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Peace agreement between ethics and aesthetics: the effects of the war on the art and culture of memory (case of Bosnia and Herzegovina)

The siege of Sarajevo was the longest siege in contemporary human history. One of the characteristics of this period was an amazing response of artists to the situation they faced. As the result of that, artistic scene of Sarajevo in the period of 1992–1995 was one of the most interesting phenomena in all history of art in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: theatre, siege, art, ethics, aesthetics

With art, all which is good becomes more beautiful
and all which is evil more bearable.

Ivan Turgenev

Despite the fact that next year will mark the 30th anniversary since the beginning of the siege of Sarajevo, to this day there aren't very many serious studies on art created in that period. What we can use as a source when discussing the aesthetics

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as well as the ethics of art – in this case, primarily the art of theatre – is a significant number of articles, written and audio-visual testimonies. The most important and most comprehensive studies written about this period are summed up in these three publications – *Theatre under siege* by Gradimir Gojer (MES, Sarajevo, 1997), *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995* by Davor Diklić (Chamber Theater 55, 1st edition, 2004; J.U. MES Sarajevo, 2nd edition, 2016) and *Theatre under siege* (J.U. MES and Sarajevo National Theater, 2020) by Hana Bajrović.¹

In case of the aesthetical features of theatre performances staged during the siege, we are primarily talking about a continuation of what used to be the trademark features of Bosnian theatre in the years preceding the war. However, the circumstances in which those performances were to be staged would certainly impact their specific features.

The eighties were essentially a period of an overall development of the BH society within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1984, Sarajevo was the centre of the world as host of the Winter Olympics and that had a great impact on all spheres of life, including theatre, i.e. art in general. That period of prosperity is also associated with the founding of the Academy of Performing Arts (December 1981) as an independent institution that was to contribute to the development of theatre. As part of the Academy of Performing Arts, in November 1984, the Open Stage Obala was founded and it did not take very long for it to become one of the most interesting theatre stages in former Yugoslavia. Produced by the Academy's Open Stage Obala, the play *Tattooed theatre* (*Tetovirano pozorište*) by Mladen Materić had a significant reception even outside Bosnia and Herzegovina, winning the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was a play whose aesthetics represented a completely new theatre tendency. In complete silence, these very powerful performances seemed like some theatre versions of a silent film. That silence in the plays *Tattooed theatre* (*Tetovirano pozorište*) and *Moonplay* (*Mjesečeva predstava*) by Mladen Materić with which the BH theatre bade farewell to the Sarajevo audience and peace, was very symbolic in a certain way.

The MESS Festival, founded in 1960 as a festival of small and experimental stages of former Yugoslavia, which is now one of the oldest theatre festivals in South-Eastern Europe, also put Sarajevo on the map as a very important theatre centre of Yugoslavia. Back in the eighties, it had already been regarded as one of the favourite festivals for artists from the entire SFRY.

As in many other aspects of social life, the eighties were rightfully regarded as the golden years of BH theatre and art in general. Not only was the artistic life more intense in the capital, but the same energy was also felt in other cities in the country. In 1978, in Zenica, an industrial city 50 km away from Sarajevo, the largest theatre building in Bosnia and Herzegovina was built. The new building intended for the

¹ The publication by author Hana Bajrović bears the same name as the exhibition at the Sarajevo National Theater and is a part of the International Theater Festival MESS Memory Module 2020.

theatre founded in 1950 was a first-class accomplishment of the BH post-modernist architecture and stands as one of the best examples of theatre architecture in this part of Europe.²

At the beginning of 1990, the Bosnian National Theatre produced a play titled *Saint Sava (Sveti Sava)* written by Siniša Kovačević and directed by Vladimir Milčičin. It was to cause an intense and heated public debate indicating the awakening of nationalism in SFRY. The Greater Serbian nationalists would prevent its performance at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade scheduled for the end of May 1990.

