Devised Comedy as Theatre-Making Methodology for Post-War Reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of London, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, September 2025.

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that devised comedy is a transformative methodology for engaging divided communities in complex discussions about identity, trauma, and post-war reconciliation. Situated at the intersection of peacebuilding, theatre and comedy studies, this practice research demonstrates that devised comedy is an effective practice with significant potential to reconfigure the workings of authority, reconstruct collective memory, and foster a hopeful future.

The research developed through theatre-making with young people in Northern Bosnia, a context marked by trans-generational war trauma, entrenched ethnic divisions, and institutionalised memory politics that reinforce conflict rather than foster reconciliation. This ongoing antagonism among competing narratives of a traumatic past and the absence of dialogue was addressed through devised comedy focused on challenging social and ethnic divisions. The directorial methodology created for this work is grounded in three essential components: (1) comedy being specified as the intended genre, (2) employing devising as a collaborative theatre-making strategy, (3) replacing predetermined narratives with single-word stimuli for creative deliberation.

Through examining the co-creation of three devised performances, the research reveals how devised comedy not only provides a convening space for both participants and audiences, but is also a genre that critically addresses ethnic division by enacting the reconciliation aims of restoring capacity for trust and creating a discursive space that recognises the presence of multiple narratives. Building upon existing studies of theatre in post-war contexts, rooted in participatory practices and collective authorship (Dolečki et al., 2018; Thompson, 2002, 2008, 2013; Cohen et al., 2011; Zelizer, 2010; Kuftinec, 2009), this study makes a contribution to the literature on participatory practices in post-conflict situations by investigating comedy as a genre that has often been overlooked, with the aim of broadening theatre practices and methodologies related to reconciliation processes.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was made possible by the generous support of my supervisors, colleagues, and course team at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, as well as partnership with the Most Mira NGO.

I am grateful to Dr Duška Radosavljević, who supportively accompanied me throughout this journey. As my supervisor, she was extreamly generouse with her time and incisive in her questioning, which profoundly enriched my thinking over the years. I am also thankfull to Dr Tom Six, who became my supervisor later in the journey, for his robust mentorship and critical guidance.

I extend my thanks to my peers and colleagues at Central for inspiring conversations and helpful comments in various instances of this research. I am also grateful to the students I have taought, mentored and engaged with in discussions about theatre-making.

The research would not have been possible without the collaboration with the community of students and facilitators from Prijedor. Thank you for being playful, creative, and brave in embracing the unknown with me. Thank you for the work, laughter, and tears we shared.

To my close friends and family, thank you for being my personal network of emotional support, laughter, and thoughtful critique. You championed my work while also providing a healthy outsider's perspective on its importance when it was most needed.

Finally, hvala to Daniel and Nella for their unconditional support and for reminding me that there are worse things than writing a PhD— running from a volcano eruption, for example.

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In-Between

It's April 2016. After a flight from London to Zagreb, I drive for four hours between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This territory, once forming part of a single country – my birth country Yugoslavia – is now divided by an EU border. Eventually, I park the car and get out for a stretch. I'm standing in a field, a no man's land in between the Serbian village of Petrov Gaj and the Muslim village of Kevljani[1]. Behind me are the remains of a house. Somebody's home destroyed in the war—a silent witness of the human tragedy, now overgrown by grass. On my left is a small village school. Walls decorated with the artworks on the topic of autumn and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are visible through big glass windows covered with colourful handprints. On my right is dom kulture [a cultural centre][2] built in Yugoslavian times, still with the visible bullet holes from the 1990s war. When I first stepped into this field back in 2009, as part of a small team from the UK/Bosnian charity Most Mira [Bridge of Peace] that came to organise the first community art festival in this area, the cultural centre was a derelict and abandoned building. It was missing a roof, it had no windows, its walls were covered with nationalistic graffiti and dirt that we patiently cleaned.

After the end of the Second World War in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) there was a serious initiative not only to build infrastructure, houses, schools and hospitals but also cultural centres. In her useful study of cultural centres in Bosnia, Aida Kalender (2018) observes that immediately after the war, Yugoslav[3] cultural policy followed André Malraux's concept of 'democratisation of culture' with primarily the emancipatory and enlightening goals. In the period after the Second World War, about 300 cultural centres were erected in towns and villages across Bosnia-Herzegovina as spaces for cultural, educational and social life. They were a significant and active part of the community life and an important place for socialisation; hosting professional theatre productions on tour, being a home for local amateur cultural companies, screening films and organising social and music events. However, during the 1990s conflict, these 'homes of culture' were not only destroyed, but also turned into places of execution and torture. This particular

[1] While term ‘Bosniak’ is now the standard term in academic and political discourse, my use of ‘Muslim’ in this introduction is intentional, as it reflects the terminology employed by local community when describing their own villages and identities. This usage is not a religious designation but an acknowledgment of the vernacular ethno-national label. During the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, constitution recognised ‘Muslim’ (with a capital 'M') as distinct nationality. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the national assembly formally adopted the term ‘Bosniak’ [Bošnjak] in 1993 to refer to this same ethnic group.

[2] The literal translation of ‘dom kulture’ is ‘the home of culture’. Throughout the thesis I will be using Serbo-Croatian terms as part of the main discussion in order to reduce the loss of meaning in translation.

[3] Further in the text Yugoslavia refers to Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

destruction was, to a degree, part of the memory war that I will be analysing in the introduction to this thesis. As Viktor Ivančić (2019) points out, on the one hand, there was a cruel pragmatism behind these actions as spaces of a certain size were needed for mass captures and executions (Ivančić et al. 2019). However, on the other hand, using cultural centres as spaces for mass torture and execution bears a strong symbolic dimension, as they were also places from which the foundational Yugoslav idea of 'brotherhood and unity' was spread, so it had to be destroyed and denied.[4]

As I stand in the no-man's-land between these three buildings which represent important aspects of identity, ideology and memory formation, I reflect on the multiple levels of significance contained here. These are places where family stories are told, where official history is learnt, and where personal memories are formed; where the interpretation of the past, present, and imagined futures is intertwined. Somewhere in the intersection of these personal, familiar, cultural and historical threads, our world and sense of belonging are created. I'm standing in the field where contrasting living memories are overlapping. This site is also a place where, at the beginning of the war in spring 1992, the Muslim people from the nearby villages were summoned and held before being transported to the concentration camps of Omarska, Keratern, Trnopolje and Manjača. It is also a space where for four years, from 2009 to 2012, the peacebuilding charity Most Mira held week-long art festivals, where each year, I had worked with several hundred children from ethnically divided communities creating art and memories together. It is a field where the families of victims and perpetrators shared the same space on the last day of the festival, watching their kids write over the painful memories of war trauma with new memories of art, creativity and community-building through theatre.

At this moment in time, I'm back to start a new theatre project with a group of young people to investigate the power of theatre to support peacebuilding. I sit back in the car and start the engine. The radio switches on amid an angry debate about the heroism or guilt of Radovan Karadžić, a wartime leader and the supreme commander of the Bosnian Serb Army. My arrival in Prijedor coincides with his sentencing to forty years of imprisonment for 'genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war' (ICTY, 2016) committed during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I drive away from the school, once attended by hundreds of children from both villages, which will be closed soon due to the lack of students.

[4] These mass murders in the spaces of cultural centres are also referenced at the end of Jasmila Žbanić's film *Quo Vadis Aida?* (2020).

Introduction

Research question

My socially engaged praxis[5], which forms a central part of this PhD, is set in the northern Bosnian municipality of Prijedor. It is from here that the images of starving and tormented people behind the concentration camp wire that shocked Europe in 1992 came.[6] This is the area where several mass graves were discovered, and from which over a fourth of former residents have already been convicted at the International Crimes Tribunal and at the Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina for crimes against humanity (UN, 2024). This is also a place in-between several conflicting understandings of past events, guilt and crimes.

Among the first problems I encountered as a theatre practitioner working with young people in war-torn Bosnia were transgenerational war trauma, inherited entrenched division, and the absence of a common narrative. Bosnian society is in a liminal position where the gunfire has ceased, yet the memory war continues through education, art and ongoing struggles around memorialisation.[7] Nowadays elections are contested with the same ethno-nationalistic rhetoric that spread fear three decades ago, often by the same wartime political leaders or those influenced by their enduring values. Young people born into division attend segregated schools in their towns and villages, learning from different, sometimes even conflicting, history textbooks. 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.[8] This absence of shared narrative about the recent past, which feeds ethnic antagonism, has led me to pose the research question of what

[5] To clearly distinguish between my practice as theatre director and the practice conducted as a part of this PhD inquiry I will use Nelson's term praxis to refer to the latter.
[6] In 1992 the ITN reporter Penny Marshall and The Observer journalist Ed Vulliamy, reported from the Omarska and Trnopolje camps. Their video reportage was also used as evidence in ICTY, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6-ZDvwPxk8.
[7] Since 2012 there are two strong initiatives to contest memorialisation 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 the 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 Acelor 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.
[8] For more see the hostile responses from some nationalist groups at 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 Jasmila Žbanić's film *Quo Vadis Aida?* (2020) (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/10/jasmila-zbanic-quo-vadis-aida-srebrenica-massacre-bosnian-war)

theatre-making[9] can offer to challenge the social and ethnic division, particularly in the context characterised by a notable reluctance to engage in conversation about these critical issues.[10]

Starting from James Thompson and Richard Schechner's notion that 'people in crises need theatre to understand and deal with what happened and then learn how to move on' (2004), in this thesis, I focus on a collaborative approach to theatre-making as a valuable tool for critical conversation that allows for multiple voices to be heard. Central to this investigation is a question of the very genres in which we choose to tell these stories of the traumatic past as well as possible futures. My intuitive feeling, or 'hunch' (Trimingham 2002), which later became an essential direction for my research, was that comedy as a genre matters, not only as a positive, enjoyable invitation[11] for the participants but also as a vehicle for a critical conversation about the past and the present. Through this lens, I examine how theatre can facilitate the coexistence of conflicting war narratives and support a societal process of moving forward towards peaceful coexistence. In order to contextualise this starting hunch, I placed it in between two theoretical ideas: the social dimension of comedy that calls for togetherness and allows us to critically see the familiar as unfamiliar (Critchley, 2003) and the re-narrativisation of collective memory (Ross, 2013; Assmann A.[12] and Shortt, 2012) that can lead to the notion of a hopeful future.

In an effort to address this enquiry of what devised comedy can bring into the complex process of rebuilding peace, I need to contextualise further my research question, as well as my position as both a director and a researcher-practitioner. First, I situate the question within a wider frame of reconciliation and memory studies. This is a necessary aspect not only because memory politics are impacting contemporary ethnic division in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also due to the crucial role they played in the formation of the conflict. In Müller's words, 'Yugoslavia has horrifically demonstrated what happens when memory wars turn into real wars' (2002, p. 17). Secondly, I refer to Johan Galtung, the principal founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies, and his notion that the

[9] Theatre-making being understood as 'all-inclusive collaborative process whether the outcome is a solo show or an ensemble piece, a new play or a performance installation' (Radosavljević 2013:23).

[10] From my encounters with people in Prijedor I've noticed that this unwillingness to address the past has several reasons: for some there is nothing disputable to be talking about, for others the everyday life is grim and difficult so they do not have the will nor the strength to open up a dark conversation about the war ('dosta nam je i ove muke') or some understand these subjects as an attempt or conspiration to put blame on the whole Serbian nation.

[11] In this context, I understand the term "invitation" in its basic sense, as in inviting someone to attend a workshop or theatre show. This is different from Garet White's (2024) interpretation of invitation as a concept in participatory performance. However, White's perspective on invitation as a strategic and ethical tool is a useful idea to consider – in particular the aspect that invitation should be perceived as a gift or an opportunity, rather as demand or test.

[12] In my theses I refer to the work of both Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann. In order to distinguish between the two and avoid confusion I'll be also using their first name initial.

three crucial constituents of a 'peace culture' eroded during a conflict are creativity, non-violence and empathy (Galtung 1998). This conceptual framework guides this exploration of theatre practices in post-war contexts, with a particular focus on their creative models and approaches to theatre practices for the re-humanisation of the 'other'.

This thesis is exploring theatre practice within a peacebuilding initiative, so it is essential to critically reflect on the fundamental notion of conflict. Highlighting that conflict, if it is not violent, is a natural part of human relationships with the progressive power to lead us towards growth, discovery and change, international peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach understands peace as a conflict transformation rather than resolution, 'a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationships' instead of a static 'end-state' (Lederach, 2014, p. 16). In the introduction to their book *Peacebuilding and the Arts*, Theodora Hawksley and Jolyon Mitchell expand on Lederach's understanding of peacebuilding not as a process that will erase conflict but one that will transform it from a violent mode to a constructive, non-violent relationship. They further define peace not as conflict-free space but as 'an ongoing, dynamic process, a journey that sets human relationships on the road to life' (Mitchel at al. 2020, p. 3). This understanding of conflict resonates with Aristotle's view of incident (or conflict) as the initiator of dramatic action, which lies at the very heart of theatre (Aristotle 2000, p. 11). Furthermore, this non-necessity for resolution in international peacebuilding theory mirrors theatre's capacity for being a lens to witness and observe a particular conflict that does not impose the agreement over narrative but leaves us with bubbling questions and thoughts. In relation to the peacebuilding process, this understanding of theatre-making as an open-ended creative conversation that explores conflicting multiple viewpoints could be a useful tool in navigating various dissenting stories and in the context of officially one-sided political memory. This intricate relation between narratives of traumatic past, non-concluded conflicts and possible stories of cooperative future challenges my position as a theatre director and researcher, further influencing my enquiry into formulating a possible theatre-making methodology within the peacebuilding process, focusing on the questions of which stories we choose to tell, how we create them, and what the relationship is between the genre we choose and the motivation behind our storytelling.

Scholars from Peace and Conflict Studies often highlighted the unique potential of art projects within the post-war reconciliation process. Researchers like Johan Galtung (1995) argue that while treaties secure peace by halting violence, art builds the 'positive peace'[13] necessary for lasting reconciliation,

[13] According to Galtung, negative peace is defined as the absence of violence and war. In contrast, positive peace is 'the integration of human society' (1964:2), characterised by social integration, optimism, and preventive approach to conflict.

empathy, and shared identity. This aligns with John Paul Lederach's (1997) view that deep-rooted conflict stems from a failure of 'moral imagination'[14], an inability to visualise an exit from violence. Therefore, effective peacebuilding must ultimately engage the human emotions and imagination to be able to 'step into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence' (2005, p. 5). Yet, only in recent years has this relation between art and peacebuilding become an interesting field for deeper exploration by academics from peacebuilding as well as arts and humanities studies. In this conversation about the arts and peacebuilding, only a few edited books—*Peacebuilding and the Arts* (Mitchell et al. 2020), *Acting Together* (Cohen, Gutiérrez Varea, & Walker, 2011), and *Performance in Place of War* (Thompson et al., 2009) — dedicated a section to the possibilities of theatre, more specifically within post-war contexts. Besides, *Theatre for Peacebuilding* (2018) by scholar and activist Nilanjana Premaratna and the first-hand study *Theatre, Facilitation and National Formation in the Balkans and the Middle East* (2009) by Sonja Kuftinec offer additional relevant accounts and outline the experiences of the theatre practitioners that worked internationally in the conflict affected societies. Adding to the conversation are articles from practitioners such as Schinina (2004) and Zelizer (2003 & 2010), reflecting on the practice, analysing approaches, and questioning ethics.

However, a noticeable gap emerges from this very brief literature overview (which will be expanded in the next chapter): while the affective power of laughter, joy, and play is frequently acknowledged and valued as healing and coping mechanism within conflict and post-conflict context, there remains a significant lack of research focusing on comedy as an intentional genre aimed at facilitating post-conflict reconciliation. This thesis aims to identify and address a critical gap in the field. Setting my research within the field of theatre and peacebuilding, I do not perceive this thesis as a critique or an opposition to existing approaches to theatre practices in this context. Instead, focusing on comedy as a missing topic from the current conversation, I see my practice research as a meaningful contribution to the diverse methodologies and aesthetics that inform this field.

Key terms

This thesis is positioned at the intersection of Bosnian and UK cultural contexts, as well as within the domains of theatre and peacebuilding. To help establish a common framework and avoid any

[14] Lederach argues that this capacity is built on four critical practices that are essential for transforming deep-rooted conflict: the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that include our enemies, the capacity to embrace creativity, paradox and complexity 'without reliance on dualistic polarity' and capacity to take risk and step into unknown. (:5)

potential misunderstandings, this section provides a definition for a few key terms that may prompt immediate questions. Additional key terminology will be introduced and explained as necessary in the following chapters.

While 'applied theatre' is a well-established field of study in the UK, the equivalent term in Bosnia-Herzegovina, ‘primijenjeno pozorište’, remains largely unfamiliar and is often met with confusion or scepticism. As an anglophone term originating from an educational context, ‘applied theatre’ is broadly established as a participatory practice that leverages theatre’s potential to facilitate social and individual transformation. It creates an ethical space for dialogue about issues pertinent to specific communities or groups, as well as for reflection on themes of identity, memory, and narrative (Nicholson, 2005; Thompson, 2009; Shaughnessy, 2012; Abraham & Prentki, 2015). In mainland European tradition, which has influenced Bosnian-Herzegovinian theatre culture, similar practices are usually referred to as 'social theatre' or simply 'theatre'. Their roots are more aligned with political rather than educational theatre. As Guglielmo Schinina (2004a) outlines, European social theatre emerged from a ritualisation of society in the latter half of the twentieth century, inspired by the works of Antonin Artaud and Paolo Pasolini, who viewed theatre as a rite. This search for theatrical forms reflective of social and political changes gave rise to what is known in the Anglophone context as 'community-based theatre', and is referred to as 'theatre animation' or 'new theatre' elsewhere in Europe (e.g., Italy and France). Characterised by new dramaturgical models, such as collective (ensemble) work and workshop theatre ‘it included all decentralised, educational, recreational, and community-based social activities using theatre and performance’ (Shinina 2004a, p.19). It can be argued that the term ‘primijenjeno pozorište’ ['applied theatre'] has been introduced to Bosnia-Herzegovina primarily through internationally funded NGO projects. Consequently, it is often perceived as NGO-driven work existing somewhat outside the framework of the state-funded repertoire system that is heavily reliant on international funding and associated with specific deliverables (Palmberger, 2016). This perception frequently leads to the form being viewed as less artistic or overly instrumentalised, carrying a negative connotation of a ‘second-rate’ theatre aligned more with therapy or NGO activism than with high art. In light of these connotations, during the praxis in Prijedor, I consistently refer to the work we created as ‘theatre project’. The aim was to affirm the integrity of the project by emphasising also the artistic and aesthetic value of the pieces created and to intentionally distance the work from immediate associations with the NGO-driven context, despite its connection to the Most Mira initiative. However, the academic and practical field of applied theatre practice remained a critical framework for my thinking.

The term 'devising' is central to this research, as it defines my directorial methodology, which I refer to as ‘devising comedy’. Similar to 'applied theatre' this term is conceptually nuanced within the UK

context, yet it may cause confusion in continental European contexts, in which the verbal and the corporeal elements may be more integrated (Radosavljević 2013, p. 65) and is largely absent from the discourse in Bosnian theatre. One of the Bosnian[15] terms used to describe devised work the term 'autroski projekat' which translates to 'author's project' or 'author's theatre'. This term refers to performances that are created (authored) by a director or a collective, often without relying on the pre-existing play-text. While it conveys the notion of experimental and unconventional work (often produced with a limited budget and diverging from mainstream productions), this term typically suggests a production in which a singular vision, most often a director, imposes a strong artistic vision. This is the reason I wish to avoid using it. Another term occasionally found in academic writing is 'razvojno pozorište'[16]. However, this translation does not fully capture the essence of devising. The word 'razvojno' means 'developmental', which reduces the complex, collaborative process to a simple notion of growth, failing to encompass the critical and political dimensions inherent in the devising process. Due to these challenges in translation, when working with your people in Bosnia, I introduced the English term 'devising'. As a group, we opted to use it to accurately reflect our theatre-making process. Building on Duška Radosavljević's extended analyses of the origin of the practice, which trace its dual genealogy as 'aesthetic-methodological, on one hand, and political on the other' (2013, p. 59), my understanding of the term foregrounds its function as a consciously political theatre-making methodology. Methodology deeply tied to a political tradition that seeks alternative forms of representation, giving voice to marginalised perspectives and challenging dominant narratives through its very structure (Govan et al., 2007). In this thesis, I understand devising as a political theatre-making methodology rooted in collective authorship, which breaks away from using a pre-written play text as the starting point of the creative process. The relevance of this approach to my praxis in Prijedor is profound and operates on two interconnected levels. Firstly, its non-reliance on a pre-written script empowers participants to generate material from their own experiences. This approach is essential in creating an ethical space in which participants could collaboratively build a new, shared narrative, indicating how the mode of creation itself can be a transformative political act in a post-conflict setting. Secondly, the anti-hierarchical and collaborative ethos of devising serves as a microcosm of the pluralistic society that

[15] Instead of using the official acronym BCMS, which stands for Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian language (historically considered a single Serbo-Croat language during Yugoslavia), in this thesis I will refer to the language as 'Bosnia language' (bosanski jezik) as the praxis is situated within the cultural and political context of Bosnia-Herzegovina. While the acronym BCMS has administrative utility, it diminishes any cultural identity,and feels unnecessarily distant from the nature of this research.

[16] https://cpi-ns.weebly.com/metodologije.html

peacebuilding aims to achieve, validating and accommodating a multiplicity of voices and perspectives.

To conclude this section, I would like to provide a concise definition of the term ‘reconciliation’. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research, it's important to clarify this concept to ensure a shared understanding of the word. The terms ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘reconciliation’ are inherently interconnected (and will, at times, be used interchangeably throughout this thesis). In the context of peacebuilding, ‘reconciliation’ is understood as a process designed to heal the social, psychological, and emotional wounds inflicted by conflict, as well as to rebuild relationships among individuals and communities that have been divided (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2013). Only in recent decades has the concept of reconciliation garnered significant attention from the disciplines of peace studies, international relations theory, and political psychology (Ackerman 1994; Kriesberg 1998, 2004; Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004). Scholars broadly agree that reconciliation is a long-term, complex endeavour to transform hostile relations into cooperative, nonviolent relationships across political, legal, social, and cultural spheres. This transformative process involves nurturing mutual recognition and acceptance, which is key to developing a shared vision for future coexistence. Furthermore, the process often necessitates profound social and emotional transformation, through which new values, norms, collective memories, symbols, and attitudes emerge. Reconciliation studies suggest various methods and strategies that fall into three main categories: legislation, economy, and culture. These methods include apologies, truth and reconciliation commissions, public trials, reparations payments, the creation of a shared history, education, media engagement, publicised meetings between representatives of different groups, joint projects, and cultural exchanges (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004).

