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Authority melding: carnivalesque elements within reconciliation pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of post-conflict reconciliation and the carnivalesque, examining how certain carnivalesque strategies function as an artistic intervention to engage young people as a constructive force in the peacebuilding process. Focusing on comedy and the subversion of authority, it proposes that, through the inversion of hierarchies, and collective laughter, carnivalesque strategies empower young people to challenge authoritarian narratives and assert their agency in rebuilding communities. Drawing on my 12 years of practice in Northern Bosnia as a theatre director and facilitator, this article employs sociologist Richard Sennett's understanding of authority to analyse devised comedy as a peacebuilding pedagogy.

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Reconciliation

One of the first challenges I encountered as a theatre practitioner working with young people in Prijedor was the prevalence of trans-generational war trauma, alongside entrenched ethnic division and conflicting narratives regarding the recent past.¹ This region is infamous for the distressing images of starving people behind the concentration camp wire that shocked Europe in 1992. The discovery of multiple mass graves in the area resulted in the conviction of 30 former residents for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY, 1993–2017). Despite the gravity of their actions, certain narratives steeped in nationalist sentiment continue to hold these war criminals as heroes.² The society is in a liminal position where gunfire has ceased, yet the 'memory war' continues through education, art, and ongoing struggles around memorialization.³ The country remains deeply divided along ethnic lines, and efforts towards peacebuilding have encountered significant stagnation.⁴ Young people born into division attend segregated schools in their towns and villages, learning from different, sometimes even conflicting, history textbooks.⁵ Films and theatre productions dealing with the subject of war crimes are often understood as provocations, received with public outrage, political accusations, and even threats.⁶ Furthermore, youth in Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrate significantly low confidence in political and democratic institutions, while placing more trust in traditional authorities, such as organized religion and the military,⁷ and they are often viewed as a marginalized group, inadequately integrated into the social and political structure.⁸ All of these factors present an additional challenge in the process of peacebuilding.

Reconciliation is a complex and long-term process involving rebuilding non-violent relationships between former enemies in political, social, economic, legal, and cultural domains, enabling them to envisage a future of coexistence and cooperation. It aims to foster mutual recognition through social transformation by cultivating new values, norms, and collective memories.⁹ This process begins when conflict-rooted beliefs, such as polarized stereotypes, dehumanization of the rival group, and self-glorification, are challenged. For the process to be effective, it is crucial to establish a discursive space that recognizes the presence of multiple narratives, critically examines collective memories, and acknowledges responsibility for past misdeeds.¹⁰ This mutual recognition and acceptance should arise from a social

transformation in which new values, norms and attitudes develop while the capacity for trust and hope is restored.¹¹ However, creating a mutually acceptable narrative regarding past events can be challenging, as opposing parties frequently have differing perceptions and experiences of the conflict. Because of that, the process should be grounded on the principle of a dialogue that allows all conflicting sides to share their stories, since ‘collective memories are rarely directly malleable, and simply telling people they are wrong is rarely productive’.¹² As mentioned above, this social transformation also necessitates an emotional transition that requires rebuilding confidence and trust. There are no ready-made manuals on how to achieve this transformation, so every situation must be considered in its specific context. Ultimately, as Roger Mac Ginty notes, ‘peacebuilding is often discussed in terms of societies and institutions, but it is frequently experienced within households, through the education of children, and in community sentiment’.¹³ The negotiation of various narratives, the potential for emotional transformation, and the collaborative process of creation represent significant intersections between peacebuilding and theatre-making.