It was this event that was later deemed a symbolic beginning of the end of the joint Yugoslav cultural space and of the dissolution of the Yugoslav theatre. Either way, that event divided the wider cultural public of the time, exposing the deep division of society and thereby announcing all the tragic events that would follow.³

Generally speaking, theatre in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s was focused on modern theatre tendencies. Those were the years of an intense opening of the Yugoslav cultural space to the west and to that which was characteristic of European art of the time.

As regards the urge to explore new forms, the performances that were to be staged in Sarajevo during the siege aesthetically represent a continuation of what theatre artists were concerned with in the decade preceding the longest siege of a city in modern history. All their specific features would be a result of the circumstances the artists would find themselves in, as well as all the citizens of the country in which a war was to break out in 1992.

In the introduction to his book *Theatre under siege*, written immediately after the war and primarily discussing the activities of the Chamber Theater 55 (Kamer-niteatar 55), Gradimir Gojer writes:

Turning a new page in its activities, in the period from 1992 to 1996, the Chamber Theater 55 was surely commencing a new phase in its organisation, its functioning and creating a new artistic atmosphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The period of aggression on the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a period of seeking completely new forms of theatre expression, forms compatible with the current state of affairs which, objectively speaking, were not theatre-friendly in the least... The book you have in front of you does not represent an attempt to glorify the artistic endeavours of the Chamber Theater 55 during the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina (...) It is a compilation of attempts to bear witness to that which had been experienced, seen and done; to the numerous attempts to live life in a way which is more humane than the life our enemies had intended for the citizens of Sarajevo.⁴

Hence, in order to be able to grasp the particularity of what was to represent the uniqueness of theatre and cultural life of Sarajevo in the years of the siege, it is of utmost importance to describe the situation in which all this had occurred.

² The building was designed by renowned BH architects Jahiel Finci and Zlatko Ugljen.

³ H. Begagić, *Saint S or How the Saint Sava Play was "Archived"* (www.bnp.ba) [accessed: 30.09.2021].

⁴ G. Gojer, *Theatre under siege* (MES, Sarajevo 1997).

A report from the besieged city

The siege of Sarajevo was the longest siege of a city in modern history. The enemy started closing in on the city on 5th April 1992 while the siege itself would last until 29th February, that is until 16th March 1996.⁵ It lasted for 1425 days. Signing of the Dayton Peace Accords stopped the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the four years of war, there were 11,541 casualties in the city, of which 1,601 were children. 50,000 citizens were wounded and many of them were disabled.

By 2nd May 1992, the city was completely surrounded and there was not a single way out or any other connection with the free territory. Certain parts of the city were occupied and so their inhabitants ended up being refugees in their own city. Heavy artillery was placed all around the city – tanks, mortars, heavy machine guns and snipers being fired 24 hours a day at Sarajevo's population. The city was constantly shelled and bombed. From the surrounding hills, citizens were an easy target for numerous snipers. It is estimated that during the siege 50,000 tons of artillery was fired at the city.

Everyone was a target – civilians, women, children, the elderly... Schools were bombed, religious sites of all denominations, libraries, museums, maternity hospitals, theatres. Cemeteries were shelled as well. Funerals were held during the night so as to avoid bombing and snipers. Those who defended the city were armed with courage, not with weapons. Sarajevo fire-fighters, lacking water and being exposed to snipers and shelling, did their best to save people's property. Hospitals, lacking the essentials, were continuously under enemy's fire. Every day, new lives were born in improvised maternity hospitals.

The attack that took place on 2nd May 1992, followed by heavy shelling is remembered as one of the worst days of the siege.⁶ That night, all the important infrastructure needed for a city to function normally was destroyed, burnt or heavily damaged. The post office was destroyed so there was no telephony in the city anymore. Moreover, Sarajevo's water supply was cut off, there was neither power nor gas. The city was running out of food supplies. People were massacred with bomb shells as they were queuing up for water or bread. The city that had less than a decade ago been in the centre of media attention as the host of the Winter Olympics suddenly became the topic of horrific reports mentioning deaths and destruction. Through the presence of international journalists who were in the city, reporting on the horrible circumstances, Europe and the rest of the world were given a live coverage of the siege, the aggression and

⁵ In accordance with the provisions of the Dayton Peace Accords, the siege of Sarajevo was officially brought to a close on 29th February 1996. It was then that the reintegration of the then-occupied Sarajevo municipalities began. The last quarter of the city which had been occupied during the war was Grbavica. Its reintegration took place on 19th May 1996.