Navigating the thesis

Thesis is organised into five chapters. The first chapter establishes the interdisciplinary theoretical framework for this practice research. It provides a combined literature review of four key fields—peacebuilding, memory, theatre, and comedy studies—to unpick their meeting points and identify knowledge gaps. The review is organised around two central concepts: first, the dramaturgy of memory as a process of transforming collective and cultural memory in post-conflict societies, and second, the capacity of theatre to negotiate multiple, conflicting perspectives of conflict. Chapter Two, situates the work within the framework of practice research methodology, articulating further its concept of interstitial improvisation. It clarifies the documentation process and elaborates on my

positionality as a researcher-practitioner. Chapter Three offers a reflective analysis of the three core pieces of praxis that form the evidential foundation of this research: *Dan jednog baksuza* [*A Day in the Life of an Unlucky Man*] (2016), *Brkići* [*The Moustache Family*] (2016) and *Tu i tamo* [*Here and There*] (2018). The chapter examines each work through two key lenses: the themes explored by the group and the specific directorial methodologies employed. The primary objective is to outline the evolution of the directorial methodology, illustrating how insights acquired from each project directly influenced the alterations and adjustments implemented in the next. The chapter should be read after examining the Presentation of Praxis (PP)[17]. Building on the previous chapter, Chapter Four provides a deeper, focused analysis of the specific mechanisms of comedy within the praxis. It examines how comedy's inherently interstitial nature—simultaneously playful and provocative—enables it to navigate fractured memory politics. Chapter Five concludes the thesis by summarising the findings and suggesting directions for further research.

[17] The Presentation of Praxis is submitted on the USB stick together with the printed thesis.

Chapter One: Context

Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina that lasted for three and a half years, from April 1992 till December 1995, was one of a series of conflicts that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia (1991-2008)[18] into seven small ethnic states. The disintegration of Yugoslavia was marked by gory wars, crimes against humanity, concentration camps, genocide, systematic rape, displacement of about four million people and methodical destruction of cultural heritage, not seen in Europe since the Second World War. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended in November 1995 with the tripartite signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace, known as the 'Dayton Peace Accord', which was agreed upon at the US Air Force base Wright-Patterson. It was signed a few weeks later, on 14th December 1995 in Paris, by all three parties involved in the conflict: Alija Izetbegović for the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Franjo Tudjman for the Republic of Croatia, and Slobodan Milošević for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; it was officially witnessed by the British Prime Minister John Major, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, French President Jacques Chirac, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, and the US President Bill Clinton. This was a document that stopped the bloody armed conflict but failed to bring peace to the country, it simply transferred it 'from the military to the political realm' (Belloni 2020, p. 359). The main preoccupation of the Dayton negotiators was to establish territorial, military and security agreements and provide a constitution for the new states. It created a very complex institutional governance system based on ethnonationalism, making Bosnia the state with the highest number of presidents, prime ministers, and ministers per capita in the entire world' (Belloni 2020, p. 359). The strongest critique of the key aspects of the accord is its promotion of ethnic divisions and the creation of a unique and complex system of institutional governance that made political life difficult and placed the country in a political and economic deadlock. Bosnia-Herzegovina became a state comprised of three parts. Its constituent elements are two independent entities with their own presidents and legislations – Federacija [the Federation] populated mainly by Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and Bosnian Croats, and Republika Srpska [the

[18] 1991 is taken as the beginning of the breakup as in June 1991 Slovenia and Croatia declared independence, and the arm conflict began. For the end of the breakup, I've taken 2008 as the year when Kosovo self-declared independence. For now Serbia is still refusing to recognise the independence, the negotiations about the normalisation of relations between two countries is still an ongoing process.

Bosnian Serb Republic][19] inhabited mainly by Bosnian Serbs – and the condominium of the Brčko District that is under the international administration of the Office of the High Representative (OHR).[20] Bosnia-Herzegovina's ethno-democratic frame is therefore focused on division (instead of unification) in the form of ethnopolitics and ethnonationalism that 'reaffirms ethnic as opposed to civic principles of political organisation, which in turn reinforce the very logic that has sustained the war' (Caplan 2010, p. 222). The ethnic division is also embedded in the Bosnia-Herzegovina constitution provided by the Dayton Accord and in the organisation of all government levels (including the tripartite presidency,[21] Parliamentary Assembly, Constitutional Court and Central Bank), assigned and decided on the ethnic principle of representation of the three constitutional groups.[22] The definition of constitutive people only as Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats leaves out a considerable part of the population, including those of mixed heritage, Jewish people, and Roma people.[23] Another critique of the Dayton Accord is that its focus on the economy, believing that change in the economic system (with a focus on privatisation) would lead to the integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina, left the public sector weak. Some critics of the accord emphasise that it is an agreement that is signed between international partners and the local elite who preserved their positions after the end of the war, and today their nationalistic politics continue. It froze the conflict (Markovina 2018), leaving ethnic animosity and segregation to lead the country into the space 'between wars' [medjuratno] or even 'pre-war' [predratno] (Dubravka Stojanovic, 2020, my translation).

Violent conflicts are complex, and multiple actors participate in them, from intra-state formations to international officials and communities. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the process has also involved several international organisations (in addition to the UN, NATO, and the EU, most notably the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations specialised agencies), bilateral donors (primarily, but not exclusively, from Europe and North America), and countless numbers of international NGOs. Building peace after a violent conflict is an equally complex negotiation process that involves various

[19] One of the indications of the ethnic division messiness can be followed by the various English translation of Republika Srpska entity such as Serb Republic (but not to be confused with Rebublic of Serbia) or Bosnian Serb Republic and often referred to it by its original name in BCS.
[20] International control over BiH is held by the Office of the High Representative (OHR)
[21] The Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina consists of three members, one from each constituent people, who take turns in the position of President of the Presidency every 8 months.
[22] The Dayton Accord: The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/0/126173.pdf (Accessed 19/12/2020)
[23] The problem of this understanding ended up at the International Court of the Human Rights. See the Sejdić and Finci case.

initiatives and numerous participants. Peacebuilding studies propose various methods and strategies based on three categories: political, economic, and social (Strupinskiene, 2016). Some of the wide range of initiatives can include public trials, apologies, and truth and reconciliation commissions, as well as joint social projects and cultural exchange. Every situation needs to be considered in its specific context, as there are no ready-made manuals. Therefore, the peacebuilding effort needs to be strategic, working flexibly with different actors, from high-level state politicians to grassroots organisations and communities (Hawksley & Mitchell, 2020).

According to an extensive literature review, peacebuilding is understood as a complex and long-term process of reshaping and rebuilding the non-violent social, political, legal, economic and cultural relationships between the former enemies, thus enabling them to have a vision of future coexistence and cooperation (Ackerman 1994; Kriesberg 2004; Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004, Mac Ginty 2011). This mutual recognition and acceptance should be achieved through a social transformation, from which new values, norms, collective memories, and attitudes develop, and a capacity for trust and hope is restored (Hawksley & Mitchell, 2020). This process of rebuilding the society after conflict begins 'when the parties in conflict start to change their beliefs, attitudes, goals, motivations, and emotions about the conflict, each other, and future relations' (Bar-Tar & Bennink 2004, p. 26). It is further suggested that the process needs to challenge hostile beliefs formed during the conflict, such as 'polarised, simplistic stereotypes of former opponents' (Mac Ginty 2013, p. 99), delegitimisation and dehumanisation of the rival group, as well as a one-sided, self-glorifying view of one's own group (Bar-Tal 2004). The process is understood as essential for long-lasting stable peace and prevention of a possible new conflict (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004; Kelman 2004; Kriesberg 1998; Ackerman 1994). This transformation of confrontational relationships into cooperative partnerships necessitates a fundamental shift from division and hostility to a shared vision for the future. This process is inherently emotional and involves rebuilding trust and confidence among the divided groups. As Roger Mac Ginty rightly observes, 'peacebuilding is often discussed in terms of societies and institutions, [but] it is often experienced in terms of households, the education of children, and community sentiment' (Mac Ginty 2013, p.7). It is precisely within this intimate and experiential realm that this PhD praxis operates, encouraging young people to question inherited collective memories and facilitating a space where they can actively construct the cooperative relationships necessary for a sustainable peace.

The creation of a common narrative shared by former enemies, identified as one of the crucial elements of the peacebuilding process, demands a critical examination of collective memories,

'learning about the rival group's collective memory and admitting one's own past misdeeds and responsibility for the outbreak and maintenance of the conflict' (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004, p. 18). However, establishing a new, shared, and recognised narrative about past events is a complex issue, as the opposite sides have different understandings and experiences of the conflict. Besides, partial truth and denial of crimes can be used as rationalisation for continuing anger and hostility between the groups (Kreisberg, 2004). Therefore, for this process to happen successfully, discursive space needs to be created, the existence of 'multiple narratives' needs to be acknowledged (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004), and the importance of a dialogue where all conflicted sides will tell their stories will need to be emphasised since 'collective memories are rarely directly malleable, and simply telling people they are wrong is rarely productive' (Ross, 2013, p.98). The issues encompassing the creation of a common narrative bring back the relevance of the memory discourse, together with the understanding of emotions 'as socio-political forces that contribute to the construction of identity and community' (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2013, p.82). As Marc Ross concludes, 'peacebuilding is likely to have its greatest effect on collective memories when it improves the short and medium-term rewards resulting from the operation of new institutional arrangements and addresses the emotional needs of members of all communities so that the benefits of peace are apparent and past differences are not viewed as inevitable predictors of future conflicts' (Ross, 2013, p.98).

This literature review of peacebuilding practice reveals the significant parallels between reconciliation and theatre practices, emphasising ways in which concepts and methodologies from both disciplines can mutually inform and enhance one another. First, both disciplines fundamentally engage in negotiating multiple narratives to create a new, collective story. Second, both fields entail the process of emotional transformation. Theatre relies on empathy and catharsis to evoke emotional responses from the audience, while peacebuilding necessitates the transformation of destructive emotions, such as hatred and fear, into constructive feelings like empathy and trust, which are essential for reconciliation. Lastly, both aim for a collective act of creation resulting in a new reality collaboratively shaped by the participants.

Memory transformation

Before exploring further how theatre, and devised comedy in particular, can contribute to the reconciliation process of conflict transformation, I will expand on the context by offering a brief reading of the fall of Yugoslavia through the lens of memory discourse. There are several reasons for bringing memory discourse into this conversation. Firstly, as I will show in this section, the creation

and manipulation of collective and cultural memory played an important role in generating and maintaining interethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Secondly, as I've discussed above, the politics of remembering and the creation of collective memory are an important part of the peacebuilding process. Thirdly, the peacebuilding challenge around one-sided political memory in contemporary Prijedor deals with the navigation of memory and the ways the societies confront legacies of the problematic past. To begin, it is important to present some foundational facts about the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), which are essential for understanding the formation and transformation of collective memory. Key aspects, such as its unique model of socialist self-management, its non-aligned foreign policy, and the state-sponsored doctrine of 'brotherhood and unity', actively shaped national identity and distinct cultural and collective memories. These elements will later serve as key points in the dramaturgy of memory, providing the essential framework against which personal and collective recollections are contrasted, contested, and ultimately solidified.

SFRY figures of memory

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was a multicultural,[24] secular country,[25] characterised by its own economic system of samoupravni socijalizam [socialist self-management],[26] whereby all decision-making was decentralised and transferred from the political centre to the workers' councils within a particular system of market socialism. It had a federal parliament, consisting of six constituent republics and two autonomous provinces.[27] Following the breakup from the Soviet bloc in 1948, Yugoslavia, as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1955, occupied a distinctive geopolitical position between the East and the West. Its citizens enjoyed

[24] The constitution guaranteed the use of three different official languages Serbo-Croat, Slovenian and Macedonian as well as education in their mother tongue for two of the biggest national minorities (Hungarian and Albanian).
[Ustav Jugoslavije, Član 41: Građaninu je zajemčena sloboda izražavanja svoje narodnosti i kulture, kao i sloboda upotreba svog jezika. Građanin nije dužan da se izjašnjava kojoj narodnosti pripada niti da se opredeljuje za jednu od narodnosti.]
[25] By the constitution religion was separated from the state and religious beliefs were defined as a free and personal choice. Three main religions in Yugoslavia were Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam. There was also a significant Jewish community.
[Član 46 Ispovedanje vere je slobodno i privatna je stvar čoveka. Verske zajednice odvojene su od države i slobodne su u vršenju verskih poslova i verskih obreda.]
[26] For an interesting reading of the relation between self-management and art practice in Yugoslavia see, Branislav Jakovljević, 'Alienation Affect' (University Mitchigen Press, 2016).
[27] The six republics were: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. The two autonomous provinces were: Kosovo and Vojvodina.

liberal travel policies[28] and cultural openness.[29] It was a prosperous and highly respected country that followed fast modernisation and enjoyed cosmopolitan and urban culture (Calic, 2019). This is not to say that critical social and economic problems were not present. On the contrary, structural issues with self-management, regional economic disparities and the allocation of power based on ethnic proportionality, known as a 'nacionalni ključ ['national key'], created fertile ground for the occasional nationalism that 'never completely vanished from Yugoslavia' (Calic 2019, p.223). The crisis of the 1980s that started with Tito's death in 1980 brought about disputes over the organisation of the state that suffered from upheaval and corruption, as well as 'sudden dramatisation of the national question' (Glenny, 2000, p. 628). Additionally, it was propped up by a high national unemployment rate, following similar economic trouble in Europe and the USA. However, by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, regardless of these difficulties, Yugoslavia was on the way to joining the European Community (Djukanović 2017)[30]. Events, however, took another turn that required carefully dramaturged memories.

A considerable amount of literature has been published offering various readings of the causes of the traumatic disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed. Scholars from different disciplines - history, social and political science, economy, and law - are analysing various aspects. Each offering numerous accounts of the cause of the collapse of the country. Academics, politicians, and ordinary citizens from the region are still in continuous disagreement about whether this was a civil war, aggression, or a liberation war. It would be reasonable to say that the fall of Yugoslavia happened throug the interplay between several different factors, reasons and chance circumstances. Some of the most common aspects identified as pieces of the conundrum are: structural problems of the complicated system of governance in SFRY (Sekelj 1993, Calic 2019); eroding economic circumstances (Woodward 1995, Radeljić 2010); the historically problematic relationship between the two biggest ethnic groups, the Serbs and the Croats (Gligorov 1994, Glenny 1995); the individual personalities of the leading politicians such as Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tudjman (Glenny 1995), global factors such as changes in international politics brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall (Zimmerman 1996, Radeljić 2010) and the discord within the European Community on how to approach the Yugoslav conflict (Glenny 1995). As Dejan Jović (2001) shows in his comprehensive

[28] An interesting curiosity is that Yugoslav passport holders could 'cross more borders without visas than any other passport [holders] in the world' (Glenny 2000:570)

[29] Art historian Branislav Dimitrijević (2015) observes that during the 1960s Yugoslavia decided on internationalism. This period that lasted until the beginning of the conflict was characterised by rich international cooperation, artistic exchange and constant fluctuation through theatre, film and music festivals (BITEF, FEST, Belgrade Jazz Festival).

[30] See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_90_64 and Dragan Djukanović http://www.yuhistorija.com/serbian/medj_politika_txt00c1.html

critical analysis of some interpretations of the fall of Yugoslavia, none of these arguments is complete and can be understood as a sole factor in the breakup. However, every one of them does bring intriguing aspects and sheds light on this tragedy. Still, for the purpose of this research, I will be focusing particularly on memory politics, not only as a crucial element in the disintegration of Yugoslav society but also as it is characterised by its own narrativisation.

For all the usually overlooked aspects of its liberalism quoted above in my summary, Yugoslavia was a single-party socialist state that also concealed many contradictions, including never diminished nationalist circles (Perović 2014, Calic 2019). Two key ideas that post Second World War Yugoslavia (SFRY) was founded on were socialist self-management and the principle of 'brotherhood and unity', understood as 'solidarity among different yet related and coexisting peoples' (Celic 2019, p. 169). The dominant 'figure of memory' (Assman, J. 1995) in post-Second World War Yugoslavia was the heroic role of the partisans and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the People's Liberation War ['narodnoosolobodilačka borba –NOB']. The People's Liberation War was narrated as a joint anti-fascist fight of all ethnic groups, and this was promoted through the construction of monuments, commemorative practices, education, school textbooks, as well as art (literature and filmography in particular).[31] This supernational Yugoslav identity was formed as an umbrella identity that aimed to reconcile different ethnic communities (particularly Serb, Croat and Slovenian), which in both the First and Second World Wars participated on the opposing sides, committing mass crimes that left deep scars and trauma (Stojanović 2018). However, it was never a good time in post-war Yugoslavia for the complexities of these memories to be addressed, and they became, as I will further illustrate below, a prominent characteristic of the conflict, playing a crucial role in its formation and maintenance.

In the winter of 1990, the first Yugoslav multi-party elections were held, accompanied by a strong wave of national populism that led to the years of decline. During the national election campaigns, most of the political parties claimed strong ethnonational programmes (and it could be argued that in their programmes, there was nothing much else apart from calls for 'national justice', however that is understood). In his study of the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Pavković observes that the emerging political elite lacked a common ideology and shared political interests or loyalties. Instead, they promoted distinct national ideologies that conflicted not only over the preferred

[31] An important place for this new identity to be propped up was work brigades [‘radne akcije’] collaborative free labour sourced from Yugoslavia’s youth aimed at rebuilding the country, celebrated and remembered for their strong enthusiasm as well as music and dance– ‘Reconstruction was not just one great toil; for the youth, at least, it was also a huge party and the first important Yugoslav ritual of integration' (Celic 2019:171).

constitutional structure for their respective nations but also over territorial claims (Pavkovic, 1997, p. 122). Therefore, in order to justify separatist ideologies and territorial claims, the collective memory of the peaceful multicultural and multi-ethnic coexistence had to be expelled from the main political and cultural narrative and proclaimed an illusion and a trick of the past. As historian Dubravka Stojanović explains: 'since the present could not have been changed easily or quickly, and Yugoslavia could not have been dissolved and recomposed in ethnically cleansed national states, it was much easier to first change the model of national remembering, and then, based on the changed pattern, to intervene in the present' (Stojanović, 2017, p. 154). Building new national ideologies started with reinterpretations of history, purification of the language(s) and culture(s), and separations of 'us' and 'them'. Two main avenues for this segregation were education and culture, as the important producers and facilitators of collective memory. In education, the main change was seen in language, history and geography textbooks, which were altered to offer new readings and revaluations of the shared past, borders and culture-based on division. Language became the expression of national identity; therefore the Serbo-Croatian language had to be dismantled, and 'suddenly, the primary, communicative function of language was replaced with the symbolic function' (Pozgaj Hadz, 2014, p.51),[32]a political one. The deliberate dismantling of the Serbo-Croatian language serves as an example of how memory politics function in an instrumental way. This process effectively disconnected a vital thread of shared experience and collective memory. By forgetting the common language they once spoke, people eventually forgot that they could understand one another, thereby solidifying the political borders drawn between them.

Dramaturgy of memory

Having summarised some facts and memory fragments about SFR Yugoslavia, I will now move on to discuss the significance of the creation as well as alteration of cultural memory in the context of Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, emphasising in particular how this memory revision was used to enhance national feeling and to justify the wars that would follow.

[32] The need to forcibly adapt languages to follow separate national identities led to the 'campaigns of linguistic engineering' (Pozgaj Hadz, 2014:75) as well as the exclusion of particular, previously Yugoslav, writers from the textbooks based purely on their ethnicity. There are ongoing language debate and dispute that followed breakup of Yugoslavia. Serbo-Croat (or Croat-Serb) was one of the three official languages spoken in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. With the separation newly formed countries needed to fabricate distinct national languages, therefore now there are Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrian and Serbian language. Regardless of being the same language in the linguistic sense, the difference remains a significant political issue. After years of wasted time and money the International community got around the issue by adopting the acronym BCS (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian).

According to existing research in psychology, memory is the crucial psychological process of constructing meaning (Olick, 2007) and a vital element of our existence and survival, as we need it in order to learn, make sense of the world and belong. Understood as 'the contemporised past' (Assmann J, 2008, p. 129) it defines our actions, and it is central to creating individual and collective identities by generating, upholding and retrieving knowledge and experience. It is impossible to remember every moment that had happened in our life; as individuals, we remember episodic events, moments and sequences from the past, our memory exists in between remembering and forgetting, and according to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, it interacts with 'reference points determined by society' (Halbwachs 1989, p. 51), creating an ongoing dynamic conversation between individual and collective memory. As Jan Assmann similarly clarifies, 'every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These “others”, however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past.' (Assmann J, 1988, p. 127). We could say that one of the main aspects of individual memory is its fragmentation and connectivity. Transported into the theatre language, individual memory could be seen as an interactive performance of fragmentary dramaturgy [fragmentarna dramaturgija]. This term ‘fragmentary dramaturgy’, which does not exist in English theatre theory but is commonly used in former Yugoslav theatre culture, has been described by Duška Radosavljević as 'an open, episodic, non-linear, non-Aristotelian or postmodern dramatic structure' (Radosavljević 2019, p. 316). This analogy between the fragmentary nature of memory and the notion of fragmentary dramaturgy will be useful in my analysis of the practice, where I'll be looking at how this open structure influences subject matter and how (re)connectivity of the fragments offers possibilities for multiple narratives to exist.

Starting from the premise that 'human beings do not only live in the first person singular but also in various formats of first person plural', cultural anthropologist Aleida Assmann (2010, p.37) further develops this network of memory creations by arguing, together with Jan Assmann, for the importance of cultural memory**.** They propose that cultural, individual, social, and political memory represent four main memory formations (Assmann J, 2011). Cultural memory is defined as 'a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation' (Assmann J, 1995, p. 126). It has a normative and formative function, determining value systems and 'motivat[ing] communal action by narrating a shared history' (Assmann J, 2011, p. 123). As a part of collective memory, cultural memory is crucial for the construction of a group's identity and, correspondingly, national identity. The construction of collective memory relies on foundational

'figures of memory' (Assmann J, 1995, p. 129), fixed points from the past that are consolidated, transferred and institutionalised via stories shared through education, art, social rituals and memorialisation practices. The paradox, however, is that these points are highly mouldable, often according to the desired political stance, and they can also intertwine with myths and legends, as I will show further in this section.

According to the socio-constructivist approach, 'the past is not a natural growth but a cultural creation' (Assman J, 2011, p. 33). On a similar line is Jan-Werner Müller's statement that 'memory to some extent *is* political culture' (Müller, 2002, p. 26). Pliant and even unreliable, memory yet contains great power to lead our actions and shape the future. It is the active substance of our conduct, it unites and splits up communities and is often ‘at the heart of issues about national self-determination' (Müller, 2002, p. 9). For this reason, history and cultural memory are sturdily tangled in the formation of the identity, ideals and emotions of a particular group. As Maria Todorova explains, historical memory has been widely used, alongside language, territory and culture as a characterisation of an ethnic group or a nation. It is understood as a 'repository of ideas about the common origin and the past, creating a deep feeling of group solidarity' (Todorova, 2004, p.3). In the same way Aleida Assmann writes 'history turns into memory when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation' (Assmann A, 2006, p.216). There are various examples, such as post-war Europe, British imperial memories and the recent Brexit campaign, of how this interrelation between history and memory could be used (and abused) by the political elite to provoke events with serious political consequences. In his analysis of why memory matters politically, Muller challenges the conflation of history and memory as a 'perspectivist power claim' while also acknowledging that the separation between history and memory is a fabricated dichotomy and proposes that this relation should be seen as 'memory *in* history' in contemporary politics and international relations (Müller, 2002, p.24). This process of remembering involves recalling a segment of the past to be carried into the future. However, when considering a particular cultural memory, there is always a question of why we recall that particular event, segment or person in this moment in the present; what is the intention with it, what would we like to achieve with it; and how do we do it, in what manner do we decide to memorialise it? As pointed out by Ilana Bet-El, who was a Senior Advisor on the Balkans in the UN Department of Political Affairs and senior political analyst with the UN mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina 'part of the power of the words "I remember" is precisely in their ability to reconfigure any event, however long past or collective, into a seemingly real personal memory' (Bet-El, 2002, p. 209). This is precisely why this thesis not only critically examines the potential of collective theatre-making to understand the conflict but further

explores the specific theatrical genre chosen for narrating the traumatic past and envisioning the potential future.