This ongoing antagonism among competing narratives of a traumatic past and the absence of dialogue led my enquiry into formulating a possible theatre-making strategy rooted in the pedagogy of the creative conversation. The aim was to challenge ethnic division and explore complex narratives in a context resistant to dialogue. The practice I reflect upon consists of four original theatre pieces: *Dan jednog baksuza* [A Day in the Life of an Unlucky Man] (2016), *Brkići* [The Moustache Family] (2017), *Hajdjekud* [Let’s go] (2018) and *Tu i tamo* [Here and There] (2018), devised with young people from the Prijedor municipality. Performed in the local Prijedor Theatre and later toured to several other towns and communities, each project involved twenty-three to twenty-six participants, age sixteen to twenty-three. The youth demographic was heterogeneous, involving members of various communities with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as a wide range of socioeconomic circumstances and various levels of academic achievement. Most had no prior theatre-making experience, and for those who did, the process involved a more conventional approach of staging text-based plays directed by teachers. To address this, I chose to disrupt the traditional hierarchies in theatre-making, typically associated with a director, writer or teacher as the singular arbiter of artistic vision, by fostering a space for the participants to shape the work through their experiences and collective authorship. My first strategy was to reframe my position as a director. Rather than assuming the role of an author, I positioned myself as an initiator and facilitator of the creative journey, acknowledging that the content and the aesthetic of the piece would emerge from the collective creative conversations. This reframing led to a directorial methodology grounded in three essential components: (1) employing devising as a collaborative theatre-making strategy, (2) replacing predetermined narratives with single-word stimuli for creative deliberation, and (3) specifying comedy as the intended genre. In redistributing creative agency, this approach not only subverted traditional hierarchies of theatre-making but also encouraged trust, dialogue, and a shared sense of responsibility among participants. This mirrored the democratic and inclusive ethos necessary for meaningful conflict transformation, encouraging participants to take ownership of their narratives and resist the passive positioning often imposed on youth in traditional settings. Below I will reflect on how comedy, embedded within this methodology, disrupted the authoritarian dynamics prevalent in both Bosnian-Herzegovina theatre and its society. I will refer, in particular, to the carnivalesque elements of suspension or subversion of hierarchy, empowerment, resistance, and the potential to foster social renewal.

Authority

Before embarking on further discussion, I would like to briefly clarify the concept of authority, as it encompasses personal, social, and political dimensions of human existence that are vital for the reconciliation process. Richard Sennett characterizes authority as one of the ‘emotional bonds of modern society’, framing it as ‘an interpretative process [of power] that seeks the solidity of a thing’.¹⁴ This process is inherently dialectical, marked by a tension between invitation and rebellion, where individuals simultaneously yearn for authoritative guidance yet resist its constraints. Historian Leonard Krieger further explains this dynamic in his study of the modern crisis of authority, arguing that authority exists in a paradoxical relationship with human agency: it is ‘both complementary to human liberty and opposed to it, both complementary to reason and opposed to it, and both opposed to power and complementary to it’.¹⁵ Building on this tension embedded in the notion of authority, Sennett, much like Hannah Arendt,¹⁶ observes the decline of traditional authority structures – paternalistic, religious, and hierarchical – in

contemporary societies. This erosion creates a vacuum that is frequently filled by two distorted alternatives: authoritarianism, which relies on rigid, fear-based control, or false egalitarianism, where superficial claims of equality mask hidden power structures. Another essential characteristic of authority is that it cannot be unilaterally imposed; it must instead be bestowed by others. As Arendt notes, authority is rooted in the concept of voluntary obedience, but it is often associated with force, violence, or tyranny. However, a crucial distinction lies in the fact that ‘authority requires willingness’;¹⁷ unlike coercive power, which relies on domination, authority depends on recognition and consent. When authority is imposed through force, it destroys trust and generates authoritarian dynamics within familial, political, or other types of relationships that thrive on fear, intimidation, and intolerance of differences. Authority rooted in mental rigidity cannot be just replaced, but it needs to be willingly modified by communities.

These insights into the role of trust and free will in legitimizing authority bring us back to the reconciliation process, which similarly cannot be imposed and needs to rebuild trust between opposing sides. As I will analyse in the section that follows, devised comedy emerges as a valuable methodology in this context, since it fosters an atmosphere of trust and voluntary engagement. This approach directly addresses the central challenge of reconciliation: how to support the emotional change that leads to peaceful coexistence without alienating groups by denying their truths and chosen authorities, or without creating a vacuum that is filled by authoritarianism or despair.

Carnavalesque strategies

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the carnival as a medieval folk tradition that temporarily suspends social hierarchies through humour, chaos, and grotesque exaggeration, creating a liminal space where norms of decorum, class, and authority are subverted. This temporary disruption permits dominant ideologies to be questioned, even if order is eventually restored. In a similar vein, the devised theatre methodology intentionally subverts artistic authority by dismantling the traditional theatre hierarchy of writer, director, and actor.¹⁸ The collaborative creative process cultivates the fluid redistribution of authority, where the authoritative ‘single author’ is replaced by shared authorship, liberating the group from possessive claims to ideas and redirecting focus from individual success towards collective dialogue. Also, the single-word stimulus I employ encourages open conversation by minimizing any preconceived notions and further disrupts the traditional hierarchical approach to theatre-making that begins with a text, allowing for traditional narratives to be questioned.

