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Theater of war

Cultural resistance and Susan Sontag's staging of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot in besieged Sarajevo

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ABSTRACT Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is widely known as an iconic, absurdist play about waiting for that which never arrives, and Sontag's staging of the play's first act during the Bosnian war with the local actors came to be seen as a powerful act of cultural resistance, a statement about waiting and performing life under the siege. This article argues that making theater in such circumstances is an example of a performative machine that challenges Clausewitz's term "theater of war".

KEYWORDS theater of war | cultural resistance | siege of Sarajevo | *Waiting for Godot* | Sontag

SAMMENDRAG Becketts *Mens vi venter på Godot* er allment kjent som et ikonisk absurd skuespill om å vente på noe som aldri kommer. Sontags iscenesettelse av stykkets første akt med lokale skuespillere under Bosniakrigen er en kraftfull kulturell motstandshandling, med et budskap om hva det betyr å vente og opptre som levende i en beleiret by. Å spille teater under slike omstendigheter vil ifølge denne artikkelen bety å igangsette en performativ maskin som utfordrer Clausewitz' begrep «krigsteater».

NØKKEORD krigsteater | kulturell motstand | beleiringen av Sarajevo | *Mens vi venter på Godot* | Sontag

War is a social activity.

(*Carl von Clausewitz, On War, 1832*)

INTRODUCTION

The war in Bosnia occurred in the early nineties, between 1992 and 1995. It began when Bosnia gained independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1992 and was brought to an end by the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, an international intervention in late 1995. The ultranationalist Bosnian Serb forces (supported by the Serb Yugoslav Army) targeted the Bosnian Muslim and Croat population, resulting in more than 100,000 fatalities of all ethnic backgrounds, tens of thousands of raped women, and more than 2.2 million displaced people. The siege of Sarajevo lasted for 1,425 days.¹ This makes it the longest military siege in the history of modern warfare, longer than the 900-day siege of Leningrad in the Second World War. The entire capital was destroyed and its utilities cut off, leaving the city without electricity, heating, and phone lines, and with tap water and food supplies that were basically acquired through humanitarian aid. The civilians could not defend themselves. They were bound to wait while hoping for Western intervention. This siege also stands out for the international media presence, the cultural resistance in the city, and its multicultural nature.

Cultural life in the city was brewing, as incredible as it may sound, in those dehumanizing conditions. The citizens were not suffering passively; they worked hard on preserving their dignity.² For instance, as Davor Diklić writes in his book *Theatre in War Sarajevo*³ (2004), the Sarajevo String Quartet performed its hundredth wartime concert on 5 February 1994, when 66 people were killed and 199 wounded in the Markale massacre. When it comes to visual arts, 177 exhibitions were held in six galleries in the city. In the theaters, 182 performances premiered⁴

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1. We arrive at this number if we calculate the sum of the days from the beginning of the siege on April 5, 1992, until the official lifting of the siege on February 29, 1996. The Dayton Agreement, which ended the war, was signed on December 14, 1995, but the siege lasted until the end of February 1996.
 2. See chapter 12 in this anthology: “Fortellinger fra Sarajevo: Vi lot ikke musikken dø”. In that article, Randi Margrethe Eidsaa writes about the role and meaning of music during the siege in Sarajevo.
 3. *Teatar u ratnom Sarajevu 1992–1995. Svjedočanstva*; Engl. *Theatre in War Sarajevo, 1992–1995, Testimonies*. All the translations from this book that appear in the article are my own.
 4. Among them were Alcestis, Richard III, Ionesco, Chekhov, ex-Yu and local writers, renaissance comedies, etc. (Diklić, 2004, p. 99).

and over two thousand shows were performed and seen by more than half a million people (Diklić, 2004, p. 10). However, there was one event among these which stood out for the extraordinary attention it received from the local and international media, both at the time it was happening and afterwards. In 1993, Susan Sontag staged a production of the archetypal play about waiting: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2006 [1955]). It was a local event in the Bosnian language, but it was directed and mediated by Sontag, a world-renowned American intellectual, writer, and critic. This production was part of the phenomenon named *cultural resistance*.⁵

There are several instances of conflicting and contradictory thoughts with regards to this aesthetic event. When using the term “conflict”, one thinks not only of the armed conflict which led to the final disintegration of Yugoslavia and the theater being made in the midst of it – but also of the role of media in war, the negative reactions that Sontag received from some critics abroad and in Bosnia, as well as the use of the term “cultural resistance” and how it could be reflected upon more than twenty years after the end of the war.⁶ How to survive, and how to die in war – and why make theater at all when bare life is at stake?

