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Research Article

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# Theatre, City and Crisis: Some Aspects of Performing Arts in Serbia in the 1990s

Irena Šentevska\*

This paper discusses a specific point of response by Serbian theatre production to the social, political, economic and moral crisis of the 1990s (which includes Serbia's involvement in the armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia) – namely, different modes of engaging with urban spaces as performance venues. The analysis is based on an in-depth study of the theatre production in Serbia (and Montenegro) in the 1990s, especially as a medium of artistic reflection of the social reality. Against the background of a state of permanent social crisis, which may be traced back to the late 1980s (the late socialist period in Yugoslavia), this study explores the points of closest encounter between the theatre and the city, identifying four basic models of such interaction in this particular social context. It argues for a more nuanced understanding of the social use of theatre, hoping to reach a more universal level of discussion as to how theatre responds to extreme situations of social crisis with its complex arsenal of expressive means.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Serbia, 1990s, Urban Space

## The theatre and its place in a society in permanent crisis

The 1990s were a formative period for the political and cultural paradigms and the social reality which Serbia and other post-communist<sup>1</sup> countries experience today. This largely explains the 'return' to the 1990s in theatre studies of Southeastern Europe and a growing number of research projects which shed new light on the theatre production of this period, especially in the context of the war in former Yugoslavia. From national<sup>2</sup>, trans-national<sup>3</sup> and regional/comparative<sup>4</sup> perspectives, this research works with the theatre legacy

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<sup>1</sup> Stefanova, Kalina. (ed.). 2000. *Eastern European Theatre After the Iron Curtain*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Šentevska, Irena. 2016. *The Swinging 90s: pozorište i društvena realnost Srbije u 29 slika*. Belgrade: Orion Art; Šentevska, Irena. 2017. In Search of Catharsis. Theatre in Serbia in the 1990s. *Südosteuropa* 65(4), 607-31; see also contributions to the issues 118 and 119/120 of the Serbian theatre journal *Teatron* (2002) dedicated to the Serbian theatre scene in the 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> Lukić, Darko. 2009. *Drama ratne traume*. Zagreb: Meandar; Jestrović, Silvija. 2013. *Performance, Space, Utopia. Cities of War, Cities of Exile*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>4</sup> See contributions to the upcoming volume Dolečki, Jana / Halilbašić, Senad and Stefan Hulfeld. (eds.) 2018. *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

of the 1990s in order to contribute very specific images to the larger picture of contemporary artistic and social developments in the Western Balkans.

In an attempt to make a contribution to this 'bigger picture' of the cultural and social transformations that took place in the Western Balkans in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this paper explores the 'encounters' between the theatre and the urban space (as the space of 'real life' and existential anxieties) in the context of the theatre production in Serbia in the 1990s. It identifies and contextualises four basic models of such encounters, hoping to answer the following questions: under which specific circumstances have theatre producers and artists engaged the urban space? What was their motivation to perform 'outdoors', address 'ordinary people' ('people from the streets') and otherwise challenge the conventional understanding of the theatre institution as a strictly demarcated space of communication with 'normal' theatre-goers? Can we discuss similarities between the separate instances and establish some sort of typology? Can we observe these typical cases as responses to an extreme situation of social crisis with theatre's complex arsenal of social communication and individual expression?

This paper stems from the comprehensive research of the theatre production in Serbia in the 1990s presented in my book *The Swinging 90s: theatre and social reality of Serbia in 29 pictures*, where I attempted to make a contribution to the expanding field of performing arts studies. In methodological terms, performing arts studies overcome the modernist focus on characteristic theatre phenomena and poetic considerations, shifting the interpretative emphasis onto the roles and operation of the performing arts in their social contexts. Moreover, my research was largely based on personal experiences as a frequent theatre-goer. Specifically, in the period 1996-2006 I curated the Biennial of Stage Design, the leading exhibition/festival dedicated to current theatre production in Serbia, which had a special emphasis on the visual and technical aspects of the productions.

In the 1990s the theatre system in Serbia, although slowly and belatedly, entered a process of transformation which visibly changed the theatre production<sup>5</sup> in comparison to the models of management, financing, public relations and, indeed, methods of creative work inherited from the 1980s – the late socialist period. In the other post-socialist countries, the 1990s were a decade of rapid changes in production models – from the rigid system of institutional state support towards project funding, internationalisation, professional networking and the rise of the independent art scene – though sustained with contributions from private and public foundations, the European Union, the Council of Europe and corporate sponsors. In Serbia, due to international isolation and the UN sanctions provoked by the military conflicts in former Yugoslavia, these transformations amounted to occasional support for the feeble non-institutional artistic scene. State-funded institutions remained untouched by these reform processes, which additionally contributed to an atmosphere of lethargy and system inertia dominating the official sphere

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<sup>5</sup> Đurović, Jelena. 2002. Novi produkcionni modeli u periodu tranzicije: Izazov i nove inicijative (thematic issue 'Theatre in Serbia 1990-2000', part II). *Teatron*, 119-120, 44-51.

in general. Accordingly, the regime personified by Slobodan Milošević continued with the generous support of international events conceived in the socialist period (like the Belgrade International Theatre Festival – BITEF)<sup>6</sup> to maintain the illusion that, in spite of the sanctions of the international community, ‘everything stayed the same’ and that Belgrade still claimed the cultural importance it once had. (Part of this cosmopolitan gloss of the cultural scenes of Belgrade and Yugoslavia was a direct consequence of political speculations during the Cold War.)<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the marked tendency to maintain the *status quo*<sup>8</sup> in every single aspect of production, and in a changed cultural landscape which saw numerous new media and forms of cultural consumption and participation, the theatres in Serbia in the 1990s were still very well attended. The institutional theatres developed different strategies of dealing with the reality of the fact that they found themselves in a gap between an autocratic and disastrous political regime which sustained them, and self-proclaimed artistic and social objectives (indeed, reasons for existence). Like in the socialist times, they still addressed the ‘ideal’ spectator, informed enough to appreciate the artistic concept and virtuosity of the performance, yet feared for potential conservatism and lack of understanding and tolerance.