⁶ To mark the anniversary of the founding of the Sarajevo War Theater in 2012, this theatre company produced a play tackling the events that took place on 2nd May 1992. The play was titled *It was a nice and sunny day* (*Bio je lijep i sunčan dan*) and directed by Tanja Miletić Oručević.

the genocide. On average, 329 shells were fired at the city on a daily basis. July 22nd 1993 was marked in Sarajevo's history as the day that saw 3,777 shells fired at the city. Abandoned by almost everyone, Sarajevo refused to surrender to the enemy. Resembling a separate planet, the city had a life of its own.⁷ Apart from the courage shown by Sarajevo's citizens on front lines, they also tried to at least keep up the appearances of normality so badly needed so that their own lives had a purpose. Zbigniew Herbert, a Polish poet, was frequently quoted in the period of the siege. His poem, *Report from the besieged city*, written back in 1982, remains to this day one of the best and most precise descriptions of the real state of affairs in Sarajevo at the time.⁸

(...) cemeteries grow larger
 the number of defenders is smaller
 yet the defence continues and it will continue until the end
 and if the City falls but a single man escapes
 he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile
 he will be the City
 we look in the face of hunger the face of fire face of death
 worst of all – the face of betrayal
 and only our dreams have not been humiliated.
 (Zbigniew Herbert, 1982).⁹

It is only through that wish that “our dreams remain unhumiliated” is it possible to explain how it came to be that at the very beginning of the siege, on 17th May 1992, i.e. in the period of the most intense attacks launched on the city, the Sarajevo War Theater was founded. To this day, it remains the only theatre institution in Europe that was founded in circumstances of war. In the documents submitted to the City's Assembly, it was stated that this theatre “was founded as a public institution within the field of culture which is of particular interest to the city's defence”.¹⁰

The artist's reaction to the siege

On the night of 4th April 1992, the Opera ensemble was scheduled to give one of its regular performances at the National Theater. However, the performance was suddenly cancelled and in its place, the play *On God's path (Na Božijem putu)* written by Ahmed Muradbegović and directed by Sulejman Kupusović. Muradbegović is a Bosnian author who happened to be director of the Sarajevo National Theater

⁷ In 1992, during the siege, director Šahin Šišić made what is by many considered to be the best documentary about the city titled *Planet Sarajevo*.

⁸ The poem was used in the play *City* by authors Semezdin Mehmedinović and Haris Pašović in 1993. Incidentally, the translation of *Pan Cogito* by Z. Herbert was published by the Svjetlost publishing company in Sarajevo in 1988.

⁹ Z. Herbert, *Pan Cogito*, edited and translated by Petay Vujičić, Sarajevo 1988, p. 251.

¹⁰ The archives of the Sarajevo War Theater.

during WWII. This play had first been staged at the beginning of the war, in April 1941. Almost fifty years later, this was to be the last play performed at the National Theater before the siege. That night, after the performance, the actors left the theatre and as they were heading for their homes, they saw the first barricades and heard the first sniper shots.¹¹ The first grenades were fired at the city. Day in and day out, the citizens were gradually getting accustomed to the new life conditions that were to be their reality in the four years to follow. The greatest challenge for all people who lived in Sarajevo was to survive!¹²

After the initial shock, in an atmosphere of total destruction, people were trying to lead their normal, everyday lives in an attempt to preserve their common sense. Life was precarious. Every day was considered as potentially the last. It is therefore that people decided to live their lives to the fullest. They were determined not to give in to despair and reduce their lives to the very basics. They were persistent in finding a greater purpose to all that was happening around them. This attitude was confirmed by the testimonies of theatre workers during that period in Sarajevo, but also the testimonies of other artists.¹³ The need to act arose from an artist's urge to keep doing his/her job even in "abnormal circumstances", to organise his/her life according to those circumstances in an attempt to make it purposeful. According to the testimonies that were preserved, it is evident that the stakeholders themselves emphasised that art was a primal need, whilst elevating the motivation for artistic expression in such circumstances above the material motivation so characteristic of peacetime.¹⁴

