I do not want to live in a Europe, where my dog cannot shit in the grass!**
- But *I* want. (35-38)

Everyone from the ensemble stays silent while an actress, the only one who was not part of the discussion scene, dressed in a grandiose dress made of Euros, slowly comes in and takes a seat in front of the table, facing the audience. In a microphone (which is I believe one of the favorite props of contemporary directors) she is saying the words of Maria Theresia proclaiming a free royal town: "*Nominentur Neoplanta... may they live in peace and love each other, may this multiethnic city be an example of **different peoples' peaceful coexistence, peaceful coexistence, peaceful coexistence...***"(Neoplanta, 39). The text shown bold goes on in a loop until finally an actor gently sticks a 500 Euro bill (a very realistic prop for this dreamy scene) on her mouth, silencing and leaving her as the light goes down. The curtain behind the actors slowly goes up and there is nobody in the (original) auditorium behind. Here the spectators have the same picture in front of them as before the beginning of the performance. Throughout the whole performance the narration chronologically illustrates a wide period of time, from when there was nobody in this region ... until today. Naturally, the conclusion of each viewer might be different.

What makes this play unique among some other plays dealing with history that I've seen in the past years produced in Serbia, is its crave for an honest dialogue. It does not take sides and it does not offer a concrete conclusion. It believes in the power of the audience and the power of theater as a mediator of many themes that are

silenced for instance in mainstream media, or in our schoolbooks. Nevertheless, it symbolizes a dialogue that should happen even outside theater.

Although it contains aggressive scenes that are present in most of Urbán's productions, 'Neoplanta' is at the same time emotional without trying to be that. It contains many elements of the epic theater; few realistic scenes are present as well. The setting with a new reality is changed sometimes by simply moving a chair from one place to the other. The playfulness regarding the theatrical styles underlined the lingering bond between the written word and real life, as the performance is based on a novel and on improvisational scenes as well. Actors represent, demonstrate but they also jump deep into characters for a moment of realism where they try to depict situations according to the written actuality.

The industrial world of Attila Antal's music and the light design of Robert Majoros take the spectator to a journey between a dream and reality, that is another proof that each person in a process of making a play is tremendously important. The significance of these plays in institutional theaters (too) is vital because it is also involving the audience, and beside its tendency to inform and reflect upon historical events, it creates a new generation of spectators. It inspires us to rethink and redefine our own perception of "truth" and to address the issues that must be addressed within the community, no matter our ethnic background (which must be colorful, considering where we live).

In my research process I came along a dissertation written by Kathryn M. Morris that had inspired me to think about another aspect within my experience of this semi-documentary production: its impact on the audience.

Morris points out the following:

Documentary relies not only on the collective efforts of the writer, director, actors, and others involved in production to move the play from "page to stage," but the audience member is also recognized as playing a pivotal role in its progression... without audience recognition, understanding, and, finally, "coming to terms" with

the presentation, there would be no lessons learned or ideas shared. In this regard, dramaturgical analysis is dependent on the reflexive contributions of audience members expressed in post - performance discussions and questionnaires. (84-85)

There were as a matter of fact many discussions following this performance. I could say that performance had a strong intention to educate, but what is more important, it served as a great trigger for starting the dialogue outside the theater.

While touring with it I was truly surprised how people do not know, for example, that there were and still are Hungarians and many other nations other than the Slavic ones in their (former) country. At last knowledge is here to be shared, not kept. Moreover, while performing outside of the ex-Yugoslav territories, I figured out that there are many similarities wherever we happened to be. People could relate to the story because it was universal, yet, as I said, personal for us, playing in it, and they recognized our devotion.

The play initiated never ending discussions, even very personal ones. I remember a moment from Maribor, Slovenia during the discussion when an actress from the troupe realized she is talking to her pen pal from the time she was ten. Surprisingly, her pen pal was an actor leading our after-show discussion. There were many magical moments around this play and it has influenced me as a spectator and as a performer as well. Its documentary-based foundation has to some extent inspired me to start working on my own authorial documentary pieces. However, at this point I was still not concretely introduced to this specific genre, so wide and colorful.

Documentary theater – a short description

The definition of documentary theater is very complex and it have changed in time. Morris cites Carol Martin who points out that the late twentieth century already included varieties of documentary based genres: docudrama, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of witness, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact. Even “applied theater” has a documentary base, Morris claims. (8)

Documentary theater is a form of expression that uses archive materials, original documents, court protocols, interviews, research reports and much more to create a script that is non-fiction. The action, as well as the words of the characters, seeks to provide as much as possible from the content of letters, diaries, photographs, news reports, film or TV footage, parliamentary, judicial or other official records. These stories can be personal (stories of the authors themselves) or from gathered material of unknown people, therefore, less personal. A subgenre called verbatim tends to keep the exact form (from word to word) of the interviews and other gathered material.

Although glimpses of the documentary theater can be found even in some of Shakespeare's historical dramas, the concept is usually associated with recent times. One of the forerunners of the documentary theater in Europe was Bertolt Brecht who alongside with Erwin Piscator began to introduce the audience to the epic theater; dramatic works that were intended to induce social change and deny the "sophistication" of the dominant theater tendency, fully based on fictional characters and actions.

In the time of mass media and various forms of manipulations where the line between real and unreal is almost invisible, the process of undressing the truth (in theater too) is essential.

A laboratory “workshop”

In this chapter I examine my first steps as an author leaning towards the documentary genre, which itself caught my greater attention in 2015 in Budapest, when I saw a performance titled 'Sea Lavender or The Euphoria of Being'¹⁰, a motion-verbal, confessional duet with Éva Fahidi, a 90-year-old Auschwitz survivor and Emese Cuhorka, a young dancer-performer. The authorial piece focuses on topics such as living with the memory of the Holocaust, the gap between generations

¹⁰ von Richthofen, Luisa. "92-year-old Holocaust survivor Eva Fahidi dances for remembrance", *Deutsche Welle*, Published on 9 Nov. 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/92-year-old-holocaust-survivor-eva-fahidi-dances-for-remembrance/a-41311829>.

and the fate of each, aging, existence in the young and old body. All of these are approached with humor, sincerity and empathy. The performance was directed by Réka Szabó, the artistic director of The Symptoms theater company.

After seeing this performance that night I was even more confident that I was looking for personal stories which somehow resonate in me and with me. For me this performance was somehow a reminder of how important it is to preserve the stories around us – the truth around us. While mentioning to my friends this experience, surprisingly enough, few days later a colleague of mine suggested a documentary theater workshop. I felt it cannot be a coincidence and was eager to join. So, I did.

The workshop was held by Boris Liješević, a theater director and pedagogue, as Monday meeting sessions throughout a year. None of us, including him, knew what we are about to produce, because producing was not the main point of our meetings. Our aim was to freely experiment with our material and to playfully dive into a journey of fresh cognitions.

In the group of eight to ten people, each week we brought interview materials which we then first read out loud to each other. Each text got a feedback from the group which was based on the impressions during the reading of the raw version of the interview. The next step we took was usually an improvisation inspired by our memory of the text that we shared. Finally, we thought about the potential context of the scenes, the staging itself.

Personally, the most useful moment in this process was to take turns between taking a role in the scene and being an outsider, a spectator of the same. This was particularly important because it gave me space to distance myself from the story that I am attached to, and to take inspiration from my colleagues' interpretations.

With a voice recorder in my pocket, I started documenting various stories in my walks of life – usually stories that were circulating around me for a long time. I felt

that documenting them symbolized a new form of life, maybe a bit longer than an average human life.

I claim that using interviews on stage is a great challenge. The words one is about to put on stage while making a documentary play are often words of living people. Therefore, it requires a higher sensitivity. It is imperative to depict these stories without censorship and manipulation of the original context in which they have been told. Yet, consulting with the interviewee and treating them as authors can lead to a wider freedom in staging a piece. With that being said, in our Monday meetings we treated the shared interviews with immense discretion and responsiveness and our „subjects” were aware of our intentions.

My curiosity brought me to people that were keen to speak, and I was never trying hard to look for a „perfect” interviewee. Most of the stories that I’ve collected during that one year had something in common: the theme of war. I started a closer examination of the human segment within this theme, at the same time trying to leave out the lumps of the habitual and highly impotent „everyday politics”.

My region, the Balkans, became a center of various unfortunate events between 1991 and 1999 and the generation that was born in this period has in my opinion an unwanted task to resolve many pending issues and questions from the war-torn past, to be able to look at the future. Still, I declare it is hard to do so.

In the process of interviewing, some people experienced talking as a sort of therapy, and that made me hopeful. Documentary as a genre became alluring to me for multiple reasons. First, my senses got sharpened, and I felt a special kind of link to the storyteller. I saw his/her eyes, I sensed a certain manner and intention in the look and in the voice, I followed the body language and I could not be indifferent. I also find myself taking part in this „therapy” while carefully listening to the ones having something to say – it seemed that talking out the past is indeed the only way to reach the present – the truthful present from which we can deliberately start building the future.