Art can have a political impact, and art, especially theater as the medium, may influence the way we look upon conflicts. In 2018, it had been twenty-five years since the staging of Sontag's *Godot*.⁷ I am a researcher who moved to Norway in 2013. Before then, I had lived in Bosnia, and I spent the war years in Sarajevo; my family and I lost our home in April 1992. I was ten years old when the war ended – to use Dori Laub's term, I was a “child survivor” (Laub, 1992, p. 75), unaware that I would become a witness to processing war (hi)stories other than my own.⁸ In addition to the aforementioned layers of conflict, there is a strife between the researcher and the survivor. What are the implications of debating the significance of theater during the Balkan conflict from a safe distance, in a low-conflict zone

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5. The term is discussed by interviewees in Diklić's book, a collection of thirty-three testimonies from the war. The interviewees are the survivors and eyewitnesses who were directly involved in theater and cultural life during the siege of Sarajevo. The book contains rich personal recollections of experiences during the war. It serves both as a document of individual and collective memories, as well as a resource for studying theater under siege through the cultural resistance. At the end of 2017, the book was re-published and promoted in Sarajevo with a new foreword, afterword, and translations to English (*Sarajevo Times*, 2017).
 6. “The besieged city defends itself by culture and thus survives”, from *Sarajevo Survival Guide* (Prstojević, 1993, p. 89).
 7. I will be using *Godot* and *Waiting for Godot* interchangeably.
 8. Three levels of bearing witness: “[T]he level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (Laub, 1992, p. 75).

like Norway? As we move on the temporal and the spatial axes, the openness and space in public discourse for topics such as conflict versus aggression, responsibility, role, and engagement of an intellectual, naturally, change. What also changes is what is possible to say – and for whom. The researcher asks herself: have I learned to live or to perform life as a child in war? And how differently would I reflect upon the questions of art being used in political statements if I had not experienced living in war?

In this article, I will present the aesthetic event and its key actors before I move on to a discussion about how the overall situation in wartime Sarajevo could be viewed as an example of theater of war on several levels. I will explore the interaction between Sontag's *Godot* as an instance of cultural resistance during the siege, and its wider context. By studying this example, I will argue that theater under siege and cultural resistance are part of a performative machine: a theater of war. What are the dynamics between theater in war and theater of war? Does performance equal resistance? I will further argue that Susan Sontag's staging of Samuel Beckett's iconic play, *Waiting for Godot*, while helping us understand the layers of performativity within the theater of war, also adds to its complexity.

SONTAG IN SARAJEVO

Susan Sontag came to the capital the first time in April 1993 to visit her son, writer David Rieff, who was reporting from the war zone, and she wanted to show support and solidarity with the Bosnian people. After witnessing the horror and destruction during her two weeks in Sarajevo, Sontag wanted to return to the capital and “pitch in and do something” (Sontag, 1993, p. 52) in her capacity to help the citizens. How could she help anyone in that situation?

I was not under the illusion that going to Sarajevo to direct a play would make me useful in a way I could be if I were a doctor or a water systems engineer. It would be a small contribution. But it was the only one of the three things I do – write, make films, and direct theater – which yields something that would exist only in Sarajevo, that would be made and consumed there. (Sontag, 1993, p. 52)

Sontag was openly in favor of American intervention in Bosnia and she criticized the French intellectuals André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy for coming to Sarajevo for only twenty-four hours, holding a press conference and leaving. She could not understand the passivity of the world's intellectuals; she saw herself

in the tradition of writers George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway, who fought in the Spanish Civil War. Sontag said: “People told me they thought I was crazy to come here [to Sarajevo], but they didn’t understand that I couldn’t not come here. Once I understood what was happening, it was the obvious moral choice. It was the only choice” (Schreiber, 2014, p. 202).

Sontag was introduced to people from the cultural milieu who could help her realize the idea of staging a play for the citizens with the local actors from the professional theaters. After talks with the local theater and film director and producer Haris Pašović, the choice of the play to stage struck her as obvious: Samuel Beckett’s absurdist and existential play, writes Sontag, “written over forty years ago, seems written for and about, Sarajevo” (1993, p. 52). The citizens were waiting: for food, for water, for the end of war, for help. Her engagement served as evidence to the citizens that the rest of the world cares – even though, as Sontag points out, she represented nobody but herself (1993, p. 54). In her article, Sontag explains that waiting for Godot actually meant waiting for Clinton to lift the embargo on weapons (1993, p. 57).