From today’s perspective, the popularity and relative success of the theatre in Serbia in the 1990s seems paradoxical. During the crises caused by the military conflicts in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the ‘average’ theatregoer in Serbia would have to experience a shocking combination of turbulent social transformations. First of all, the process of political democratisation and the introduction of multi-party government along with the pseudo-totalitarian regime of the Socialist Party of Serbia led by Slobodan Milošević as heir to the property and political monopolies of the dissolved League of Communists of Yugoslavia (SKJ). Also in the mix was the hypocrisy of the political elite – mostly former youth communist leaders who once built highways of ‘brotherhood and unity’ (often with their own hands), and were now orchestrating the civil war in Yugoslavia, which had already been dismantled. At the same time, state (public) property was being chaotically transferred to private ownership, more under political pressures than in pursuit of economic interests (‘deregulation’ of the economy). Both public sector and private funds collapsed, from foreign currency savings to pension funds. Pyramid banking schemes flourished, along with waves of hyperinflation and the galloping devaluation of labour, while the primitive amassing of private capital accompanied illegal operations in legal businesses. The existing employment structure was maintained (regardless of the economic consequences) in fear of the potential loss of votes which mass redundancies would bring. Staggering waves of migration saw an influx of refugees from the war-afflicted areas as well as brain drain, the mass emigration of the cheaply-educated population,

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<sup>6</sup> Ćirilov, Jovan. 2002. Bitef pod sankcijama: Uprkos okolnostima (thematic issue ‘Theatre in Serbia 1990-2000’, part I). *Teatron* 118, 31-33; Vujanović, Ana. 2010. *Nove pozorišne tendencije: Bitef – Beogradski internacionalni teatarski festival*, in *Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji: XX vek* (Volume I), edited by Šuvaković, Miško. Belgrade: Orion Art, 375-84.

<sup>7</sup> Marković, Predrag J. 1996. *Beograd između Istoka i Zapada 1948-1965*. Belgrade: NIU Službeni list SRJ.

<sup>8</sup> Grujić, Petar. 2002. Problemi repertoarske politike: trenutni propust ili zloslutna pojava. *Teatron* 119-120, 64-68.

mainly to the 'hostile' Western countries. The new arrivals, without privilege, were condemned to a marginal existence, without Serbian citizenship or basic documents, accompanied by the official rhetoric of pan-Serbian concord and solidarity. Corruption spread throughout the judicial, healthcare and education systems. United Nations economic and cultural sanctions imposed isolation. Despite Serbia's proclaimed neutrality in the war, there were successive waves of army drafts accompanied by a rise in chauvinism and an outbreak of xenophobia, allegedly defending patriotic values and national legacies. The deregulation of the media was followed by a collapse of professional standards and a monopoly on current affairs reporting by Radio Television Serbia. The global hegemony of the mass media industry was embodied in local turbo-folk idioms and what was known as the Pink Culture.<sup>9</sup> This period also saw the growth of consumer appetites and a passion for Western gadgets as standards of living fell rapidly, leading to economic dependence on relatives abroad and 'alternative' sources of income.

The average person exposed to a combination of such collective experiences was not very likely to be 'upset' or 'annoyed' in the theatre. According to theatre director and historian Anja Suša, "the theatre in this period assumed the function of morphine for the audiences bombed by the ghastly images of Sarajevo and Vukovar."<sup>10</sup> In the circumstances of overall confusion in the repertoire of Serbian theatres, their stages were frequented by the characters of Feydeau and Labiche, comedy relief and national epics, thus becoming places of escape from the unfavourable social reality.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, a major question haunting the theatre professionals in this period was how theatre fiction could match the unbelievable events occurring in social reality and day-to-day life. At this time the lives of almost every person in the audience were more dramatic than those of the characters on stage. (The theatre encounters this problem whenever the social reality becomes excessively dramatic.) The main paradox (and probably the most interesting thing about the institutional theatres in Serbia in the 1990s) is that, whatever they did, whichever strategy they opted for to deal with the social reality, they still operated within the same system which sustained the military operations – the system which catered for their very existence and used them to embed a sense of normality in a social climate of permanent crisis.

Like in other countries of the post-socialist realm, the 1990s in Serbia were a period of major reconstructions of national identity, which a decade earlier had represented combinations of Yugoslav, Serbian, Montenegrin and/or other ethnic identities. To a lesser or greater extent, everyone in former Yugoslavia experienced this identity makeover. In the context of the transitional re-

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<sup>9</sup> This term refers to a cultural model associated with so-called "turbo-folk" music, which came to prominence in the 1990s as a form of mass-media resistance to the high-cultural values propagated by the cultural establishment of the socialist period. "Pink" refers to the centrality of the privately owned Radio Television Pink (launched in 1994) for redefinition of the cultural and social values since the 1990s and for the deregulated post-socialist media system in Serbia generally.

<sup>10</sup> Suša, Anja. 2002. Promeniti odnos – stvoriti sistem. *Teatron* 119-120, 70.

<sup>11</sup> On the meagre acts of anti-war protest of the theatre professionals in Serbia in the 1990s see: Jovićević, Aleksandra. 2002. Društvena stvarnost i beogradska pozorišta (1991-1995): trenutak srećnog samozaborava. *Teatron* 118, 42-49.

structuring of the post-socialist nation-states of former Yugoslavia, theatre became a segment of the inherited 'cultural infrastructure' administered by the political leadership. It is hardly plausible to entertain the modernist notion of art's autonomy under such circumstances. It goes without saying that theatre was (and still is) expected, 'democratically' (that is, relieved from explicit censorship) to reproduce the ideological premises of the new, post-socialist order. Post-socialist Europe has gradually lost the attributes and memories of socialism (and gradually ceases to be post-socialist), becoming a *banlieue* of the new, globalised Europe. In this context, the theatre (as an often rather anachronistic, but still vital cultural industry) remains an important vehicle for the reconstruction and ideological reinterpretation of the surviving elements of national cultures.