I argue that the task of theater makers of my generation (and not only them) is to find new ways to approach the past and that our path should include maximum sensitivity and ability to listen, without taking any concrete ideological or political sides. Hence, that is why I think documentary theater in each community, and especially communities dealing with traumatic pasts, is vital. Moreover, I believe that peoples' stories can build an alternative history, different from the ones in our schoolbooks.

The theme of war in institutional theaters in the Balkan region has started to emerge predominantly in the last decade. What I learned is that a big number of these performances were very similar in portraying the phenomenon of the Balkan wars. For instance, usage of music and video archives from the past, actual political speeches and inserts from news were and still are common elements. Demonstrating violence is often very realistic. Contemporary theater generally seems to be loud and expressive in the former Yugoslav region. Nevertheless, it's components and tendency to raise questions were new and provocative for me as spectator. On the other hand, the documentary workshop gave me new insight to the process of staging a human story and after some time I was absolutely confident in my sense that there is a need for new narratives in this genre, no matter they theatrical style, particularly within this very theme.

The first people I interviewed were the closest people to me. Few of them I asked to tell me stories that I've heard from them before. Some of these stories I've had already heard before, but as time passed, they became blurry in my mind. I had an urge to keep these stories alive, precisely as they are, not only as „anecdotes” which I would remember only partially. Those stories were centered around childhood, identity, immigration. It was interesting to observe how people sometimes add new details to the stories they often tell, while some others are vanishing away.

After a while, I had a list of interviews made with my grandmother, my uncle, my mother, my girlfriends that were teenagers a decade before me. Unintentionally, most of them were women. While talking about their past, it was evident that their

past is affected with the historical events of the region. This topic of war was also familiar to me, because I experienced it to some extent. I knew about men who were dragged into the battles, I heard about those who died, and I met some who survived, but rarely talked about it. However, I knew so little about the experience of women in the war, during the war.

'Sea Lavender or The Euphoria of Being' has highly influenced what would become the core of my future interest within the theme of war: women in war. It is a very broad topic that does not exclusively refer to those who fought with guns, but those who fought with peace. Nonetheless, I noticed a tendency of (especially) male directors in the region to expose and put their theatrical concept in front of the vulnerability of the theme of war. I believe it is a long and complex process to try out talking about it in different manners, if not all.

On the other hand, the already mentioned performance directed by Réka Szabó implied that saying less is sometimes more and that the body can also talk. Throughout the performance the performers are referring to the process of making, which gives another layer of honesty and truth to the performance.

The dialogue between Cuhorka and Fahidi is actual life and after seeing it two times I can say it is very different, but both times vividly real. This performance emphasizes the magical power of storytelling and simplicity. The young performer shares elements of her life as does the old lady who, due to working on this performance, is very fit and flexible. They talk about love, fashion, dance and childhood, about everyday themes, as the will of the body to move is outlines itself in various forms.

I found some analogy between the simplicity of our attempts during the workshop and the performance that I would continue to use as one of the references of narratives that I strive for in my work as well, and that requires a level of oblivion regarding what I've known. I have been a passionate spectator of the Brechtian staging, yet I am very keen on combining it with a level of gentleness and just being, a quality that I am still discovering.

First MA - introducing a delightful task

I enrolled in the one-year MA program of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad in 2015 and I also got accepted into the Gender Studies MA program of the University of Novi Sad. My plan was to combine the academic research work built around the theme of women's involvement in the Yugoslav wars with performing arts. I believe that thinking *and* experiencing is a formula for a better understanding of numerous issues. Very often researches of great academics circulate only within the academic circle. My idea was to spread it to a wider audience, because it is indispensable for a community affected by war. Also, I find it significant and challenging to find a language that is comprehensible to a wider range of people, not only academics, while experimenting on stage with my research material. Only lately have I learned that there are people who are open to approaches that I am keen on exploring as well, one of them being a Nena Močnik, a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Study of Storytelling, Experimentality and Memory in Finland, who is as well working with victims of war rape. However, while being in contact with the main professor of the Gender Studies department, I got an impression that it was not a place that supports experimental techniques in the research. Today, for many reasons that I hereby won't discuss, I am glad I did not start my studies there. Nevertheless, I was more than glad to read through the exquisite published material of the Gender Studies department. There I found a book of interviews made specifically with Roma girls. I chose to translate some of them from Serbian to Hungarian. I had and still have a big passion for translation. One of those interviews I turned into a monologue with which I went to audition for the MA acting program at my alma mater university and got admitted. During this one year I had a small number of classes and I did not accept any new roles in the theater where I had a part-time engagement, because I knew that I want to continue to study abroad to widen my understanding of theater. I also had enough time to write my first MA thesis and to prepare the required monodrama, my first 50 minutes long authorial performance.

The previously mentioned workshop gave me courage to prepare an authorial documentary piece. That is what I've had decided, but I had no references from the past about students' authorial (documentary) pieces, at least not around me. I was about to enter an unknown field of theater making and my professors at the theater school were luckily supportive of this idea.

My task was to stage a monodrama, a solo performance, thus appropriating and implicating into my work all those crafts that we've been introduced to as students in the years prior: directing, dramaturgy, acting techniques. The students had complete freedom as authors, and we were expected to go through an independent process of creating a whole piece. This seemed as a vast and at the same time amusing challenge, chiefly because I've been mainly working with people in the school and in the theater, never on my own.

This very process from the start included many emotions from my side and I also learned that the dialogue cannot be forced, it shall come because of mutual connection between me and the storyteller. By this time, I had only three interviews that were strongly connected to the theme that I've decided to study and that had influenced my life as well.

brainstorming

Whilst brainstorming for my graduation performance I tried to focus on themes that I've been examining up until then. There were few specific topics that I was sure I want to include in my work:

- the multicultural environment of the place I live in and a critical questioning of the same;
- a childhood within the war, strongly impacted by my visits to Sarajevo, but also by living as a refugee and with refugees;
- the ethics of the mainstream media in Yugoslavia during the 1990's, with strong focus on their esthetics and rhetoric;

- resisting the war, inspired by individuals actively involved in the opposition that were against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, with a focus on women and their personal experiences.

mapping the dramaturgy

My starting point *were* the interviews. Listening and typing them down, then reading repeatedly the transcripts made me realize that the time range that they *together* illustrate is a period of ten years. Subsequently, the decision was made to focus on a certain time period, limiting myself to keep the dramaturgy in some kind of frame, to keep it symmetrical, yet supple and free. I ended up revising some events that occurred between 1989 (when the idea of war started to appear throughout the country, but only according to an interview made with my mother) and 1999 (when the NATO bombing of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia took place).

Writing my own texts, taking notes of my own memories first served only as a guide, experimentation with the timeline while putting up a collage of various stories, it helped me identify with other texts. As a result, instead of taking stories of other kids from books that documented childhood in war, I began my work on developing mine.

In the final text, I tangled my personal stories, outside sources (newspapers, video commercials, e-mails) and some of the interviews I've had. In addition, I composed short songs. Some of the frequently appearing questions while outlining the structure were the following: „What are the parallels between me and the people around me? Where do our lives meet? How did we perceive the same event?“. As I studied my own memory and the memory of others, I slowly found analogies of parallel worlds and prehensions within. Naturally, the performance of *The Symptoms* gave me a hint that tangled histories of people on stage (in this case) could serve as an offer to the audience to bind and juxtapose their own experiences with what they see.

„Parallel“ – glimpses of the epitome

In the following chapter I would like to briefly discuss few details concerning my first play that I named „Parallel“. It was played only once, on the 26th of September 2016 in the Retirees Club, a big room in the style of the sixties, where few times a week elderly people meet to socialize, play chess and various other games. I had no concrete concept connected to this exact location (unfortunately), but I knew that I do not want to perform in a black-box/classroom with dark walls. Nevertheless, I was also very inspired by the „flat theater“ that is very common in Budapest. It had its own charm, this nostalgic atmosphere of the socialist space, yet with an ordinary position of the performer/audience in the space, the place contributed little to the performance and was not used with all its capacities.

Behind me there was a white door that automatically opened at the end of the performance. At that point the audience sees a fully bright and modern new room behind, full of food and drinks, as it is often the case on traditional graduation events. I saw in this a way a chance to draw a contrast between „the performance“ and „not the performance“ space, making it highly ambivalent and questioning it for myself as well.

As stated, in addition to the interviews I added materials which I am not personally connected to, as a result of looking through more than five hundred newspapers and video footage published in the nineties. A piece of television news from the same time, informing about the inflation, was projected in one of the scenes. The projection continued with various, quiet grotesque commercials from that time, but without sound. On the looper, an electronic tool used to create repetitive, rhythmic musical patterns or dense layers, I used a male distorted voice to „dub“ the commercials projected behind me, by reading parts of e-mails that the anti-war activists sent out throughout the world, even to the neighboring countries and their own peace activists. E-mails¹¹ served as basically the only mean of communication, since the postal and phone connections, mainly between the „enemy countries“ did

¹¹ Gessen, Masha. „Balkans Online“, *Wired*, Published on 11 Jan. 1995, <https://www.wired.com/1995/11/zamir/>.

not exist. It was a crucial and fresh information for me that at the time e-mails were used in the region. Combining the mainstream and the underground sources could accentuate what we've missed as a community, what some chose to watch and to be influenced by, while the political minority was in search for freedom, independence and peace.