In July 1993, three months after her first visit, Sontag returned to Sarajevo. She made major dramaturgical changes on a play known also for Beckett’s strict alterations policy.⁹ To quickly remind ourselves: *Waiting for Godot* is a tragicomedy in two acts, where two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for Godot, who does not appear. A boy comes to inform them that Mr Godot won’t come today, but surely, he will be here tomorrow. Instead of Godot, two other characters show up – Pozzo, the cruel master, and Lucky, his poor slave, whom Pozzo has on a leash. In Beckett’s original there are five male characters – but in Sontag’s production there were a total of nine on stage, since she had tripled the roles of Vladimir and Estragon, and they were also both male and female. Another major change, with a rather suggestive message, was that she chose not to stage the second act at all. In the second act, Godot once again does not come. The sit-

9. According to Admir Glamočak (cast as Lucky), the Beckett Foundation gave permission for twenty performances of *Godot* to be played in Sarajevo in 1993 (my interview with Glamočak, 30.12.2014, unpublished). This was an exceptional decision because of the special circumstances and situation in which the play was produced. Ines Fančović (Pozzo) remembers that *Godot* was played around twenty times with great success, and that MESS (International Theatre and Film Festival Sarajevo) was later invited to a festival in London dedicated to a fifty-year celebration of Victory over Fascism, organized by Vanessa Redgrave and her brother. Pašović, who was the director of MESS at that time, travelled to London to propose *Waiting for Godot* for this festival. This is when the Beckett Foundation forbade further performances, not only in London, but also in Sarajevo (Diklić, 2004, p. 82), due to the clauses stating that Beckett’s text must be played integrally according to Beckett’s stage directions (Diklić, 2004, p. 91).

uation further deteriorates; everything is more brutal, more desperate, an underlined confirmation of Act I. Lucky can no longer speak, Pozzo is blind, and Vladimir has given in to despair. So, by cutting out Act II, Sontag wanted to suggest that it might be different; that there is still some hope left for the citizens, and this was, ethically, the most crucial dramaturgical decision. In Sontag's words: "Perhaps I felt that the despair of Act I was enough for the Sarajevo audience, and I wanted to spare them a second time when Godot does not arrive. Maybe I wanted to propose, subliminally, that Act II might be different" (1993, p. 56).

After six weeks of production under nearly impossible rehearsal circumstances,¹⁰ the Sarajevo production of *Waiting for Godot* premiered on August 17, 1993, seventeen months into the siege, at the Sarajevo Youth Theater (*Pozorište mladih*). The premiere was at two o'clock in the afternoon, with the second performance at four o'clock the same day; only matinees were played in Sarajevo at that time. People had to walk to the theater and take the same dangerous route back home. The stage was lit with only twelve candles. Around a hundred people were seated at the front and very close to the actors. Ines Fančović (cast as Pozzo) said that the audience was practically sitting on stage (Diklić, 2004, p. 81). Tickets to the performance were free, actors were not paid for their engagement, and neither was Sontag. *Waiting for Godot* was performed twenty-two times with great success. The last performance took place on November 19, 1993.

"WAITING FOR GODOT SEEMS WRITTEN FOR AND ABOUT SARAJEVO"

Waiting for Godot was written just after the Second World War (October 1947–January 1948) during the fruitful period that Beckett himself called "the siege in the room" (Bair, 1990, p. 367). Perhaps Sontag's juxtaposition of Godot and the war in Sarajevo is not so surprising: she saw the connection between the characters waiting for Godot in the play, and the approximately 380,000 people in Sarajevo waiting for salvation that never seems to come. In both instances, waiting became "the central activity" (Perloff, 2005, p. 81). The collectivity of experience was striking, which is why the performance resonated with the citizens: all the citizens were waiting for one and the same Godot, and watching the performance was like watching themselves on stage.