In the case of the Yugoslav wars and contemporary post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, the politics of cultural memory formation are fundamental not only in setting up the scene for the disintegration of a peaceful multicultural society into small, broken and divided states but also for maintaining the conflict more than two decades after the last armed fight. As historian Dubravka Stojanović points out in her analysis, when new states are formed, it involves setting new borders and modifying old ones. This transformation has implications not just for customs, transport, passports and currencies but 'the breakup of formerly common states necessarily means the breakup of a constructed shared historical memory' (Stojanović 2019).[33] Reinterpretation of the past and manipulation of historical facts aimed to spread fear, call for revenge and represent multicultural Yugoslavia as an oppressive state ['tamnica naroda'] that should be dismantled. Pointing out that the revision of history is based on a nationalistic, mythical narrative and antagonised memory and is deeply rooted in several key myths — of victimisation, national exceptionalism, and national injustice — Stojanović shows how cultural memory was redesigned to justify the war. In her analysis, she details how history was reshaped in the desired narrative across all new states born from Yugoslavia by removing certain facts, highlighting others more than they would correspond to historical reality, and even distorting some until they became historical untruths or mythical narratives (2007). It could be argued that in order for the memory of peaceful cohabitation to be erased from collective and cultural memory, the Yugoslav cities with the strongest multi-ethnic populations, such as Vukovar, Dubrovnik, Mostar or Sarajevo, were attacked particularly viciously during the 1990s wars. Similarly, the reasons for the Bosnian war becoming a bloodbath could be linked to the perceived status of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an encapsulation of Yugoslavia itself, often called 'Jugoslavija u malom' ['yugoslavia in miniature']. As Muller observes, in Bosnia 'memory was literally blown up, as monuments, mosques and other concrete manifestations of collective memory were erased, and mnemonic maps were rewritten as normative maps for an ethnically reconfigured future' (Müller, 2002, p. 17). Furthermore, this course of reshaping value systems by heightening national feelings created a strong division between former citizens, who now became ancient enemies. As Stojanović explains, 'it is only through the image of the enemy that the true image of the nation and its exceptionalism is constructed' (Stojanovic, 2017, p. 148). The enemy, or the 'other', was a former neighbour, now portrayed as unreasonable and ungrateful. 'We' had to be restructured and split into 'us', and

[33] https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/balkans-war-historical-memory/

'them'. But who is 'us' and who are 'them'? And if you are 'ours' but criticise 'our' politics, then you are 'them'. The rhetoric that followed was charged with fear, stereotyping and a call for liberation and revenge.

As previously stated, with the rise of nationalistic politics in 1980s Yugoslavia, new stories were needed, and the mainstream cultural scene began to be dominated by historical and nationalistic sentiment. The systematic weaponisation of culture paved the path to war. As Naum Panovski observes, cultural production across the Yugoslav republics was hijacked by 'self-proclaimed "caretakers" of the national health' who used literature, rock music, film, and television 'as negative socio-political matrices for inflaming nationalist sentimenta' (Panovski 1996, p. 10).[34] Popular culture is an important component in the formation and preservation of collective and cultural memory. It remembers the glorious past, sheds light on forgotten or silenced stories of the not-so-glorious past, questions its ethics and processes traumatic events (Gluhović, 2020, 2013; Dragićević Šešić, 2018; Tilmans et al., 2010; Puga 2008). It is a place where 'the past and present coexist' (Plate and Smelik 2013, p. 12). However, popular culture is also an important tool for the fabrication of cultural and historical memory. In her seminal work on the mythic interpretation of history, Stojanović (2017) analyses in detail how two fictional books about the First and Second World Wars (Dobrica Ćosić's[35]*Vreme smrti* and Danko Popović's *Knjiga o Milutinu*) created the reinterpretative framework of the past in favour of Serbian nationalist ideology and within ten years became official historical discourse. Interestingly, the novel *Vreme smrti* [*The Time of Death*], originally written between 1972 and 1979, was adapted into two very popular theatre performances at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade, *Kolubarska bitka*[36] [The Battle of Kolubara, 1983] and *Valjevska bolnica*[37] [*The Valjevo hospital*, 1989]. While *Valjevska bolnica* showed the suffering and misery of WW1, *Kolubarska bitka* became 'one of the key pillars of the surrogate catharsis of the transformed spectator-citizen into

[34] In the process of reinterpretation of shared history and altering collective memories, the takeover of the mass media by political elites helped this radical shift in the understanding of the past. This was mostly done by the centralisation of the media in each republic, employing political supporters in the high positions as editors, implementing censorship, and in some cases by even physically seizing the relays as in the case of Kozara, Prijedor, Bjeljina and Doboj in October and November 1991. Mass media (TV, radio and newspapers) became part of the political strategies and started to reproduce and reinforce the conflict on the scale that the verdict concerning the genocide committed in Srebrenica at the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) trial had recognised the role of propaganda. Likewise, The War Crimes Prosecutor's Office in Serbia is investigating the media's responsibility for inciting war crimes in the early 1990s.

[35] Dobrica Ćosić was a popular Serbian novelist and later politician close to Slobodan Milošević. He was known for his historical and war novels. He played important role in the rise of Serbian nationalism, was called father of the nation [ocem nacije] was one of the signatories of the notoriousnationalist Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Science, died in Belgrade, piecefuly aged 93.

[36] Premiered Jugoslavensko dramsko pozoriste, 1983.

[37] Premiered at Jugoslaovensko dramsko pozoriste, 1989.

the spectator-Serb'[38] (Vučković 2003, p.13, my translation). Theatre historians recorded intense emotional reactions at the performances where the audience behaved as if they participated in the battle, cheering, shouting and crying - 'the play's reception became a social and political phenomenon' (Stojanović, 2013, p. 142). One could wonder if this audience reaction reversed the usual process of memory formation (from living into cultural), transforming this cultural memory of WWI into an embodied living one by making some members of the audience feel as if they lived through the suffering of war from their theatre seats. This corporeal, live, as well as emotional element of the performing arts 'blurs the boundaries between past and present by bringing the past to and in the here and now' (Plate and Smelik, 2013, p.11).

This example of how a fictional work of literature became official historical discourse shows not only how parahistory became mainstream but also highlights the role culture can play in the narrativisation, formation and transfer of memory. Memories are best moulded through storytelling since stories 'are infused with strong emotions communicating far more than historical facts' (Ross, 2013, p. 96). As Aleida Assmann observes, the transformation of personal memories into stories serves to safeguard these memories. She asserts that 'those memories that are tied into narratives and are often rehearsed are best preserved' (Assman A., 2006, p. 213). These shared stories allow individual 'felt memories' to become part of 'constructed meaning', ultimately creating a collective record of a group, community or nation. This interpretive process of memory narrativisation serves as a fundamental mechanism of memory formation, as Assman further elaborates. Furthermore, this possibility of interpretation allows the contestation of memories, opening cultural memories to ongoing reinterpretations. This thought brings us back to the role of theatre in the construction of collective memory and invites the question of what kind of stories we choose to stage, to whom we are telling them and why. In the words of James Thompson, a researcher with extensive practice in war and post-war contexts: 'the act [of telling stories] is not neutral but intertwined with multiple acts of narrative creation' (Thompson, 2005, p. 25). We are born into particular culture, its stories, rituals and symbols. We inherit particular cultural memory that becomes an important part of our identity, we inhabit the understanding of the past it presents us with. Throughout life, we are expected to maintain a particular understanding of the past, including our present as it becomes part of the past, and to pass this understanding on to the next generation born into this cultural memory. However, this process is never a settled or finalised one, but 'the process of interaction between an ever-evolving and accumulating past, and an ever-evolving and accumulating perception of generations of people who are redefining their evaluations of the past, in a word the question not

[38] 'jedan od ključnih stožera surogata katarze transformisanog gledaoca-građanina u gledaoca-Srbina'.

of reconstructing, but of constructing the past' (Todorova, 2004, p.13). Within this process of being born into it, processing it, and passing it on, we can alter and influence cultural memory in a similar way to how we approach theatre adaptation of a piece belonging to our canon, by altering a protagonist, ideology or genre, for example.[39] We can change the stories we decide to tell, refocus the conversation within the inherited stories or just tilt the perspective a bit, as Banksy proposed for the slave-trader Edward Colston statue.[40] This thesis will attempt to answer the question of whether devised comedy could be a mode of adaptation of a particular cultural memory that would lead to a vision of a hopeful future.

Genre of memory

The previous section offers a brief overview of the literature related to cultural memory formation and the peacebuilding process, which are two vital aspects of my practice research context. It emphasises the importance of the dramaturgy of the collective memory and the need to develop a common narrative about the conflict that accommodates multiple conflicting perspectives to ensure they are acknowledged rather than dismissed. Next, I will turn our attention to the genre of memory politics, questioning whether comedy can challenge social and ethnic divisions or if it may be misunderstood as a genre that undermines and disrespects the trauma of war.

In my native Serbo-Croatian language,[41] two words '*sećanje'* and '*pamćenje',* are often used interchangeably to translate the English word 'memory', alongside the more technical term '*memorija'*, which typically refers to computer memory or the capacity to store data. Despite this interchangeability, a subtle nuance exists between '*sećanje'* and '*pamćenje'*. When recollecting or reminiscing about events or people from the past, the verb '*sećati se*' is habitually used, as in the phrase '*sećam se* bilo je to…' ('I recollect it was…'), but when we want the past or the present to be

[39] Split Britches' *Belle Reprieve*, a rewrite of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* from a feminist/queer perspective as a vivid example of complex re-shaping of canonical stories we tell. This performance shifted genre, ideology and theatrical form. From naturalism it shifted to performance cabaret, it played with multiple layers of identity (Blanche DuBois was a beautiful drag queen, the star of the show, Stanley was Stella's butch lover, and Stella was queer and femme) as well cultural layers through citations of a film version of Elia Kazan. An important moment is when in the story Blanche refuses to have unhappy ending and decide to refocus the conversation and resist the author 'I know that happens in the original play but this is not going to happened in this play, I'm going to stand up'.

[40] https://www.instagram.com/p/CBNmTVZsDKS/ 'What should we do with the empty plinth in the middle of Bristol? Here's an idea that caters for both those who miss the Colston statue and those who don't. We drag him out the water, put him back on the plinth, tie cable round his neck and commission some life size bronze statues of protestors in the act of pulling him down. Everyone happy. A famous day commemorated.' Banksy on Instagram, 9/07/2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CBNmTVZsDKS/

[41] I'm using term Serbo-Croat (SC) as this is important for my identity.

carried further into/for the future, the verb *pamtiti (*noun *pamćenje*), as in the imperative '*pamti'* or *'zapamti'* (*'remember'*). This distinction is further nuanced by the derived term, *zlo-pamtiti,* which means to remember with vengeance. This inclusion of *zlo* ('evil') qualifies the mode of remembrance, raising deeper questions on ethics and intentionality underlying remembering. It invites reflection on whether memory is wielded to perpetuate fear and seek retribution or to foster learning, healing, and reconciliation. Framed within an Aristotelian vocabulary of theatre, this also prompts consideration of the genre of remembrance—whether tragic, comic, or satirical—and the kinds of affective and ethical responses we seek to evoke in an audience.

As shown in the previous section, in the last decade of the 20th century in Yugoslavia, collective and cultural memory underwent a significant transformation, marked by a shift from internationalism to nationalism. During this period, we witnessed the potential of popular culture, including theatre, to establish fixed memory points that can be used to incite anger, foster division and maintain conflict. This process was not a neutral act of recollecting the past events, rather, it was a strategic one, best understood through the concept of *zlopamtiti*. The nationalist appropriation of cultural memory operated on this very principle - not to document the past, but to weaponise it, ensuring that the historical grievances continued to fuel future hostilities. Nevertheless, this process is not immutable. As Marc Howard Ross observes, the malleability of memory also allows for the potential to create a counter-narrative. He notes that because social processes can alter collective memories, there is a possibility to enrich, modify, and recontextualise these memories in ways that may diminish hostility and distrust while fostering intergroup cooperation (Ross, 2013, p.98). A good example of how theatre can benefit the creation of unity could be found in Milija Gluhović's comprehensive research on the theatrical representation of the Second World War memories in Europe, where he argues that staging complex and distinct stories from the past could be a powerful instrument for creating collective memory and sense of common European identity that includes differing memories' which would allow the peoples of the continent to take a reflexive view of themselves in light of others' experience' (2013, p.7). This corelates with Sonja Kuftinec's understanding of theatre as a place where opposite sides meet to 'affectively illuminate how truths collide rather than to stake out oppositional claims or resolve binary conflicts' (Kuftinec, 2009, p. xiv). Most theatre practitioners who are working in post-conflict settings value the theatre's potential to challenge, construct, and deconstruct different narratives while offering space for multiple positions without enforcing the pretence that conflict should be resolved. Instead, the central aim becomes one of transformation, seeking to 'transform the practitioners, the participants and the public's existing knowledge and experience' (Schechner & Thompson, 2004, p.13). Theatre is often recognised as an ethical space for

creating and reflecting on memories and narratives; redefining social rules and ethical relationships; relating the experience of the groups to their cultural, social and historical contexts, developing relationships and communications in divided societies, providing relief and figuring out empathy and affect; (Thompson, 2013, 2008, 2002; Zelizer, 2010; Kuftinec, 2009; Schinina, 2004; Schechner & Thompson, 2004). The methodologies employed are equally diverse, encompassing traditional rituals, forum theatre, autobiographical or documentary performances, as well as adaptation of classical plays or performances of new writing (Dolečki et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2011; Thompson, 2010). Some productions are developed collaboratively with communities that lack professional performance training, while others are staged by artists with formal training in the performing arts. Ultimately, the aesthetics and approach of theatre-making are not predetermined – rather, they are shaped by the specificities of the conflict, cultural nuances, and the communities engaged in the creative process.

Comedy and peacebuilding

What is noticeable from this literature review of theatre practices in conflict and post-conflict zones is the lack of comedy as a focus of the literature. However, the power of laughter as a healing and coping mechanism is frequently acknowledged (Cohen et al., 2011; Thompson, 2008; Kuftinec, 2009) and the importance of acts of joy and playfulness are emphasised as 'an assertive rejection of the brutality of violence' (Thompson 2013, p.155). In the words of theatre company Masrah Al-Arab from Lebanon which worked with young people during the 2006 Lebanon war, ingrained in the joy and play is an 'attitude to life – a way never to take things too seriously and a secure place to deal with serious issues' (Thompson 2010, p.38). Through history and across cultures, we can find examples of jokes, comedy and laughter working as survival mechanisms through difficult and dark moments as well as a form of resistance and a way of creating unity within the oppressed groups (Bakhtin, 1984; Greenberg, 2019; Lipman, 1993; Paschel, 2016; Stojanović, 2023). For example, writing about theatre in Sarajevo during the 1990s' war, Davor Diklić explains that within a diverse repertoire of local theatres, theatre of the absurd and comedy created a significant part of the wartime repertoire. Bosnian philosopher Sulejman Bosto further suggests in his testimony recalling cultural activity during wartime Sarajevo that comedies performed during the siege 'offered defence against evil and death through humour and irony' (Bosto, 2004, p.57, my translation), emphasising further that the true value of these performances lay in their siding with life in the conflict of life and death[42]. Likewise, in his analysis of the repertoire of theatre groups that performed in the Terezin

[42] In original: 'u ovom konfliktu života i smrti, u kojem svi ovi umjetnici nude život' (Bosto 2004:57)

Ghetto, Lisa Peschel (2016) points out that they regularly used comic allegory to deal with everyday reality in the ghetto. More recently, literature has emerged that offers interesting insights into the role of humour during conflicts, such as Üngör and Verkerke's (2015) analyses of humour and genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Syria, or Wilding's (2006) and Peacock's (2016) case study of clowning in conflict zones.[43] Both studies emphasise the important effect that humour has in the context of survival, as a 'complex mechanism for coping with anxiety and fear [and] protest culture against the oppressor' (Üngör and Verkerke 2015, pp. 80–83). In his article 'Laughing our way to peace or war', peacebuilding scholar Craig Zelizer (2010) concludes that the potential of humour in the process of reconciliation is yet to be studied.

A foundational question, or rather a foundational doubt, underpins this PhD project is whether the genre of comedy can engage with difficult narratives without undermining their gravity. This inquiry is anchored in the intricate relationship between comedy and tragedy. In his work on comedy, Matthew Bevis asserts that 'comedy does not preclude tragedy; it presupposes it' (2013, p. 96), an understanding that also resonated with Aristotle's understanding of comedy as a plot 'where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies — like Orestes and Aegisthus — quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain' (Aristotle, 2000, p.18). Therefore, this thesis proposes that this interplay provides a crucial framework for exploring conflicting narratives. This theoretical proposition was vividly confirmed in the first workshop by a seventeen-year-old student DJ.M. from Prijedor, who defined comedy as 'the art of telling tragedy through laughter' (Personal journal, 2016). There are three initial reasons why I have chosen comedy as a genre[44]**.** Firstly, comedy acts as a significant vehicle for fostering community, effectively addressing humour's fundamental social function, which includes 'relief of tension, anxiety or fear; breach of inhibitions; and celebration of consociality' (Palmer, 1994, p.62). The laughter, fun, and playfulness inherent in comedy challenge socially imposed hostility and the dehumanisation of the 'other'. Secondly, the comedies' ability to challenge the traditional social conventions by 'subversions of our commonplace expectations, including our expectations concerning standard emotional scenarios and schemas, our norms of grace, taste, and even the very forms of comedy itself' (Carroll, 2014, p.27). In his study *On Humour*, philosopher Simon Critchley emphasises that 'humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke […] suddenly and explosively [humour] lets us see the familiar defamiliarised, the ordinary made extraordinary' (2002,

[43] Comedy and humour are two different but interconnected terms that I will be using throughout the thesis. For clarification I'll be using 'comedy' to refer specifically to genre, and 'humour', 'humorous', 'laughter' or 'comical' for more general purposes.

[44] The fourth function of comedy as mechanism for authority disruption I identified throughout the process.

p.1). Drawing from this defamiliarisation of the familiar, I have opted for comedy as a genre of critical narrative. This possibility to challenge social norms through playfulness is a quality we can track through theatre history, from Aristophanes' comedies that dealt with important political issues related to Athenian politics, Molière's critiques of courtly life and hypocrisy or Dario Fo's political satire. Thirdly, comedy can be understood as a 'form of life-affirming purification' (Bevis, 2013, p. 8), as Matthew Bevis notes, writing about the aetiology of comedy in the context of ritual. Comedy storylines often draw us into the dark and tragic world of misfortune where injustice is done and characters suffer trouble, however, fortunate resolutions turn the tragic story into a comedy, 'a story in which people can believe their luck' (Bevis, 2013, p. 53). This position of the hopeful future I understand as a political position alongside which I wanted to locate my practice research.

In addition to these three main reasons for comedy, I'm entering this practice research with an important reservation regarding the practice of comedy. Humour is characterised by sharing. This characteristic can unite people, even people from opposite sides and people in conflict. On the other hand, the act of sharing a joke with a group can function as a mechanism for exclusion and ostracism, as seen in antisemitic caricatures in Nazi Germany and in various racist and sexist jokes that persist in contemporary discourse. Racist humour, defined as humour 'which expresses false and unflattering beliefs about an ethnic group' (Philips, 1984, p. 87), relies on negative stereotypes of a particular ethnic group. Moreover, as humour is a 'source of social information' (Carroll, 2014, p. 76), it fabricates and reconstructs the categories of 'us' – the pillars of appropriate norms – and 'them' the ones that 'deviate from the norms commemorated by the comic amusement in which *us* participate' (Carroll, 2014, p. 77).[45] This is uncomfortably relevant for the work in the ethnically divided Bosnian society that has not yet accepted 'the other' as equal and cherishes strong negative stereotypes of the opposite group. This notion of 'us' and 'them' is very ambiguous, although a crucial one. History offers plenty of examples of certain groups being responsible for horrible atrocities and injustices when 'us' starts feeling superior over 'them' based on race, nationality, gender, religion, ethnicity, class, ability or even eye colour. On the other side, there are similar examples when this division into 'us' and 'them' brought positive changes and prosperity. It is useful to note that this classification is not a priori, negative or positive; quality is determined by what is taken as a ground for this distinction and what one's actions regarding it[46] are.

[45] Italic in original.

[46] Like a joke this division needs to be seen in the context: who is telling a joke, to whom, and why – who are 'us' and 'them', what is the base of division.

The aim of this practice research is to use devised comedy to destabilise the foundations of 'us' and 'them', moving them away from ethnonationalist imperatives - having in mind Dragan Klaić's optimism that 'with some luck, the next generation might free itself from the restraints and one-dimensionality of ethnic or religious identity and assert themselves as citizens in the first place' (Klaić 2008:86). By engaging with the dramaturgy of memory and its transformation through narrativisation, this research is guided by Aleida Assman and Linda Shortt's premise that while the past is fixed, 'our perception, our narratives, our memory constructs of these events can' be changed (Assman & Shortt, 2012, p. 13). The central PhD inquiry will explore how devised comedy can support the post-conflict reconciliation by creating a discursive space for navigating conflicting stories in a way that fosters intergroup cooperation, rather than perpetuating the cycles of retaliation that characterise *zlopamćenje* [remembering with vengeance/malice].

Comedy culture in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Returning to Diklić's observation that the interplay between tragedy and comedy functioned as a coping mechanism during the siege of Sarajevo during the 1990s, it is important to notice that humour and comedy were not only sudden coping mechanisms employed to deal with the war and dehumanisation but were, and still are, an integral part of everyday life. They play a significant role in popular culture and alternative art movements within the cultural and political landscape of contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina and the former Yugoslavia. Besides a prominent manifestation of the oral tradition of telling jokes ['pričanje viceva'] that is still very much present in social interaction in the region,[47] there is also a strong tradition of political cartoons[48] and aphorisms[49] using humour as a way to question social norms, confront political power or resist social oppression. A brief review of the history of Yugoslav theatre testifies to the high cultural status of comedy. Jovan Sterija Popović (1806-1856) and Branislav Nušić (1864-1938) were significant dramatists whose 'comedies of mentality' and satirical plays belong to the classical canon and are still widely staged. [50] Their

[47] Other important oral traditions are šaljive pesme [humorous songs] and šaljive priče [humorous stories], first time collected and published in the 19th century by prominent linguist and scholar Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. Their characteristic are the linguistic play with meaning but also the focus on the character as well as situations and narrative.

[48] Korax and Petričić are well known cartoonist who regularly criticised the political scene through the 1990's.

[49] In Yugoslavia there were several journals and radio shows that regularly dedicated space for the aphorisms such as, Ošišani jež, Radio Beograd (Beograde dobro jutro), Ilustrovana politika, Etna, to name just a few. The writers of aforisms were well respected (Dusko Radović, Vlada Bulatović Vid, Milovan Vitezović) and published.