My aunt is the author of a documentary film^v made few years prior, about an anti-war movement called the Zitzer Republic^{vi} and various peaceful resisters throughout the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia in the nineties, majority of them being initiated by women. I chose to include this story because I believe it is crucial to talk about it, mainly since only few people have heard about it. I started to investigate this theme beyond the facts that I've learned in her documentary. My advantage in this research process was that I speak Hungarian and Serbian; therefore I was able to look through a wide range of documentation and archives. The movement was uniting people of different ethnic background who did not think war is an answer. The essentiality of this example lays in the still present, constrained tendency of hate speech between the ethnic groups living in Vojvodina. My strong aim was to point out the times of trouble when ethnicity did not play any role.

Encyclopaedia Britannica suggests that *"Brecht regarded his method as a way of helping spectators understand the complex nexuses of historical development and societal relationships"*^{vii} which was indeed one of my aims, to make the performance deductive, yet not entirely.

I used proclamations of this „republic”, their assertions, speeches, descriptions of their everyday life in the squatted building in a small village in Vojvodina called Tresnjevac. In my final work I described the writings that could be found on the walls of the inhabited place where the people who rejected the military invitation lived for months.

I believe that talking about good deeds shapes our mind in a constructive way. However, that does not mean that we should not be critical towards the atrocities

and horrors that were part of our past. From my early adulthood I have been involved in various human rights „activist” groups advocating for peace, and at the end of the day, my closest family is very diverse: Serbian, Hungarian, Croatian, Slovak, German; I’ve always felt my role is to see the human, without any ethnic borders. I was and still am interested in the individuals who were not voluntarily fighting on the battlefields, who were betrayed by their own country’s political establishment, who stayed humans even in times of trouble.

In the newspaper archives I found two texts¹² that affected me, written in a style of a journal. One of the texts was titled ‘A letter to the refugees/dissidents’. The female journalist starts her writing as follows:

„ I am not threatened by the mobilization, because I am a woman. I eat good food that is good for my skin, for my blood pressure (...) I read some comments according to which some of you would like to come home (...) My friend has been mobilized before I had a chance to give him a lecture. Now I can only guess: Vukovar? Osijek? Borovo Selo?¹³ If only he was in Sahara or in the Brazilian jungle. I feel so sad for those who left, I helplessly listen to the music wish lists on the radio ‘To XY for his enrollment in the military service.’ (...) Miserable youngsters. „

I find this text witty and full of spirit. Here I used the rope – exploring its surface, it’s touch, while saying the above quoted of the text. As an aside, in this performance many objects were used. I believed that the objects would serve me as helpers in my first solo performance, but as I look back, they were often stopping me from being present. I had a mini-TV that I want to keep in each next series of the war-themed performances of mine. My childhood stuffed animals were present, as well as red plastic flowers, a rope, a boa, a plastic ‘Barbie’ horse, a blank protest sign. The way of using some of them was not functional and very destructive, for some moments even

¹²both from the Vojvodinian Hungarian paper named ‘Naplo’, neither of the issues is in my possession anymore, therefore I am not able to reference them

¹³battlefields during the Serbian-Croatian conflict

confusing. This experience points out for me that if the idea seems good in my head, does not mean it functions on stage.

Returning to the topic, the author points out that the dissidents should not come home and that she has six suggestions for what they should do if they have thoughts like this appearing in their mind, some of those being: „(...)dig yourself a hole somewhere under the great sky and try sleeping there, it is certainly better than a battlefield, (...) or hurt your own hand with a knife for instance, at least nobody is pointing a gun at you”. While listing these reasons I start using a rope as a skipping-rope. The sixth reason is again reflecting to her womanhood, which is not associated with the war-zone directly, but very much indirectly, while idly watching the world around her falling apart, she finishes her writing as follows: „We also know to handle caustic soda, Molotov cocktail and the ax. Greetings, (in case the leaders plan to form a women’s troop) from a refugee candidate.” My „rope game” symbolized running but staying at the same place. When I reflect on it today I believe it was one of the simplest, but most honest and effective moments of the performance.

The previously introduced looper helped me create sounds that I associated with war and chaos. The song 'War is beautiful' I composed before, but since this technique of making music on the spot was still new to me, I gave myself a kind of a „break”, while recording it on spot, focusing only on the song I need to record in a certain rhythm. The recorded sound repeated itself and I continued the scene looking at the distance and proudly saying goodbye to the son who left for the battlefield, throwing plastic flowers after him could have been a known reference for the older generation sitting in the audience.

I applied interviews in the following ways:

❖ Dialogues with change of voice - the advantage of this device called looper is that my voice can be altered into a different color, depth/height. It has around 300 effects that served me well. I started the performance with a question directed towards my mother: „How did you and dad meet?”, using of course the interview

that I've made with her, but also including all my own questions. Technically, I was using an effect to color her voice, while mine stayed as it really is.

❖ „Acting out”, in this case a friend who remembers the day the bombardment of Yugoslavia had started. Prior to this scene I use a sentence to connect this scene with the previous, unrelated one:” I've always liked girls. Older girls... I wanted to be like them”. These unrelated sentences helped me a lot and gave me courage to jump out of the main theme and tangle with atmospheres that are not related to the war. At this scene I embody a cool teenager and I start with her interview as a monologue, in first person, „as if I am her and I am remembering”. This method of realistic correlation did not work out in my case and I will try to avoid it in my future work, at least in this exact form. Moreover, in my strangely constructed dramaturgy of the scene, her text is stopped from time to time, the scene is full of tangled switching from my own story (that I narrate as well, many times „as if I am there”, using present tense) back to the chunks of the story of my interviewee, and like that in circle until both stories end.

❖ Previously recording myself as I read part of an interview that I've made with an artist/ playing the recording in the performance. This technique I use at the end of the performance when I stop the recording and say that „I feel sorry to use this text like this”, referring to the banality of this „medium” and criticizing slightly my own incapability to use it creatively or to finish the performance.

The narrative present¹⁴ tense was used whenever I spoke about my memories, the short monologues began with stating the exact year of the event I was describing. I used my memory of different life events like: a car crash in my childhood, moving to another country as a kid, attending rock concerts which my father played, but sometimes even a simple question concerning identity showed up in the performance, for instance while using the microphone as a phone: „Hello, dad, do

¹⁴also called 'historical present'

you hear me? I just wanted to ask you ... Dad, why am I not a catholic?" These moments of playfulness were very helpful. On the other hand, I often forgot about the power of the 'alienation', for instance, and went deep into an unwanted role. I do think there are many great ideas that can serve as inspiration for theater making, one of them being this.

At that time, I read Hungarian translations of poems by Wisława Szymborska, and got an idea to include two of them. To address the audience, I used her poem titled "List"^{viii}. This was one of the rare moments I felt truly present on stage during this performance, telling each sentence to a different person in the audience, with no intention other than asking the audience these questions/saying the poem full of questions that strongly resonated with some of my concerns.

Since I had invested plenty in the dramaturgy, and the concept of the "whole piece", I left the last 10 minutes of the performance for a free improvisation. My big crave for something unknown brought me joy on stage. The ending scene shows a struggle to end the performance, which I by that time almost fully accepted. I finally said something fully honest and up to date; I talked about my struggle at that moment, about my questions concerning ending this performance, assuring the people that this is not the end, only the beginning, thus asking for understanding. I mentioned the fact that I do not like microphones, but I really need it, I declared that there will be no more translation (and it is as a matter of fact done, I translated the text only up until the improvisational part) and that I cannot translate all my life and everything. I addressed my mother that "...she should have had already learned to speak Hungarian, maybe because she lives with a Hungarian for thirty years already, and that way she could translate instead as well". At last, I declared that each performance should end with a song and I tried to sing a folk song. With a fully destroyed voice I ended this show.

Looking back, I see myself as a nervous and disturbed person on stage. As if I cannot wait for it to come to an end. It is really confusing to be in that state of mind, led by

fear and with almost no playfulness. However, when I do experience the playfulness and joy and when I am able to be present and calm, I feel motivated to continue with all, whether good or bad. Even though I found it hard to work on my own, this process helped me to see which from the used tools are constructive for my work. I felt many words clashing within my “acting techniques”, whereas I only wanted to be myself which then was still unknown to me, how to be only myself. The “self-documentation” represents a sort of healing as well and I must say that working on personal themes brought me closer to the theater, people around me and nevertheless, myself as a human. Once I read that:

“The later work of Michel Foucault suggests that self-documentation is not new. On the contrary, many in Ancient Greece and Rome apparently kept hupomnēmata, or notebooks “to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.” These were fragmentary notebooks, but their result was not merely a collection of disjointed scraps; rather, they contributed to a new whole, along with the writer themselves. According to Foucault, the purpose of the hupomnēmata was to care for the self, which was an ancient directive. (Foucault laments that today we only recall know thyself, having forgotten about care for thyself.) As Foucault writes, “writing transforms the things seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood.’” People regularly returned to their hupomnēmata for nourishment.”¹⁵

‘Parallel’ illustrated my scrapbook of thoughts, a journey of outlining a theme. At the end of it, I was sure I must relearn to play, to play like kids do.