Hugh Kenner, literary theorist and critic, points out that "[i]t is curious how readers and audiences do not think to observe the most obvious thing about the

10. During almost a month and a half of working on the production, the rehearsal was interrupted only once – at the end of July when a fellow actor was killed.

world of this play, that it resembles France occupied by the Germans, in which its author spent the war years” (Kenner, 1988, p. 30). This statement can be read as parallel to Sontag’s claim that *Waiting for Godot* “seems written for and about Sarajevo” (1993, p. 52) – just as France was occupied by the Germans, Sarajevo was surrounded by the Serb nationalist forces.

CULTURAL RESISTANCE: FROM THEATER IN WAR TO THEATER OF WAR

Theater has a special place among the various art forms because it is about *here* and *now* more than any other means of expression. People gather in the haven of theater for a kind of ritual in which they can re-experience themselves and others. However, the function of theater and art in general becomes even more prominent if we take a closer look at their role in times of crisis. To be free and safe in the theater acquired literal – rather than merely symbolic or metaphorical – meaning when discussed in the context of war.

It is a common conception that the term “theater of war” was coined by military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his treatise *On War* (1832), where he defines “theater of war” as a term which denotes “a portion of the space over which war prevails”.¹¹ However, the first mention of theater as a metaphor connected to war occurred in relation to the Thirty Years War almost two hundred years earlier. German historian Marian Füssel writes that in the eighteenth century, with *theatrum belli* (theater of war), “one first of all described the very geographical space where war took place”, but at the end of the twentieth century “the metaphor celebrated a comeback in the discourse on war and the new media” (2008, p. 206). Analyzing the link between the military siege of Sarajevo and the cultural activities in the city, we can register the presence (and fusion) of two different kinds of theater of war.

Both are used in the metaphorical sense and in connection with military activity, but their metaphorical quality is not the same. According to Clausewitz’s definition, the city was, geographically, in a theater: surrounded and isolated by hills and mountains, people were in the battlefield valley, in the sniper’s aim – there was a designated space where war occurred. This is theater of war proper. From here, there is a transfer problem with extending the use of theater of war as a metaphor,

11. “This term denotes properly such a portion of space over which war prevails as has its boundaries protected, and thus possesses a kind of independence. This protection may consist in fortresses, or important natural obstacles presented by the country” (Clausewitz, 1832, Book 5, Chapter 2).

because what is real (the siege of the capital) has a metaphorical denomination in language; in interaction with the activity that this war reality has imposed and created (these activities include coping mechanisms to tackle the trauma of living in constant danger and in dehumanizing circumstances), it produces an occurrence which resembles it in turn, another theater of war within it. Theater of war becomes a meta-metaphor.

If the primary use of this term could be de-metaphorized, it would allow us to explore “theater of war” as a “new”, fresh metaphor used to refer to the situation in wartime Sarajevo with a focus on the performative aspect in which the city is the stage, the citizens are the actors, and they are aware of the double gaze: the aggressor, as well as the international community, is the audience. However, in the language realm, theater of war functions as a metaphor, and I will therefore use more simple means to distinguish between the two. The first of them (I will call it the primary theater of war, the source) is the warfare *theatrum belli*, while the other one (the secondary theater of war, the target) emerges from it, and within it, because of the context and environment that the primary theater of war produced. From “theater of war” proper I derive a secondary metaphor: theater of war as performance. Like Füssel (2008), I want to suggest that the term “theater of war” has returned from warfare to humanities, but in the case of the Bosnian conflict, it has developed further and acquired one more layer: it should be treated as a complex performative act of making theater on multiple levels within the context of an armed conflict.

The first level of theater would imply the actual stage within the theater proper. This is theater *in* war. The professional actors were performing on the podium; their audience was the citizens. However, several actors (among them Izudin Bajrović, who played Vladimir) expressed that the “audience was a part of the performance, even more than that – they were the characters in it” (Diklić, 2004, p. 28). So, if audience became a part of the performance on stage, who becomes the “new” audience? Does this mean that the podium has extended itself outside of the theater walls, or that the audience-as-characters brought it out after the performance? Or perhaps that they came in with their performativity and integrated themselves into the play because the war reality was so surreal?