One such discussion was held in May 1992 at the Youth Theater Cabaret. Bearing in mind that the cabaret stage is situated below ground level, a group of artists and people from the neighbouring buildings sought shelter there from the grenades that were fired all over the city. The debate everyone seemed to be involved in was centred on the question whether or not "it made sense to make theatre during the war". Remembering the debate, actor Miki Trifunov says that "they realised that it made

¹¹ Quoted from the memory of actor Izudin Bajrović.

¹² At the beginning of the war, a creative guide through Sarajevo titled *Survivalguide* (1992) was published by Fama International. Very soon the term "Survival Art" was beginning to circulate.

¹³ There is a significant number of similar examples in Davor Diklić's publication *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995* (Chamber Theater '55, Sarajevo, 2004).

¹⁴ "Once we had 'agreed' to all that, we decided to organise our lives in a way which would suit or even outgrow such circumstances. That also envisaged a continuation of work, i.e. a continuation of our work in abnormal circumstances. The life that was almost completely devastated was supposed to be enriched in a certain manner. What else could I – a man who was involved in acting – have done other than continue doing what I do? In my view, the result of that work – and let's not pretend that everything we did during the war was fantastic and outstanding because it wasn't – but there were quite a few great moments. I guess, that was the adrenalin which, in moments of depravity, suffering and death, rose to such levels that even large amounts of money could not match it." – Izudin Bajrović. (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, 2nd edition, Sarajevo 2016, p. 21).

perfect sense to provide some kind of resistance. And what resistance do we have in ourselves other than our sensibility we like to refer to as theatre”.¹⁵

That is how the play *Shelter* (*Sklonište*) was created. Written by Safet Plakalo and Dubravko Bibanović, it was to be staged by Bibanović as the first performance under siege, performed in front of a hundred or so viewers on 6th September 1992.¹⁶

The play was set in the holdings of a theatre, with the director and dramaturge discussing the aesthetic and ethical dilemma about making theatre during the war. The authors opted for grotesque as the form of their choice describing it as a situation in which laughter speaks about sadness. One of the cast members, actress Irena Mulamuhčić, sees *Shelter* as a spiritual foundation of resistance, whilst actress Jasna Diklić emphasises the fact that there was not a single line in the play which refers to hatred. The actor Milorad Miki Trifunov reminisces that “reactions were fiercer and emotions purer as we had no time for lies”, describing the play as “an incident that was so much more than theatre”. Particularly interesting is Milorad Trifunov’s statement that “the more we worked, the more meaningful was our existence and the less meaningful was all that surrounded us”.¹⁷

It is important to emphasise that the premiere of the play *Shelter* was not the first theatre event during the siege. Ever since it began, various short plays, poetry readings and plays from the regular repertoire were performed at the Chamber Theater ’55. The plays in question were *Die hard* (*Umri Muški*) – produced in 1990 and directed by Admir Glamočak and *The poor little hamsters* (*Sirotimalihrčki*) from 1991, directed by Haris Burina. Both these performances were part of the regular repertoire of the Chamber Theater ’55 in the first month of the siege until some new productions replaced them.¹⁸

When the siege began, many performances had to be withdrawn from the repertoire as there were many actors who left Sarajevo. The drama ensemble of the National Theatre shrank from the pre-war 45 members to 13. New performances were

¹⁵ The documentary film titled *From the shelter to the Sarajevo war theater* (47 minutes). Authors: Nihad Kreševljaković and Sanela Kapetanović, TV SA, 2012.

¹⁶ “And then the amazing thing happened. A group of theatre people created the play titled *Shelter*. When I heard of it – and I no longer remember how I was told or how I found out about it – I instantly went to see it. There were about a hundred people here... it was a very good performance, but that was ephemeral. What to me seemed to be the most important thing of all were the people who came to see the performance” – Strajko Krsmanović. (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, 2nd edition, Sarajevo 2016, p. 134).