[50] These are Serbian authors, however their work has reacheed beyond the national frame and influenced the Yugoslav cultural space that Bosna-Herzegovina was part of it. It is interesting that Nušić was the artistic director of the National Theatre in Sarajevo from 1925-1927 and his work is still widely staged and celebrated in Bosnia.

tradition of perceiving and presenting life as bitter tragi-comedy is continued through the contemporary work of Aleksandar Popović (1929-1996), Ivo Brešan (1936-2017) and Dušan Kovačević (1948),[51] whose comedic plays, often embedded in the theatre of the absurd, challenged established narratives and opened debates about social transformation.[52] Some of these comedies also became an integral part of popular culture through film adaptations.[53]

Comedy and drama are the favoured genres of contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovinian audiences, as testified not only by the theatre repertoires where this genre of comedy occupies a significant place, but also by numerous theatre festivals with a particular focus on comedy, such as the regional festival 'Osmijeh Sarajeva' [The Smile fo Sarajevo] or the international comedy festival 'Mostarska liska' [Mostar Coot][54]. This trend could also be traced during the Yugoslav period by looking at any of the *Godišnjak Jugoslovenskih pozorišta* [Yearly overview of Yugoslav theatres][55] or recalling the cult comedy show *Audicija* [Audition] premiered in 1984, at Otvorena scena Obala [Open stage Obala] in Sarajevo, and performed over 3,000 times across Yugoslavia. Furthermore, humour as a form of subversion played an important role in the multidisciplinary anti-establishment art movements in the 1980s, such as the *Novi talas* [New Wave], Ljubljana's *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK)[56] and Sarajevo's the *New Primitives*[57] art collective formed in 1983. The New Primitives' main characteristics were the use of absurdity, surrealism and self-irony. Having ordinary people as protagonists and incorporating the language of the Sarajevo neighbourhood [mahala], this very local subcultural phenomenon became very popular across Yugoslavia through the TV series *Top lista*

[51] Dušan Kovačević is also an Serbian author that transcends national identity, as several movies that obtained the cult status within the popular Yugoslav culture were based on his palys *Ko to tamo peva, Balkanski špijun* and *Maratonci trče počasni* krug.
[52] For further analyses of meta-theatrical elements of Kovačević's work see Duška Radosavljević's *Metatheatre As A Political Tool In Yugoslav Drama In The 1980s And 1990s.*
[53] Yugoslav cinematography embraced this interplay between tragedy and comedy. Crni talas [Black Wave] of Yugoslav cinematography was a movement that brought about dark humour in their social and political critique (Dušan Makavejev, Aleksandar Saša Petrović, Lordan Zafranović are some of the names). They were, together with filmmakers belonging to the group internally known as th Prague School - 'praška škola' (Goran Paskaljevic, Emir Kusturica, Goran Markovic) internationally recognised and some of their movies are considered world cinema classics.
[54] 'liska' is the name of the bird but in Mostar's slang it represents local wits and creative, humorous minds.
[55] For example, the 1983/1984 Godišnjak shows that across 97 theatres, there were 12 premiers of Ivo Brešan's plays, 25 premiers of five Dušan Kovačević's plays (Balkanski špijun being staged in 15 and Sabirni centar in 7 theatres across Yugoslavia), Branislav Nušić Sumnjivo lice having 8 premiers, together with 13 of his other six plays. Sterija Popović having 13 premiers, together with numerous other comedies such as work of Fadil Hadžić (28 premiers of 12 plays) Together with 12 premiers of 8 plays by George Feydeau, three play by NIkolai Gogol, six production of five J.B. Mollier's plays.
[56] NSK is an art movement (including Laibach, IRWIN, Noordung, New Collectivism and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy) formed in 1984 in Ljubljana. In 1992 they created an independent art state that existed beyond physical borders (see https://nskstate.com/)
[57] The name of the movement was originally in English.

nadrealista [*The Surrealists' Chart Toppers*][58] that presented a weekly sketch comedy show from 1984 until the movement officially ended in 1987. However, their legacy continued. For future research, compering the different approaches to humour used by these three Yugoslav movements, along with their aestheticisation of kitsch in addressing national identity and modes of socio-political dysfunction/functioning, would be interesting. This brief overview of the comedy culture in Bosnia-Herzegovina is necessary, not only to place my proposed research project within a cultural context but also to acknowledge the influence of these movements (the satire of the New Primitives and the tragicomical aspect of Kovačević's work in particular) on the contemporary Bosnian culture and the importance of these cultural references for the young people that participated in the theatre projects conducted as part of this research project.[59]

[58] For more on Top Lista Nadrealista see Erol Handžar 2020.

[59] Similarly, it is worth noting (in the context of the shared cultural space of former Yugoslavia) that humour has also played an important role in anti-government and anti-war protests in Serbia through the 1990s and in 2020 anti-government protests Slovenia. For more on humour and the carnivalesque quality of the protests in Serbia see Milena-Dragićević Šešić's *Umetnost i kultura otpora* (2018) and Janjira Sombatpoonsiri's *Humor and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia* (2015)

Chapter Two: Methodology

The previous chapter provided key aspects central to my practice research context by reviewing the intertwining points between peacebuilding, memory, theatre and comedy studies. In this section, I will present interstitial improvisation as a specific research methodology employed in this practice research, clarify the documentation process and elaborate on my position within this research.

Practice research

In order to conceptualise the journey of this PhD enquiry and to articulate a research methodology deployed in this artistic investigation, I have turned to existing methodologies that advocate for the interconnectedness between research and practice and '[pursue] hybrid enquiries combining creative doing with reflexive being, thus fashioning freshly critical interactions between current epistemologies and ontologies' (Kershaw 2011, p. 66). The practical element is fundamental for this inquiry, not only because it is a continuation of my work as a theatre director but also because the practice provided the only viable mode of investigation into my research question 'what can devised comedy theatre bring to post-war reconciliation?'

From initial research into the practice research methodologies, it was evident that there was a strong agreement for practice to be 'the principal research activity' (Haseman, 2006, p. 7) or that it is 'submitted as substantial evidence of research inquiry' (Nelson, 2013, p. 9). However, the interpretation of this connection between practice and research opened up the debate on the process, documentation, position of the researcher and ways of knowing, producing a range of terminology – 'practice as research' (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011; Nelson, 2013), 'practice-led research' (Smith & Dean, 2009; Sullivan, 2009), 'practice-based research' (Candy, 2006), art based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012) or art-based research (McNIff, 2009) to mention just the foremost ones. The recent tendency, the 'second wave' (Hann, 2015) of practice as research, proposes the use of 'practice research' as an umbrella term that is 'loose enough that it does not privilege any of these sub-debates, while also being new enough that it invites a focus on the future' (Hann, 2015, p.5). In this thesis, I use the term 'practice research' as very valuable in relieving any binarity between research and practice in order to understand it as a 'polyphonic conversation [that] implies overlapping and concurrent voices' (Mackey, 2016). However, when referring to the work of researchers and practitioners, I will use the variations they use in order to be true to their choices.

As I have mentioned before, the complex position of my practice research that sits in-between three academic disciplines of peacebuilding, comedy and theatre studies and in between theatre and peacebuilding spaces asks for continuous negotiation of different voices, ideas and intentions. There are three elements of practice research methodology that are fundamental for my inquiry: first is the ability to 'embrace contradictions' (Kershaw, 2013, p. 65), second is the perception of knowing as 'a continuing process of negotiation between various modes (knowing-how, knowing-what, knowing-that)' (Nelson, 2013, p. 58), and third is the complexity of the practitioners-researchers' positions as 'subjects of the research as well as the authors of its ideas' (Mackey, 2016, p. 481). Therefore, this thesis adopts practice research as its core methodological framework. This choice is strategically aligned with the inherently interdisciplinary and negotiated nature of my thesis, offering a robust structure for navigating the polyphonic and often contradictory voices, ideas, and spaces that characterise my inquiry.

Interstitial improvisation

In an attempt to further articulate the practice research methodology that can encompass various, often opposing, and conflicting elements, I have continuously returned to the notion of interstitial space. This concept refers to an in-between position, a relational standpoint that explicitly acknowledges interconnectedness and interdependence. It serves as a lens through which I investigate the possibilities devised comedy can bring into the dynamic interaction among different peacebuilding and theatre-making elements and explores their interconnectedness and interdependence.

In architecture, 'interstitial space' refers to a space between an external wall and an inside room designed to prevent damaging condensation. It can also refer to an 'intermediate space located between regular-use floors, commonly located in hospitals and laboratory-type buildings to allow space for the mechanical systems of the building' (Wikipedia)[60]. These are the essential, yet often overlooked, in-between areas — like hallways, staircases, and waiting areas — that connect our defined urban environments. They are crucial yet frequently overlooked areas that exist between distinct urban environments, including hallways, staircases, and waiting areas. They play an essential role as connective elements, providing mental transitions between different areas and offering

[60] While there are several architectural sources that philosophically and aesthetically discuss the concept of interstitial spaces within buildings, cities, and urbanism—such as Rem Koolhaas's 'Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan' (1978) and Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's 'Collage City' (1978)—this Wikipedia entry provides the most straightforward explanation needed here.

opportunities for brief retreats, contemplation, or spontaneous social interactions (Abdel & Pintos, 2022). In medicine, 'interstitial space' is a fluid-filled space in between cells, vessels, muscles and organs that provides a 'structural environment surrounding those cells' (Stewart, 2020). Thus, it is a fluid space outside the main features but essential for the functioning of the bigger organism. Analogously, within my research, I conceptualise the interstitial space as a connective, in-between position that emerges outside the centre, among official authorities and communities, between peacebuilding objectives and theatre-making processes, and across ethnic and generational divides. I operationalise this concept as a methodological stance: a fluid, connective position that cultivates the potential for contemplative reflection and spontaneous social interaction.

This concept of interstitial space, not belonging to the main spaces but being crucial for their functioning, can also be compared to bell hooks' understanding of the 'margin' as a space of radical openness, possibility and resistance that offers a different view 'both from the outside in and from the inside out' that confronts the authority, questions dominant narratives, uncovers unknowns and queries who is telling a story to whom? In her words, 'to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body' (hooks, 1989, p. 82). Margins and interstices are however two different kinds of spaces – one (the margin) is visible, liminal and acknowledges clear division, the other (the interstice) is less detached as it is enmeshed within the main structure. However, both exist away from the centre, and that awayness is their political location. It could be suggested that an outside/ in-between position is a good place from which to enter the spaces, circulate and bring connections between fragmented spaces[61]. I will argue in a later chapter that this notion of the interstice correlates with the position that young people have within a patriarchal society, the position that theatre (and art) has within peacebuilding initiatives and the position that comedy is often found to have on the fringes of theatre genres but within them too. In this thesis, I will look at how this decentralised interstitial position allows resistance, (inter)action and connection with the centre. Working from the space hidden from the main features but omnipresent within the body is not only a useful understanding of how I, as a researcher and as a director, have approached the work to get the project running, but it also encapsulates a political consideration of the practice.

Fluidity of the interstitial space also implies flexibility and flow. As such, it correlates with the element of improvisation, understood as a spontaneous imaginative action to overcome the obstacles, a journey that embraces unpredictability and an in-the-moment negotiation of various perspectives and possibilities. Improvisation is a multifaceted term that encompasses both processes

[61] 'intuitive messiness and aesthetic ambiguity are integral to researching theatre and performance, where relationships between the researcher and the researched are often fluid, improvised and responsive' (Kershaw & Nicholson 2011:2) – mozda koristan citat

as well as forms within the realm of art. It is a training methodology, an integral part of the devising process, and a performance form in its own right (Frost and Yarrow, 2007; Caines and Heble, 2015). At the core of improvisation is learning to listen to others, letting go of preconceived notions, embracing the unknown, and responding in the moment without judgement or hesitation (Spolin, 1963/2017; Johnston, K. 1981/2016; Johnston, C. 2006 ; Wright, 2006; Boal, 1992). It demands adaptability and flexibility, presenting various paradoxes. For instance, there is the contradiction of taking actions that are both spontaneous and structured, the idea that relinquishing control fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas, and the notion that it is a 'highly specialised and often taken-for-granted capacity' (Ravn et al., 2021). Beyond the artistic sphere, improvisation is also a significant area of study in social science, where it is explored as a vital component of our daily life and our social interactions (Born et al, 2017; Crossley, 2021) or a support for change within organisations and communities (Robinss Dudeck and McClure, 2018). This points out that improvisation is not just a technique, but a crucial element of human interaction that requires the ability to respond creatively and effectively to changing circumstances. As George Lipsitz observes in his analyses of the Afro-diasporic music, improvisation is a way of knowing and being through 'imaginative repositioning' (2015, p.11). This understanding resonated strongly with my position and sentiment about entering the sensitive space of trauma, narrative disagreement, and power imbalance.

Later in the thesis, I discuss further the use of improvisation in my directorial methodology and its effect within the creative process. Here, I would like to emphasise two aspects that are fundamental for this practice research methodology of interstitial improvisation. First is the conversational quality of improvisation based on listening and responding. Second is the understanding of improvisation as an action that requires all our knowledge and skills put together in the process of trial and error. These qualities are central to the proposed practice research methodology rooted in the process of 'doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing' (Nelson 2013, p.33). However, as Trimingham rightly observes in her very early piece on practice as[62] research (2002), this process is a 'hermeneutic-interpretative spiral model where progress is not linear but circular; a spiral which constantly returns us to our original point of entry but with renewed understanding' (Trimingham 2002, p.56). This spiral progression was evident in my practice research, as each piece of praxis would start from the same methodological point of entry based on comedy and devising, and with each praxis, I gained a new understanding and highlighted different aspects of my praxis. However, the spiral process evolved into a tendril, facilitating the development of an answer to my research question not through the same circles but through a spring-like connection of opposing helices.

[62] I am keeping the Trimingham use of term.

Documentation

As I was entering this academic enquiry from the prior position of the practitioner, I came back to Trimingham's statement that for practice to be recognised as research, it has to be subjected to 'analyses and commentary', be conducted 'for the benefits of others apart from the researcher themselves', and its outcomes can't remain in the realm of embodied knowledge but have to be 'translated into analytical language' (Trimingham, 2002, p. 54). This distinction between academic and artistic research also shaped how and why the process and practice will be captured and documentation assembled in order to 'assist in *articulating and evidencing the research inquiry*' (Nelson 2013, p. 90)[63]. Acknowledging the 'sheer difficulty of capturing the process and events' (Nelson 2013, p. 71) and being aware that, in addition, my practice is set outside university, in another country in fact, so supervisors or examiners will not going to be able to experience it in person, I have applied multiple methods in order to (as comprehensively as possible) document the practice and to make the process transparent. This includes video documentation to capture visual insights and audience reactions, and journaling to record observations and reflections, as well as the collection of reports, questionnaires, and interviews conducted by Most Mira, which provide valuable insights from the perspective of peacebuilding objectives. Through the course of four years, while refining both the practice and methodology, I have critically examined the modes of documentation, embracing models that work and rejecting futile and inefficient elements. Initially, feeling obliged to video record as much of the process as possible to 'truthfully' capture the practice, with the first project, I experienced the trap of being caught up in a 'frenzy of documentation' (Nelson, 2006, p. 80). I came to recognise that the presence of a camera can disrupt the delicate social dynamics of the workshop environment and I discovered that the most valuable research insights often emerge from reflective practices rather than from reviewing raw footage. Frantic video recording of the process was therefore abandoned after the first piece of praxis as an inefficient method. The video from the rehearsal room, filmed by me, will not be included in this submission.

Modes of documentation that do capture the process and practice effectively and will be referenced in the thesis include: a) modes of auto-documentation through a reflective journal and my rehearsal notes, b) photo material from rehearsals c) video clips taken by participants, c) Facebook group correspondence, d) participant feedback, e) video footage of the final performances and f) final play-texts. I will include case studies, interviews and evaluation reports conducted by NGO Most Mira and

[63] Italic in original.

collected to follow the impact of the projects, as these were obtained from a peacebuilding aspect of the project. This approach was beneficial, as it allowed me to analyse how specific artistic methods directly influenced the peacebuilding core objectives. It is important to contextualise the feedback received from participants. While facilitators, who come from a social position of authority, were more open to offering constructive criticism, the formal feedback from young people was predominantly positive. This reluctance to offer negative feedback can be attributed to several factors. First, the inherent power imbalance inherent in top-down educational systems likely caused young people to fear potential reprisals or jeopardising future opportunities. Second, a genuine desire to express gratitude for the opportunity may have made negative feedback feel like an act of ingratitude. Finally, a potential general distrust in official institutions could have undermined their belief that the feedback process was meaningful. Consequently, the critical remarks that did emerge were particularly insightful, as they signified that a sufficient level of trust had been established to foster a genuinely open dialogue.

Most of the conversations were conducted in the Bosnian language, and the feedback citations presented in the thesis are English translations done by me or Most Mira. I will also use Bosnian newspaper articles about the productions to offer an insight into how the projects were perceived within the society more broadly. When it came to presenting and commenting on the praxis, I decided to use participants' initials instead of their full names to avoid emphasising ethnic distinctions. By doing so, I aim to consciously prevent categorisation by ethnicity. Ultimately, this approach ensures that the focus remains on the collective process and the artistic work, rather than on individual or ethnic identities. In the end, it is important to acknowledge that while some processes of researching, reflecting and doing were employed simultaneously, some aspects of the practice will be analysed retroactively. This multi-layered archive, consisting of both real-time documentation and retrospective analysis, will serve as a crucial foundation for this practice research inquiry.

Positioning

I'm standing in the field, a no-man's-land in between the Serbian village of Petrov Gaj and the Muslim village of Kevljani in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Leaning on the goalpost, surrounded by the remains of a house, a cultural centre and a school - three buildings that represent important aspects of identity, ideology and memory formation. But I'm not from this place. I'm not even from Bosnia-Herzegovina. I am a theatre director originally from Belgrade (now Serbia), currently living in London

(UK). I was born in Yugoslavia, a country that started dissolving while I was in my late teens. I come from a country that no longer exists, except in the memories and myths of those who lived part of their lives during its existence. I do have two different passports that state two different official nationalities, however, I do not have an intimate feeling that I do belong to any particular nation I have/had once, I am/was a Yugoslav. Similarly, I can be from mythological Atlantis.

'Why do you come here?' With true curiosity in their voices, young people, teachers, facilitators, and even officials posed this question to me more than once during these ten years that I've been coming to Prijedor. I'm not from the area; I do not have any family ties, no ancestors, nor personal memories or any connections, and that's something that puzzles everyone.

'Because of a cup of coffee' would be one of my answers. One day in spring 2009, I met a friend for a coffee before seeing a movie at the National Film Theatre in London's Southbank. Zrinka Bralo is an ex-journalist originally from Sarajevo, an activist for refugee rights, and founder of the charity organisation Migrants Organise in London. Now, with a few people from Bosnia and the UK, she was setting up a small charity, Most Mira, that would work with youth groups in Bosnia using art to support peacebuilding. Their approach was based on three main points: working with young people, using art and avoiding direct political focus. They were preparing a pilot peacebuilding project, an art festival for 250 kids from ethnically segregated communities. The funding was very tight, and she was looking for volunteers. Given my professional and personal background, I was an obvious candidate for a volunteer with an art background, and I speak the language. In April 2009, I arrived in Prijedor as part of a small team that organised the first week-long art festival. For the festival to happen, five of us on the ground (four English-speaking women from a peacebuilding background) and I (the only native speaker) began conversations and negotiations with schools, the officials and the community. After some successful lobbying, community efforts and a lot of cleaning and sweeping, in July 2009, Most Mira held its art festival. For a week, more than two hundred kids aged 8-14 from four ethnically segregated schools ran around the field, played, created music, art and theatre. In the next three years, we would hold festivals annually, and the organisers brought together 120 international volunteers from 16 countries (artists, filmmakers, academics and students) and more than 1500 young people from different ethnic backgrounds, as well as their teachers and parents. The refurbished cultural centre had new windows and a new roof, but the bullet holes remained.

'Because I believe in the importance of theatre' would be another answer. I'm a theatre director, and I always understood it as a playful and complex way to interrogate what it means to be human. With my first professional production, *Kafka's Dick* by Alan Bennett at the National Theatre in Belgrade,

I've experienced a collision of turbulent historical events, the absurdity of the regime policies and the excitement and joy of creating theatre. Just a few weeks into the rehearsals, the NATO bombing of Serbia started, and we had to stop rehearsals. Realising that I couldn't find anything better to do during the bombing but to play in the theatre with the actors, we walked back into the rehearsal room. Indeed, it was this play that reopened the National Theatre in Belgrade after the bombing, but a few months later, under the new directorial regime, it was taken off the repertoire following the unofficial political ban of all American and English plays at the National Theatre. As a theatre director shaped by that experience, I believe that the most extraordinary moments happen in-between laughter and tragedy.

'Why not?' is my final answer. Throughout my life, I've lived and worked in different cities and countries. It happened that by chance, I came to this part of the planet. So why not play here? However, I am also mindful that my involvement can't be seen as neutral and apolitical. I am Serbian by my accent, Slovenian by passport, Montenegrian as well as Bosnian-Jewish by my surname, and a Londoner by my place of residence. This complex manifestation of identity has allowed me flexibility in conversations with local communities and with officials. It was certainly helpful when I had to negotiate the proposed festival themes sitting at the same table with the principal of a primary school in Kozarac, (who was a concentration camp survivor) and the principal of a primary school in Omarska, (who belonged to the mainstream political party that denied committed crimes). I was not from Bosnia-Herzegovina, but I spoke the language and knew the culture. I was approved by the Serbian side for my accent and by the Muslim side for my Slovenian heritage and for my lodgings in the Muslim village, Kevljani, in the house of a concentration camp survivor. However, as for lasting relationships with the community and young people, I had to earn them through my work.

My position is that of an outsider who has, over time, become a native outsider - 'naša [our] other'. This identity exists in a state of flux, within the interstitial space between changeable definitions of 'us' and 'them,' eluding fixed classification. Drawing on Tim Prentki's reflection on fools and tricksters as figures defined by non-belonging, I see my role as a researcher as akin to that of the Fool: a 'figure of fluidity and insinuation, at once nowhere and everywhere, intrinsically at odds with a classical canon of separation and decorum' (Prentki, 2012, p. 121). Occupying this in-between, Fool-like position allows me to engage with both criticality and creative potential. I find myself outside the dominant buildings, memories, and narratives, yet perpetually in relation to them. It is within this space of present awayness as a political location that new questions emerge, contradictions are held in productive tension, and new understandings arise precisely through friction.

Chapter Three: Analysis of the praxis documentation

The aim of this chapter is to reflect upon the practice research into the potential of devised comedy to support a process of peacebuilding by offering a space for the exploration of complex narratives and fostering meaningful conflict transformation. The praxis forming part of the PhD took place between 2016 and 2018. It consists of three original theatre pieces *Dan jednog baksuza* [A Day in the Life of an Unlucky Man] (2016), *Brkići* [The Moustache Family] (2017) and *Tu i tamo* [Here and There] (2018) [64], devised with young people from the Prijedor municipality, performed in the local Prijedor Theatre and later toured to several other towns and communities. In the thesis, I will refer to the theatre pieces using abbreviated titles for *Baksuz* (2016), *Brkići* (2017), and *Zemlja* (2018). The commentary will provide a comprehensive analysed of the praxis, exploring its origins and the rationale that underpins it. Subsequent analyses will follow a chronological framework to emphasise the repeated starting points and highlight new discoveries that praxis uncovered.