Contrary to “theater of war”, “theatre under siege” (Diklić, 2004) is not a metaphor. It stands for all the activity, productions, and performances that unfolded in theaters during the military siege of Sarajevo. It was an important part of what is today known as “cultural resistance”. These two terms emerged from the intense cultural activities during the war. From today’s perspective, more than twenty years after the end of war, we can claim that what the citizens had been doing during the

period of immensely disrupted normality can be called cultural resistance. This was, conditionally said, considered as a “normal” cultural activity by the cultural workers of the city. Making theater during the war can be called resistance on several levels: resistance to attack, to death, to aggression, to siege, to chaos; most importantly – to being victims and being portrayed as victims by the international media. The hope that the war would stop at any moment, the atrocities, as well as the ideological resistance, was part of everyday life. Returning to work in the theater seemed like the only option for the actors, the only reasonable choice. The cultural life of the city and life under the siege were unfolding at the same time.

Living and working in and through the war conditions was not considered cultural or spiritual resistance at the moment it was happening. The new reality required rapid adjustments. The citizens and the theater workers experienced these everyday activities rather as a coping mechanism, but the common activities have gradually developed the greater, symbolic dimension as well as the meaning of resistance later. There was a general shift in atmosphere from the very beginning of the war, through the time *Godot* was staged, and until the war’s end. It is not possible to label exact phases, but from the initial shock of the war breaking out, and through the disbelief, helplessness, and depression, the attitude slowly shifted to spiteful, the opposite of passive, and almost resilient. According to Bajrović and Glamočak,¹² the actors who were part of the production, as well as to several testimonies in Diklić’s book (2004), there was a point when the citizens started getting used to seeing death and war as part of their everyday life – as brutal as that may sound – and, given the conditions, they strived to resume normality.

During the performances, the audience and the actors felt that they were seeing and performing themselves in their own circumstances. When listening and reading about the memories of participants in the production, one gains an impression that this specific event in the theater meant more than others.¹³ The city provided a platform for a manifestation of Beckett’s play through Sontag’s production, and the performances provided the space for cathartic experience.

Peter Brook, the English theater and film director, writes that “the theater is a holy place in which a greater reality could be found” (1996, p. 60), and this was

12. The interviews with Izudin Bajrović and Admir Glamočak were conducted by me in Sarajevo in December 2014 as part of the research for my MA thesis (see Abazović, 2015).

13. Glamočak, the actor cast as Lucky, explained in the interview that working on this performance had “made [him] a better human being” (my interview with Glamočak, 30.12.2014, unpublished). Glamočak told Sontag that “by performing Lucky, [he] will be performing the city” because Lucky was the “expression [...] and metaphor of Sarajevo and its citizens” (Diklić, 2004, p. 93).

precisely the significance of theater for people during the Bosnian war. It provided protection from the constant bombardment, and it became a “symbolic space” (Jestrović, 2013, p. 129). Theater became a shelter in a literal and a symbolic sense in Sarajevo: literal because the theater physically shielded the audience and the actors from danger (the Youth Theater had robust concrete surfaces); symbolic because theater activity became the core of what was called cultural and spiritual resistance. In that sense, the theater became a place for preserving dignity and sanity. Prstojević half jokingly writes in *Sarajevo Survival Guide* about Kamerni Teatar 55: “The auditorium is one of the safest places in the city” (1993, p. 87). As much as theater was the place of ideological resistance, it was not *normal* that a theater building or an auditorium was the safest place in the city.

During the siege, the citizens were deprived of all means necessary to lead everyday lives, and were completely shattered by the war reality. Media presented the Bosnians to the world as powerless victims, and this label, in addition to truly dehumanizing circumstances, contributed to their feeling of lost self-worth. Seen from this perspective, resistance through cultural activities was of utmost importance – *putting on a play* was a “serious expression of normality”, as Sontag writes in her essay “Godot Comes to Sarajevo” (1993, p. 54), and therefore a way for the citizens to recover their morale.¹⁴

Since the citizens could not physically protect themselves from the everyday shelling and snipers, they tried to at least shield themselves from the on-going emotional turmoil, to increase and optimize the functionality of everyday life. Under such conditions, everyday life itself can be seen as a “universal form of resistance” (Donia, 2006, pp. 317–318). People worked themselves into a conscious forgetting, which implied strenuous effort and repression. This made all life under siege appear as performance; Sarajevans performed normality and daily life. The social anthropologist Ivana Maček writes that “Sarajevans described their wartime existence as an *imitation of life*” (Maček, 2009, p. 62). A Bosnian journalist, Senad Pećanin, explains how “[t]heater was a simulation of desired reality, different from the one that surrounded us. The greatest significance of theater at that moment was that one could escape and act as if everything is normal. We forgot we were in a microcosm, within a horrifying and inescapable environment” (Diklić, 2014, p. 220).