In its present, post-war circumstances theatre in Serbia suffers from problems inherited from both its specific position in the 1990s and the current difficulties faced by public theatres throughout the world.<sup>12</sup> In its post-socialist context, it is clear that politicians who have shut down hundreds of factories and laid off thousands of workers have displayed reluctance to act on institutional theatres, in fear that they would be attacked as a threat to national culture. However, theatre professionals still warily acknowledge the fact that theatre has become a minority option in the unfair competition for audiences' leisure time and attention, with the endless output of products of the cultural industry. Paradoxically, due to the aforementioned extreme social circumstances which affected both artistic motivation and the available resources (administered both by Milošević's officials and the international community – foreign foundations and diplomatic missions) the variety of the production and the artistic achievements of the theatre professionals in the 1990s were visibly higher than today. In the early 2000s the post-Milošević governments shifted the focus of expenditures on theatre from high-quality productions to the refurbishment<sup>13</sup> of old and dilapidated theatre buildings inherited from the socialist times. These decisions were additionally motivated by the ample opportunities for graft and pilfering involved in such endeavours. New theatres were not built, but the existing ones (at least in Belgrade as the economic and cultural capital of the country) were considerably 'beautified', which (unexpectedly) affected the production in a negative way. Less and less money has been spent on the actual productions due to the large costs of the renovation and refurbishment of existing theatres. Regional and national tours by repertory companies, once especially encouraged and subsidised by the authorities throughout the communist realm, have become almost impossible due to the prohibitive expenses. Smaller towns were especially affected by the dramatically reduced and irregular theatre programming. This overall tendency of marginalising theatre as an artistic and social institution goes hand in hand with the cultural consequences of globalisation visible in the uniforming tendencies in theatre production and the repertory emphasis on international hits, fads and bestsellers, and the adoption of acting styles borrowed from film and television. On the other hand, the high politicisation of theatre in terms of dependency on

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<sup>12</sup> Klaić, Dragan. 2012. *Resetting the Stage: Public Theatre Between the Market and Democracy*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.

<sup>13</sup> Šentevska, Irena. 2008. Rekonstrukcija beogradskih pozorišta post-2000: dezinfekcija, dezinfekcija i dekontaminacija. *Forum* 53, 48-55.

the current whims, (often private) needs and interests of the politicians currently in power imposes a sense of tacit censorship and the impossibility of challenging the prevailing consensus on what can and cannot be said and done in the theatre. Some producers rely precisely on such an atmosphere to provoke a sense of political controversy, with projects focusing on sensitive political topics and protagonists – e.g. the assassination of the Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić,<sup>14</sup> the proclaimed independence of Kosovo or the Hague Tribunal.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, a reflection of the current (certainly unfavourable) social circumstances and the difficult legacies of the 1990s remains largely outside the realm of institutional theatres and is only sporadically addressed by informal theatre groups. Feminism, LGBT issues, environmentalism, human rights, solidarity with the unemployed, impoverished and discriminated, the fate of refugees, domestic violence and other ‘unpleasant’ topics remain largely in the ghetto of the independent theatre scene (which is, again, largely dependent on foreign donations and occasional minuscule government grants). The impossibility of maintaining the continuity of independent work caused a mass drain of talent in the 2000s and later to the more prosperous European and world countries. It may be claimed that some of the best Serbian theatre professionals now work largely outside of Serbia, and their absence greatly affects the theatre production in the country.

After everything that happened in Serbia (and Yugoslavia) in the 1990s, and after the cosmetic interventions on its ‘infrastructure’ in the 2000s, theatre is an under-funded, weakened and marginalised form of public entertainment which aspires merely to its own economic survival in the overall unfavourable circumstances. It is increasingly difficult to sell tickets to an impoverished and indifferent audience with less and less free time and permanent income. From this perspective it seems, again rather paradoxically, that Serbian theatre, with all its difficulties and setbacks in the 1990s, had more interest in quality theatre than today (and that it achieved better artistic results, however scarce they may seem). In the 1990s what was lacking in resources was compensated for by creativity and motivation. Today the theatre establishments look much better and more comfortable than they were in the 1990s, but they have less and less attendance and importance. Operating as self-centred enclaves, theatres are more marginalised than they ever were in the period after 1945. Accordingly, it is increasingly difficult for theatre professionals to predict and address the needs and expectations of the audience. This overall picture conforms to the assessment of cultural policies in post-communist countries, which reveal more continuity than discontinuity and more effort to sustain the existing inherited infrastructure than to make it more effective through institutional and systemic reforms. Today, nationalist politics does not need theatre (like it did in other periods in history, including the 1990s) for its self-legitimation, increasingly relying on the mass media to

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<sup>14</sup> Opposition politician, leader of the Democratic Party (DS). He studied with Jürgen Habermas and had a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Konstanz. He was Mayor of Belgrade in 1997 and Prime Minister of Serbia from 2001 until his assassination in 2003.

<sup>15</sup> The International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991, more commonly referred to as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

assert its influence, which is the major reason for the marginalisation of theatre in general.<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, theatre in Serbia, at least in the last three decades, has not overcome a state of permanent crisis. In different periods (during the Milošević regime; during the terms in office of Vojislav Koštunica<sup>17</sup> and Boris Tadić<sup>18</sup>; during the current domination of the regime personified by Aleksandar Vučić<sup>19</sup>) different aspects of this existential crisis would affect the theatre production with more pronounced and detrimental effects. One of the visible consequences of the incessant difficulties faced by the theatre community is the further fragmentation of the audiences and the general retreat of the theatre from the streets, urban environments and spaces strictly un-designated for the theatre and its consumers.

This study now focuses on its main topic and leaps backward to the period which coincided with the military crisis in former Yugoslavia (1990s), when the theatre production in Serbia had its closest encounters with the realms of everyday life and its existential struggles. In other words, we look at the paradigmatic scenarios of abandoning the traditional stage and entering the public urban space in response to the artistic and social challenges of this period, discussing four basic models of theatre's presence in the urban arena.

### **The urban space as a spectacle**

The festival Theatre City (Grad teatar) was founded in 1987 in the coastal city of Budva in Montenegro. In the 1990s, within 'rump Yugoslavia' (the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisting of Serbia and Montenegro), Budva's cultural importance grew considerably. Economic sanctions imposed by the international community, an overall decline in buying power and rigorous visa regimes for the people of Serbia and Montenegro, who used to spend their summer holidays in Greece, Spain, Italy or at more exotic destinations (not to mention Croatia and Slovenia), forced them to spend their summer vacations at the Montenegrin summer resorts. Budva became the choice of theatre lovers. Under the auspices of the Montenegrin government, the Theatre City festival somehow managed to present attractive and dynamic programmes: during its more successful seasons it would become a true theatre centre of the reduced

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<sup>16</sup> Two academic events at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade contributed considerably to the academic discussion of this problem: *Media, Democracy, Populism* (November 9-10, 2017) and *Theatre Between Politics and Policies: New Challenges* (March 23-24, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Conservative politician, leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), who was the last president of Yugoslavia from 2000 to 2003 and prime minister of Serbia for two terms (2004-2007 and 2007-2008). With a PhD in Law, he previously held a number of academic posts.