¹⁷ The documentary film titled *From the shelter to the Sarajevo war theater* (47 minutes) Authors: Nihad Kreševljaković and Sanela Kapetanović, TV SA, 2012.

¹⁸ “That afternoon I wanted to go and see a performance. More precisely, I wanted to see the production of *Poor little hamsters* by Gordan Mihićat the Chamber Theater ’55 again. During one of those rare quiet periods, I managed to run from the Youth Theatre to the Chamber Theater ’55 and see the performance. That was when I had my first surprise since the war had started. There was a significant number of people who came to this performance, running and sneaking like me, between rounds that all of a sudden became our destiny.” – Gradimir Gojer. (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, 2nd edition, Sarajevo 2016, p. 61).

required. From the first premiere that took place on 6th September 1992 until the end of the war, the theatre life became more intense and generally better.

Theatre productions peaked in 1994 when there was a total of 22 first showings by professional theatre companies.¹⁹ The plays written at the beginning of the siege played an important role here.²⁰

Numerical data, as well as the testimonies by the participants in Sarajevo's theatre life (both artists and the audience) support this claim. Theatre inspired people and it also had an effect on young people who, inspired by the theatre during the war, decided to enrol in the Academy of Performing Arts that also kept up its pedagogical and production work in the days of the siege.²¹

Even though theatres in Sarajevo made their work visible as cultural institutions, the decision to start working was made by artists themselves. What they essentially valued was the audience's recognition that what they were doing made sense. A positive response from the audience regarding their need for theatre was, alongside the artists, the backbone of the city's artistic life and that which the media started referring to as the spiritual, i.e. cultural resistance. Essentially, it was all a product of the need to stay civilised despite the circumstances.²²

Even the enemy saw these activities as some sort of resistance. Safet Plakalo reminisces that after the premiere of *Shelter* had been announced at a press conference, the theatre building instantly became one of the bombing targets.²³ Similar situation would be repeated with other plays and events.

¹⁹ H. Bajrović, *Theater under siege*, J.U. MES and the Sarajevo National Theater, 2020.

²⁰ "These first few performances made us realise that we could still work despite the war. In May 1992, it seemed completely impossible to do anything else but hide from the grenades. However, by January 1993, we knew that even in such circumstances it was possible to work. And that's when work obviously did its thing, especially in times of war, it saves people's mental health." – Izudin Bajrović. (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, 2nd edition, Sarajevo 2016, p. 23).

²¹ "From 1992 until the end of the war, the theatre production never ceased to exist. On the contrary, it was transformed into an amazing quality, which goes on to prove that to a man, art and its spiritual values are primary and priority needs and that without them, man is not a man in a higher sense. The theatre that could do this actually pushed me to enrol in the Academy of Performing Arts during the war". – Aida Begić. (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, 2nd edition, Sarajevo 2016, p. 38).

²² "On the one hand, it was much simpler than what people make it seem, but on the other – here is the paradox –it was deeper and more complicated than one could possibly explain. So, on the one hand, there is exaggerating and big words and on the other, every word and every explanation simplifies or diminishes the theatre experience of the time. For instance, none of us, none of the theatre workers expected or worked for a pay, but of course, we could all do with a tin of food here and there because one of those tins was worth more than dozens of thousands of marks. There was certainly that desire to show and to prove that Sarajevo was a city that is deeply and tragically wounded, but it was also a city which is not dead, whose spirit is not dead and that it still lived the life of a city, of a civilised environment in which art played an important role. Those of us who stayed here take great pride in our work, a great pride indeed". – Vlado Jokanović. (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, 2nd edition, Sarajevo 2016, p. 116).

²³ The documentary film titled *From the shelter to the Sarajevo war theater* (47 minutes) Authors: Nihad Kreševljaković and Sanela Kapetanović, TV SA/SARTR, 2012.