¹⁵Gorichanaz, Tim “Documenting the self” *Scratchtap documents and design*, Published on 4 June 2017, <http://scratchtap.com/documenting-the-self/>

Authorial acting MA

For several years, I was looking for schools I would like to study and create at and the Department of Authorial Creation and Pedagogy caught my attention even a year before I applied for the studies. Two days after showing my first authorial performance, I was already in Prague with high hopes that I will find my own path and inner peace. The reason for that was that I felt inferior and unhappy because I knew that I was not honest on stage and that I was lying to myself and to the audience as well. I had an impression that I need to collect some more tools and feelings to be able to enjoy and play.

Also, I often felt that it is expected from me to accept a role because it should be an “honor” to serve the community or to have a job at an institution. However, I decided to study in Hungarian language because I find it rich and beautiful and because I believed that the “saving the language” propaganda of any kind could be replaced with an organically “maintaining the language” life. Moreover, I think that theater could be a space where different people cohere, so my intuition was very right when it suggested I should start my two-year MA studies in Prague. I was surrounded with people from different parts of this world, various temperaments and ideas came together in those two years.

Nevertheless, I very much liked the idea of exploring my own identities throughout observing and exploring the creativity of a human being. I decided at the time that I would only focus on creating something that I feel connected to. Also, I was craving for a laboratory-like work and the information I’ve previously learned on the website of my future school clearly suggested an atmosphere that I immediately felt dragged to.

The psychosomatic discipline called ‘Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner’¹⁶ was in the focus throughout my studies. The experience of continuous sessions meant

¹⁶“The Discipline” *(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner a solo open improvisation discipline*, http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org/The_Discipline.html,

returning to the playful kid in me, the one I completely forgot about throughout the years of “growing up”. I became engaged in this exploration of myself and others in the “public solitude”¹⁷. My verbal and non-verbal expression finally met to continue their journey together. Seeing and understanding other people, and different “selves” within me happened in parallel. First of all, I was grateful that I can be in a nonjudgmental environment with people from different backgrounds, not exclusively theatrical ones. The attention that we shared on our department made me a better listener and observer. Finally, I was in an environment with no hierarchy, an environment where I was able to be *myself*, in a place where we are all equal. All the “imperfections” suddenly became embraceable.

This solo improvisational discipline taught me to listen to my thoughts as well as my body. Verbalizing the thoughts that are in my head at the exact moment of being in a semi-empty space (knowing that you are being watched) was an empowering experience as a performer as well as a human who just wants to have a productive relation to this situation. From feeling often only uncomfortable, I got to the point when I felt joy and curiosity towards myself and others.

In my tryouts, I’ve touched upon exploring various themes, some of them being the fourth wall, the different languages, and the imitation/figures. After some time I felt more connected to my body and I started experimenting more with non-verbal expression. Involving the body into my stage presence meant including a wider range of rhythm and embodying characters that responded through my impulses, the ones that I expressed within the improvisations. In this period I became aware of the importance of the space itself, which I’ve been assessing with the assistance of my voice. This experience helped me to find out my blocks as an actor. My body became rooted, but not stuck to one spot. I learned that our body gives us signs and that my greatest task is to observe them with joy.

¹⁷ Ibid. / The actor’s ability to stay “private” while being watched.

Furthermore, I think that the skills that I've learned before this school, I was not able to use because I did not know *how* to use them. In time I learned that the *how* depends much on me and that discovering the *how* is indeed a path that cannot be known. This was indeed what I was doing: searching for my *own* way. The directed concentration enabled me to awaken and notice some unconscious moves, gestures, expressions, thoughts and later use them in a cultivated way while building my own authorial pieces.

Throughout these two years, we learned to give constructive feedbacks for each other and the written reflections were as well one of the core elements of my studies and they served as a great dialogue between me and myself, as well as between the pedagogues and pupils. Finally, studying at this school gave me hope and will to be an author and to share my knowledge, because I claim it is worthy, only if shared.

ParalleLite - outlining my own narrative

In my final performance at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, I made a piece that I named, mainly for myself „ParalleLite“. I imagined this performance as a continuation of a previous, with – as the name might or might not suggest – a lighter approach to the theme, fulfilled with lightness in my body and in my mind. The first showing of this piece occurred in my own flat. It was obvious that my attraction to the living spaces did not disappear in two years. I was convinced again by my own experience that being attracted to a space does not mean that this space could add something significant to the performance. The night of my first showing I experienced disappointment and light depression, most probably because I still did not realize I should decide whether I want to play or not this game called „theater“. I was sure that this game cannot be played seriously, but my body and mind kept on being stiff and tight, possibly as a consequence of being unsatisfied and too critical of myself while being in front of an audience almost every night for few years. Just after this night have I made myself a promise that I would do this only if it makes me feel good and thankful. Few weeks later I did a slightly different version which came because of not thinking about it for few weeks.

Several days before the second showing, I was working on it in isolation for many hours a day with high focus and relaxed body. Also, I understood the above-mentioned promise as a deal between me and myself, giving sense to the idea that I could be truthful only if I am present. While working on this version I had no other tasks than that. Since the school was over and the exams as well, I had a perfect chance to focus on a dialogue with myself and to use the dialogical approach within. The laboratory-like work helped me discover new themes and I accepted the questions that I directed towards myself, among them: „What do you want to say? Do you need this text/story and what does it mean to you? “. I decided to cut stories that I borrowed from two writers, texts that are not the interviews that I collected or short monologues that I wrote. The next step was to exactly know the practical „changes “between two stories and the connection between them. After knowing what I want to share in these forty minutes, drawing an exact outline for a performance gave me freedom to dive and exist within while in the meantime examining and discovering curves and edges of the shape itself.

Instead of wanting to introduce for example the visual world within a space and its own atmosphere, in the second showing I took care of mainly my own concerns as the one who is wittingly being watched and does not always feel comfortable with it. The only convenient possibility for me at this point was to accept this position with a psychosomatic approach that I got introduced to while attending the Dialogical Acting „classes “or meetings, I would say. To be able to feel free on stage, I need to „cure “myself from the habits I've been building for many years. Sharing with my spectators how I feel in the precise moment meant an ease and it contain a dozen of “holistic” self-care. While working with similar material for few years, I learned that delivering stories of other people can be more truthful in case I share an honest part of myself as well. „Parallel “symbolized a juxtaposed line of similar themes. In that process I found similarities between the path of getting free of fear and breaking free from the past itself, which is constructive especially when we tend to involve the present. Therefore, talking about the present became an important part of my new discoveries as an artist. Suddenly, while focusing on certain stories of the past

opened many new themes in my own mind, themes that are very much connected to the present and to the future. This is a segment that I tried to underline within the final version of 'ParalleLite'.

In the performance, I needed to start with creating my own autonomous atmosphere with a song on a looper, without leaning on the space itself and I named it „Wall “. I was making the music on spot and I also set a tempo for the upcoming song by counting in rhythm in Serbian, very similar to Czech: jedan Mississippi, dva Mississippi, tri Mississippi... As a connotation to something that only I know, it reminded me of a year I spent living next to that river and this accurate counting method that I discovered in a movie that was shot few years prior, in my hometown. The only text that I used in this repetitive song that followed was „I see the wall “. I continued the performance with declaring that I see the audience and that I am not going to pretend I do not see them, as the convention of the 'fourth wall' might suggest. Shortly after this, I claim that I am not going to start (the performance) until I don't feel that I am ready to start. I also show many helpful practices/exercises from the previous system I've been trained in. The decision to point out the psycho-physical state in which a performer might be in before (19 o'clock in my case for years) and during the performance (which I many times had no wish to play) has a big role in the start of the performance. I use the Hungarian texts, exercises that have sealed my years working in the theater and a prayer I've said so many times in my childhood, while desperately wanting to become a Catholic. I touch upon themes like faith and how it changes shape in the course of time, I examine a personal perception of being an actor and the concept around the convention of the 'fourth wall', a theme that occurred in many of my Dialogical Acting improvisations. Throughout the whole performance I am keen to explore the edges of the space called „theater “and the one that is „not theater“, chiefly because I believe I need to construct a platform where I can examine my own beliefs accumulated around „pretending“ and „not pretending“. Nevertheless, the song about a wall was strongly impacted by my visits to places of this world full of walls that divide humans not only physically, but psychologically too.

While making this version, I put in parallel the state of being on stage, wishes appointed to a decision to be on stage with the wish to survive and overcome the unpleasant moments with joy and unconditional faith in myself and the audience. The tongue-twister exercises, side by side with the known prayer („Our father”) are there to merge the relativity of the themes presented, thus keeping the importance of their role in my life. This prayer first appears as another tongue-twister, but gets translated to English and while pointing out two different translations of the same, I am setting questions around the role of a translation. Therefore, I play with the relativity of the language by using all three languages that I speak and showing distinctions even within the same language, with differently translated versions of the same prayer. Further on, I decide to refer to the relativity of time, contrary to my first performance in Novi Sad where I tried to keep the dramaturgy within a frame, quite rectilinear.