In Prijedor, not only was this process more fruitful in terms of creativity, as multiple perspectives generated more unforeseen ideas, but it also engendered a space of discursive authority that rejected a singular voice to embrace polyphonic foundations. This dismantling of the hierarchical structure led young people to feel a strong sense of ownership and pride. As one student stated, ‘this play was ours, it was personal and very important to us as it represented our voice’.¹⁹ From a peacebuilding perspective, this collaborative ethos to theatre-making is crucial for enabling young people to generate their own stories and critically engage with collective memory. It directly challenges the fixed narratives and top-down control that are often present in conflict-affected societies, creating a microcosm of reconciliation agency. Within this liberated space, young people in Prijedor embraced this position and tapped into comedy’s disruptive potential to interrogate their socio-political reality.

Throughout history and across cultures, we can find examples of jokes, comedy, and laughter functioning as survival mechanisms during difficult moments, as forms of resistance, and as ways of creating unity within oppressed groups.²⁰ In my theatre-making practice, I have chosen to work with comedy as a genre for three key reasons. Firstly, comedy serves as a powerful tool for generating an invitation for both participants and audiences. When reflecting on what was significant for them in the process, young people repeatedly emphasized the creation of new friendships, laughter and freedom of expression. Joy as an emotion played an important role in creating a trusting atmosphere. This trust was vital for nurturing lasting relationships and a feeling of community that extended beyond ethnic, religious, and social differences. Secondly, as a genre, comedy necessitates a happy ending. As Matthew Bevis discusses in his examination of comedy’s roots in ritual, it is a ‘form of life-affirming purification’.²¹ Its storylines often immerse us in a dark and tragic world where characters face injustice and hardship. Yet, when a fortunate

resolution occurs, these tragic tales shift into comedies, creating ‘a story in which people can believe their luck’.²² With its subversive yet generative nature, comedy provides a potential pathway for this emotional transformation, employing playfulness to challenge entrenched positions and ‘get life going again’.²³ In my view, the purpose of a happy ending is to engender a sense of hope, ‘not as some future-orientated wishful thinking but as a political alternative to the collapsing world’.²⁴ In its absence, political apathy often prevails, an atmosphere evident in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina.²⁵ This need for a hopeful politics catalyses action rather than resignation, because ‘hope takes place in what’s possible: in freedom, in our ability to create one future instead of another’.²⁶ Thirdly, comedy is a genre of critical narrative. The themes explored in all four devised pieces show that young people questioned the profound impact of the recent war on individual lives and identities. They opened up a conversation about war trauma and ethnic segregation. They also raised important socio-political issues that may not have been immediately recognized as direct consequences of the conflict but that are essential to address in a post-war reconciliation context, such as patriarchal patterns that perpetuate harmful traditions and new divisions between the diaspora and local communities. Challenges related to the exploitative realities of unrestricted liberal capitalism, corruption, forced privatization and worker exploitation emerged as well, highlighting the deep scars on the social fabric left after this ethnically motivated conflict, which obstruct meaningful peacebuilding.

Through the lens of comedy, which both entertain and critique, young people engaged with the socio-political complexities of contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina avoiding oversimplified viewpoints. Institutions traditionally regarded as pillars of society, such as the family, the military, and religion were subjected to scrutiny, highlighting the necessity of reconsidering (and at times dismantling) entrenched norms. Customs like mandatory military service and arranged marriages were portrayed as outdated and oppressive, with their enforcement made ridiculous through a comedic lens. These artistic representations served not merely to ridicule authority but also to challenge its legitimacy, prompting audiences to reassess the foundational assumption upon which such authority is given. The participants’ creative objective, as articulated in feedback, was clear: they wanted to examine real situations through jokes, ‘to make people laugh, and discuss reality’.²⁷ Audience responses also asserted this approach, with one attendee describing the work as ‘not just amazing, but real’.²⁸ Another audience member praised its incisiveness, stating, ‘the play is the dissection of our reality’.²⁹

While young people’s use of comedy to challenge authority aligned with its historical role as a vehicle for socio-political critique,³⁰ a new insight was its ability to actively reshape the participants’ own authority, establishing the authority of young people as a legitimate force within their community. In Prijedor Theatre, the audience was notably taken aback by the unexpected nature of the pieces and the nuanced narratives articulated by the younger generation. Audience feedback frequently described the shows as superb and inspiring. Many audience members emphasized the enlightening value of the experience, while others reflected on the aspect of joy and entertainment.³¹ These responses marked a pivotal shift in which the audience actively engaged with and acknowledged the perspective of young people. As one student observed, ‘we always listen to older people, but this time, they listened to us’.³² This comment resonates with broader sociological findings which highlight the marginalization of youth in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the young frequently lack meaningful representation in the sociopolitical structures that govern their future. Yet, in the Prijedor Theatre, this traditional power dynamic between adults and youth was disrupted, allowing young people to be recognized as co-authors of their community’s narrative. This shift in traditional hierarchies allows for new, more equitable forms of collective agency, where the young are acknowledged as reliable voices, with epistemic authority, and vital interlocutors in discussions regarding the past, present, and future.