Setting the Stage

As noted in the Introduction, the practice forming part of this PhD research builds upon my prior work of running art and text-based theatre projects as part of Most Mira's peacebuilding efforts in Prijedor (2009-2016). After four art festivals, due to a lack of funding in 2012, Most Mira had to rethink its strategy. As a result, in 2013, I initiated *Shakespeare's Comedies*, a two-year-long theatre project run in collaboration with four ethnically segregated primary schools from the Prijedor municipality, which was designed to address inherited ethnic division and facilitate the mixing of young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. I have selected comedy as a genre that is characterised by its capacity to create positive feelings. Embedded in this creative process were laughter and joy which challenged the socially imposed hostility of the opposing ethnic group. This enabled the young participants to initiate the formation of their own memories, narratives, and experiences of the 'other'. Shakespeare's work was selected as its cultural presence transcends the narrow bounds of local ethnicities and extends beyond the limited confines of nationalities (Milatovic-Ovadia 2024). With my proposed PhD research practice, I intend to investigate the possibility of using comedy in the peacebuilding process, not only as a valuable tool for creating an inviting space for both participants and potential audiences, but also as a genre that has the

[64] In the thesis, I will refer to these theatre pieces using their abbreviated titles: *Baksuz, Brkići, Zemlja*. These titles are not only conveniently concise but also reflect how the participants referred to their work.

potential to critically address the intricate issues of reconciliation, in particular conflicting narratives about recent historical events.

Participants

Each of the projects included young people, aged sixteen to twenty-three years old, from the Prijedor area, and several local teachers and artists who had the role of facilitators. The youth demographic was heterogeneous, comprising 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. The engagement with the second generation is important because youth in Bosnia- Herzegovina demonstrate significantly low trust in political and democratic institutions, while placing more trust in traditional authorities, such as religious institutions and the military (Branković et al. 2017, p. 15). Furthermore, they are often viewed as a marginalised group, inadequately integrated into the social and political structure (Pratto et al., 2017). Therefore, this PhD praxis has the explicit intention of addressing these complex challenges and fostering constructive social transformation.

The majority of the participants had no prior theatre-making experience. For those who had it, the process involved a more conventional approach, which involved staging text-based plays directed by teachers. To address this, I decided to introduce the role of facilitator as a key element of my directorial intervention. Facilitators were adults, predominantly teachers from local primary and secondary schools, also of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Their role was to lead weekly proposed activities and ensure the workshops were safe. The introduction of the term ‘facilitator’ [fasilitator] instead of using the term ‘teacher’ aims to challenge the traditional top-down power dynamic between adults and youth, as well as teachers and students. This redefinition seeks to disrupt the conventional authority associated with an omnipotent director or teacher as a sole holder of artistic vision and to foster collaborative theatre-making by promoting a more egalitarian framework within both educational and creative processes.

Both the students and teachers were unfamiliar with the devising and collaborative theatre-making approach, which challenges the traditional method of creating a theatre performance based on a predetermined text and an artistic hierarchy with a director [or teacher in the school context] at the top position. One of the students described his drama classes at school as follows: 'in my school, the drama club is run by a teacher, and it's really bad. The teacher picks the play, and we just read it for 45 minutes a week. People attend it just to get good marks. The worst part is that the teacher does

not ask us any questions, just tells us how the character should be' (MM Report, 2018). Thus, in order to assist the facilitators who were unfamiliar with the planned collaborative method of theatre-making, I held an introductory session at the beginning of each project. Starting from the main concepts of collaborative practice and drawing from Freire's notion of liberal education practices and fostering critical facilitation (Freire, 1992), facilitators were introduced to several essential principles, including the establishment of the creative environment and key strategies for enabling the improvisations and navigation of creative conflicts. Introduction to these foundational skills allowed them to effectively guide and support the young people throughout the collaborative creative process. The introduction to this, for them alternative approach to theatre-making also prompted them to consider the pedagogical strategies employed in the classroom and provided an opportunity to reflect on their own methods (Most Mira Report, 2016, p. 4). Over the course of this research, several teachers provided feedback that incorporating some of these strategies in the classroom improved student engagement and increased their creative problem-solving abilities. Additionally, they noted that by embracing playfulness, they gained authority and respect from students, which will be further examined in the concluding chapter. However, others felt more comfortable continuing with traditional methods due to apprehensions about potential challenges in maintaining discipline and structure in the classroom (Most Mira Report 2016:6).

It is also important to note that over the years, recruitment also followed the spiral model of learning, with some previous participants continuing to be involved while new participants joined for the first time. During the initial piece *Baksuz*, all participants were starting from the same point as they were all new to devising method of theatre-making. In the following two pieces, *Brkići* and *Zemlja*, the group comprised a mix of participants, both young people and facilitators, including those who had taken part in one or more of the previous projects and others who were completely new to the group. This process allowed for different levels of experience to come together, enriching the collaborative effort and resulting in the broader creation of collective memories. That added another layer to the collaboration aspect and shaped the creative methodology. With inter-ethnic, inter-social, and inter-generational composition of the participants, this inter-theatrical collaboration brought to the creative process a concept of repetition. This aspect is examined in more detail later in this Chapter, where the significance of these collective memories of fostering collaboration and shaping multicultural community cohesion as an alternative to the dominant cultural memories of historical antagonism is discussed.

Directorial methods for Peacebuilding

Beginning with the single word

As mentioned in the introduction, various theatre practitioners with specific experience in working in the conflict and post-conflict settings emphasise that storytelling must be approached with extreme care and sensitivity since stories have the potential to deepen divisions rather than transcend them (Kuftinec, 2009; Nicholson, 2006; Thompson, 2006), particularly in the communities where myths and (mis)understanding of historical and cultural narratives are frequently used to create and maintain conflict. Setting up the first piece of praxis, *Baksuz*, I have decided to avoid using documentary and verbatim theatre practices as they are not helpful for this particular context, which is heavily influenced by the cultural politics of strong narrative disagreement, which contributes to the perpetuation of memory wars. Taking into account Nicholson's argument that 'fiction and reality, self and otherness, are not in opposition or isolated from each other but, as narrative constructions, they are interrelated and mutually embedded' (Nicholson 2005, p.66) and recognising that contemporary theatre in Bosnia-Herzegovina is largely text-based, I considered using an established text as a starting point for the devised piece. Also, guided by James Thompson's argument of 'Romeo and Julietism', which cautions against the oversimplification of narratives in peacebuilding theatre practices, resulting in work that may lack relevance on the ground (Thompson 2013, p. 154), I wanted to avoid imposing a reductive, romanticised narrative onto the complex process of conflict transformation. Within the context of the post-war narrative in Bosnia, I was looking for a comedy text that would allow for the exploration of multiple perspectives, thus leading to more nuanced discussions rather than adhering to a simple 'hero/villain' mindset. To this end, I was particularly interested in satire because of its dual function as both critique and entertainment (Declercq, 2018, p.1). Considering the sensitive nature of the Prijedor context, I decided to re-evaluate Gogol's and Chekhov's satirical short stories, as well as revisit Brecht's poetry.

However, none of the options I initially considered seemed quite right, so I had to rethink my approach to how I began the creative process. Furthermore, taking into account the marginalised position of young people in Bosnian society (Brankovic et al. 2017), it was important for me to avoid a situation where adults impose their own perspectives or dictate what young people should think. In my effort to establish the least preconceived and the most open-ended starting point, I made the decision to limit the stimuli to a single-word prompt. Placing a white piece of paper with a solitary word at the centre of the room, I sought to explore stories that the group would bring into the space. This instinct to reject a set text and reduce the preordained voice of a particular source, in order for the group to develop its authentic narrative, evolved into a directorial strategy focusing on

carefully chosen single-word stimuli. Furthermore, this approach embraced collective authorship, allowing for multiple voices to be heard – thus it encouraged the complicated conversations as the group developed a full-length text-based theatre performance over the course of four months.

Each subsequent piece of practice started with a white sheet of paper bearing a single word, placed in the centre of the room to prompt the conversation. Without the imposition of the specific guidelines, restrictions or direction, the group followed the flow of their responses. Participants freely shared their initial impressions, thoughts, and personal anecdotes in response to this prompt. These first impressions and responses to the stimuli were used as initial improvisation starters, focusing on situations and characterisations. Working from the group's words and stories was an important element in establishing the collective authorship that would resist traditional power structures in theatre and in the classroom. From a peacebuilding perspective, the emphasis was on creating a shared story that would incorporate all the voices of the participants, allowing for 'multiple narratives' (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004) to exist.

Beginning the devising process with a single word stimulus aimed to destabilise predetermined narrative, not only regarding the text of the future performance but also in relation to narratives of a recent conflict. However, as the following analyses of praxis will demonstrate, the word choice was never random. Each term was selected for a specific reason, whether in response to current issues or as a continuation of ideas from a previous project. For my first project *Baksuz*, I chose the word 'glas' [voice], aiming to examine whose voices are marginalised in this society. I wanted to delve into the silence surrounding war crimes, the lack of representation for opposing voices, and the suppression of diverse perspectives. However, these thoughts I did not share with the group but kept them for myself, listening to what the group was offering as an initial response. The word 'brkovi' [moustaches] as a stimulus for the second piece of praxis *Brkići*, was a direct response to the emerging themes and conversations about patriarchal authority from the previous practice. The third word 'zemlja' [land] hints at the concept of identity and contains an opportunity to delve into the complexities of memory politics, which young people brought up in the previous work.

In an effort to explore the question of what devised comedy can bring into the complex process of rebuilding peace, particularly from the lens of memory (re)formation that challenges dogmatic positions, my proposed directorial methodology consisted of three essential components: (1) comedy being specified as the intended genre of the future piece, (2) a single-word stimulus as a departure point instead of a pre-existing script, and (3) devising, understood as a creative methodology that does not rely on a pre-existing text and as such is a political way of theatre-making (Radosavljević, 2013). The first component, comedy, was envisaged as a tool for reflection as

well as engagement. The single-word stimulus aimed to open up the conversation between young people and their society by reducing any predetermined ideas. The third component, devising, sought to contrast the prevalent contemporary theatre culture in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is characterised by director's theatre that is predominantly text-based, thereby precluding a political understanding of authorship.

Directing strategies

In order to provide a more comprehensive commentary on my peacebuilding directorial methodology and creative choices I decided to use, it is essential to swiftly offer a culturally contextualised understanding of the director's role.

In the theatres of former Yugoslavia, directors occupy a prominent position in the theatrical hierarchy. They are seen as authors who engage in critical analysis and radical interpretation of the text, craft a mise-en-scène, and are particularly dedicated to their work with actors (Belović, 1986, 1994; Lazić, 1983). In his comprehensive study of the history of modern theatre directing in Yugoslavia from 1861 to 1941, Josip Lešić (1986) analyses the development of directing as an independent art form which began in the nineteenth century, following European trends. The aesthetics and approaches of early Yugoslav directing were shaped by artists who travelled abroad to study and returned with new knowledge. Notable directors include Mihailo Isailović, a follower of the Meiningen Ensemble; Milutin Čolić, a student of the German director Carl Hegemann; and Ivo Raic, a Max Reinhardt collaborator. Another significant influence occurred during the tumults of the October Revolution, when a considerable number of artists migrated to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Former members of MHAT, such as director Aleksandr Ivanovich Andreyev, introduced Stanislavsky's techniques, while collaborators of V.E. Meyerhold, including Yuri Lvovich Rakitin, introduced the concepts of theatricalization and physical action. Directing aesthetics between the two World Wars was characterised by ‘stylistic syncretism’ (Lešić, 1984, p. 114). It is a period when most diverse poetics appear on the same stage - from expressionism and symbolic stylisation to naturalism and psychological realism. It is also a time of individual directing styles. Another important development for that period was the establishment of regional theatres [banovinska pozorišta] in 1929, which brought decentralisation of theatre art and introduced modern theatre directing to the provincial towns. After the Second World War, theatre life in Yugoslavia experienced a significant revival. New ensemble theatres were formed, international festivals such as BITEF emerged, and art schools with programs in theatre directing were established.

This brief overview of Yugoslav directorial cultural tradition revealed that there was no single, predominant directing style or methodology. Instead, there was a strong inclination towards dominant mainland European forms. This resulted in the coexistence of various, sometimes

contrasting practices that set the stage for contemporary training and understanding of the profession. It also recognises a variety in understandings of the director's role, ranging from strong authorial voices to the pursuit of invisible direction, as director Božidar Violić suggested, 'while the actor cancels himself in his role, the director cancels himself in others in his direction. This self-annihilation in others is the essence of the directing art and a starting point of the paradox of directing' (Violić 1974, my translation). Without going into the specific pedagogies of teaching the art of directing, it is important to emphasise the primary objective of the directing course in most Yugoslav drama schools: to nurture an artist who possesses a comprehensive education in various facets of theatre-making, including dramaturgy, scenography, music, and acting. In the words of the key theorist of directing in former Yugoslavia and director Hugo Klajn: 'the director must be his own dramaturg […] the director must have something of an actor, writer, painter, musician, must be a psychologist, pedagogue and producer, must be modest, devoid of vanity, and have authority.' (Klajn, 1955, p. xv). Informed by my training at the Faculty of Dramatic Art in Belgrade, I brought to this praxis a notion of directing as the construction of connections guided by a 'philosophy of the whole' [filozofija celine] (Drašković, 1988). As an experienced theatre-maker, I also bring a set of practical skills in dramaturgy, facilitation, and composition. It is also important to recognise that the initial social expectation in relation to my role as a director entails bringing a creative vision, interpreting the material, knowing the answers and directing collaborators in what to do. However, as I previously noted, within this peacebuilding context, it was essential for my praxis to challenge the hierarchical directorial position in order to cultivate a space conducive to the engagement of complex conversations.

Therefore, my first strategy was to reframe my position as a director. Rather than assuming the role of a visionary, I emphasised my role as an initiator, facilitating a creative journey. I cast myself as a collaborator who offers a starting point and acknowledges that the content and the aesthetic of the piece will emerge from the collective creative conversations. I positioned myself outside of the process's centre, as a heterarchical director who 'predicates the success of the creative process on the quality of interpersonal relationships and is comfortable sharing authority with other collaborators and members of the ensemble' (Radosavljević, 2019, p. 251). Therefore, I decided to modify the authorial role of the director towards the notion of collective authorship. This approach to theatre-making fostered the essence of ensemble, as Cornford (2021) understands it, not only as a creative way of working but as a political act that disrupts hierarchical artistic (and social) structures. Cornford's argument that ensembles, ingrained in horizontal decision-making and sharing labour, embody collaborative resistance to neoliberal individualism through their very mode of producing theatre, is very useful here where praxis seeks to disrupt the authoritarian dynamics

prevalent in both Bosnian theatre and the broader societal landscape. In Chapter Four, I will discuss how incorporating humour and comedy allowed me to redefine my position in this way and foster the idea of shifting (or sharing) authority that the collective authorship required.

Drawing from this reframing of the director's role, my second directorial strategy was to choose a collaborative method of theatre-making, to place conversation at the heart of the process and create rehearsal structures that would emphasise conversation in both the process of composing the piece and in negotiating conflicts. Conversation is understood here as an exchange of experience, information and views (Morreall, 2009, p. 87), and as a method for cultivating virtue through interpersonal spoken exchange of questions and answers that brings one's view into the connection with a range of views and inspire moral insights (Jonas, 2018). This approach aligns with Paulo Freire's (1968/2021) principles of critical pedagogy, framing creative dialogue as a mechanism for collaborative artistry. Crucially, it demands active participation and a willingness to engage with contentious themes as they emerge, transforming potential friction into generative artistic inquiry. This reasoning for conducting a creative inquiry through conversation is also pertinent to the peacebuilding process, as it necessitates the cultivation of a space for diverse ideas and offers potential for a transformation of dogmatic positions into a dialogue between opposing sides. Throughout the process, engaging in conversation enables the exchange of knowledge, skills, and a sense of shared responsibilities. It is integral not only for building material for a future show but also for establishing the decision-making process, something I'll elaborate on further later in this commentary.

The third directorial strategy involved placing a strong emphasis on integrating play, playfulness and ludic practices into the process. Extensive research indicates a significant correlation between engaging in playful activities and fostering human creativity, wellbeing and development (Wright, 2006; Bateson & Martin, 2013; Tonkin & Whitaker 2019). Understood by psychologist and biologist as a means of acquiring knowledge, finding better solutions, and escaping sub-optimal outcomes, 'playful play (as distinct from the broader biological category of play) is accompanied by a particular positive mood state in which the individual is more inclined to behave (and, in the case of humans, think) in a spontaneous and flexible way' (Bateson, 2014, p.100). This flexibility of standpoint is essential for conversation to happen as it stands in opposition to a rigid, authoritarian, and dogmatic narrative upon which the war is constructed, and division is sustained. Furthermore, play can occur only when players are well and free (Bateson, 2014). This freedom is rooted in spontaneity, where the focus is not on trying to control the future, but on embracing the opportunity to explore and experience whatever unfolds (Johnstone, 1979/2016). Such spontaneity, along with cognitive flexibility and freedom from predetermined outcomes, exemplifies the understanding of interstitial

improvisation. This methodology desires the flexibility of in-between spaces to envision, negotiate, and create alternatives to rigid systems. Therefore, fostering this state of ‘playful play’ becomes a fundamental precondition for deconstructing the dogmatic foundations of sustained conflict and building space for genuine dialogue.

Praxis

As established in the methodology section of Chapter Two, each piece of praxis employs a consistent framework of devised comedy, centred around single-word stimuli, collective authorship and comedy. However, each iteration generated a new insight, adhering to the 'hermeneutic-interpretative spiral model' proposed by Trimingham (2002), where each cycle returns to its initial point of entry enriched by new knowledge. Therefore, in this retrospective commentary on the praxis, I will focus on two key elements of each work – the themes explored by the group and specific directorial methodologies employed in the process- and investigate how insights gained from each piece directly informed the modifications and adaptations made in subsequent projects. Building upon this foundation, Chapter Four will provide a detailed analysis of the specific role of comedy within this praxis. Drawing from the questions of what stories we tell and how we tell them discussed here, I will explore the ability of comedy to create an inclusive environment and foster thought-provoking conversations that explore new perspectives that challenge conventional social and theatrical norms, and by doing so, support the process of conflict transformation. There, I will reflect specifically on my key finding that comedy serves as a constructive tool for peacebuilding through its potential to create the interstitial space where collective memories could be examined, 'multiple narratives' (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004) can be acknowledged, and hopeful futures can be envisaged.

Dan jednog baksuza [*A Day in the Life of an Unlucky Man*]

The first project was designed to explore the notion of voice and its absence within contemporary Bosnian society. It began with the single word 'glas' [voice] written on a piece of white paper placed in the centre of the room and ended with a collectively created story that follows Baksuz [an Unlucky Man] on the quest to obtain an ID and exercise his right to vote for change.

What: Speaking for themselves

The single-word stimulus 'glas' [voice] was chosen with the intention of examining what the dominant voices are and who is voiceless in contemporary Bosnian society. I also considered the immediate context of Prijedor and the reluctance surrounding discussions of war crimes, juxtaposed with the endeavours of the emerging 'Dan Bjelih Traka' [White Ribbons Day] movement to challenge the rejection of commemorating the children murdered in the 1990s war. By choosing this word, I

hoped to challenge the structural silence surrounding the discussion on war crimes and the political suggestions that these topics should be avoided.

At the outset of the first workshop, the group promptly identified two main issues relating to the concept of voice. The first issue was the lack of young people's voices in political discussions and society, largely due to the prevailing patriarchal values. The second issue involved the broader mechanisms that silence various voices in society, which stem from the corrupt political elite, ineffective administration, high unemployment rates, poverty, exploitation of workers in private companies, and the challenging circumstances faced by farmers. The improvisations that followed had a strong satirical tone and used humour and exaggeration to highlight societal issues. They provided a way to criticise and comment on politics, culture, and social norms. However, during the few weeks of improvisation, no one mentioned differences in war narratives, issues related to memorialisation, or anything directly related to the conflict in the 1990s. At this point, I found myself in an ethical dilemma. My research was set to investigate the potential of devised comedy to address ethnic conflict in situations where even the will for the conversation about it is missing. Given the group's reluctance to discuss the past, I grappled with the decision of whether to raise the topic of war crimes. I wrote in my journal:

> 'Should I initiate a discussion on war crimes? According to the panel discussion *Javni čas o Srebrenici* [65]only 6% of the population in Republika Srpska believes that the war crimes occurred. What if the topic never arises? Can the project still contribute to peacebuilding if it does not address the segregation imposed by war? Am I imposing my own perspective or should I follow the group's conversation?' (Personal journal, 2016).

In the end, having in mind Thompson's warning of the 'danger of being meaningless on the ground' (Thompson, 2013, p.154), and to avoid imposing the director's vision on the future piece, I decided to trust the process. I chose not to push any conversations that the young people did not initiate.

Two months into the process, one of the students, a young woman, M.T. expressed her desire to play the role of a soldier. Her request provoked a sense of unease within the group, particularly among the facilitators. Initially, most facilitators (from all ethnic backgrounds) wanted to veto this suggestion without engaging in the conversation. In an effort to maintain an open rehearsal space, I proposed that, rather than outright rejecting the proposal, we should have a discussion without any pressure regarding the inclusion of this character in the play. By delicately initiating the conversation and inquiring about the reasons behind the facilitator's reluctance to include the character of the

[65] Public Leson on Srebrenica (Peščanik 2016)

soldier in the piece, the group engaged in an open and valuable dialogue. Teacher S.S. pointed out that the issue is too complex and sensitive to be told through a single performance. She also emphasised that there is a high risk of the project being banned if it becomes politically unsuitable [politicki nepodoban]. Pointing out that the facilitators were behaving similarly to their parents, the young people explained that when they ask about the recent past, they often receive incomplete answers or are met with silence. Recognising the challenges of discussing the war and the war crimes, the entire group decided that the character of the Soldier should be included in the play, but not as a prominent figure. The role of the Soldier was played by the already mentioned female student M.T. She was pre-set on stage, quietly sitting in the corner as the audience entered the auditorium (Presenting the Praxis, *Baksuz* video). Throughout the play, the Soldier wandered around the stage, asking for a cigarette and attempting to share her story. However, nobody wanted to listen, as they were all preoccupied with surviving in a corrupt society dominated by ruthless capitalism. Only at one point in the play does the Soldier address the audience directly with her monologue about birds.

> SOLDIER (walking with one shoe on): Hey buddy, do you have a cigarette?
>
> BAKSUZ: No [ma otkud mi]
>
> SOLDIER: Hey, I saw a swallow the other day. I read in the newspaper that there is none left, they slaughtered everything...
>
> BAKSUZ: Leave me alone with those stories.
>
> SOLDIER: Seriously. But do you have one cigarette?
>
> BAKSUZ: I don't have any. I am in a hurry. (leaves the stage)
>
> SOLDIER (to the audience): Nobody cares about swallows anymore. And do you know that when we tear down the tree and tear down the house, all those birds from around there will leave. What can I do now? I can go back to my little wall to sit, to watch, to be silent. (sits down)

This metaphor about the bird was inspired by a true story told to me by a farmer K.P. in whose house I was living while in Prijedor. In one of our conversations, he recalled how, when he returned from the concentration camp to his devastated village, the first thing he did was start feeding the birds. The Bosnian-Serb soldiers not only destroyed the houses of their non-Serb neighbours but also cut down the trees to prevent the Muslim neighbours from returning home. Destroying the trees had two meanings. First, a home can be rebuilt fairly quickly, but trees take time to develop and are

difficult to replace. Second, it erased memories because trees are usually planted to commemorate life milestones, such as a child's birth or marriage. Moreover, without the trees, there were no birds so he decided to bring birds back to his land. I shared this story during a discussion on how to address war crimes in a manner that would not provoke censorship and immediate backlash. Student M.T. took this story and intertwined it into her monologue.