Every theatre worker as well as every visitor of any artistic event was willingly putting their life at risk. Many Sarajevo artists were wounded and 22 were killed. "It was not uncommon for an actor to pass out on the stage due to hunger or fatigue; actors would often get frostbites from the cold inside the theatre premises".²⁴

Theatre survived thanks to the artists who decided to continue working even if it cost them their lives, because they believed that what they were doing was right and because they believed people, i.e. their audience who came to see them perform at the risk of being killed. From the beginning of the war until its end, that never changed, so none of them gave up.²⁵

On the one hand, the besieged city resembled some sort of a hell on earth. On the other, there seemed to be a special drive and creativity present in it. There was always something going on and being done, whether it's an exhibition, concert, a book launch, an independent performance, a monodrama, or a children's play... In spite of there being literally no passable conditions, people somehow managed to find alternative ways for the technical execution of various events. The artists made it their aim to defend the spiritual integrity and find a greater purpose in a terrible situation in which they found themselves.²⁶

From today's perspective, it is clear how different life was for the people of Sarajevo back then. From the testimonies found in available literature, it is evident that the people involved in Sarajevo's cultural life of the period had a certain awareness of how special the times they lived in were but also of their personal responsibility

²⁴ D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, Chamber Theater '55, Sarajevo 2004, p. 12.

²⁵ "So we walk out of our dressing rooms, we take a look. We can't walk out on the stage, we have nowhere to perform. So many people turned up that they've filled up every spare inch, the stage included. There were at least a hundred people standing, not to mention the stairs, the floor, the entrance, the stage even! We can't enter the stage, let alone perform on it. It was packed with people, one man on top of the other, like on a bus. Then there was an attempt to send some of them back home. Some women started complaining: 'No, not us. We came all the way from Alipašino!'. Somehow, they managed to squeeze themselves in, to free up some space on the stage. Reaching it felt like walking your way through a packed tram – you first fight your way through the standing crowd and then you jump over those who are seated, and all that to get to those two free square metres of the stage. Unbelievable, really! Totally insane. Like us, people started turning up at the theatre to keep their sanity. As far as I am concerned, one thing is for sure – had I not been working and acting, I would have probably lost it. For me, it was a psychological valve. I know that for sure". – Žan Marolt (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, p. 155.

²⁶ "After the initial confusion, all those people who stayed in Sarajevo – novelists, poets, theatre workers, painters, sculptors, etc., they all stood up spontaneously, without any announcement, to defend that spiritual integrity and to help the citizens not to succumb to the circumstances. A peculiar defense, so typical of Sarajevo was on the rise. For instance, professors at the Academy of Fine Arts came up with the idea to task some twenty artists to develop the Map of Graphics Sarajevo '92. All the invited artists gladly took part. While Sarajevo was on fire, the artists were making the map on 18 graphic sheets, thus symbolically overcoming the difficult situation and overwriting the objective image of the real state of affairs which foreign reporters were trying to depict, taking shots of massacred bodies, burned buildings, etc." – Muhamed Karamehmedović (D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, p. 122.

towards the ethical postulates that state the importance of remaining civilised and celebrate beauty, diversity and freedom despite all the hatred!

Some specific features of art from the period of the siege

Going back to the issue of aesthetics characterising the theatre during the siege, we have already stated that the entire execution depended on technical conditions, i.e. on the fact that performances were most frequently prepared and performed in venues that had neither power nor any other adequate material conditions. Thus, a power blackout never implied that the performance was over, because once the candles were lit, the performances were just resumed. Neither were they interrupted and cancelled in case of bombing even though both the actors and the audience could hear the explosions nearby. There was a mutual agreement between the artists and the audience that what they were doing was some sort of a fight which is not only ethically correct but also highly recommended.

Moreover, the repertoire of Sarajevo theatres was very versatile. From Greek tragedies, world classics to modern playwrights; from tragedy to comedy. Going through the repertoires of Sarajevo theatres at the time, it is almost impossible to find any items containing some sort of propaganda, which could be deemed normal in times of war. In such conditions, censorship was not uncommon either, but there was no censorship to speak of.²⁷

Alongside activities within theatre companies, there was a number of professional actors and actresses who were actively engaged in theatre but independently, and that was particularly the case with children's theatre. Actors such as Josip Pejaković performed their monodramas, whilst some engaged in poetic theatre (Miki Trifunov for instance). They were performing their plays, performances and monodramas all over the city, in refugee camps, kindergartens, shelters, cafes, even on front lines. That is a unique and very valuable segment of cultural resistance from the period of the siege.