<sup>18</sup> Prominent member of the Democratic Party (DS) from 1990 to 2014. Third president of Serbia, from 2004 to 2012. From 2000 to 2004 he was Minister of Telecommunications and Minister of Defence. Psychologist by profession; now president of the Social Democratic Party.

<sup>19</sup> Prominent member of the Radical Party (RS) until 2008, when he became deputy president of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which he now leads. Prime Minister of Serbia (2014-2017), currently in office as President. He previously served as MP, Minister of Information (1998-2000), and Minister of Defence (2012-2013). He graduated from the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law.

Yugoslavia. From its first seasons<sup>20</sup> the festival used the Citadel (a mediaeval walled city) and other spaces selected by the directors and producers of the guest performances. These included beaches, monasteries, the harbour, the park, the main square, the church of St Mary, the ruins of the Early Christian basilica and other attractive urban venues. Theatre City also took over the island of St Nicholas and reached several neighbouring towns on the Montenegrin Riviera. With the attractive theatre productions, following up with a night out Budva-style, the audiences had good opportunities for temporary escapes from the grim reality of their everyday lives which had brought them to Budva in the first place. Summer festivals that rely on the added value of the attractiveness of the performance spaces basically exploit what Elinor Fuchs terms as “you’ll-never-be-here-againness”.<sup>21</sup>

According to Dragan Klaić, “a troubled and confused society, its spending and speculation binge curtailed along with frequent holidays abroad, turns to the public theatre for an artistic, but also social and intellectual experience, for collective soul-searching, critical insight and some self-assurance”.<sup>22</sup> In the Serbian institutional theatres of the 1990s (which were responsible for the greater part of Theatre City’s official programme) there were two distinct tendencies of reviving classical pieces of literature, which might be termed respectively traditional and eclectic. The former (traditional) helps the audiences orient themselves in times and places other than their own, even more so if it is realistic, if real space is simulated on the stage. The latter (eclectic) demands more specific interpretation skills from the audiences. Traditional staging aims at more direct communication with the audiences, probably on the assumption that they often lack sufficient knowledge to appreciate eclectic modes of artistic communication.

Two basic ideological reasons for the never-ending revivals of classic theatre pieces in times of social crisis may also be discussed in this context: a) in the timeless words of the theatre classics the spectator recognises his own time and place in the community (naturalisation), and; b) the classics help us forget our own times and traumas, facilitating all sorts of imaginative escapes into the golden ages of the mythical past, at least temporarily (suppression). Every theatre performance, as any work of art, may be viewed as a singular case and a self-contained entity when it comes to unraveling the relations between its artistic intentions, artistic methods and ideological effects. It is, however, rather safe to assume that in the context that we are discussing here the traditional approach to staging of the theatre classics was more ‘ideological’ (both in terms of naturalisation and suppression) than the eclectic, which generally offers a wider range of artistic devices to explore topicality, play with contemporary analogies and, finally, communicate political messages.

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<sup>20</sup> Ćirilov, Jovan and Feliks Pašić. (eds.). 1998. *Grad teatar Budva 1987-1996: Prvih deset godina*. Budva: Grad teatar.

<sup>21</sup> Fuchs, Elinor. 1996. *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*. Bloomington – Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Klaić, *Resetting the Stage*, xi.

In order to discuss the first (and probably prevailing) mode of the use of public urban space in theatre in this period, two Shakespeare productions (*Troilus and Cressida* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) staged by the festival Theatre City Budva will be described in more detail. As for *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare's cynical assessment of the disenchantment with the futility of war and its frail morality had often proved successful in communicating resentment towards the social reality. (*Troilus and Cressida* contains allusions to the ongoing imperial conflict between England and Spain following the defeat of the Invincible Armada). In the fourth year of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession (1994), it seemed that these unlimited possibilities for interpretation had motivated director Dejan Mijač to stage Shakespeare's *problem play* about the Trojan War, first in Budva and then in Belgrade – during the Siege of Sarajevo, and sometime halfway between the Vance-Owen Plan and the Dayton Accords. This staging was judged by the critics as a work of remarkable value, intellectually challenging and effectively amusing which, moreover, artistically sublimated “our immediate everyday experience”.<sup>23</sup>

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* has quite a different history from that of *Troilus and Cressida*. Its social role and function has also been considerably different throughout the centuries. Compared with *Troilus and Cressida*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is less likely to tackle contemporary ethical issues. This play is usually an opportunity for temporary escape into the magic forest – a spectacle of forgetfulness. This certainly applies to the 1997 staging by Nikita Milivojević for the Budva Theatre City festival, sometime halfway between the Dayton Accords and the NATO military intervention in Yugoslavia. This spectacle commenced on the terrace of Hotel Mogren, with a parade of wedding gowns and then moved to Budva's historical Citadel. As part of the set design two enormous ostriches, heads buried in the ground, emulated the stone of the surrounding architecture of the ancient city of Budva, symbolically communicating the midsummer night's dream situation. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was staged as part of a summer festival where a well-tanned segment of the people of Serbia and Montenegro recovered from the social reality of the 1990s, in this case in the sobering presence of giant ostriches. Specifically, it was not only those flightless birds who buried their heads in the sand of Budva's beaches when faced with a bitter reality. As noted by Serbian anthropologist Ivan Čolović in his description of this festival's opening ceremony in 1996: “The masters of the Theatre City got a mandate of power in this other reality. Their job is not to change and eventually improve reality, but to ritually expel it from the city.”<sup>24</sup>

### **The stage as a space of restrained freedom**

The second model identified in our analysis is a case of ‘flight’ from the stage of a public theatre into its urban surroundings. As opposed to the first model, which is the most widespread approach to the use of public urban space for theatre performances, characteristic for publicly funded (usually summer) theatre festivals throughout the world, this second model may be considered to be relatively rare, because institutional (public) theatres often display a

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<sup>23</sup> Stamenković, Vladimir. 1994. *Zastrašujuća savremenost*. *NIN* no. 2293, 9. December 1994, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Čolović, Ivan. 2000. *Politika simbola*. Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 226.

tendency of simultaneous opening to a (supposedly) general audience and isolation from their immediate urban surroundings and everyday life. Institutional theatres are generally not inclined to interact with their urban 'neighbourhood', and even less inclined to collaborate with artists who are not members of the same artistic community (for example, who are not classically trained performers, who work as freelance experimental artists or align themselves with the artistic 'underground' scene). Belgrade's Bitef Theatre is therefore a very interesting case for discussion in the particular context of the (early) 1990s in Serbia.