The play concludes with the celebration of the election victory of a new, uncorrupted politician named Ćoso [Barefaced]. At that point, Baksuz [the Unlucky Man] approaches the Soldier and asks to hear her story:

> BAKSUZ: Hey, stop. What did you want to tell me?
>
> (They sit at the table)
>
> SOLDIER: The swallows returned...
>
> (Blackout)

The quiet omnipresence of the Soldier had a powerful effect on stage. Some audience members commented that this role delivered an incredibly moving and important message about how we choose to conceal the truth of the conflict (MM report, audience feedback 2016). This character of the Soldier was important for the participants as it represented a lost Ex-Yugoslav generation ruined by the war. As student N.T. noted in his feedback, 'she is lost, spent her best years in the war, and now she is no longer important to anybody. Now she is only a fool. She is one of those people everybody calls a fool' (MM Feedback 2016). However, it is useful to note, as highlighted by Tim Prentki, that fools are inherently 'inevitably outsiders' who possess the capacity to traverse boundaries, defy existing categories, and by doing so, they reveal and critique societal norms (Prentki, 2012). In the context of peacebuilding, this conversation about the role of the Soldier was significant for our participants as it broke the silence and recognised the harm and persecution inflicted on the non-Serb, predominantly Muslim community. The incorporation of this character of the Soldier was one response to the navigation of collective memory. It allowed the group to confront legacies of the problematic past by challenging one-sided political memory in contemporary Prijedor. The fact that the group (which comprised a mix of ethnicities, including students who identified as nationalists) made the acknowledgement of responsibility is an important moment as this kind of recognition is politically and psychologically crucial for any society recovering from conflict (Čehajic and Brown, 2010). Moreover, the fact that they decided to share this conversation with the wider community demonstrates a commitment to an open dialogue,

contributes to the creation of a common narrative and fosters understanding among different groups.

The negotiation of sensitive subjects becomes an integral point in the creative process. This typically involves careful considerations of reasons behind a particular proposition, thoughtful considerations of the repercussions and the possible theatre aesthetics that can be used. Another episode of potential (self)censorship arose when students created the character of a corrupt Mayor. One facilitator expressed concerns that our performance might be banned. So, we decided to change the name of the character, so Mayor became Boss, and then Boss became Brko (meaning 'moustache-man'), a name the group embraced with humour. However, another issue emerged regarding one of the lines saying: 'The Boss's kid got a place at the university purely because of his father's status and connections.' This was too similar to a real case of nepotism involving the sons of Prime Minister Željka Civijanvić and President Dodik. Thus, the facilitators proposed a change in the tone to make it more neutral, suggesting something along the lines of 'that kid got a place…'. Student A.M., who played the role of the Student, was unhappy with the proposition, arguing that this would undermine the intended message and the point would be lost. That prompted us to explore an alternative solution that would not reduce the issue but rather, in the spirit of comedy, exaggerate it. This solution emphasised the extent of the nepotism by amplifying family connections and portraying them as absurd. The student A.M. came up with the satirical line: 'It will get better when Brko's aunt's sister-in-law's son, who is actually a cousin of his wife's brother's wife, fifth generation of aunt's godfather's godchild, for whom he fixed the gutters, so his brother's son – when he is not accepted [at university] through connections, then it will get better here!'[66] Concluding the monologue with the statement that the Son lacks knowledge but has connections, and that we who lack connections are irrelevant, which in the original entails a play on words.[67] These lines also highlighted the significant and harmful effects of nepotism, and the audience chuckled along in recognition of the social reality.

These conversations on negotiating challenging subjects and censorship played an important role in both the creative and the peacebuilding process. They were significant for two reasons. Firstly, they provided a platform for diverse perspectives to be heard, empowering young people to ask difficult questions and challenge facilitators who, at that moment, represented the adult world that silences their voices. Secondly, it became evident that this theatre piece held significance for the young

[66] In the original: 'Kada od Brkine tetke, zaove malog, koji je ustvari sestrić šurnjaje, peto koleno ujnine strine kumovog kumčeta, kome je onaj radio oluke, e njegovog brata sin – kad on ne bude primljen preko veze, e tad će biti bolje'.
[67] In the original: 'On nema znanja, on ima veze a mi što smo bez veze mi smo bezveze'. The phrase 'bez veze' translates to 'without connection' while 'bezveze' means 'irrelevant'.

people. Rather than just complying with authority figures (teachers in this case) they started to gain confidence to engage and confront the facilitators as well as their sociopolitical reality. Additionally, a strong critique of the contemporary sociopolitical situation was depicted in the Obtaining the ID scene simply set in a long queue where time occasionally stands still (PP, *Baksuz* video). Following the Unlucky Man's repeated attempts to gather all necessary documents, the scene uses dramatic satire to address the irrational administrative processes and to comment on the dysfunctional bureaucratic system. While trying to prove his identity, the Unlucky Man becomes stuck in a never-ending cycle of the 'one missing document' [fali ti jedan papir]. Similar to the previous scene where the extent of nepotism was emphasised by amplifying family connections, the employment of the comedic exaggeration underlined a social anomaly. The audience resonated strongly with this scene, as its comic value and sneering laughter emphasised the recognition of frustration and helplessness caused by the bureaucratic hurdles hindering progress and justice. It blurred the line between fiction and real life, as one audience member explained, 'this play, this comedy reflects the reality of Bosnia - when my husband had to apply for a [EU] visa, the process was equally long and filled with this sort of endless bureaucracy' (MM Report, 2016). This scene was also frequently recounted and referenced by participants, their friends, and the audience, as they all acknowledged its truthfulness, and some of them had even personally experienced the absurdity of 'one missing document' at some point. The audience's reactions to this satirical theatre piece shared a strong critical perspective that the young people offered from the stage. It clearly indicated that, through laughter, the audience and the young people reached a mutual understanding bridging the experiential gap. This moment vividly illustrates how comedy functions as a tool for reconciliation by creating a shared and critical space. The collective laughter does not trivialise the issue of nepotism and corruption but rather acknowledges this uncomfortable truth collectively, fostering a sense of unity.

This scene also highlighted another important aspect of the young people's emancipation. In the scene, the characters waiting in the queue represent a cross-section of society, including a Young Person planning to emigrate, an Old Woman struggling to remember the past, a nouveau riche woman frustrated because she is late for the sales, an Athlete running on one spot, and a Friend of the Grumpy Clerk who bypasses the queue and obtains an ID without any documents. Throughout the scene, characters from the queue step out of the scene and directly address the audience. The story of a Young Person waiting for her passport for two and a half hours, because everyone ignores her as 'young people are considered invisible' (PP, *Baksuz* video), had a strong sense of relevance for young people. In the middle of her monologue, a paper bag was placed over her head, and only her eyes were drawn on it. The Young Person becomes silent, takes out a felt-tip pen, draws a mouth on the paper bag and continues the story by asking us whether she should stay or emigrate. This scene

clearly conveyed how young participants felt about their place within society. Some audience members listened, as evidenced by one student who shared the following feedback:

> 'My grandmother sees me as a child, but after witnessing my performance, she acknowledged that I am no longer a little girl. My mother was moved to tears by the realisation that I am prepared for the world, although she may not be ready for that just yet' (MM Report, 2016).

This transformation of the traditional dynamic between youth and adults into a more equal relationship is fundamental for the process of reconciliation, because it promotes meaningful intergenerational dialogue and empowers youth to act as proactive agents of change rather than passive recipients of historical narratives. Furthermore, it disrupts the cyclical transmission of trauma and prejudice often passed through generations (Lederach, 2005; Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). By creating a space where different generations can collaboratively reframe memory and identity, these transformed relationships confront entrenched power dynamics and facilitate the co-creation of a shared future – moving society beyond the divisive legacies of conflict.

How: Collective authorship, reshaping hierarchy

As seen above, by beginning with a single word stimulus, the praxice challenges the traditional hierarchical approach to theatre-making that begins with a text. Additionally, by emphasising collective authorship, it calls into question the conventional division of labour between playwright, director, actor, and designer.

From a peacebuilding perspective, this approach to the creative process holds great potential due to its political and social implications. Apart from challenging the prevailing model of authoritarian socio-political structures, it is also a relational process, rooted in 'ways of relating to the "other"' (Colin and Sachsenmaier 2016:13), asking to navigate the polyphony of the individual voices and identities in order to create a coherent collective piece of theatre. From a rehearsal room perspective this approach presents four fundamental questions: how can we establish trust that will mitigate the fear of the unknown; how do we share responsibility; who has the ultimate decision-making control and how can we achieve collective agreement? Theoretical and practical examination of collaborative theatre-making practices often notes that the decision-making presents one of the major problems, and can prompt a non-agreed hierarchy (Heddon & Milling 2005). When the fear of the unknown kicks in, the group looks to someone to take the responsibility and lead the process.

As with any devising process, this one was not without its challenges. Starting with just one word and not knowing how the show will develop evokes both terror and excitement. Some facilitators found this process to be inspiring, while others found it challenging to balance creative chaos. In the

feedback received, one facilitator expressed a preference for a predetermined text, '[in the rehearsals] the story kept changing; next time, I would prefer to have a predetermined script for the young people to use' (MM report, 2016, p.6). Another facilitator's feedback emphasises the need for a more fixed and set approach that limits the space for improvisation, noting, '[in the performance] people performed their improvised lines instead of their scripted lines. We need less improvisation and more practice' (MM Report, 2016, p.3). However, according to the student feedback, the absence of a specific text as a starting point is largely appreciated by the students because they feel they have constructed their own story and that their expression is valued. The process of creating the show resulted in them feeling strong ownership and pride, 'this play was ours. It was personal and very important to us as it represented our voice' (MM Report, 2016, p.8). In addition to this sense of unsettledness due to the absence of a clear text to work on, another concern was the lack of a clear hierarchy. As it was mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, in order to embrace a collaborative model of theatre-making, the roles of collaborators - students, teachers, facilitators and the director, had to be re-shaped. This process was not without its challenges. For example, some facilitators expressed uncertainty about the participatory methods, objecting to the effacing of the hierarchical structure between students and facilitators. They preferred an environment that was more controlled and adult-led due to a fear of the unknown embedded in the devising process and a desire for the final performance to be successful. However, others acknowledged the benefits of collaborative practice, and they later reported that they used some of the methods and techniques learned throughout the project in their own classrooms (MM Report 2016, p.4).

Another related issue I was facing was a hierarchy imposed on my role as the director. Too many times when the process was facing disagreements or dead ends, I heard from facilitators and students the sentence 'Maja will solve the problem'. I was seen as the person who would make final decisions and resolve any creative and political conflicts. This position was something that I had to address throughout the process. In order to emphasise the shared responsibility and the hierarchy of the roles, I decided to embed some rules in the process. The first rule mandates that the facilitators, the director and all present in the room at any moment have to participate in warm-up games and exercises aimed to get the ensemble into the habits of freeing the imagination, conveying spontaneity and embracing ridiculousness and mistakes. This request led to some facilitators expressing hesitation, as they feared that appearing silly would undermine their status and authority. However, with time, this reluctance gradually disappeared as they saw that embracing playfulness enhanced the respect from the young people and fostered stronger connections between the group. In order to further reshape my position as a director, I delegated responsibilities, asking other members of the ensemble to run warm-ups, decide improv starting

points, or summarise group ideas. The second rule was that everyone comments on every aspect of the work, regardless of their role in the process. This aimed to break the tendency of just the director or the facilitator offering comments on the work presented and to make space for everyone's voice to be heard. The third and last rule was that decision-making is always conversational. During the generative part of the process, where the material was created, people contributed fluidly, and the decision-making wasn't a very prominent issue. Still, as we entered the complexities of the Composing phase of the process (PP, p. 11), I was mindful to ensure that the final decisions were not solely reliant on my role as director. Every creative decision was presented to the ensemble, discussed, adjusted and agreed upon by everyone. To avoid conflicts based on personal preferences, we would always refer back to the main idea of the piece and the overall dramaturgy, questioning how the proposed choice sits within that framework. Another model of sharing creative responsibilities could be observed in the process of writing the final play text. During the rehearsals, the characters, situations, and some of the text were developed through improvisations. Responding to that, I proposed an initial dramaturgical structure which was then open for discussion and feedback, before being finalised. Following this, the writing process began with the formation of a writing group led by several students, while maintaining an open invitation for participation from the entire group (PP, p.24).

These last two rules were articulated to navigate power relations and encourage the collective authorship based on the principle that no single person is responsible for a single section and that people can contribute fluidly. However, even though this project aimed to reshape the position of the director and playwright in a Western Balkans context, it also maintained some traditional labour divisions by assigning the specific role of the designer. This was informed by practical considerations, as I wasn't sure if the group would have enough time or the practical skills to also work on the set and costumes. Therefore, at the beginning of the project, the artist N.Č. was employed as a designer. He was also introduced as a facilitator with this particular set of skills and participated in the initial workshop I've run with the facilitators on collaborative methodology. However, he encountered difficulties with the collaborative aspect of the project. He regarded design as his sole creative responsibility and declined to accept input from other students and facilitators. This resulted in some tensions that were ultimately resolved. A significant moment was during the dress rehearsal, when N.Č. presented costumes made from disposable coverall material. They aesthetically encapsulated the ideas of the piece, but when tried out, they were found to be impractical for movement and generated a continuous fluttering noise when performers moved on stage. The students initially tried to make them work, and we ran the dress rehearsal in these costumes, despite the challenges. Ultimately, however, they found the costumes to be impractical and

expressed their concerns about performing in them. Although they were apprehensive about offending the designer by expressing their concerns, it was a critical step in guaranteeing the young people's authorship of the piece: 'No one liked the costumes, but we were worried about what the designer would say if we told him. We also didn't want to insult him. He was unhappy but understood why. He said we were right, apologised, and changed the design. We are a team, and it is rare to have a team. We always listen to older people, but this time they listened to us' (Most Mira Report, 2016, p.5).

This marked a noteworthy degree of progress from the project's initial phase, during which students were hesitant to express their disagreement with the facilitators. I was compelled to address this issue by cultivating a conducive environment, based on heterarchical conversations and playfulness, where they feel empowered to express themselves freely (Personal Journal 2016). In the final feedback, several facilitators commented on how they had not seen the students discuss these political topics in a school setting before and were surprised at how creative the young people could be (NED Report, 2016). Again, this recognition showed a significant transformation in the social status of the youth. This newfound recognition also bolstered their confidence and helped them amplify their social voice. As a result, their perspectives and voices are now being taken more seriously. This empowerment is useful in the peacebuilding efforts precisely for the involvement of Bosnia-Herzegovina's youth as significant political actors in the promotion of peace by incorporating their perspectives, concerns, and hopes into peacebuilding programs for the long-term success of such interventions (McEvoy-Levy 2013).

Brkići [*The Moustache Family*]

Reflecting on the outcomes of the first piece of practice and considering the feedback from participants, especially regarding the stories the initial stimuli evoked and the dynamic of the collective authorship practice, I revised the initial foundational points of my proposed directorial methodology. Affirming Trimingham's 'hermeneutic-interpretative spiral model' (2002) that entails returning to the original point of entry but with a transformed understanding, for the second practice, I decided to continue using a single-word stimulus and maintain comedy as the predetermined genre. However, drawing from the participants' feedback, I decided to implement two significant changes. First, learning from the conflict with the designer, I did not assign any specific creative roles. My intention was to investigate how the dynamics of collective authorship would develop in the absence of any singular designated role, thereby allowing the entire

production process to emerge organically. Second, I opted not to mandate a final written play. By relinquishing the requirement for a definitive text, I intended to open up the space for improvisation. These inquiries were vital for understanding the nature of freedom and responsibility within the process liberated from the constraints of prescribed hierarchy. The creative process robustly followed the key strategies outlined in the initial practice: positioning creative conversation at the core of the process and placing a strong emphasis on incorporating play and ludic practices throughout the process. The group consisted of the members who were entirely new to the process, and several students (about a third) and facilitators (half) who had participated in the previous project *Baksuz*. This mixture added a new dynamic to the creative process, fostering an environment for mentorship and the exchange of ideas, allowing the core principles of the creative process to be rediscovered and redefined by the new ensemble.

What: Unpacking complex narratives

In the first piece of the praxis, the stimulus ‘glas' [voice] initiated the conversations surrounding war crimes, bringing to light the issues of silence and censorship. However, it also broadened the conversation to encompass additional themes that are vital for effective peacebuilding but may not be immediately recognised. One of these themes is the erosion of ethics within society, which has led to widespread corruption, vicious opportunism and deepening inequality. This examination of the erosion of ethical values is pivotal within the context of peacebuilding, especially as the transformation from division and hostility to a shared future focused on common interests necessitates an emotional transformation grounded in rebuilding trust and confidence (Mac Ginty, 2013). Furthermore, by opening up the conversation centred around collective societal norms and values, students touched upon the questions regarding the authoritarian and patriarchal power dynamics present in contemporary society. In light of these conversations and drawing inspiration from the character of the corrupted politician Brko in *Baksuz*, I have decided to use the word 'brkovi' [moustache] as the stimulus for the second piece of praxis. By introducing a symbol of authority that embodies notions of masculinity, maturity, success and heroism, I sought to expand the discussion of post-war reconciliation to include the intricate power structures of patriarchy. In the first rehearsal, we placed again a white paper on the floor with the word 'moustaches' written on it. We played with fake moustaches, examining the symbolic meaning attached to moustaches, drawing inspiration from the examples found in the oral tradition and proverbs like 'ne ceni vola po rogovima ni čoveka po brkovima' [do not value an ox by its stirrups, nor a man by his moustaches], as well as personal stories and anecdotes related to the experience with gender relations, inherited social roles and moments of disobedience against these norms. This conversation explored how patriarchy

impacts our everyday lives by shaping the perception of masculinity, influencing war rhetoric and contributing to the social oppression of not only women but young men alike.

The resulting piece, titled *Brkići* [Moustache family] follows the story of a Brkić family over the course of centuries, beginning in the mid-20th century, and concluding in the present day. As the story unfolds, it delves deeper into the interaction between personal experience, social norms and historical events that have shaped their lives. The play opens with a scene that ironically depicts a traditional patriarchal family hierarchy, highlighting the ways in which social expectations are transmitted across generations. Set in the first half of the 20th century, the scene features a three-generation family gathered around a dinner table, enjoying Sunday lunch [PP:13]. While they are slurping soup, a dead grandfather, Vijeko Brkić Brk, the man with the largest moustache ever seen, nags his living wife, Baba-sa-jednom-nogom-u-grobu [Granny With One Foot in Her Grave], about why the grandson hasn't married yet. In response to this nagging from the ghostly past, she asserts her authority by warning her son about the imperative of facilitating his son's (her grandson's marriage. The conflict arises when the grandson declines to marry the affluent girl selected by the family, known as Ćosava Žena [Beardless Woman], due to his affection for Brkata Vila [Moustache Fairy], a not-so-affluent poet. This refusal not only disrupts the child's expected obedience within the family structure but also prompts a critical examination of the position of young males within the patriarchal structure, as well as the notion of female beauty in relation to prevailing social norms that align with the contemporary ideal of hairlessness. In this initial scene, the reversal of traditional gender roles highlights the harmful mechanisms of the patriarchal system, encouraging us to critically examine the flaws within the system itself rather than the perpetuation of divisive gender accusations.

Moving through the historical timeline, *Brkići* continues to look into the oppression of patriarchal structures from the male and female lens. Combining two traditional comedic devices, role reversal and play with social stereotypes, the piece invites playful enjoyment while facilitating a cognitive shift (Morreall, 2009) that allows audience to perceive incongruity of prescribed gender roles. The first device, a role reversal, is a well-established comedic technique that involves switching traditional roles between characters. This strategy effectively underscores the absurdity of societal norms and expectations by placing characters in unexpected positions, allowing the audience to view familiar defamiliarised. By exaggerating and subverting common social stereotypes, such as who performs household chores like ironing and cooking, as well as the politics surrounding bodily hair and expectations surrounding gender and combat in war, the piece invites the audience to critically examine the rigid gender categories that often dictate behaviour in society. The second device involves a playful engagement with social stereotypes. Stereotypes were unavoidable in our

process as they play a significant role in the creation of comedy, and by examining the patriarchal system, we were focusing on social stereotyping of gender and the creation of negative division. However, stereotypes can lead to discrimination and in the context of humour, negative stereotyping can be harmful as it belittles individuals or groups, causes offence, and promotes prejudice (De Sousa, 1987; Morreall, 2009). Given the potential for misunderstanding and offence, I approach this subject with a sense of deliberate caution. Starting from Morreall's understanding that sexist and racist jokes perpetuate negative stereotypes not by making factual claims but 'by being indifferent to the truth' (Moreall, 2009, p. 106), my directorial strategy underlined the importance of critical reflection. I facilitated reflective exercises on the varied characters the group had created, including an authoritarian grandmother, a nosy neighbour, an authoritarian father, a submissive wife, an uxorious husband, and a wealthy aunt from Germany. These exercises involved improvisations based on swapping specific character traits, particularly gender-related, to disrupt the patriarchy and uncover new insights. This approach aimed to invite a more nuanced discussion about the societal norms that shape our perceptions, and to highlight humour's complexities and its significant implications within the societal context. Moreover, this repetition-based approach became an important aspect of the creative conversation, which I will analyse further later in this chapter.

Together, these two comedic techniques provide insightful commentary on social roles and encourage both amusement and contemplation among the audience. In the words of the young people, the aim was to show 'that men and women should be equal and there should be no stereotypes' (MM feedback 2017, p.4). They wanted to communicate with the audience that ‘men do not only need to do what is only for men- things change over time, and stereotypes are not good. Our society does not have enough education about this’ (MM Report, 2017, p. 4). By directly challenging established social clichés and questioning traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, the performance encouraged a critical reassessment of preconceived ideas about identity and the societal norms that underpin them. The audience’s response confirms this dual impact, with feedback highlighting both its intellectual merit by calling it ‘very educational’ and ‘sharp dissection of our reality’, and its entertaining value, sharing that 'I can't remember the last time I laughed so much' (MM report, 2017, p.3).

In contrast to the first piece of practice, where the theme of war was omnipresent, this piece took a different approach where time was measured by various wars, as highlighted in the placards between scenes: ‘doš’o rat/ proš’o rat/ opet rat’ ['war came/ war passed/ war again'], and it was briefly noted that Zglajzala Majka [Unstable Mother] floats between the present and the world of South American soap operas as a way to escape the trauma of war. The primary focus of the

performance was on gender-based social issues. The theme of patriarchy, understood as 'a hierarchical social order centred on dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity' (Leatherman, 2011, p.17), is relevant in the context of post-war reconciliation for several reasons. Firstly, patriarchal ideology affects widespread use of sexual violence in warfare as 'sexual violence in conflict does not develop in isolation from the society's preexisting socioeconomic and culturally shaped gender relationships' (Leatherman 2011, p.17) and continues to perpetuate violence against women in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina (Kostovicova, et al. 2020). Secondly, as feminist and other masculinity scholars noted, it cultivates the construction of hegemonic and militarised masculinity (Duncanson 2019, Christensen 2022) closely connected with nationalist discourse that in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina maintains the hostile inter-ethnic relationships. Thirdly, as portrayed in the initial scene where it was expected of a Son to submit to the power of the Grandfather and accept forced marriage, it doesn't allow youth to have access to power. Additionally, another scene, where Son refuses to go to the army and both Father and Grandmother are upset that this will bring dishonour to the family, illustrate that patriarchal ideology is reinforced by both women and men within society and its various institutions, ranging from the family to the state, emphasising understanding that different forms of masculinity and violence are shaped by social values that prioritise certain masculinities over others—specifically, tough 'warrior' masculinities over 'effeminate' non-militarized masculinities (Myrttinen et al., 2014). In the rehearsal room this notion that youth, regardless of gender or ethnicity, do not have access to power within patriarchal society, fostered a sense of mutual understanding and collective voice that promotes cohesion rather than ethnic or gender division. As one of the young people said in the feedback: 'this has made me a better person, and I love everyone involved. These people - they make me think about the world, others and myself!' (MM Report, 2017, p.6). These conversations about the gender-based and age-based power dynamics within the patriarchy shed light on the authoritarianism embedded in patriarchy, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the social norms that underpin the culture of conflict, and the possible articulation of the protest voices that can transform society.