During the siege, there were more than 100 premieres performed at Sarajevo theatres and across the city. Theatre companies alone had 57 premieres in the four years of the siege. For comparison, let us state that nowadays, the four theatre companies in Sarajevo on average have thirteen productions with just over 500 performances in a year. During the siege, there were around 2,000 performances, and what is most important, every single performance had an audience. Under shellfire and snipers, risking their lives, those people came to theatres, cinemas, galleries,

²⁷ In the documentary film *Don't cry for me Sarajevo – Susan Sontag in Sarajevo* (Directed by Nihad Kreševljaković, 2019), director Pjer Žalica states that there was no censorship to speak of, emphasising that in circumstances of war the musical *Hair* was performed (Gerome Ragni and James Rado). *Hair* was one of the most visited performances during the siege. The Sarajevo *Hair* was directed by Slavko Pervan and Kaća Dorić as co-director.

attending various cultural programs that took place all over the city almost on a daily basis. Two international film festivals were held in Sarajevo during the siege. In 1993, the festival named “After the End of the World” was held, whilst 1995 saw the first edition of the Sarajevo Film Festival, which is nowadays one of the most important film festivals in Europe. On the premises of the destroyed cinema Sutjeska, the modern BH art exhibition titled “Witnesses of Existence” was on display. Numerous concerts were held, ballet performances, exhibitions, theatre performances, films and other cultural programs. The “Sarajevo Winter” Festival was also held.

During the siege there was a total of 3,102 artistic events, 48 concerts of the Sarajevo Philharmonics, 263 books were published, 177 art exhibitions put on display, 156 documentary films made. The first non-governmental organisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina registered in besieged Sarajevo was the P.E.N. Centre of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Numerous rock bands were formed, playing their concerts with the help of rare electrical generating units. The “Rock under the Siege” concert was also held.

Art and the love of beauty in that period were the soul food for the citizens of Sarajevo but also a source of hope for a better future. Remembering what the city was like back then, the writer Ferida Duraković described it as our artistic attempt

to show the world that we aren't all wild savages who do nothing but slaughter and annihilate each other. That we're normal human beings, people with an European education, mired in the quagmire of onerous Balkan history and the high-level political interests of Europe and the world, their feigned humanism and weekend diplomacy... We were artists who needed help and who had nothing but our art with which to shield ourselves from the shells that followed, and to keep from being erased. In the war we devoted ourselves to our art and showed the world our literary, musical, artistic, theatrical, multimedia work so that we wouldn't lose this only life we have, anonymous and unrecognized, ripped to shreds by a shell or shot from a sniper in the hills above, on the streets of the besieged, bizarre city that lies at the intersection of the four great religions of the world – such a treasure yet with such a cursed fate!²⁸

Such an attitude of the citizens of Sarajevo towards life in a time of death attracted many renowned artists²⁹ to Sarajevo whose arrival reflected their support to the city who had been fighting for the idea of Europe as a place where all people are equal and where diversity was a God-given gift and by no means a punishment or a curse.

In place of a conclusion

The siege of Sarajevo was an attack on urban civilisation that would, unfortunately, announce the terrorist threats to cities all over the world. The main aim of

²⁸ F. Duraković, *Was the war better? – culture in besieged Sarajevo*, 10th October 2019, www.nomad.ba [accessed: 30.09.2021].