The 1960s had seen an initial enthusiasm in Belgrade for new trends of avant-garde modern theatre, which resulted in the creation of Bitef (Belgrade International Theatre Festival) in 1967 as "one of the rare places where productions by Yuri Lyubimov and Robert Wilson, Antoine Vitez and Anatoly Efros could be seen in one place".<sup>25</sup> Bitef Theatre was conceived as the offspring of the Bitef Festival, in response to the need to establish a stable institution which would promote Bitef's cause in the local context (research and experiment in theatre and the advancement of new theatrical tendencies). From its very inception in the late 1980s, this theatre has found itself in a somewhat odd situation in comparison with the other state-funded theatres – but it was, and it has remained, an institution. Launched in 1989, by the early 1990s it had found itself in the iron grip of an increasingly conservative and patriarchal society which was abandoning everything that Bitef stood for during the Cold War era. Bitef had been conceived as a prestigious international festival, a unique place for encounters of leading theatre innovators from opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. (Given the foreign policy of openness and non-alignment which prevailed in Tito's Yugoslavia, Bitef was among the state's most important cultural projects.)<sup>26</sup> In the early 1990s Bitef Theatre was experiencing all the changes in status of the Bitef Festival in a fairly drastic way. At the same time, the company was facing the failure of the impossible mission it had taken upon itself. The mainstream theatre was difficult – indeed impossible – to change.

A deconsecrated evangelical church – an interesting but neglected building – was discovered during the seventh Bitef Festival (1973) with the performance of Odin Theatre's *Min fars hus* (My Father's House), directed by Eugenio Barba. It was transformed into an exciting and valuable theatre venue and renamed Bitef Theatre. In the early 1990s the building was still at its best. It would eventually begin to deteriorate because of the many difficulties the company later encountered. In this period, in addition to other forms of experimental and 'new' theatre, and in sharp contrast to other establishment theatres in Belgrade, Bitef Theatre cultivated works largely inspired by global popular culture. Its stage was frequented by characters impersonating the likes of Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Nick Cave, David Bowie, Marc Bolan, Sid Vicious, Brian Eno, the Trainspotters, etc.

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<sup>25</sup>Jakovljević, Branislav. 2016. *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945-91*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 304.

<sup>26</sup> Radulović, Ksenija. 2017. *The Foundation of Bitef (1967) and Cultural Diplomacy of Socialist Yugoslavia*, in *Cultural Diplomacy: Arts, Festivals and Geopolitics*, edited by Dragičević Šešić, Milena. Belgrade: Creative Europe Desk Serbia and Faculty of Dramatic Arts.

The early 1990s were marked in Bitef Theatre by the artistic leadership of theatre director Ivana Vujić. At a time when what was happening in Serbia (and its immediate surroundings) was already clear, when the 1992 Bitef international festival hosted only one international production,<sup>27</sup> Bitef Theatre displayed a tendency to somehow communicate its own position in this situation. The close encounters between the members of different performing arts communities (institutional and informal) within the premises of Bitef Theatre culminated in 1994 with a project titled *Aircraft without an Engine* (Aeroplan bez motora). The title was a reference to the 'anti-European poem' of the same title by Ljubomir Micić, leader of the 1920s avant-garde art movement *zenitizam*.<sup>28</sup> Under the artistic leadership of Ivana Vujić, *Aircraft without an Engine* was convened as a 'gift' to the 28<sup>th</sup> Bitef Festival. Regrouping, members of Belgrade's alternative and independent art scenes became the main protagonists of this unusual event which transformed the entire building of the theatre and its immediate urban neighbourhood into a vivid stage. *Aircraft without an Engine* included 27 openings: theatre and performance art, alternative fashion parades and music programmes – from (non-standard) concerts of classical music to rock acts.

In the 1990s, art in Serbia (theatre included) was visibly marked by two mechanisms of isolation: outer – blocked access to the zones of global exchange of information, experience, commodities and work, and inner – (self)isolation of the artists mainly communicated through some form of 'active escapism'.<sup>29</sup> In such circumstances theatre, especially institutional (state-funded) theatre, had a markedly ambivalent position – balancing on a swing between self-proclaimed engagement and overt escapism. So, what were these festivities in Bitef Theatre celebrating? In retrospect, the answers to this question may be 'a better past' or *joie de vivre* in a life of unrestrained (artistic) freedom that had already passed. *Aircraft without an Engine* exploded and plunged into the (urban) space like a kamikaze pilot, making a statement on the state of artistic freedom in society (and the state itself).

### **The city as an arena of everyday life**

Within the Serbian independent cultural scene during the 1990s, the theatre productions of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju – CZKD) stood out prominently as they (almost without exception and more or less explicitly) raised ethical questions pertaining to personal and collective responsibility for the circumstances and consequences

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<sup>27</sup> Best of Jango, Jango Edwards & Co., Amsterdam.

<sup>28</sup> Golubović, Vidosava and Irina Subotić. 2008. *Zenit: 1921-1926*. Belgrade: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, Institut za književnost i umetnost / Zagreb: SKD Prosvjeta.

<sup>29</sup> A term introduced by art historian Lidija Merenik in Merenik, Lidija. 1996. *No Wave: 1992-95*, in *Art in Yugoslavia 1992-95*. Belgrade: Fond za otvoreno društvo, Centar za savremenu umetnost. See also: Vuković, Stevan. 2002. *Privatna hladnoća/ javna okrutnost: lagani posrćući hod kroz devedesete*, in *Remont. Review: beogradska umetnička scena devedesetih* (exhibition catalogue), edited by Radosavljević, Darka / Čubrilo, Jasmina and Stevan Vuković. Belgrade: Galerija Remont, 23-32; Anđelković, Branislava and Branislav Dimitrijević. 2005. *Poslednja decenija: umetnost, društvo, trauma i normalnost* (exhibition catalogue). Belgrade: Muzej savremene umetnosti, 9-129.

of life under Milošević's regime. During the mass civic and students' revolt in Serbia (which took place from November 1996 to February 1997), both theatre-goers and non-theatre-goers had the opportunity to take an active part in para-theatrical events<sup>30</sup> triggered by the social reality. The staging of Wilhelm Reich's book *Listen, Little Man!*, presented in Belgrade in 1997 as part of the multidisciplinary festival *Lust for Life (Žudnja za životom)* under the auspices of the Open Society Fund, was inspired precisely by these experiences of the long student and civil protests in Belgrade.