How: Improvisations as a mode of being

As I mentioned earlier, after analysing the initial piece of praxis*, Baksuz*, I revised the framework of my proposed directorial methodology by refraining from designating specific creative roles, allowing for a more fluid collaboration, and creating more space for improvisation as an important part of both the creative process and the final performance. In the feedback, young people expressed strong enthusiasm for the freedom of improvisations, articulating the joy of this creative autonomy, while some facilitators felt less confident about participatory methods rooted in improvisations due to apprehensions about uncertainty and desired a more controlled creative environment. Concerns

were rooted in the fear that performance might not meet the expected standard. They also worried that straying from the script is risky, as it could lead to unpredictable comments. As sociologist Anja Joos observes, improvisation could be viewed in a negative light because we favour planned deliberation and logical actions. Drawing from Kurt and Naumann (2008), she notes that uncertainty of the future can clash with the inherent human desire, likely shaped by cultural factors, to envision the future and plan in advance (Joos 2011). This apprehension highlighted a desire from the facilitators for a smooth and guaranteed successful outcome, something that a devising process by its definition cannot offer. I was aware that adhering to the suggestions of using a predetermined script and working in a more traditional theatre-making approach would lead us back to a situation where students are directed on what to do and how to do it. Therefore, I decided to take a different route and experiment with an approach that abandons any attempt at labour division. I believe this approach, though it may be perceived as risky and potentially chaotic, is essential for allowing the group to engage critically with the process and ideas we were exploring. By embracing the risks of spontaneity and working on the notion of listening, this decision aimed to generate more space for young people to create their own stories, juxtaposing the possible peacebuilding trap that sees young people as 'a receptacle for dreams and anxieties of local adults and international actors' (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015, p.122). This decision was also rooted in the ethos of improvisation which emphasises the gracious risk taking, acceptance of failure as a natural part of the process, and 'an independent and transformative way of being, knowing and doing (Frost and Yarrow, 2016, p. 3). In this analysis of the role of improvisation in the creative process, I am explore improvisation not only as a means of generating material for performance but also as a vital mode of interaction among participants. This involves the cultivation of trust, the practice of active listening, and the establishment of a shared sense of responsibility. Furthermore, I aim to highlight how this artistic experience of improvisation empowered the group to integrate these aspects into their everyday lives.

Establishing a foundation of trust among all participants was the initial step in the creative process. This strategy sought to shape the ethos of our collaboration through non-hierarchical conversation by cultivating an environment that encourages open dialogue and cooperation. In the initial 'meeting up' stage of the process (PP, p.8), the focus was on fostering the creative environment rooted in playfulness, with an emphasis on spontaneity and immediacy as a way to challenge predetermined understanding of the theatre and social rules. Spolin's understanding of spontaneity as a moment of personal freedom that liberates us from 'preconceptions, interpretations, and assumptions (if one is to solve the problem) so as to be able to make direct and fresh contact with the creative environment and the objects and people within it' (Spolin, 2017, p.15) was an important

foundation for our work. In the first rehearsal, the initial conversation about the fears and expectations of the participants highlighted that the main obstacle to spontaneity was a fear of the unknown and a fear of failure that would provoke ridicule and disapproval from others or the community. This fear was also evident in the facilitators' anxiety about the possible quality of the show and in young people's initial self-doubt and nervousness about sharing their ideas, fearing they might not seem smart or funny enough (Personal journal, 2017). These emotions are an expected part of the creative process. However, if not addressed, they stand in the way of creative risk taking and they become a distraction. Another issue that this anxiety showed was how little trust the group has in themselves, and adults have in young people. A fear of failure and the notion of trust are in a direct relationship. As Waterman notes: 'what seems like virtuosic risk-taking in improvisation is actually the skilful exercise of trust. […] Trust involves the willingness to take a risk that someone or something is trustworthy. Most of us are willing to take risks in exact proportion to how much we trust in the outcome.' (Waterman, 2015, p.60). This relationship between trust and fear is also significant in the peacebuilding process. As Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker observe 'conflict and trauma can generate powerful emotions, such as fear, anger, mistrust and betrayal, which can in turn bind societies and communities together by generating cultures of fear, anger, resentment and anxiety. Rather than initiating a much needed process of healing after atrocity and trauma, such reactions can easily generate fear of and intolerance towards difference, thus establishing new cycles of violence and hatred' (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2020, p. 88). Furthermore, Hutchison and Bleiker argue that while traditional peacebuilding approaches - focused on immediate challenges like security, institution building, democratic accountability, and economic progress - are important, they are not insufficient for achieving lasting peace. To enhance the process, the authors emphasise the necessity to 'work through the collective, politicised forms of emotion that may unknowingly constitute animosity and divisive political relations' (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2020, p. 88). Going back to our rehearsal room, in order to create trust that brings willingness to take creative risks, I focused on the listening aspect of improvisation that get us to the collective authorship as an important aspect that challenges the authoritarian way of being. Having in mind Frost and Yarrow's point outlined in their introduction to the improvisation, that 'the hardest thing to learn is that failure doesn't matter. What matters is to listen, to watch, to add to what is happening, rather than subtract from it, and to avoid the reflex of trying to make it into something you think it ought to be, rather than letting it become what it can be' (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, p. xvi). Furthermore, it could be argued that this strategic integration of playfulness and the acceptance of failure within our creative process liberated participants from the constraints of social taboos, established habits and inhibition. This approach empowered participants to engage in creative risks that they might have

otherwise shied away from, a phenomenon reflected in the themes that emerged, such as the harmful mechanisms of the patriarchal system. This led to a more holistic understanding of the social norms that underpin the culture of conflict, as well as the potential articulation of protest voices that can transform society. This acceptance of playfulness and mistakes not only enhances individual agency but also challenges authoritarian systems, which rely on obedience and perfection[68].

The second important aspect of understanding improvisation as a way of being concerns the concept of active listening. One which scholar George Lipsitz defines not as passive hearing but as 'an act of deliberation and discernment' that requires 'attention and interpretation' - a capacity that is cultivated through experience and is fundamental to building the spontaneity necessary for creative collaboration (Lipsitz, 2015, p.11). It is a multi-faceted phenomenon: Michael Rost defines it through four parallel forms of processing—neurological, linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic—embedding it within social, cultural, and cognitive contexts (Rost, 2024). This complex act, which entails both the possession and suppression of voice,[69] finds a profound political dimension in the work of philosopher Mladen Dolar. In his work *A Voice and Nothing More*, he highlights the etymological link between the words for 'to obey' and 'to listen', which also pertains to the Bosnian language. Drawing from this connection he reflects on the political dimension of listening, suggesting its intertwining with power and ideology. This political voice is not merely about compliance but involves an active process of subjectification—a negotiation with the symbolic fabric of tradition and social norms (Dolar, 2006, p. 122). This perspective aligns with the peacebuilding perspective which underscores the importance of interpersonal listening in cultivating empathetic responses and understanding of diverse perspectives (Bodie et al., 2023). However, as Macnamara articulates, while interpersonal listening is crucial, it alone is insufficient for sustainable peace. Instead, there is a need to shift toward large-scale listening, which involves creating inclusive spaces where dialogue flourishes free from judgment (Macnamara, 2016). Such spaces, I argue, are inherently

[68] In his work *A voice and nothing more* philosopher Mladen Dolar point out how the word for 'to obey' is the same in many languages, including Bosnian, as the word 'to listen'. In his work he reflects on the political dimension of listening suggesting that listening is structured by power and ideology, and as such it has opacity and traumatic potential. Listening is not just about comprehension but it is linked with desire, power and unspeakable. about encountering the limits of meaning (the point where the voice becomes a disturbing or sublime object)

[69] This concept is deeply rooted in performance studies, where the act of listening is widely acknowledged as a crucial part of the art making process. It is discussed in almost every book about theatre-making, particularly regarding acting and improvisation, from Spolin (1963, 2017), Grotowski (1968, 2002) to Johnstone (1981) and Boal (1979, 2000). It involves being attentive, it requires concentration and supports strong stage presence. Through the history of philosophy, notion of listening was integral to the understanding of human cognition and perception, it is understood as psychological act (Barthes 1985) and a sociocognitive phenomenon (Beard 2009).

improvisational as they necessitate attentive, deliberative, and discerning listening grounded in trust and responsibility.

While this improvisational space, that exists ‘in a zone that lies somewhere between order and freedom, between structure and surprise’ (Dudeck and McClure, 2018, p. 6), successfully dismantled barriers and fostered a powerful sense of collective authorship, this very openness also created a space where interpersonal conflicts could emerge. These tensions arose from a variety of factors, including clashing personalities and additional issues that students unintentionally brought into the rehearsals. Crucially, however, the same framework that allowed this tension also offered ways to resolve it. As one participant's journey highlights this process of built trust: 'at first, I was impatient with the project and nervous about it - but we worked together and have become a team' (MM Report, 2017, p.9). This sentiment is echoed in another participant's reflective feedback, which acknowledges conflict but highlights the group's capacity for repair:

> ‘it was heartbreaking when I had an argument with one of the actors, it was unnecessary. Sometimes we get nervous, and not every day goes as planned, but I shouldn’t ruin other people's days. But we were able to resolve it. It’s important that we can express our thoughts. We must support each other. We have the freedom to do so here’ (MM Report, 2017, p.7).

Thus, the freedom within the process was not the freedom from conflict, but rather the freedom to navigate it constructively, transforming moments of tension into affirmations of a resilient collective bond. Following the ethos of conversation, the conflicts were addressed in a manner that ultimately fostered great group cohesion, as this feedback testifies: ‘even when there is tension, we can always discuss it and find the common ground. We learnt that we should avoid arguing – instead we should just talk’ (MM Report, 2017, p.8). As Bodie observes, in the context of the post-conflict reconciliation, the outcome of the act of listening may not culminate in a definitive resolution of conflict. However, it is an important process that involves open dialogue, mutual understanding, and the development of trust, paving the way for possible resolution in the future (Bodie, 2023). I would argue that these conflicts in our rehearsal space were resolved effectively due to an ethos and atmosphere founded in the non-hierarchical conversation and improvisation strategy rooted in augmented sense of listening that fosters trust and ‘creates new understandings of perviousness and futurity in order to explore hidden possibilities’ (Lipsitz, 2015, p. 11). Young people listened to one another to create a theatre piece that is engaged in political conversation with their society. In the theatre, the audience attentively listened to the young people’s perspective, uncovering new possibilities within familiar themes. Audience feedback reflects this sentiment ‘the play is the

dissection of our reality. The characters are inspirational and convincing. The context is spot on. I am delighted.' (MM Report, 2017, p.3). This creative conversation between the group and the audience brought a new positionality of the youth that aligns with philosopher Fiumara's assertion that 'through listening a development unfolds that seems both open and enigmatic (clearly perceptible but equally clearly unfathomable): a development of relationships that become knitted together into an ever increasing involvement' (Fiumara, 1990, p. 115). I'll be reflecting on this positionality and authority shift later in Chapter Four.

In this analysis of the role of improvisation in the creative process of this praxis, the third focus is on the cultivation of a shared sense of responsibility. As previously established, improvisation is a practice that embodies spontaneity and challenges predetermined notions, builds trust, and encourages listening on various levels. Moreover, it also demands a collaborative ethic - including responsibilities to oneself and to one's partners. This ethic, as Daniel Fischlin argues in his essay on jazz improvisation, involves

> 'the need to consider what the other has to say; to respond constructively; to disagree; to remain silent until one has something to say; to add consonance or dissonance; to change the topic of conversation; even to critique ossified notions of what being responsible might mean in order to provide means of achieving new creative outcomes' (Fischlin, 2015, p. 290).

In my praxis, rooted in collective authorship, the group shared the responsibilities for both the content of the performance and the various tasks that needed to be completed. The young people internalised this ethos, expressing ownership over the work: 'this play was ours, it was personal and very important to us as, it was our voice' (MM Report, 2017). Furthermore, they appreciated the decision-making freedom that opposed the hierarchical constraints that they faced in the local educational system and society:

> 'having the freedom to improvise was good, it was a new experience without strict boundaries. I appreciated how we collaborated as a group and reached compromises. We respected each other's opinions and made an effort to include everyone's ideas. The atmosphere during our project was very positive, as we had the liberty to explore our creativity' (MM Report, 2017).

By embracing the ethics of improvisation, students took risks and welcomed the unexpected. This approach, which is rooted in spontaneity and focuses on embracing the present moment rather than controlling the future (Johnstone 1979), allowed them to act without the fear of failure that typically

governs their educational and social settings. This liberation within the playful environment led not only to a significant personal growth but to a shift in how they were perceived by their community. Facilitators observed a striking transformation in the group's dynamic and self-awareness, noting that:

> 'with this freedom, the young people feel a sense of responsibility. I was pleasantly surprised by the level of maturity they exhibited. They have a clear understanding of what is best for the group, and I have witnessed considerable improvement in all of them. After seven hours of teaching, I come here feeling inspired by their boundless energy and innovative ideas' (MM Report 2017:9).

This observed link between freedom and responsibility aligns well with Fischlin's insights that improvisation carries an 'ethical charge' that 'carries over into the social practice of responsibility, the social practice of improvisation', where this mindful interaction enables 'right action to occur' (Fischlin 2015, p. 293). This aspiration for freedom and flexibility of thought could be seen as an important element in the effort of breaking the cycle of conflict by building a complex narrative that is inclusive for all sides. In a peacebuilding context, this positions improvisation as a deliberate practice that demands cooperation and a shared responsibility for the future. By embracing risk and uncertainty, the group created a microcosm of social responsibility—one where agency was not imposed but negotiated, and where creative outcomes emerged from shared commitment.

Tu i tamo [*Here and There*]

What: Intricacy of conflict

The third piece of praxis started with 'zemlja' as the single-word stimulus. In Bosnian, the word 'zemlja' is a polysemic term that can refer to soil, land, country or the Earth. This multifaceted meaning of the word holds significant relevance within the local context. For many participants, whose livelihoods remain tied to subsistence agriculture, 'zemlja' operates as both a literal ground of sustenance and a symbolic site of belonging. This duality of the concept of 'zemlja' is further complicated by the notions of patriotism and nostalgia. This emotional connection is particularly pronounced given the war-related exiles as well as the current high rate of emigration[70].

[70] Data from 2010-2019 showed Bosnia and Herzegovina had the highest net emigration rate in the Western Balkans at -12% (Leitner, 2021) The emigration s disproportionately high among young people, resulting in a significant outflow of skilled workers and professionals, which contributes to the exacerbation of skilled labour shortages within the country (WFD Research Study).

Furthermore, the term's territorial connotations also foreground the politicised nature of borders in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina as Prijedor is only a two-hour drive from the European Union border with Croatia and lies on the edge of the internal boundary between Republika Srpska and the Federation. The final piece, titled *Tu i tamo* [*Here and There*] interrogates all these tensions the term brought, by following a day at the small border crossing between the European Union and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This choice of location was particularly inspired by the Kostajnica border crossing, which is a two hour drive from Prijedor. Before the fall of Yugoslavia, this site was merely a bridge spanning the Una River; after the war, it became the official border between Croatia (now a member of the EU) and Bosnia-Herzegovina. A striking metaphor for the absurdities of borders emerges in the geographical arrangement of a Kostajnica football pitch, caught between the past and the present, as described in the Introduction. Built before the fall of Yugoslavia, the pitch is now divided by the frontier, with one-third located in EU territory and two-thirds in Bosnia-Herzegovina. During matches, players unconsciously traverse this geopolitical divide hundreds of times - unintentionally performing the subversion of borders. By focusing on the border as a space of conflict and coexistence, *Tu i tamo* reframes 'zemlja' not as a stable entity but as a terrain of negotiation—between memory and hope, localism and transnationalism, and the enduring legacies of imposed partitions. In the piece, the border was used as a site of tension, discord and conflict, examining the complexities of interpersonal, neighbourly and familial divisions. The two main themes explored were centred around the ethnic divisions present within contemporary Bosnian society, and dynamics between the diaspora and local communities, emphasising the complexities of their interactions.

This third piece of praxis engaged with ethnic divisions in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the most explicit manner. The central storyline follows a love affair between two people from opposing ethnic backgrounds whose families strongly disapprove of their relationship. The couple decided to run away together, but their families caught them at the border. This situation resonates powerfully with many young people, as evident by student testimony, 'my friend is Muslim, and her boyfriend is Serbian. When her mother found out about their relationship, she insisted that my friend end it. Now, my friend lies to her mother and continues to see him in secret. Many families are like that' (Most Mira Report, 2018). This dynamic mirrors the *Romeo and Juliet* trope of forbidden love across factional divides, a recurring motif in post-conflict cultural production (Thompson, 2013). However, the work deliberately subverts this paradigm of tragic inevitability. In a pivotal scene, the families' confrontation devolves into a farcical debate over which household bakes the superior *pita* [pie][71].

[71] Pita or burek [pie] is traditional Bosnian dish that also hod a strong cultural significance. https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2012/6/5/burek-i-drustvene-vrijednosti

This culinary dispute inadvertently exposes the ambiguity and performativity of their own ethnic identities that are far from ethnic purity. The narrative culminates in a defiantly joyous wedding, officiated by a self-styled Multi-Kulti priest—a symbolic rejection of ethno-religious divisions. By scripting a happy ending, the participants reclaim agency from deterministic narratives of ethnic antagonism, proposing coexistence as a creative act rather than a political abstraction. This sentiment was echoed by a participant who emphasised: 'it is a Muslim and Serbian marriage—and people disapprove of it, believing it to be problematic; however, it does not matter. There are mixed marriages within families' (MM Report, 2018). Through this deliberate narrative choice, the praxis celebrated a future built not on segregation, but on the courageous intimacies of shared life. This process aligns with what scholar John Paul Lederach describes as the 'moral imagination,' the capacity to imagine oneself in a web of relationships that includes even one's enemies, which is central to conflict transformation (Lederach, 2005).

Another significant challenge to the established system of ethnic and religious segregation is embodied in the character of the Multi-Kulti priest. This character, a satirical embodiment of multicultural divisions, serves as a critical lens through which the piece interrogates the entanglement of religious and ethnic identity in Bosnia. As outlined earlier in Chapter One, religion operates as a foundational marker of both ethnic and national identity (Pavkovic 2020). Subverting this paradigm, the priest (deliberately cast as a woman to challenge patriarchal religious norms[72]) performs a farcical syncretism, blending elements of various religious practices from Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and invented traditions. Her exaggerated ritual provoked uproarious laughter from audiences, functioning as what Bakhtin (1968) might term a carnivalesque critique—using humour to expose the absurdity of rigid divisions while affirming shared humanity. This tonal balance between satire and solidarity resonated powerfully: as noted in the documentation of the audience reception, 'although discussing such topics is still taboo, the crowd of 350 people was delighted by the performance' (NED Report, 2018). This bold exploration of socio-political topics, such as religious divide or non-acceptance of mixed marriages, reflects the growing confidence of both facilitators and youth participants, cultivated through years of collaborative practice. This third piece of praxis benefited from accumulated experience and trust, as all facilitators and half of the participants were familiar with the proposed creative methodology, rooted in comedy and collaborative practice. However, this process was not without friction, as newcomers occasionally resisted the collaborative ethos. Participant feedback highlighted specific struggles, noting that 'some new people do not listen and act as if they are in charge; they do not work well with others', or explicitly challenged the

[72] In all four religions (Islam, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity and Judaism) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, women are not perceived as possible religious leaders.

non-hierarchical way of working: 'L. and A. have been arguing, she wants to be the leader, but nobody else wants that - it is all about collaboration' (MM Report, 2018). Ultimately, these conflicts were resolved by the young people themselves, reflecting their growing agency and the robust collaboration culture they were building. Reflection on the process underscores this collective resilience, with participants observing: 'we had the energy to change, we needed to accept ideas and listen more' and 'our collective energy was a great help to us. We motivated each other and pushed through the challenges together' (MM Report, 2018). This ability to include individual ideas into a shared vision was crucial, as one participant reflects: 'Many ideas and perspectives came together for this play, and everyone had the chance to be heard and to contribute. Initially, one can be offended when you see that your contribution may not fit well, but you gain a new perspective when you look at the bigger picture' (MM Report, 2018). As in previous processes, improvisation emerged not merely as a technique but as a fundamental way of being—a key tool for democratic negotiation and relational attunement. This was succinctly captured in the assertion: 'we improvise all the time, and we know how to work together and listen to other people' (MM Report, 2018), illustrating how the practice fostered an embodied ethic of listening and adaptive collaboration.

Returning to the themes of *Zemlja*, the piece moves beyond its exploration of ethnic divisions to critically examine another facet of post-conflict society: the intricate and often contentious relationship between diaspora communities and those who remain locally. The title *Tu I Tamo* [*Here and There*] itself encapsulates the fluidity of belonging in transnational contexts, where the binary between 'home' and 'abroad' becomes destabilised. Spaces of familiarity may exist in foreign lands, while the homeland can grow increasingly alien to those who left. The Bosnian diaspora represents a particularly salient case study in forced and voluntary migration. Currently, an estimated one-third of Bosnia-Herzegovina's population resides abroad—one of the highest diasporic ratios in Europe (World Bank Report 2024)[73]. This mass displacement occurred in three distinct waves: economic labour migration (1960s–1970s), war-induced exile (1992–1995), and post-2000 emigration driven by persistent socioeconomic precarity. Notably, over 90% of Bosnian migrants have secured permanent residency abroad, with a disproportionate share comprising highly educated and skilled people[74]—a 'brain drain' that exacerbates local development challenges (Pozz,i 2011; Valenta & Ramet, 2011). Paradoxically, while this exodus deprives Bosnia-Herzegovina of human capital, the diaspora sustains the national economy through remittances; Bosnia-Herzegovina ranks among the world's top remittance recipients, with these inflows constituting ~10% of GDP (World Bank 2021),

[73] For further statistics see: https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/BiH-Factsheet-v.2.pdf

[74] Note: after the secondary school the majority of the participants in theatre projects went to study or work abroad, mostly in Serbia, Slovenia, Germany and Austria.

adding another layer to the complex relationship between diaspora communities and those who remain locally.