²⁹ Among the artists who arrived in Sarajevo at the time were Susan Sontag, Annie Leibovitz, Predrag Matvejević, Christopher Merrill, Drago Jančar, Joan Baez, Bruce Dickinson, Leibach band, Bibi Anderson, Chris Keulemans, Lebeus Woods, Peter Schumann, Massimo Schuster, Bono, Zubin Mehta, Juan Goytisolo, Vanessa Redgrave, Jose Carreras and many other artists, intellectuals, humans.

those modern barbarians was to attack the complexity and diversity of cities and societies in order to return to fundamental values and ways – a brutally Fascist ideology.³⁰ Lebbeus Woods was not the only person to state that in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina the values of a civilisation that was promoting social diversity were being defended. We could argue that even 26 years after the siege and after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, the struggle still continues. It appears that, though it is a topic for itself, the current artistic scene of Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (among the artists at least) is trying to preserve the memory and conception of art as an exclusive synthesis and an inseparable fusion of ethics and aesthetics.

It is precisely the affirmation of that concept that the Memory Module (established within the International Theater Festival MESS) has been concerned with since 1995. From that year onwards, the Memory Module has implemented more than 150 different artistic programs. From 2005, the Memory Module has grown into a festival of culture of memory with a particular focus on art created in radical conditions.³¹ From 2018, the Memory Module has established the Award for the Contribution in Preserving the Culture of Memory awarded to those artists whose work represents a fusion of aesthetics and ethics. This program aims at preserving the continuity of experiences of art created in times of war. The idea behind it was developed in the last days of the siege, with a view to explore the relationship between mind and emotions, the interaction between intelligence, love and ethics as well as the relationships between science and art, art and memory.

The draft document written in 1995 from which the Memory Module was originally developed wrote: “How is it possible that today, in a united Europe, there is genocide, destruction of cities, cultural and religious heritage? How is it possible that we at the same time witness the exceptional technological development and destruction that progress creates? How are we to defend ourselves from this? What is the effect of all this on art?”³² This never ending sequence of painful questions sounded like a declaration of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Century, at the turn of which man has lost the battle against himself, thereby losing everything except hope. That hope would seem much more meaningful if the art created in the period of the siege were recognised as a historical and universal phenomenon, as Davor Diklić put it back in 2004.³³ It could hardly be deemed subjective were we to say that that phenomenon was not only an important part of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian artistic legacy but also an essential part of the European cultural and artistic heritage.

³⁰ L. Woods, *War and architecture*, Sarajevo 1993.

³¹ As of 2008, the Memory Module is held in the form of a festival, in the period from 6th April to 9th May bearing in mind the significance of both dates. 6th April is the Day of the City of Sarajevo marking the liberation of the city in 1945. On the same date in 1941, the city was bombed by the Nazi airplanes, whilst in 1992, the day marked the beginning of the siege. As for the 9th May, the audience is always reminded that it marks the Day of Liberation from Fascism.

³² Arhiva Festivala MESS, folder 1995.

³³ D. Diklić, *Theatre in Sarajevo during the war 1992–1995*, Chamber Theater '55, Sarajevo 2004, p. 8.

Art in which the aesthetic and the ethic are inseparable from one another seems to be more necessary than ever if we want no one to ever go through what the citizens of Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina went through thirty years ago.

Hence, we will close with the words written on the occasion of the great exhibition held in 2019, when all the 57 plays staged at Sarajevo theatres during the siege were presented together for the very first time:

To engage in theatre under siege, which was the result of cultural resistance that took place in besieged Sarajevo in the early 1990s, is not only important for the sake of not forgetting our past, but also for the future, because everything that had happened is a legacy to future generations. And it is precisely the existence of theatre in a time of war, death and suffering that is a lesson to all of us – civilization conquered barbarism, good conquered evil, love conquered hatred... life conquered death. The existence of theatre under the siege teaches us that the spiritual and the intellectual within us are the only things no one can take away from us. It reminds us that even under the most radical circumstances, we must not forget who we are, what moral values we cherish and what we fight for. It reminds us that we need more than mere survival to remain human. Theatre under siege is an affirmation that aesthetics is valid only if firmly linked to ethics. The fact that people have created in the midst of war, while being hungry, thirsty, in constant fear and life danger, is proof that, even when there is almost no hope, the only thing worth doing is keeping the side of the good.³⁴

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³⁴ H. Bajrović, *Theatre under siege*, Sarajevo 2020.