This production was 'traditional' inasmuch as it followed the tradition of Augusto Boal's *theatre of the oppressed*. The category 'oppressed' in this case applied to the little people, the ordinary citizens of Belgrade and Serbia. This theatre was invisible. It occurred in the blank spots of ordinary life. The unusual theatre presentation comprised a dozen events which took place during a single day (5 September 1997) between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. in various parts of the city. Each performance addressed a different target group – pensioners, war refugees denied citizenship, consumers of cheap glamour in search of a better life, high school students, public transport passengers, radio audiences, newcomers to the big city. What these groups presumably had in common was a lack of their own opinion. Now, it was they whom Wilhelm Reich addressed with his work written in the 1940s. The venues for such theatre were the places where the little people spent their time: leisure spots – Kalemegdan Park, where pensioners gathered to play chess and enjoy folk dances from their homeland; a place in Mirijevo where refugees from the Dalmatian hinterland played *balote*; the Čumić Arcades (a symbol of 1990s shopping)... These were also venues of degradation and exclusion: the Town Hall, the Ministry of the Interior, the Hyatt Regency Hotel or an ordinary public bus during the rush hour in Belgrade.

Contrary to the policies of forced openness and 'democratic' access to theatre characteristic of the socialist period<sup>31</sup>, the theatre in the 1990s was increasingly becoming a closed institution – a veritable fortress of culture. This phenomenon is something that passed unnoticed, and indeed un-reflected, in theatre production in Serbia. Awareness of it existed only within the alternative scene, sustained mostly with funds from the international community (provided to instigate political and economic changes in Serbia and supplementing political pressure with cultural production). On the independent scene, there was a

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<sup>30</sup> On theatrical life in Serbia during the 1996/97 protests, see: Suša, Anja. 2002. Ostao je direktan prenos (građanski protest 1996-97). *Teatron* 119-120, 94-100; Jovićević, Aleksandra. 2000. Teatar, parateatar i karneval: građanski i studentski protest u Srbiji 1996-1997, in *Urbani spektakl*, edited by Dragičević-Šešić, Milena and Irena Šentevska. Belgrade: Clio, 145-60; Vujović, Sreten. 2000. *Beograd kao pokretni praznik*, in *Urbani spektakl*, edited by Dragičević-Šešić, Milena and Irena Šentevska. Belgrade: Clio, 130-46; Transcript of the discussion *Umesto predstave* (held in the Centre for Cultural Decontamination on 3. December 1996) in: n.n. Pozorište i pobuna: Igrati ili ne – Gluma po savesti, *Vreme* 322, 21. December 1996, 44-49. The main topic was the role and responsibilities of theatre artists in the contemporary political events. Among the participants were theatre directors Dejan Mijač and Gorčin Stojanović, playwright Nenad Prokić, theatrologist Mirjana Miočinović, actress Mirjana Karanović etc.

<sup>31</sup> For an overview of the network of professional theatres and amateur groups in socialist Serbia, see: Marjanović, Petar. 2005. *Mala istorija srpskog pozorišta: XIII – XXI vek*. Novi Sad: Pozorišni muzej Vojvodine, 382.

certain degree of freedom to call things by their real names. On the other hand, there were major issues of ghettoisation (the impossibility of reaching a wider audience), temporary funding (the impossibility of maintaining continuity in any aspect of the practice), the vast expenditure of time and effort on the administrative procedures required by project fundraising (which the post-socialist state-funded institutions were completely spared) and the huge workload of the few and underpaid artistic, technical and administrative staff in these independent organisations. Yet some of them, like the Centre for Cultural Decontamination and Cinema Rex in Belgrade, created some of the most memorable theatre productions in Serbia in the 1990s.

### **The performance space as a 'liberated territory'<sup>32</sup>**

The fourth model of theatre events engaging urban space identified in this study pertains to urban venues reclaimed by informal, independent and alternative groups attempting to acquire permanent premises for research and performance. This model approaches squatting – namely, exploitation of abandoned spaces, either with or without official approval, as a form of encouragement and diversification of artistic production. It often includes participation in a specific lifestyle. There are many contemporary examples from Western Europe (and Eastern Europe to a lesser extent) of reclaiming abandoned industrial spaces for such purposes.<sup>33</sup> However, during the 1990s, this was a fairly uncommon practice in Serbia for many reasons, both economic and social. However, in Belgrade, one half-abandoned factory *was* transformed into a performance venue. It was the 'Dimitrije Tucović'<sup>34</sup> sugar refinery in Radnička Street, and this occurred in very particular circumstances.

In 1994 the renowned theatre company KPGT (Kazalište Pozorište Gledališće Teatar), a leading Yugoslav non-institutional theatre run by director Ljubiša Ristić, moved in. The cultural-political movement KPGT was launched in Zagreb in 1977 and has a dynamic history of operating in various corners of the former Yugoslavia. Before settling in Belgrade, KPGT spent its longest residence (from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s) in Subotica, cohabiting with the National Theatre (Népszínház) in this period. Basically, Ristić's leftist theatre utopia was an attempt to create a cultural model which in its final iteration aimed to preserve the Yugoslav cultural space, i.e. the Yugoslav state. Ristić was convinced that theatre could (and should) demonstrate that life in the common state was still possible. After a harsh (although artistically rather productive) period in Subotica, he became an active politician, president of JUL (the Yugoslav Left),<sup>35</sup> the political party associated with Slobodan Milošević's wife Mirjana Marković. This largely facilitated KPGT's occupation of new

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<sup>32</sup> Šentevska, Irena. 2013. KPGT ili Pozorište kao 'oslobodena teritorija'. *jugoLink. Review of Post-Yugoslav Studies* 3 (Issue: Art and Politics), 60-80.

<sup>33</sup> Pearson, Mike. 2010. *Site-Specific Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; see also the classic study Schechner, Richard. 1973. *Environmental Theater*. Portland: Hawthorne Books.

<sup>34</sup> Dimitrije Tucović (1881-1914) was a theorist and leader of the socialist movement in the Kingdom of Serbia. This factory, opened in 1900, was a venue of an important (and violently suppressed) workers' strike in 1907, whose organisers included Tucović.