According to this testimony, the citizens found a hideout from war reality in theater. If this was the impression regarding most theater performances in war, it

14. When the news about the *Godot* production was published on the front page of the *Washington Post*, Sarajevans were proud: they wanted to send the message to the world that there was something else apart from brutal killings happening in a European capital (FAMA, 1993).

seems that the same cannot be said about Sontag's *Godot*. Why? Because *Godot* mirrored the reality that the audience escaped from; as Sontag wrote, *Waiting for Godot* "seems written for and about Sarajevo" (Sontag, 1993, p. 52). When describing the first level of theater, we saw that for Izudin Bajrović, who played Vladimir in *Godot*, it felt like the audiences were a part of the performance, even more – a character in it (Diklić, 2004, p. 28). As Admir Glamočak, the actor cast as Lucky, said to Sontag: "I'm performing the city" (Diklić, 2004, p. 93). If putting on a play¹⁵ (any play, including *Godot*) was a "serious *expression* of normality" (Sontag, 1993, p. 54), and if going to theater was part of an "imitation of life" during wartime existence for the citizens, where could the line be drawn between performance and reality? It seems difficult not to get entangled in these layers of performativity. This imaginary line between performance and reality cannot be drawn, but only blurred further.

To answer the question about who becomes the new audience if the citizens became performers, I need to establish the next performative layer. The second level of theater consists of the city as a colosseum. Sarajevo was besieged by a ring of artillery in which the citizens were the actors, performing normality and life; their audience were the aggressors who held them at gunpoint. It is interesting to note that performing normality had a twofold function, or two different addressees: by performing normality, the citizens boosted morale and strengthened their own resistance, while at the same time sending a message to the aggressor: We shall not be defeated. Sarajevans performed for themselves; they did not do it for the aggressors, but because of and in spite of them. The city becomes resilient, and the aggressors continue to torture it because they cannot destroy it.

The interaction between "the actors" (the citizens) and "the audience" (the aggressors) on the second level corresponds to a theater of war in the strategic, military sense. On the third level, the audience is the international community, watching the entire performance in the theater of war. If one unacceptable way of watching a performance was through a rifle scope, the other one, although more passive, was to observe the destruction and suffering on television. On this third level, the main "on-stage" activity is that of the citizens waiting, which is the main thematic connection with the play Susan Sontag staged in Sarajevo. When she came to the besieged city to stage a production of Beckett's play, the citizens were grateful that the entire international community was not silently observing the destruction. Sontag's engagement reinforced their efforts; her presence meant that

15. Here "putting on a play" could mean making a production, staging a play, or pretending; pretense; as in performing normality.

they were not forgotten. In the pit of the third level is *Godot*, whose intentional audience in the Western world are the intellectuals.

CRITICISM

Although the majority of citizens were grateful for Sontag's help and that *Waiting for Godot* was attracting media attention,¹⁶ there were some who were skeptical of her engagement, feeling that she was "using the situation to enhance her own public image".¹⁷ In the opinion of the Bosnian director, Davor Korić, the production tended to "stiffness and unnecessary seriousness", while *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich called Sontag "[t]he courageous moralist with the media-mane, putting the world to shame as a director in the besieged city" (Schreiber, 2014, pp. 203–204).

Other negative comments come from the Irish journalist Kevin Myers, who suggests that Sontag cast her actors based on tripartite national lines, that is – that she intentionally chose a Muslim, a Serb, and a Croat for the play.¹⁸ By saying this he seems to parody Sontag's embrace of the "mixture" in Bosnian reality.¹⁹ Myers also ironically adds that his "real mistake was not radioing [Sontag's] co-ordinates to the Serb artillery, reporting that they marked the location of Bosnian heavy armour" (Myers, 2005).

Perhaps harshest at the time was the American academic and critic Camille Paglia, who commented upon the ethics of engagement both in terms of the media and Sontag's moralism in her essay "Sontag, Bloody Sontag" (Paglia, 1994). Paglia laughed, viewing Sontag's "Sarajevo adventure as a ghoulish attempt to recreate her glory days, using other people's misery as a backdrop", and she found the media stories about "the wounded Bosnian white girls to be gratuitous and offensive" (Paglia, 1994, p. 359).