Only after fifteen minutes I welcome the audience to my performance, I introduce the title, my costume (which is a festive dress, “only for the sake of this event”) and myself: „I am Lea Blasko and I was born in 1992.“ / „I was born in 1942“ was parallelly recorded and switched to an already constructed scene where I used an interview. In this version the following interviews were used:

- An interview with Katalin Ladik, artist born in Novi Sad/Újvidek

I used the looper to merge general information of this artist with my own. While the general, on spot recorded sentences served as a chaotic musical/verbal background in which two destinies tangle, I stood up and presented her story in first person. In this interview she talks about identity and destinations she perceives as home, and I do have empathy for her words, because I feel she is saying something I would say. After delivering her story I stop the loop and tell my audience that this is a chunk of an interview. This way, I tried to distinguish the fiction and the non-fiction, and the audience knows what the origin of my material is.

- The story of a friend that I've used before I decided to do in three languages.

I introduced to the audience that this is a story of a friend. Again, I decided to (firstly, in this case) point out where the text comes from. My aim was to present the same story in my two native languages. Talking in first person, I represented two different characters (nobody specific, because the character is another layer that I did not need now, rather some characteristics), mainly through folk dance moves used while talking. While saying it in Hungarian I was repeating a Hungarian folk dance move, whereas in the Serbian version I used a Serbian folk dance move in a loop until the end of the story about the bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999. At last, I do not pretend that the audience understands those two versions (although few people did understand both Serbian and Hungarian) and I translate the story into English and retell it in third person, distancing myself to certain level from the interviewee and the story itself. I did feel I need to let the stories speak for themselves, without trying hard to show realistic feelings.

I was and still am in search for narratives that support the story narrating itself, without trying to fit it into various concepts, styles or fall into the depth of realism, or sometimes simple representation as well, it should touch upon all of them and carry a bit of all the tools of life and theater, honest and simple. Less and less do I feel the need for too much verbal expression, my future work might turn out to be very different, naturally, since I just started to feel what presence (with the body primarily) might mean. I used only two interviews and that gave me space to give each one attention and to find for myself a rhythm of existing within the texts, within the presentation of the same. When I performed, my breath became an active partner in maintaining peace and calmness. Choosing different ways to work with my body, my technical support, my creativity, at least different from the ones I've already tried, surely gave me a wider range of possibilities. Each possibility in the (documentary) theater's dramaturgy offers a contour, yet huge freedom to add your own detail to the story; underlined, between the lines or equally combined. Building a compact dramaturgy that has many unexpected moments and wide range of themes should not be aggressive, but natural if one works on it with curiosity. I realized that in this process of structuring and outlining the play, I draw inspiration

from our Dialogical Acting experiences – where I came to realize –each thought or theme that appears should be taken care of, not ignored, otherwise it might become an obstacle in the further play.

I decided to use the looper only few times and while being on the floor. This was helpful since I had to distinguish all the lines that I've been following in my dramaturgy and I perceived the floor as some kind of zero point, yet a place where I am present. I consciously used the looper as a partner on stage, a „helper” and supporter in my solitude. For this to be possible, I needed to choose few points and means of how I can use it without much energy. The beginning, the middle and the end seemed like perfect timings for an “intermezzo”. It happened on the actual performance, although it wasn't planned, that I accosted the looper at the end saying: “Can you help me?”. I planned to sing the final song without the microphone/looper, but because I did not find the right tune I felt really lost. Being present meant much, since I managed to recognize the possibility to go on and grab a chance to go back to my “partner”.

This time I used the looper as a prop as well. I used it while retelling my memory of the airplanes in 1999 running above my head. The microphone of the looper served as a tool to make few circles above my head and draw a picture to the audience of how close I perceived those planes, although, the planes were much higher. Here again I tried to mingle with the relativity of the space and the memory itself which we, humans, so often tend to idealize and put it in nostalgic contexts. Hence, I try to be critical of my own tools as well and to invoke how often we see microphones in contemporary theater. This criticism does not mean that they do not have their role and place in theater too; moreover I like to use it. “What kind of performance would it be without a mic?” is something I have an urge to say, stressing out the trend that is almost a “must”, at least in contemporary theater in my region and my own awareness and questions surrounding it, no matter how much I actually adore it.

The other props were my own shoes that I took off at one point to demonstrate the various versions of props used on demonstrations. I used a mini-TV, including the

cable that sticks out of it. It reminded me of a dog with a leash and I did treat this small size mobile TV as a shy pet. When reflecting this scene now, I must notice that it contains a dose of symbolism that I did not expect and see in the moments of doing it. This can happen if there is a desire in a form of playfulness and curiosity. As a matter of fact, this scene was inspired by one friend who came to visit me in Prague months before. She bought a wooden animal on four wooden wheels as a souvenir to her niece. That day we were rediscovering the pleasure of play as she treated it as her own pet.

I find it interesting that “getting rid of” some memories, unloading them for a moment, recycling them and delivering to a group of people that are keen to listen, could be in fact a way of making space for new memories. A photograph that I had with me in Prague was for the purpose of a workshop of Theater Anthropology held by professor Jana Pilatová. The photography portrayed me in the sea. Prior to introducing the photo to the audience to take a look at it whenever they wish to, I told a story about a Slovenian girl whose apartment I inherited in Prague. She moved because “She wanted to jump into the sea, and I jumped into her bed...”. Compellingly enough I saw even a wider range of similitude, because I really love the sea as well, and this photography could have been seen as a proof of my love for the sea. The reality of the “public solitude” is a specific reality and the truth just in a form of information often loses its truth if not delivered truthfully and without clear intention. This could be told for our everyday life as well, but my focus here was a state of being watched. My intention with this story and my childhood photo was to experiment with the documentary genre and its boundaries in my practice.

Being more and more aware of the fact that just by using real stories of real people does not exclusively mean that I am delivering an exclusive truth was an important task within the process. While creating this piece I remarked that besides questioning the form and the tools I imply, I am trying to leave out my own opinion from the delivery of the story and let it breath and depict as it is. “Even if you’ve only heard it, it became part of your own memory, but not a part of your physical memory, rather on an assumption.” is one of the notes I took while working on my

final presentation. Moreover, the memory/the story could and in my opinion should be in its original state, but it cannot entirely be since it has gone through a “filter” of another person, in this case an author of a performance. In my search for a narrative, I saw how important it is to lean on relationality.

The last prop I used were the small scissors. I told my audience that “I wouldn’t like us all to leave without seeing something really real and true on ‘the stage’”. Real nudity or real screams do so often seem like a deliberate banalization of these actions or states. Using the scissors to cut my hair and share it with the audience was an opportunity to spontaneously connect to the spectators and involve them in something that I never did in front of people (but in one of the stories I refer to a moment when I was so bored during 1999 that I decided to cut my own hair), yet I find it magical. Illustrating a real situation happening right there, now with the audience is another possibility to juxtapose real life with all the real-life stories that I’ve annexed and ensue the analogy of life in general.

The wall of the classroom was a significant partner and prop in this performance. It was used as a support while standing on my two feet, as well as a bed and the actual wall with shadows that I was making with my hands. ‘Magic’ is the right word to use when I refer to this scene because even the Sun made its way to the classroom, making real shadows, whereas in my previous showing I was trying hard to darken the room and use real lights for sharper shadow, and it all became a lie. The conscious movement of my hands in this scene was crucial for retelling the memory of shadows on my walls; it was indeed as if I was there in the moment of remembering.

Finally, ‘ParalleLite’ seemed as a beginning of my conscious stage presence.

A decade of documentary theater making in the Balkans

In this chapter I will refer to performances made in the former Yugoslav region that raised important questions for me as a spectator and as an author. My aim is to recollect my memory concerning their influence on me and to discuss elements that I

find helpful as a documentary theater maker. These performances do not necessarily represent my personal, yet constantly changing taste in general, even more if we talk about theater and intercrossing streams of arts; they represent some sort of road signs for me. Currently, I can introduce you to a piece of the atmosphere of several tendencies within the established narratives. I will focus on performances that are very different from each other regarding their aesthetics. In addition, each represents a significant attempt within the post-war theater communities in the Balkans.

For a moment, let's imagine that a war happened and that there is now a need in a community to talk about the happenings from the past. It often happens too late, leaving the task to some new kids who are keen to provoke their own questions, about the world and realities *they* live in, naturally. Throughout the history we've been witnessing regimes that are trying to build countries and systems on some unreleased situations and events. Yugoslavia itself gathered under a same flag nations that had misunderstandings in the past, living together in "harmony". However, in a socialist regime it was not a 'thing' to stress out, to some degree it was not possible to make a dialogue about what had already occurred. The absence of a dialogue creates a delusional state of mind where we only imagine; possibly only assume what our partner would have to say. It seems that the last decade represents a platform for a dialogue initiated by theater makers. The importance of documentary theater in the post-war community is imperative, and as far as I can see it had influenced changes in communities, at least the ones that have a chance to experience theater, however, those are not numerous.