<sup>35</sup> The party was formed in 1994 by merging 19 left-wing parties, led by the League of Communists – Movement for Yugoslavia (SK-PJ). The JUL and Milošević's party SPS collaborated closely.

premises in the old industrial complex of the sugar refinery in Belgrade's working-class neighbourhood of Čukarica.

With his parallel engagements as a director in the national theatres across Yugoslavia, the *spiritus movens* of the cultural movement KPGT Ljubiša Ristić inaugurated at the Yugoslav theatre scene in the 1970s a bizarre blend of institutional and alternative, public-funded and self-financed, bourgeois and communist, conventional and unconventional, progressive and reactionary, leftist and rightist, elite and populist theatre. KPGT indiscriminately addressed the members of very different social groups in the former Yugoslavia: the cultural 'high class' was warming improvised seats at KPGT venues together with decidedly subcultural types.<sup>36</sup> Within the Yugoslav art scene, KPGT celebrated the multinational and multicultural Yugoslav 'imagined community'.<sup>37</sup> The brand name KPGT entered into circulation in late 1981, on the poster for the production *Karamazovi* written by Dušan Jovanović, addressing the controversial subject matter of the Goli Otok concentration camp, already present in the Yugoslav theatre at the time. In this production, KPGT retained the model based on a voluntary working community with shared responsibilities and profits.

In 1984 KPGT attempted to register a space in Knez Mihailova Street in Belgrade, the venue of their Godot Fest launched earlier that year – however, they were unsuccessful. As part of Belgrade's preparations for the Olympic Games the city never won (1992), the venue in Knez Mihailova was adapted into an info centre for the Tourist Organisation of Belgrade. KPGT got an ultimatum to vacate the premises. Interestingly, the next venue to be artistically exploited by KPGT was nothing less than the major congress centre of the Yugoslav capital – Centar Sava, where they produced two quite pretentious projects, *Tajna crne ruke* (Secret of the Black Hand Society, 1983/84) and *Carmina Burana* (1984/85). The promotion of Ljubiša Ristić to manager of the National Theatre / *Népszínház* in Subotica followed in 1985. At the time KPGT was widely travelling and touring in France, Italy, Germany, the UK, etc. (They had already performed in Australia and USA in the early 1980s).<sup>38</sup>

Ljubiša Ristić was summoned by the municipal Party nomenclature to the multinational and multicultural town of Subotica<sup>39</sup>. His plans with the National Theatre met with explicit political support. What he encountered in Subotica was a derelict theatre building, divided into ethnic enclaves. The transfer of KPGT into the institutional framework of Subotica's major theatre was programmatically announced by the production *Madač – komentari*, based

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<sup>36</sup> Mladenović, Filip. 1994. Alternativno pozorište u Jugoslaviji: KPGT-studija slučaja. *Kultura* 93/94, 82-94; Jevremović, Zorica. 1994. Pozorišne (političke) fabrike socijalističke Jugoslavije. *Kultura* 93/94, 95-123.

<sup>37</sup> Toporišić, Tomaž. 2009. Taktike političkog i politizovanog pozorišta druge polovine XX stoleća. *Scena* 1-2, 251-64.

<sup>38</sup> Klaić, Dragan. 1989. *Oslobodjenje Skopja, 1977-1987, Memoari*, in *Teatar razlike*, edited by Klaić, Dragan. Novi Sad: Sterijino pozorje, 109-48.

<sup>39</sup> Klaić, Dragan. 1989. *Subotička anamneza*, in *Teatar razlike*, edited by Klaić, Dragan. Novi Sad: Sterijino pozorje, 95-108.

on the dramatic poem *The Tragedy of Man* (*Az ember trágediaja*, 1861) by the Hungarian playwright Imre Madách. It premiered in October 1985. Ljubiša Ristić and Nada Kokotović co-directed it with the Novi Sad-based film director Želimir Žilnik and the Slovenian theatre director Dragan Živadinov, a leading exponent of the Slovenian artistic movement *Neue Slowenische Kunst*.<sup>40</sup> The production was marked by the thrilling ambience of the old Subotica synagogue, subsequently used frequently by KPGT.

Narodno pozorište / *Nepszínház* became a production facility for local and international groups and initiatives, for complex co-productions and multilateral tours at the time hardly existing in Europe, still divided on Cold War terms. KPGT was a local pioneer of international theatre networking, so much in favour of the EU cultural policies in the 1990s. Under KPGT's artistic 'occupation', the National Theatre in Subotica continued to systematically explore the city's environmental capacities for theatre. Shakespeare Fest (1986) and Molière Fest (1987) focused on the revitalisation of Lake Palić, the cozy Austro-Hungarian summer resort, which after the war became collectivised, syndicalised and, finally, demolished. The 'territorial expansion' of KPGT in Subotica not only claimed the summer festivals in Palić between 1986 and 1991, but also the festivals Grad teatar Budva and Kotorart on the Montenegrin coast.<sup>41</sup>

However, in the late 1980s, the overall political support for KPGT gradually diminished, both in Subotica and in Novi Sad. Slobodan Milošević began to dominate the political scene, on the one hand claiming the continuity of Yugoslavia (which kept KPGT's mission on the politically correct side) and on the other enforcing the speedy fragmentation of the Yugoslav cultural space (which made KPGT's mission, at the same time, politically undesirable). Pro-autonomy politicians in Vojvodina were deposed in 1988 on Milošević's orders in the so-called Yoghurt Revolution, and his newly appointed supporters in Subotica and Novi Sad did not treat KPGT with sympathy. Ljubiša Ristić continued to work in Subotica and KPGT's production facilities in other Serbian towns.

In 1994 Ljubiša Ristić staged *Antigona* by Dušan Jovanović in the city of Niš, on top of its Belgrade Gate. For the purposes of staging this production at the 28th Bitef Festival in Belgrade, KPGT occupied the old sugar plant in Čukarica. This historical landmark of the socialist movement in Serbia was later to become the first permanent KPGT venue in the capital. This coincided with the fact that in the same year (1994) Ljubiša Ristić entered the mainstream politics and became president of the Yugoslav Left. At some point in the late 1990s it was announced that Dejan Mijač would direct the production *Vožnja čunom ili komad za film o ratu* based on Peter Handke's 1996 essay *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia* (*Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*). The rehearsals were, however, suspended and the production never came to

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<sup>40</sup> Badovinac, Zdenka / Čufer, Eda and Anthony Gardner. (eds.). 2015. *NSK from Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst-an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

<sup>41</sup> Jovanov, Lazar. 2016. *Grad teatar KPGT: pozorište i integrativna kulturna politika*. Novi Sad: Sterijino pozorje.

life. In spite of Handke's high (and politically motivated) visibility in Serbia, his works remained outside the realm of the institutional theatres. The only opportunities for Serbian audiences to see Handke's plays were provided by the KPGT. In autumn 1999 KPGT staged five productions in the former sugar plant based on Handke's works including *Kaspar*, *Publikumsbeschimpfung* and *Der Ritt über den Bodensee*. The final phase of the reconstruction of the old factory reached its peak in the spring of the same year, during the NATO military campaign in Yugoslavia (Operation Allied Force, 23 March – 10 June, 1999). With a large company of some 50 actors and 15 dancers, KPGT entered the year 2000 ready to welcome its international guest performers.