This dynamic returns us to Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as a temporary and participatory disruption of social hierarchies that creates a space where dominant ideologies can be questioned, even if order is restored afterwards. The necessity for unsettling authority is clearly articulated in Sennett’s argument, which suggests that disrupting hierarchical ‘chains of command’ is essential to remove the ‘quality of omnipotence’ from authority figures.³³ For Sennett, this intrinsic link between authority and disorder is not an obscure idea but a fundamental principle of a serious democratic model, where entrenched power structures must be challenged.

Conclusion

My exploration of carnivalesque strategies in relation to reconciliation pedagogy reveals comedy's profound ability to transcend mere entertainment and serve as a dynamic force for social transformation. While linking comedy and reconciliation may initially appear incongruent, as one is rooted in laughter and the other in trauma, their intersection offers a generative space for addressing entrenched hostilities, reshaping collective narratives, and envisioning alternative futures. Its power lies in its ability to facilitate space where dialogue becomes possible, where socio-political authorities can be approached not from a position of stasis and single power but flux and collaboration, and where a hopeful future can be collectively envisioned. The laughter shared in Prijedor Theatre did not erase the past, reconstruct homes or bring war criminals to justice. However, by momentarily suspending the weight of history, it accomplished something similarly important: it fostered an emotional bond and liberated subversion, allowing participants and audiences to glimpse an alternative way of being together, not as an abstract ideal but as a tangible, felt experience of connection.

Notes

1. From 2009 to 2020, I worked as a theatre director and advisor for Most Mira (Bridge of Peace), a small UK-Bosnian charity dedicated to supporting peacebuilding through art in the Prijedor municipality. The work focused on art projects with young people born after the war who were growing up with its enduring legacy of segregation. The work included four annual youth art festivals (2009–2012), three theatre pieces forming *Shakespeare Comedies* (2013, 2014, 2020), a project developed in collaboration with primary schools, and four devised comedy projects with young people (2016–2018).
2. Hariz Halilovich, and Ron Adams, 'Local Commemorations, False Heroes, and Hijacked Memories: Post-Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing Politics of Memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska (RS)', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2024), pp. 1–20.
3. Since 2012, there are two strong initiatives contesting memorialization politics in the Prijedor area. First, *Dan bijelih traka* [White Ribbon Day], a grass roots movement that each year commemorates 3,167 murdered non-Serb citizens of Prijedor, is calling for a memorial for 102 killed children to be erected. Their demands have been refused by the Serb-dominated city officials. The other is a pressure campaign on the owner of the Omarska mine, the international iron company Arcelor Mittal, to put up a plaque acknowledging that this was a concentration camp site and the place where hundreds of people were tortured and executed.
4. Martina Fischer and Ljubinka Petrovic-Zimer, eds., *Dealing with a Past in the Western Balkans, Initiatives for Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice in Bosnia- Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia*, Berghof Report No. 18 (2013), Berlin: Berghof Foundation, <http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br18e.pdf/>, accessed 7 December 2016.
5. Velibor Bobo Kovač, "Us" vs. "Them": A Systematic Analysis of History Textbooks in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina Across Three Ethnic Educational Programmes', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 57, 3 (2025), pp. 271–86; and Dubravka Stojanović, 'Construction of Historical Consciousness: The Case of Serbian History Textbooks', in Marina Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), pp. 327–339.
6. See, for instance, the hostile responses from some nationalist groups at the theatre performance *Srebrenica, kada mi ubijeni ustanemo* (2019), by Zlatko Paković (https://www.helsinki.org.rs/press_t73.html), or official comments and reactions on Jasmina Žbanić's film *Quo Vadis Aida?* (2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/10/jasmila-zbanic-quo-vadis-aida-srebrenica-massacre-bosnian-war>.
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12. Marc Howard Ross, 'The Politicks of Memory and Peacebuilding', in Roger Mac Ginty, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 98.
13. Roger Mac Ginty, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 7.
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17. Hannah Arendt, p. 97.
18. Duska Radosavljevic *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
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21. Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8.
22. Matthew Bevis, p. 53.
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Data availability statement

Data available on request from the author. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.