My aim is not to generalize, yet I decided to give a title to parts where I discuss my thoughts inspired by the performance. Within the paragraphs I question my own claims regarding theater and I look for traces that these performances and their authors might leave behind themselves for me as a lesson and inspiration.

The angry ones In 1995 Sarah Kane was introduced in an article as a “a very angry young woman”¹⁸, and angry is maybe how I perceived some time ago Oliver Frljić, a Croatian director who was born in Bosnia, a place Kane was so often addressing. By the time she commits suicide, Frljić, a member of the same generation who escaped the war at sixteen, rises to fame and opens up questions with very similar attitude. Members of the ‘in-yer-face’ generation still had something to say, just twenty years later, exactly in one of the the regions Kane was concerned about. She commented in relation to her debut play ‘Blasted’: “...there's the same amount of abuse and corruption in Essex as anywhere else, and that's what I want to blow open. Just because there hasn't been a civil war in England for a very long time doesn't mean that what is happening in Bosnia doesn't affect us.”¹⁹ Her plays represent a reality full of analogies and resemblances. Frljić directed a performance in Residenztheater (Munich) last year and he named it ‘Balkan Macht Frei’ probably setting an analogy to Auschwitz’s gate inscription. One could say that the constructiveness of theater and its community building and deductive power sometimes lays exactly in the similitude of our distinctions. I am very fascinated with the correlation between various histories of different people and their resemblance, and these authors recognized them. Some however did not have the luck to experience the main message of neither pieces directed by Frljić, nor the ones written by Kane; strangely enough people often faint or leave the performance²⁰. Their ironic antagonism is just one of the elements that make both authors recognizable.

In 2017 on a theater festival in Prague, I saw ‘Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!’²¹, an authorial documentary-based performance directed by Oliver Frljić

¹⁸ Bayley, Clare. “A very angry young woman” *Independent*, Published on 23 Jan. 1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/a-very-angry-young-woman-1569281.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. “Five people faint due to violence in National Theatre's *Cleansed*” *The Guardian*, Published on 24 Feb. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/24/five-people-faint-40-leave-violence-cleansed-national-theatre-sarah-kane>.

²¹ “Preklet naj bo izdajalec svoje domovine” directed by Oliver Frljić, Slovensko Mladinsko Gledališče, 3 March 2010, Ljubljana, Slovenia

and performed by the actors of Slovenian Mladinsko Theater. Some five years prior to this one I've seen another one of his pieces named 'Cowardice'²² and I was deeply moved by it. Both performances premiered in 2010. At the end of that piece, the actors read out loud the names of people who got killed in the camp called 'Srebrenica'. After watching it, I was sure that theater has a huge mission, it can bring enormous changes. Today I also think theater should expand its mission outside the walls of institutions as well. Notably, "*One of the continent's most controversial directors*"²³ and his piece was announced as follows: "*Shocking, accusatory and disturbing, Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland! (the last verse of the Yugoslav national anthem) is a bracing cry for civil and artistic liberty. The work of "enfant terrible" director Oliver Frlić comes to the Czech Republic at last!*"²⁴.

Full of excitement and longing for a chunk of my home/region and without reading this promotional material, I finally welcomed the day of the show. The theme was Yugoslavia, the love and hate towards it. It was not disturbing for me though, I even felt it was a bit *démodé*, even if I am not following the trends I felt that I have seen many similar shows that appeared since its premiere in 2010 by other authors in the region who do follow the trends. However, I must confess that one tear dropped from my eye to the floor of the auditorium when I heard a song called 'Jugoslovenka' ('Yugoslavian girl', released in 1989, shortly before the fall of the country) by a famous Yugoslav singer, Fahreta Jahić known as Lepa Brena. I find it silly how nostalgia works. Considering the fact that I did not even experience the time the performance is addressing nor the time when the song is released, I felt strong empathy towards people who long for the (imaginary) utopia so vividly present in their memories (the authorial team in this case). The symbols and the visual representation of Yugoslavia are very concrete (with actors singing known

²² "Kukavičluk" directed by Oliver Frlić, National Theater, Serbian Language Drama, 2010, Subotica, Serbia

²³ Trueman, Matt. "Move over Ivo van Hove: Europe's hottest theatre directors" *The Guardian*, Published on 3 Sept. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/sep/03/move-over-ivo-van-hove-europe-hottest-theatre-directors>.

²⁴ "Bazaar Festival: Damned be the traitor of his homeland! / Mladinsko Theatre & Oliver Frlić" *Alfred ve dvoře official website*, <http://www.alfredvedvore.cz/en/programme/bazaar-festival-damned-be-the-traitor-of-his-homeland--mladinsko-theatre--oliver-frlji-?pid=586&bck=program>.

Yugoslavian songs, actors covered with the flags of former Yugoslavian countries, and the country itself having a “fashion show”) and I believe the performance talks mostly to the people who are somehow connected to the theme. Nostalgia might be inherited - I thought for a moment. Another question circling in my head was: why is *this* performance visiting Prague after so many years and new projects of the author? Maybe this show today is only for the diasporas? It can also be that it is the “name” that matters above all in the industry called theater, without further thinking. Moreover, I went on to draw a naive conclusion that the half realistic fighting scenes, verbal aggression and the gunshots that accompanied the piece were intended to shock only side by side with the announcement of the show that clearly suggested what it could be, but is actually not. Irony reaches to people until they don't become full of it, and they become full of it in case it is never juxtaposed. At least this is what happened to me, besides one dropped tear. The after show conversation with the actors (the director was not present), where they talked about the performance that toured the world (the most touring show from Slovenia) I remembered how grateful I am not to have a job at an institution, because each one is a machine of a different kind, however renowned it is. I figured that I never liked playing a show for years and that each one had its own time and mission. In the theater where I worked I understood that even if the troupe feels strong connection to the show, it gets worn out, missing the true passion of its narrative after a certain time. At last, ‘Jugoslovenka’ caught my sympathy and few months later I was singing it in one of my own performances. Finally, it seemed like a good time to be reminded of it in this exact show that I've seen after its own “expiration date”. The recyclable art is actually the greatest legacy of Yugoslavia, not the wars - I thought that night.

Oliver Frljić is interesting as a director because he identifies issues that are not present in the mainstream history, as he himself is establishing a new wave of theatrical mainstream. Anywhere he goes he raises questions. For instance, when

directing in Croatia he underlines the atrocities done to the Serbs²⁵, in Serbia he points out the atrocities done by the Serbians ('Cowardice'). I find resemblance of how I think in choosing some contexts for my own themes. In Prague I tended to talk about positive sides of socialism, while at home, due to the overwhelming nostalgia and idealization that I find unproductive, I tend to stress out the darker parts of it. In the performance 'Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!' which is based on improvisations with actors, he plays with the contexts of using the collective memory of Yugoslavia and he is certainly intercrossing it with his own memory. Oliver Frlić indeed seems to play with the borders of theater, making the spectator question whether something is true or not, what is within the set frames of theater and what is not (an actor claiming on stage that the director made him say something and that is why he is going to say it, for example). Nevertheless, this region still strongly believes in the godly powers of a director, so the director often becomes the main protagonist without physically being on the stage, mostly because in a semi-conventional atmosphere it is expected from him to be that. I also remember that while working in theater, I felt some of my colleagues often did not enjoy working on authorial projects. I saw that it is very stressful for some of them to explore and to search for something if a director does not take a strong stand regarding what he wants to find at the end of the process. Not knowing became a big disadvantage in the institutionalized theater and the ones who get to direct there have to know or at least to act as if they know each moment of the yet-to-be-made performance. Strange world, I would say from my current perspective. That is how we get to a milieu where one person is taking the responsibility for everything that is said on stage. Nena Močnik remarks in one of her writings that "*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*"(91). Hereby I argue how vital it is for the actors working in the same

²⁵ Ivanovic, Josip. "Zagreb premieres play about Croatian Serb girl's murder" *Balkan Insight*, Published on 15 May 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/zagreb-premieres-play-on-serb-girl-s-wartime-killing>.

institutions for the last few decades, to express feelings and thoughts on stage, in their own *words* at least. Some of the actors experienced only conventional processes in theater making, often staging exclusively written plays. Directors who take in consideration actors and their independent personalities and experiences could take the (“institutionalized”) actor one step further from being (sometimes only) a puppet, and this is partially what happened in the last decade in the Balkans with directors like Frljić.

The work of Oliver Frljić brought in some glimpses of authorial approach in institutions, still not fully ready to break up with the quite conservative habits of theater making. The fact is that texts written by the actors are “pre ordered” by the director (and maybe his dramaturge) and they are used according to their own conception. I claim that creating a new sensibility towards creation itself requires involving a wide range of different sensibilities in our institutions, as well as redefining the role of each individual in the creation, at last breaking the borders still so present in our theater milieu and theater schools. However, reconstructing the institutions is not my aim.