However, after the change of government in Serbia on 5 October 2000, Ljubiša Ristić fell out of grace once more. The new authorities had been indifferent to the goals and ambitions of the KPGT, as well as to the financial problems it encountered in the post-Milošević period. Criticised throughout his whole career for his non-transparent business operations, Ljubiša Ristić had no option but to enter the free market economy. As a result, after 2000 the theatre production of the Sugar Factory gradually diminished. A number of legal cases were raised against the company (as the lease-holder of the space in the industrial complex, which is still a public asset), because of its inability to fulfil its financial obligations. However, there is no interest as yet in taking over these 'cultivated ruins' from KPGT.

### **Conclusion**

Against the background of the transformation of the theatre system in Serbia discussed in the introductory section, in terms of management, financing, public relations and methods of creative work, and the state of continuing social crisis (although with differing causes, intensities and effects), it seems that the closest and most diverse encounters between the theatre and the urban space (as the space of 'real life' and existential crises) happened precisely in the period of the most acute social turmoil – in the 1990s. This study has identified four basic models of interaction between the theatre as a traditional artistic medium of reflection of social reality and the space of everyday life in the city.

The first, most dominant and widespread model pertains to the use of urban attractions as performance spaces by (usually publicly-funded) theatre festivals. Such efforts in animating urban spaces, already perceived as interesting, valuable, or in any way attractive to the theatre audiences, are closely connected with public policies and the local government's efforts in advancing the tourist potentials of their respective cities. In the specific context of the theatre production in Serbia, the case of the summer theatre festival *Grad teatar Budva* was discussed as a paradigmatic example for this model of approach to urban space in the theatre, not only because it displays the common places of the marriage between theatre and tourism blessed by the local authorities, but also because of its unprecedented importance in Serbia and Montenegro with the change of the tourist trajectories within 'rump' Yugoslavia after the outbreak of the conflicts in the region. The two Shakespeare productions described in this section illustrate the two different

(or opposing) self-reflexive approaches to escapism inevitably involved in such animation of tourists in times of war or acute social crisis.

The second model identified in this study may be encountered in the rare instances when an institutional, publicly-funded theatre decides to relieve itself from the confines of its four walls and (proscenium) stage and engages in a meaningful dialogue with its urban surroundings and a population not usually perceived as theatre-goers. The motivation behind this decision may be different in each case. Nevertheless, we have explored here the case of Belgrade's Bitef Theatre, an institution with a unique position within the theatre system in Serbia due to its connection with the Belgrade International Theatre Festival. The festival *Aeroplan bez motora* was an interesting instance of such a temporary affair between an institutional theatre and its urban surroundings because it not only confronted theatre with real life in the same existential space, but also confronted members of different theatre communities, usually deeply divided by different concerns, from material resources to aesthetics and ideology of art.

The third model pertains to the non-institutional engagement with the urban space, to conceptual theatre which uses everyday life and its arenas as artistic devices. In the Serbian context such use of urban space is particularly characteristic of the independent companies without a permanent venue for rehearsals and performances. They have developed a high sensitivity for 'found' performance spaces and their inner meanings and expressive potentials. The case of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination differs from this overall picture of the Serbian independent theatre scene in that its founders had found a way to secure a permanent venue (a former private art pavilion) and cultivate a highly sophisticated theatre language and production during the 1990s. The production discussed in this paper (*Listen, Little Man!*) was atypical for the production of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in terms of its concept, dynamics and radical use of the urban arena of the everyday struggles of the 'little people'. On the other hand, it is paradigmatic and highly illustrative of the production models which sustained the oppositional (anti-Milošević) cultural scene in this period.

The last and probably most locally-specific case discussed in this paper is the 'occupation' of abandoned urban spaces for the purposes of advancement and diversification of the artistic scene. In a typical scenario, a group of like-minded artists occupy a space deemed as obsolete and abandoned by the community and the local authorities. After a process of negotiation with the authorities, the artists eventually receive permission (and additional support) to maintain the space and work towards accomplishing their creative goals. Such scenarios are especially plausible in the post-industrial landscapes of abandoned factories and other, now obsolete, remnants of the industrial era. In the Serbian context of the 1990s, with the rare exception of a few organisations (CZKD included), artists were not able to negotiate with the authorities for the permanent use of abandoned spaces for artistic purposes. Those who succeeded typically used spaces which previously had a 'cultural purpose' (art pavilions, community halls etc.). The case of the artistic occupation of the old sugar plant 'Dimitrije Tucović' in Belgrade is exceptional, not only because this was the only post-socialist factory in Serbia reshaped as a theatre venue in this period.

It vividly illustrates the close ties between art and politics which drastically affected the long career of the talented director and controversial politician Ljubiša Ristić, for better or worse.

Each of these case studies may be observed as 'transitional', in that theatre-makers used the experiences and possibilities tested in the socialist period (summer festivals; Bitef and the student/youth cultural scene; non-institutional cultural centres; (semi)independent theatre troupes, respectively) to respond to the new post-socialist and wartime social circumstances. None of these may be considered 'transgressive' in terms of crossing the limits of what is morally, socially, or legally acceptable. They rather followed the socialist tradition, which favoured theatre engaged in a meaningful dialogue with the social reality and saw the institution of theatre as an active agent of social transformation.

In identifying these four different models of interaction between the theatre and the urban space, to which (though discussed with the use of highly context-specific examples) may be ascribed a certain level of universality, this study hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the social use of theatre and to the question of how theatre responds to extreme situations of social crisis with its complex arsenal of expressive means. It also challenges the globally prevailing tendency of the withdrawal of theatre from the physical, urban public space into closed preserves of commodified middle-class entertainment.

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