16. "Hardly a newspaper or news broadcast in the West failed to report on Sontag's theater work" (Schreiber, 2014, p. 203).

17. As remembered by the American journalist and writer Mark Danner (quoted in Schreiber, 2014, p. 202).

18. See, for instance, "I wish I had kicked Susan Sontag", a sarcastic obituary written by Kevin Myers (2005).

19. "The population of Sarajevo is so mixed [...] it would be hard to assemble any kind of group in which all three "ethnic" groups are not represented – and I never inquired what anyone was" (Sontag, 1993, p. 55).

RESISTANCE, SURVIVAL, PERFORMANCE – OR?

In the summer of 1992, different artists in Sarajevo started several projects that marked a continuity of life and creativity in the city. According to Haris Pašović, Sarajevo theater and film director and producer, during the siege this “continuity for the citizens had as much meaning as having bread or medicine or water or anything else vital for basic human needs” (Pašović in FAMA, 1993, 0:40–0:52). This statement is part of the oral history project recorded in April 1993; in 2014, Nihad Kreševljaković, the director of the Sarajevo War Theater (SARTR), said the following:

What happened in Sarajevo during the siege was a phenomenon in the world of art – a “cultural resistance”. The fact that the city’s cultural life during the siege remained so intense, vividly shows that arts and culture are basic human needs, along with water, food and air. (Kreševljaković, 2014)

When collecting the testimonies for his book, Diklić asked the interviewees to comment upon the term “spiritual resistance” when referring to their engagement in the cultural life under the siege.²⁰ Interviewees often reported that theater helped them in maintaining and even in creating the feeling of existing as human beings (Diklić, 2004, p. 14). When asked to comment upon their engagement from the later perspective, many actors uttered their skepticism about the expression “cultural or spiritual resistance” (Bajrović in Diklić, 2004, p. 23). Most of them felt the term cannot accurately describe and cover the importance of what they did in the cultural sphere during the atrocities. Some claimed this was a banal and laconic coinage, and instead simply called it *spite* (Jokanović in Diklić, 2004, p. 126), insisting that there was no organized resistance, but rather a spontaneous effort to prove something to themselves and others (Bajrović in Diklić, 2004, p. 24). However, theater during the war is often described as a remedy, a therapy, a shelter, “a little miracle” (Begić in Diklić, 2004, p. 48). Although the actors themselves rejected this coinage, it is still in use. Some take a modest and humble approach (such as Glamočak and Bajrović), while others call it as important as food, water, and air (Pašović, Kreševljaković). When discussed in retrospect, it seems that the cultural resistance acquired performative aspects and sentimental values that are in contradiction with reality at the time.

The discussion about the different levels of performance in Sarajevo during the siege illustrates the complex interplay between the theater of war and theater in

20. Curiously, the title of the chapter which traces Sontag’s engagement in Sarajevo in her biography (Schreiber, 2014) is titled “Theater at the spiritual front (1993–1997)”, pp. 195–210.

war. Theater of war as a performative machine can be seen as a consequence of living and creating under the circumstances of an armed conflict, that is, of *theatrum belli* in the military sense. Arguably, the dynamics between *theatrum belli* and theater in war within this machine produces different levels of theater: the observer becomes the observed as we follow the movement from bottom to top, from the actors on the actual stage and the citizens as audience, towards the citizens as actors, performing life on the stage, which is the city itself, being observed by the aggressor. Just as Pozzo has a rope around Lucky's neck, so the aggressor has a ring of artillery around besieged Sarajevo. When media and mediation become part of this performative process, then the international community turns into a kind of audience in an absolute theater.

As Aleida Assmann writes: "Remembering [...] means recognition of the victims' memories. [...] [R]emembering is the beginning of a process, not its end" (2011, p. 50). As a researcher, one is concerned with ethics, objectivity, and an analysis of the memories of certain events within their conflict circumstances. On the other hand, one may ask: are trauma and war experience being exploited for personal gain? By being critical, would one hurt those for whom theater in war meant the most? The question is, then, how are we going to remember, teach, and critically reflect upon these events? It is difficult to predict what the narrative of resistance will look like in the future. The efforts in the cultural sphere during the war in besieged Sarajevo must be respected and deserve all praise. However, when discussed in post-war years they need to be carefully analyzed in order to avoid producing propaganda that ranges from heroism to moralism and goes against what the actions of people in the cultural sphere in wartime stood for.

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