I would like to stress out the vitality of *speaking* in this exact region, the Balkans. “*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*” (Močnik 92). I assert that besides craving for a quality “product”, we as authors should be aware of the importance of the narratives we create and contexts in which we relate to happenings.

As a conclusion, my own curiosity taught me to learn from everything. Recently I watched a performance directed by Oliver Frljić based on the text of Luigi Pirandello ‘Six Characters in Search of an Author’ and it struck me how beautifully the dramatic text tangles with the private texts, the author’s theatrical language and many of its recognizable elements set throughout the years (ridiculing the church, mocking existing and ruling politicians, giving private roles to the actors in order for them to debate about a socio-political issue, rape, addressing the audience, involving it to a

certain degree) with a soft satire and much focus on the movement, the mechanics of the actor's body at last. Frljić also works as a dramaturge for dance productions and it finally became visible for me in this performance.

My years studying in Prague made me perceive each performance as a work in progress, therefore I find big understanding for why it was essential for each to exist. This performance turned out to be fully different from what I have seen before. In one of his interviews, Frljić says that 'Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland!' and 'Cowardice' are part of a trilogy that uses a common theme (past) and form, and that his future work would focus on other themes and theatrical elements. ^{ix} As I am reading this article, I am acknowledging my own need to make another performance slightly involving the theme of war. Slightly, I say, because while talking about the past, we often forget about the present.

Finally, Frljić and his work are a great encouragement and it is an honor to follow his work which draws a chronology of a changing human being as well, it really makes wonder what Kane would write if she was still among us.

The devised "hyper-realism". Indeed, many directors in this director-centered-region perceive theater as a healer. 'Hypermnnesia'²⁶ is an authorial documentary performance that was directed by Selma Spahić as a co-production gathering actors from Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Hypermnnesia refers to a vivid memory. It is a piece that examines the personal and the collective memory, starting in the past and chronologically ending in the present. Contrary to 'Damned be the Traitor of His Homeland' which also involves non-personal materials, this piece is fully based on the stories of its authors. As I read in the article, the director *"opted for documentary theatre partly to deal with herself, which is why she put on the show, Hypermnnesia."*²⁷

²⁶ "Hipermnnezija" directed by Selma Spahić, Bitez theater and the Heartefact regional foundation, 7 May 2011, Bitez theater, Belgrade, Serbia

²⁷ Hamzic, Amina. "Docu genre answers Bosnia's postwar hunger for facts" *Balkan Insight*, Published on 28 Aug. 2012, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/docu-genre-answers-bosnia-s-postwar-hunger-for-facts>.

The actors are all in white. They use few IKEA hangers, the back of them being covered with white canvas, with two other costumes hanging on each, representing their parents, each portable hanger moves according to the need of the scene. The projection of articles, photos from childhood is an element included. There are eight chairs and eight actors. The musical inputs are very melancholic, accompanied with choir singing, performed on spot.

During the research of the process of the performance I found an article in which the author notices that the actors were “*playing on a thin wire between theatrical and private, universal and exhibitionist, lyrical and pathetic, feeling a huge responsibility that, at no time, they might slip to the wrong side.*”^x They slipped many times to good and less good sides and regarding my own work I feel the same, but they did it while using their own stories, from their own life throughout the whole play, without any daily-basis politics, that made me appreciate it even more. The amount of melancholy was from time to time balanced with humor; other times intended to be as it is, leaving me with no wider range of emotions as a spectator.

I gathered interviews of the performers regarding how this project affected the authorial team. The director recalled in one of her interviews the following: “*Documentary theatre concerned (her), as a member of the audience, in a completely new way, often causing intense emotion...*”²⁸ I got an impression that the new generation of authors in general wants to review the past, not to judge it. Spahić was born in the second part of the eighties, representing a generation of artists who links together multiple streams of arts.

In 2017 she made a performance in the theater Kosztolányi Dezső in Subotica (my high school town) based on forty poems of Wyslawa Szymborska that mainly deal with plants and animals, love, memory, war, death, and language. Indeed, I think it is a nice coincidence that my first authorial play consisted of two of her poems, furthermore that she used four translations (Serbian, Hungarian, English, and Polish)

²⁸ Ibid.

throughout the process of working on it and involved movement, which I find essential for my future work as well. This play I have not seen yet, on the other hand, the performance I am talking about can be watched online^{xi}. Empathy is crucial and it is very much reflected on the work of Spahić.

'Hypermnnesia' was played in Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian languages, which are, I have to point out, quiet the same. I believe documenting the process is also very important in contemporary documentary theater and I will tend to do the same in my future work. I transcribed and translated the YouTube interviews^{xii} of few actors who were involved in the process which was indeed well documented and I bolded the factors I find crucial in an authorial process of work:

"It was a turbulent process, very specific and strange, like some psychodrama. We worked for a month in Sarajevo, a month in Belgrade... Our only motive was to tell our story. None of us was prepared for this kind of work, however, Selma is the one who, in a wonderful, **subtle** way, showed us that it is okay to say literally everything. After the **confidence** was created between us, we felt free and we were able to tell things to one another, and when we did, we did not mind what the audience would say. It was a sort of **healing**. We placed some of the problematic things that marked us in one place, we treated them emotionally - maybe finally, and we put them somewhere in a drawer. **Working on this show has changed and freed us** all. That's the most important thing that happened to us.

After each performance, even now after a year, we are very emotional. People in Bosnia react to Sanjin's scene where his family tries to get from the Serbian part of Sarajevo to the Muslim part and which is very tragic *comically*, because they recognize this scene. In our country, people feel the comical parts, but they do not know how to react. It's a little confusing. There is a difference between the two audiences. The scene of the bombing ... in Pristina, the bombing was celebrated, and here in Serbia people were hiding in the basements. The audience in Kosovo feels unpleasant. When people feel uncomfortable, they just pipe down..." (Jelena Ćuruvija)

“Hypermnnesia was the first performance from Belgrade to visit Pristina after seventy... something. It was a triumph for all of us. The people of our generation and the elderly better recognize the situations. The younger audience not so much, they do not understand the language, although yes, we play with subtitles ... but after the performance, after various **talks with the audience**, I had the feeling that some catharsis happened even in them. I remember a German journalist, he already finished his formal questions, people were leaving and he was packing his equipment, and while doing so he stopped for a moment and asked: Do these people realize what they’ve prepared for your generation, what they have done to you?” (Alban Ukaj)

“I’ve never told any of the situations I’ve played to anyone, I did not talk to anyone about it, nor did I face them in this way. We first looked at the situations that we told **performed by someone else, and then we personally played them....** You go through different processes, you forgive yourself as a child, you understand that small creature, your parents in that situation... it was all ejected, analyzed, settled, cooled, forgiven. I thought I’d have a problem with that. Whenever I do not have a character on the stage, whenever I need to **speak in my own name**, I feel more embarrassed, because I do not have a character that is some kind of protection, subconsciously... My colleague in the scene moves almost like my dad, although he saw him only on photographs. There were some mystical situations that are also very **authentic...** for moments he really is my dad.” (Ermin Bravo)

Based on the gathered material, the actors also have a personal story to share, and they might be victims as well, other than being actors. One can be an actor/storyteller, other than being solely a victim. Nevertheless, I believe that victimization is very dangerous and that it very easy to fall into this void if we don’t rethink our own identity and how we want to exist and feel in our lives. Theater is a great platform for discovering other aspects of life. Once again, expressing our feelings in an empathetic environment, which our society should be, confidence can be built. Our theater communities could at last be platforms of understanding, especially if theater is for everyone.

From the interviews I learned that this process brought a certain healing to many of its authors, some even perceived it as a psychodrama. I imagine this kind of approach to the traumatic past in schools, nursing homes, veteran centers, etc. I imagine that this could be a very organic part of our everyday lives: to share our memories, however dark or light they might be, thus not only verbally. Sharing is an opportunity for recognition of the self and others. Broadening our senses for recognizing the authenticity of each individual could also give us a conclusion that we as a society are not unique in our victimhood, but in our understanding for ourselves and each other.

People from different countries (countries that have been in war) gathered around to exchange stories. As I heard, actors were auditioned and interviewed for the project. I still do not feel comfortable with this system, but it seems people still need somebody to organize them in one spot for the sake of some project instead of traveling and connecting with each other, on their own initiative. Yet some other conclusions would again include the importance of presenting and representing on stage. During the process actors reviewed their own stories represented by somebody else; it enabled them to see new details in it and gain a different aspect of the story itself. I recognized the importance of this technique only in Prague while working with objects on stage; embodying something or somebody else gives us a better understanding for it. The last interview listed also talks about being yourself on the stage, which is something I touched upon while discussing the work of Frlić. In the interview the actor shares thoughts about his trouble being without a character on stage, and I believe he is not the only one. Few years ago I could not even imagine myself being myself on stage. Different narratives should at last have their place in our cultures.

In search for a narrative

I learned much about the forms and styles that prevail around me, but I am in search for something new that I still don't know how to define. Finally, not knowing feels good.

While writing this thesis I stumbled upon writings on 'multidirectional memory', a term introduced by Michael Rothberg²⁹. In his writing 'From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory' he sets a question for the reader "*Does the remembrance of one event erase others from the view?*" Rothberg takes an event to demonstrate the multidirectional approach to memory, citing W.E.B. Du Bois referring to his visit to the Warsaw ghetto in 1949, who said that after that visit that it

...was not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem. In the first place, the problem of slavery, emancipation, and caste in the United States was no longer in my mind a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it... The race problem, in which I was interested cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men. (527)

This gave me hints for further questioning of my own narrative. It shall be universal; it shall be correlational, indeed cutting across the set borders. Therefore, I would like to experiment within the sphere of concrete and abstract, leaving space for that correlation.

In an essay Nena Močnik refers to her experience of making a performance, a performative/performed essay, as she calls it, in which she is referring to her previous research process which deals with victims of rape in Bosnia during the war. In the performance she also deals with her own past. Her study "*explores the potentials of turning from words toward the body.*" Not only she works with her participants with a high focus on narrating through body expression, but she also examines **her position as a researcher** and storyteller: "*This one hour-long*

²⁹ a professor in the fields of Holocaust studies, trauma and memory studies, postcolonial studies, and contemporary literatures.

*monologue was staged (...) as a dissemination tool to reflect the research and the position of the researcher in this and similar traumatizing contexts... in order to display to the audience how certain mainstream narratives have been 'canned' and reproduced..."*³⁰ I think that while addressing vulnerable themes, it is extremely essential to locate our own position in the process and to make it visible and understandable for the viewer.

Furthermore, using the **body as a tool** to express memories is another inspiring aspect of documentary theater, because our body is strongly connected to the present moment. In the performance by *The Symptoms* I recognized the vitality of the body and its connection with being alive. The active body is a symbol of life, it is also able to narrate and juxtapose the dark and close-to-death experiences. The presence of the body side by side with the verbal expression could actually give us new insights for interpretation, since storytelling is not only a verbal mediation.

Besides, theater could also be a platform for combining **various languages**, if we talk about verbal expression. For instance, the theater play that deals with the current situation in Kosovo named 'Patriotic hypermarket'³¹ directed by Dino Mustafić is based on interviews made by Serbian and Albanian journalists with Serbs and Albanians mostly living in Kosovo. The languages of the performance were Serbian and Albanian, which is a very unique situation even in the "postmodern" circles in the Balkans. I believe in the **intertextuality** that is made with using few languages on stage. I also believe that our theater should not tend to form ruling styles and narratives, but it should be open accepting the dynamics of change and variety. The actors in the play are originally from Belgrade, Pristine, Tirana and Skopje which gives a layer of different premises. The director does not "belong" to

³⁰ Močnik, Nena. "(Un)Canning the Victims: Embodied Research" *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2018, page 1.

³¹ "Patriotic Hypermarket" directed by Dino Mustafić, Association Kulturanova from Novi Sad and Multimedia center from Pristine, 3 Oct.. 2010, Bitef Theater, Belgrade

any of the two “facing” nations and their issues, but he comes from a similar background. Talking about the title of the performance, the director noted: *“Throughout the show the only prop/object on the stage is a shopping cart that is empty, but all the time there is a sort of bidding going on with the products of patriotism, the products that the peoples of the Balkans have been facing with for the last two decades, the ones that the politics is trading with. We are often unaware of the fact that we are the consumers of these platitudes that had deeply divided these nations.”*³² His statement could be applied on each part of the world I’ve visited so far. The director is not intervening in the process as a judge, rather as someone who outlines the aesthetics of the final outcome. His aesthetics is not aggressive, leaving space for each member of the team to add to it. The concept of play is present in various layers of the performance, especially in the way the authors engage with one prop, the rhythm produced by it and the live guitar. All of these are products of a laboratory environment in which each individual took part in.

I support the propensity to involve the **present** in parallel with the past in order to approach the future. In my opinion, using **various spaces** (schools, hospitals, railway stations, etc.) beside theater could bring us to the present as it is, making theater also accessible for everybody. Finally, performing in non-conventional spaces seems as an opportunity to explore the very present. As a young student of acting, each summer I spent one month on a farm with my colleagues making a performance. A one month tour followed this process where we performed in villages without theater, under the blue sky. This theater is one of rare touring theaters in Europe. Paradoxically enough, we strongly believed that without anything we can do everything.

Present

Another paradox I would like to mention is the one Boris Liješević was often talking about on our Monday documentary sessions, pointing it out as **the paradox of**

³² Ah, Neša. “Patriotic Hypermarket“ *Dan u Beogradu*, 2 Oct. 2011, <https://www.danubeogradu.rs/2011/10/patriotic-hypermarket/>.

theater. Once he mentioned what was the paradox *he* started from when directing a play based on a novel dedicated to Sarajevo³³.

During the siege of the city, for four years, performances were played during the day, since there was no electricity. The fee for a rare *night* performance was a candle, as I have learned while visiting Sarajevo myself. People figured out ways to maintain life in the chaos and horror; actors went to rehearsals, even under the risk of constant grenades, but determined to live, play and make theater. This *is* a paradox, a very hopeful one.

Furthermore, he once noted that documentary theater makers are the ones who are constantly in relation to the **present**; it is focused on issues that we have to tell in the present moment, about the present feeling(s). One of his main questions was: *What is it from this time that can interpret this time?* I found it compelling that Liješević likes to call the actor “a magician”, because it is exactly due to his imagination that the TV can turn into a dog, a chair into a baby; according to the actor’s relationship to the object, he/she gives meaning to it. Throughout these docu-experimental sessions he claimed that creation does not go from knowledge, but from the experience of the situation. To create, you have to experience what is happening on the scene. And in order to experience, you have to allow yourself an experience. If you know everything in advance, then you just do not allow it to happen, he said. *Now* I understand. At last, theater *is* magic.

³³ "Igor Štik: Elijah's chair" *Fraktura* <https://fraktura.hr/foreign-rights/books/elijahova-stolica.html>.

Literature

Barba, Eugenio, and Nicola Savarese. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. London and New York, Routledge, 1994.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York, Touchstone, 1996.

Houseman, Barbara. *Finding Your Voice*. London, Nick Hern Books, 2002.

Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theater*. Routledge, 2002.

Močnik, Nena. "(Un)Canning the Victims: Embodied Research" *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2018.

Močnik, Nena. *Fetishizing Violence on Stage: Performing, narrating and "aestheticizing" the Balkan Wars*. West Croatian History Journal Special issue: War and remembrance vol. 8, Rijeka, Croatia, 2013

Morris, Kathryn M. *Documentary theatre: Pedagogue and Healer with Their Voices Raised*. Faculty of Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Florida Atlantic University Boca Raton, 2014.

Rothberg, Michael. *From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory*. *Criticism*: Vol. 53: Iss. 4, Article 2., 2011.

Endnotes

ⁱ I am attaching a video that shows their work. “*Promo Dakh Daughters Band - Official Video*” YouTube, Dakh Daughters Band, Published 05 Aug. 2013, 5 Nov. 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjL6Y-c-HUo>

ⁱⁱ “The Creator of the Discipline Ivan Vyskočil” (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner website, 20 Nov. 2018,

http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org/Disciplines_Creator.html

ⁱⁱⁱ “László Végel (Author of *Neoplanta ili Obećana zemlja*) Goodreads, 1 Dec. 2018, https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5117724.L_szl_V_gel

^{iv} “*Neoplanta*” László Végel, András Urbán and the company, directed by András Urbán, Novi Sad Theater, Premiered 15. Feb. 2014, Novi Sad, Serbia

^v “Apostles of Good” *Vimeo*, a documentary film by by Maja Ledencac and Željka Mihaljević, 1 Apr. 2015, <https://vimeo.com/channels/livingtogether/123841307>

^{vi} Farkas, Henrik. ““The Zitzer Spiritual Republic’ Serb village rebels against the military” *Zitzer Spiritual Republic*, Published in 1993, <http://www.c3.hu/~farkashe/english/zitzer.html>.

^{vii} “alienation-effect” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, <https://www.britannica.com/art/alienation-effect>

^{viii} Szymborska, Wislawa. “List”, The freedom to question, 18 Sept. 2016, <http://free2quest.com/list-by-wislawa-szymborska/>.

^{ix} “Oliver Frlijić: Kukavičluk – Autorski projekat” *Subotica*, 27 Feb. 2011, <https://www.subotica.com/desavanja/27.februar.2011.oliver-frljic-kukavicluk-autorski-projekat-id2183.html>.

^x “O procesu nastanka predstave” *Bosansko Narodno Pozorište*, 21 May 2012, <http://www.bnp.ba/festival/vijesti/item/143-o-procesu-nastanka-predstave-%E2%80%9Ehipermnezija%E2%80%9C.html>

^{xi} Heartefact. “Hiperpermnezija - FULL video” *YouTube*, 17 Oct. 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SHVorhAOBY>.

^{xii} YIHR2010. “Priča u priči” *YouTube*, 24 May 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wap1IWSjNJQ&t=439s>.