Zemlja deftly explores this multifaceted and often fraught relationship between the diaspora[75] and the local communities through a series of vignettes that reveal tensions, humour, and unexpected connections. Each scene interrogates different facets of diasporic identity and belonging, employing satire and pathos to expose the contradictions inherent in transnational experiences. One narrative thread follows a group of young Bosnians living in Germany whose nostalgic longing for their homeland compels them to return after a lottery win—a symbolic commentary on the diasporic myth of return (Anwar, 1979; Cakman, 2021). Their idealised vision of Bosnia inevitably clashes with reality, illustrating what Sayad (2018) terms the 'double absence' of migrants who belong fully neither here nor there. Another narrative line, which brought particularly biting comedic moments, features a mixed German-Bosnian family travelling to Prijedor for vacation. The son mischievously teaches his German father phrases that invert common pleasantries: 'dobro jutro' [good morning] becomes 'primite moje saučešće' [accept my condolences], while 'hvala' [thank you] transforms into 'idi dovraga' [go to hell][76]. This linguistic subversion humorously encapsulates the cultural misunderstandings that can characterise diaspora-local interactions that often penetrate family bonds themselves, placing family members in the role of otherness and turning a family reunion into a competition among relatives from Prijedor and Munich. The piece reaches its thematic climax in a charged marketplace scene where 'Tetka iz Nemačke' [Aunt from Germany] is buying apples (PP, video). This encounter erupts into an open conflict between the diaspora and the local community, laying bare the mutual prejudices: she views farmers as dishonest and opportunistic, while they perceive her as a snobbish and privileged outsider. When she identifies as being Bosnian from Germany, the farmer immediately doubles the price of the apples—a pointed critique of the economic disparities that shape these relationships (Halilović, 2021). This scene not only highlights the existing prejudices and biases that exist within both groups but also uses humour as a vehicle for what Carroll (2014) calls non-hostile social commentary that invites a new conversation to promote a culture of peace.

All of these scenes raise profound questions about the ambivalent nature of nostalgia, the complexities of belonging, and the lingering emotional scars that resist easy resolution. They also

[75] Diaspora is understood as 'a distinct form of collective identity of a de-territorialised group of people'. However, 'diasporic identities are not static but, rather, a constant ''work in progress''; over time, many diasporic groups change, adopting new contexts' (Halilovic 2012:164).

[76] This scene plays off the joking habit of teaching foreigners wrong phrases form your language. But in this case, the also blurs the line between familiarity and otherness by placing a German father in the role of otherness.

illuminate the concept of transnational belonging—a socio-psychological phenomenon that encompasses not only individual experiences but also collective identities and personal meanings (Valenta & Ramet, 2011). This exploration of transnationalism is deeply relevant to peacebuilding, as examining these themes on a micro level reveals the intricate social dynamics shaping relationships between diverse communities. Moreover, the embrace of a transnational identity—one that weaves together multiple cultural backgrounds—supports the broader effort to rebuild a cohesive, multiethnic society. When these reflections were shared with the audience in the post show Q&A, the young people sparked a dialogue with the audience, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation across communities. One participant expressed: 'I want to tell you how proud I am of what we've achieved. The emotions I felt—especially after the premiere, seeing how proud our people were—were truly overwhelming' (MM Report, 2018). Ultimately, this nuanced theatrical inquiry recognises the necessity of accounting for the complex emotional landscapes inherent in peacebuilding. This perspective aligns with Hutchison and Bleiker's central argument that reconciliation should be understood as 'a way of recasting the emotional legacies of conflict,' a process in which 'compassion and empathy [are legitimised] as active components' rather than peripheral concerns (2013, p. 82). The production gives emotional form to this theoretical claim, using the stage not merely to represent conflict but to actively model—through moments of audience engagement and participant vulnerability—how such a recalibration of feeling might begin to forge a more cohesive society.

Zemlja concludes with an impending apocalypse: the characters board a bus to an unknown destination, leaving the audience suspended between dread and hope. This mirrors Srećko Horvat's interpretation of the apocalypse as a revelation—one that 'unveils the architecture of our world, both as place and time' (Horvat, 2021). What the performance ultimately reveals is that beyond despair lies the potential for renewal—a new narrative waiting to emerge from a transformed world. The young participants' reflections capture this shift toward resilience and unity: 'I learned to listen, to speak openly, and to appreciate the diversity around me. I now understand that collaboration is essential—we must work together, resolve conflicts, and support one another' (Feedback, 2018). In Chapter Four, I will continue this exploration by examining the role of comedy in facilitating this transformative process. Now I will return to the analyses of the specific directorial methodologies employed in the process, focusing on the notion of the conversation that develops through the practice of repetition.

How: Conversation through repetition

To begin this examination of repetition, I highlight a pervasive social assumption: the perception of conflict as cyclical recurrence. This notion emerges vividly in the line 'opet će rat' ('there will be war

again') from *Zemlja*, as well as in *Brkići*'s temporal framing of history through successive wars (PP, p.5). These artistic choices reflect a widespread colloquial belief in the Balkans that wars recur every fifty years. Although this notion is not entirely accurate, it underscores the frequency of 19th- and 20th-century conflicts[77] and their enduring grip on cultural memory. Historian Stojanović observes that this cultural memory of conflicts is depicted through two dominant frameworks: a teleological lens, which casts history as circular and recursive, and an authoritarian lens, which naturalises war as inevitable, likening it to 'summer storms that begin locally but then flare up and spread on their own' (Stojanović 2023, p. 320, my translation). Such deterministic narratives erase human agency, positioning conflict as an inescapable force rather than a product of collective choices.

In direct contrast to this deterministic view, the creative process repurposed repetition not as a marker of inevitability, but as a central strategy to generate ideas and facilitate collective theatre-making. This approach was set through structured improvisational tasks in which participants engage with the same character or scenario across multiple iterations. For instance, in small groups, young people devised variations of the same scene with different performers embodying a given character (PP, p.25, 36)[78]. It was only at a later stage in the process that we decided who would ultimately play that character in the final performance. This final choice emerged organically from this exploratory phase and was refined through these creative conversations. Far from mere replication, this process embodied an intertextual conversation, where each iteration encouraged participants to critically examine the familiar while also creating new opportunities for interpretation and understanding. Through this creative process, which Kartsaki (2017) refer to as 'looking closely', young people integrated diverse memories. They synthesised various contributions into a cohesive artistic expression that bore traces of all participants' creative investments. This methodology exemplifies Bogart and Landau's conceptualisation of repetition as an accumulative practice that 'is never really the same and contains within it the memory of the last time it was seen or heard' (2004, p. 186). In this understanding, repetition is not merely cyclical but follows a tendril logic, wherein each recurrence introduces variation while retaining essential form.

This use of repetition cultivated the sense of collective authorship, effectively disrupting conventional notions of individual creative ownership, and fostering instead what one participant described as 'a product of joint work and effort which makes it even more special... something that

[77] The Balkan conflicts in that period include: the Wars for Independence 1875-1878, the First Balkan War 1912-1913, the Second Balkan War 1913, The First World War 1914-1918, The Second World War 1938-1945.
[78] For instance, in *Baksuz*, the scene of waiting in a queue was repeatedly improvised with different performers rotating into the role of the Administrator. This practice extended to other pieces, for example in *Brkici*, the character of Baba-sa-jednom-nogom-u-grobu (Grany-with-one-foot-in-the-grave) or the Border Police in *Zemlja*,, were also played by various performers across different scenarios.

will stay for a long, long time in our memory' (MM Report, 2018). Furthermore, this creative conversation extended beyond individual production, creating intertextual connections across all three pieces of praxis components through: character recurrence[79], performative echoes[80] and aesthetic consistency[81] (PP, p.36). These strategic repetitions created what Kartsaki (2017) identifies as performance's multi-layered and flexible present, where 'performance remains but also repeats; its performative trace repeats in the future, remembering itself, repeating itself in a forward moment' (2017:114). Throughout the course of all three pieces of praxis, traces and memories of previous performances re-emerged. Favourite lines and recurring jokes from previous productions reappeared, carried forward by the students participating in multiple productions, or those who had watched one production before participating in another. Ultimately, this sustained conversation across the praxis fostered what Resina and Wulf (2019) characterise as a mimetic community, a 'feeling of belonging, in which mimetic processes, ritual actions, and exercises play a central role' (Resina and Wulf, 2019, p. xxi). These moments not only generated a shared collective memory among the participants but also facilitated a temporary identity shift, wherein the theatrical ones superseded everyday social identities —such as ethnicity or religion— fostering new modes of belonging through shared creative labour and inviting participants to observe the change.

The final dimension of conversation through repetition emerged through the interplay between the performance and its audience. The young people drew upon their lived experiences, embedding personal narratives of conflict into the piece (MM Report, 2018). By transposing elements of their daily realities onto the stage, they effectively recontextualised their experiences, compelling the audience to consider a familiar phenomenon with new eyes. This iterative restaging of lived experience through comedy generated a vital discursive space between young people and the audience, prompting deeper societal reflection. As one audience member noted: 'This was not just amazing; it was real' (MM Report, 2018). Such engagement is critical for renegotiating structures of social power and individual agency, fostering a more inclusive collective consciousness. This transformative potential was encapsulated in an exchange during a post-performance discussion,

[79] The same character of Tetka iz Njemačke (the Aunty from Germany) appeared in both *Brkici* and *Zemlj*, while the Live TV character featured in *Baksuz* and *Zamlja*.

[80] In *Baksuz* one of the facilitators, teacher N.S. portrayed a pregnant woman in the Queue Improvisation. His character was quite amusing, and although it did not make it into the final performance, it was often referenced in the group's conversations. Facilitator N.S. became a star, and the story of this improvisation became part of the group's collective memory. In the third piece of praxis, another male student proposed to play a pregnant woman who was a character involved in a border crossing as a response.

[81] When invited to reconsider the Brechtian signpost aesthetic, the participants insisted on retaining the carboard aesthetic across the second and third piece of praxis arguing for its significance as a visual through-line (personal journal).

where a participant asserted: ‘Someone in the audience asked us if we have any prejudice. And we said, no—we are here to break them’ (MM Report, 2018).

Repetition, conceived as a form of embodied dialogue, responded to the principles of the peacebuilding process. It functioned dually: as a dialogic mediator between the past and the present (Resina & Wulf, 2019), and as a mechanism for constructing both individual and collective memory (Assmann, 2008). Through their theatre pieces, young people invited the audience to engage in a critical co-exploration of their shared social reality. The reinterpretation of experiences transformed the theatrical event into what Paolo Freirean refers to as a ‘culture circle’—a space where ‘the word is more than just an instrument of communication’ but a means of ‘transforming reality’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 57). By collectively reimagining narratives of the conflicts that divide them, participants and audience alike build a mutual understanding and shared narrative necessary for empathy, collective agency and vision of the more cohesive future.

Conclusions

This chapter has offered a reflective commentary on three pieces of praxis — *Baksuz* (2015), *Brkići* (2016), and *Zemlja* (2018) — that form the core of this research. The praxis explored the potential of the proposed directorial methodology, rooted in devised comedy, as a peacebuilding strategy that creates spaces where complex narratives can coexist and where young people from opposing ethnic backgrounds can engage with intricate stories of conflict, identity, and reconciliation. The directorial methodology, grounded in comedy, single-word stimuli, collective authorship, improvisation as a mode of being, and repetition as a form of conversation, intentionally avoided imposing predetermined narratives—both theatrical and sociopolitical—allowing participants to shape the work through their lived experiences and collective authorship. This approach not only subverted traditional hierarchies in theatre-making but also fostered 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.

The emphasis on collective authorship proved vital in redistributing creative agency and dismantling monolithic authority. By decentralising the director’s role, embracing collaborative decision-making and the ethos of the ensemble, the process disrupted the authoritarian dynamics prevalent in both Bosnian-Herzegovian theatre as well as society. Participants, who were initially hesitant, grew into confident co-creators, negotiating censorship, challenging authority figures, and ultimately asserting

their voices. This shift reflects broader peacebuilding objectives, where youth agency is often marginalised yet essential for sustainable transformation. Employing improvisation, which fosters active listening and spontaneity, challenges predetermined notions and builds trust, proved essential for cultivating a sense of shared responsibility, both within the creative process and in broader peacebuilding contexts. Repetition emerged as a critical strategy, not merely as an artistic device but as a means of reinforcing collective memory and promoting intergenerational dialogue. However, the praxis also revealed tensions, including issues surrounding (self) censorship, facilitators' discomfort with improvisational uncertainty, the risks of stereotyping, and the ethical dilemmas of directing without imposition. These challenges highlight the delicate balance required in peacebuilding art—between guidance and autonomy, between critique and care.

In the next chapter, I will provide a deeper analysis of the mechanisms of comedy, examining how its interstitial nature, simultaneously playful and provocative, enables it to navigate Bosnia's fractured memory politics. As this commentary has shown, devised comedy is more than a genre; it is a methodology of encounter, one that invites participants and audiences to imagine, even fleetingly, a possible existence beyond division.

Chapter Four: Comedy and Reconciliation

The terms comedy and peacebuilding are rarely paired together, and their juxtaposition may initially appear unusual, as they often operate in distinct emotional and thematic realms. In Chapter One, I provided a brief overview of how humour and comedy have historically functioned as survival mechanisms amid wartime conflicts by fostering togetherness, sustaining morale in the face of death and tragedy, and advocating for resistance against dehumanisation and destruction. This chapter extends that inquiry and presents the findings of my practice research into comedy's potential to support peacebuilding. It explores how comedy creates, in both rehearsal rooms and theatre auditoriums, a space for a dialogue between youth and their communities on complex and polarising narratives. Building on the previous chapter, which explored key directorial strategies and critical moments that influence participants' perceptions and understanding of the conflict, this section concentrates specifically on the function of comedy and humour[82] in addressing hostilities between opposing groups, reshaping collective memories and envisaging a different society. It is organised around four key functions of comedy, as I have defined them within praxis: (1) invitation, (2) critical reflection, (3) authority disruption, and (4) hopefulness. Initially, the chapter discusses comedy's capacity to create an atmosphere of belonging through shared laughter, while also acknowledging criticism that laughter can trivialise important subjects. Next, it analyses comedy's subversive potential to interrogate dominant one-sided narratives and to renegotiate social authorities. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining the significance of comedy's inherent sense of hope, which is framed as a form of political action within the context of peacebuilding.

Comedy as invitation

As established at the outset, a key aspect of my directorial methodology was choosing comedy as the genre that can potentially challenge one-sided political narratives surrounding war crimes. For any meaningful conversation to occur, however, the presence of diverse perspectives is essential. This is a particularly critical aspect in post-war Prijedor, a society trapped in a liminal state: no longer at war, yet still deeply divided by transgenerational trauma, entrenched animosities, and competing historical narratives. As explored in Chapter One, persistent resistance to peacebuilding is deeply

[82] I will be using the term comedy to refer to a specific genre of the piece. The term humour, understood as 'the object of comic amusement' (Carroll 2014:7), will refer to an overall quality of fun and amusement present not only in the work but in a process too. This distinction will help articulate the dynamics between the genre of comedy and the broader experience of comic amusement in my exploration of comedic pieces.

rooted in segregated education systems and the continuous exploitation of ethnic divisions for political gain, which serves to perpetuate elite power (Belloni, 2020; Becirevic, 2010; Bet-El, 2002). This political stagnation, compounded by economic decline and widespread disillusionment, has left many citizens sceptical about the prospect of a hopeful future.

Furthermore, even when young people decide to participate in a peacebuilding initiative, they often encounter approaches that can feel didactic. For instance, several young people from the *Baksuz*, who had previously collaborated with another NGO, remarked that while a project with the Nansen Dialogue Centre focused on learning about discrimination through playwriting, it was 'less creative compared to Most Mira, which was better because that project allowed us to express our voices' (MM Report 2016, p.8). In such an environment, writing a call for participants becomes fraught with complexity, as one needs to navigate social fatigue alongside the underlying assumption that such projects would adopt a wearisome didactic approach.

By embracing a genre that embodies humour and enjoyment, I sought to engage a diverse range of participants, attract a broader audience, and mitigate the apprehension and fatigue often associated with peacebuilding initiatives and discourse surrounding difficult historical events. In the assembled reflection and feedback documentation, many participants (including both young people and facilitators) spoke about the importance of fun and discovered a sense of togetherness. They highlighted the laughter and the infusion of positive energy, together with the formation of new friendships and the sense of unity, as key elements of the process (MM Reports 2016, 2017, 2018). This sense of communal connection is of particular significance for young people who, under ordinary circumstances, might rarely interact with each other due to entrenched ethnic divisions. As one student of Serbian origin articulated during a debrief session, 'I never thought I could have a Muslim friend like you before' (MM Report, 2016, p.7). Recognising humour as an essential aspect of this creative process underscores its significance in fostering strong interpersonal bonds. This directly relates to the understanding that humour not only provides a relief from social norms,[83] but also reveals 'the depth of what we share' (Critchley, 2002, p.18). This shared aspect is vital for fostering collaboration and altruistic behaviour among groups, ultimately leading to a more positive perception of others (Curry and Dunbar, 2013). From a peacebuilding perspective, such a notion of inter-ethnic cohesion is crucial for cultivating an environment where participants can critically examine and challenge the divisive political narratives that sustain segregation. The practice research findings underscore the notion of comedy and the humour it engenders foster an

[83] This refers to the Relief theory of humour, one of the three traditional theories of laughter and humour, the other two being Superiority and Incongruity. For a useful summary of these theories see Morreall's *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor.*

environment perceived as inviting and enjoyable for both performers and audiences. This inviting atmosphere facilitates a space of trust that allows young people to engage with complex narratives of the conflict. It also allows, as seen in the praxis commentary, participants and audiences to critically examine entrenched divisions and ask difficult questions of identity. Moreover, the inherent playful atmosphere of the genre appears to facilitate conflict resolution at various stages of the creative process. The analysis of the praxis suggests that humour can act as a mediating force in a space that is not always harmonious and is prone to both creative and personal conflicts, in the words of one of the participants, 'everything that could have been exhausting was fun' (MM Report, 2018).

In addition to blurring of ethnic divisions among participants, comedy and humour also enabled a significant shift in the power dynamics between facilitators, me as director and young people. This initial power division, which stemmed from a top-down educational system and structures of social and artistic organisation that arose from patriarchy and autocratic leadership, was changed into a collaborative relationship throughout the transformative process rooted in devising comedy. These elements of togetherness are important steps in the formation of shared identity of young people. Through the creative process, an alternative collective memory focused on collaboration emerged, serving as a counterpoint to the socially imposed collective memory of division. As evident from the feedback reflection in Chapter Three, these two social groups formed an ensemble built on a collaborative relationship, contrasting the usual separation of student and teacher or performer and director. This transformation can be effectively understood through Tom Cornford's analytical framework, which posits that culture should be viewed not as a static product but as an atmosphere - a shared, emotional field that is collectively created and maintained (Cornford, 2021, p. 209). This process of creation aligns with Michael Chekhov's technique, which treats atmosphere not as a background mood but as an active, tangible force that performers consciously generate and radiate into a space (Chekhov 2002). In this praxis, comedy and humour played a crucial role in cultivating the atmosphere of trust and cohesion, acting as a mechanism of collective attunement – a Chekhovian process of radiating and receiving shared feelings - that is inherently resistant (Cornford, 2021). Consequently, this new, comedy-forged atmosphere introduced a dynamic that redefined the authority of facilitators and empowered young people by shifting their position within the community, a theme I will explore further later in this chapter. It also redefined the view of collective identity. By the end of the project, the term 'us' emerged to represent the newly formed ensemble, comprising young people, facilitators, and the director, highlighting the togetherness of their authorship in contrast to the previous division based on ethnicity or social position. Significantly, many facilitators felt excitement and pride, as one noted in their reflection after the

opening night: 'you come to realise that you created something wonderful with and for those young people, and you reflect on how it all started, feeling a powerful sense of achievement and joy. You feel, YES!' (MM Report, 2018, p.2). In keeping with the spirit of improvisation, I would add - you feel, YES AND![84] From this initial acceptance of the offer to be together, the expansion of the 'AND' led us to the creative exploration of a common narrative and the unpacking of complex socio-political themes related to imposed and damaging division, relevant to the group and contemporary Bosnian society. As one audience member commented, 'this show is an insightful dissection of our reality' (MM Report, 2017, p. 3). This perception confirms that comedy successfully translated a shared emotional experience into a potent, critically engaged piece of social commentary, achieving the very resistance to hegemonic narrative that Cornford describes. The full significance of this critical engagement will be elaborated later in the following section.

Returning to the notion of cohesion, the feelings of joy, understanding, and complicity extended from the ensemble to the audience, creating a shared experience of collective appreciation. The auditorium resonated with laughter as the audience engaged with the comedic elements of the productions. Across all three pieces of praxis, audience feedback highlighted the work's wit. Responses such as 'excellent', 'funny', and 'inspiring' underscored the emotional resonance of the performances, with one spectator remarking, 'I can't remember the last time I laughed so much' (MM Report 2017, p. 3; NED Report 2018, p.1). while others noted that certain scenes evoked both tears and laughter, reflecting the production's emotional complexity, as one student reflects, 'I started this for fun, but they are now my family' (MM Report, 2018, p. 2). The achievement of this community engagement was further evidenced by a steady increase in attendance, driven largely by word of mouth. In the first year, there were 145 people in the audience; by the third year, the auditorium reached full capacity of 300 seats, with audience members even occupying the stairs. The widespread appeal of comedy cultivated an inviting atmosphere, effectively mitigating assumptions about the overly didactic or tired nature of peacebuilding projects, ultimately attracting a large and diverse array of participants. This inclusivity enriched the collaborative atmosphere, encouraging open dialogue and creativity among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The final aspect of the invitation was the sense of social cohesion within the audience that was fostered by comedy. In the auditorium, individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, various religions, and contrasting experiences of the 1990s war events sat side by side, united in laughter at shared moments of recognition. Although I did not gather specific data to analyse the impact of

[84] 'Yes, and…' is fundamental guiding principle in improvisation that accept the proposition of your partner, and build upon it.

these performances on each particular community, I could glean from the auditorium reactions and anonymous audience feedback that feelings of enjoyment, laughter, and recognition resonated across all ethnic groups[85]. This collective laughter holds profound significance, constituting what Critchley terms the 'sensus communis'—a shared sensibility that unveils the depth of our commonality.

By illuminating what binds us together, laughter invites a form of philosophical spectatorship, prompting individuals to reflect critically on their own lives and societal norms (Critchley, 2002, p. 18). This critical reflection is a fundamental act of peacebuilding, as it disrupts the narrative of division and creates the psychological space necessary for social transformation. Comedy functioned as a unifying force in Prijedor, temporarily dissolving entrenched binaries of ethnic 'us' and 'them' by allowing opposing groups to engage critically and humorously with their shared reality. In his analyses of the relationship between humour and value, Carroll argues that humour plays a crucial role in constructing (and perpetually reconstructing) collective identity, it reinforces the norms of 'us' while delineating 'them' as 'those who deviate (or are alleged to deviate) from the norms commemorated by the comic amusement in which the us participate' (Carroll, 2014, p. 77). At the Prijedor Theatre, the audience's shared laughter[86] in response to a performance that critiques specific political situations and social norms allowed them, if only temporarily, to reconstruct the ethnic, generational and gender dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them'. Here, 'us' stood in opposition to corrupt politicians, traditionalists, or even their own preconceptions. By integrating laughter and playfulness, praxis challenged dehumanising narratives, subverting hostility and fear of the 'other', as the analyses in Chapter Three demonstrated. For the young people, such experiences of collective engagement are vital in shaping shared identity. Through the creative process, an alternative collective memory focused on collaboration emerged, serving as a counterpoint to the socially imposed collective memory of division. This reimagining of ethical relationships and social norms, however fleeting, also encouraged audiences to reconsider their perspectives in relation to others. A poignant moment occurred during the *Zemlja* post-show discussion when an audience member asked whether the ensemble harboured prejudices against one another. The group's response, 'we are here to break them' (MM Report, 2018), epitomised the transformative potential of this artistic endeavour. This moment also offered what Critchley describes in his analyses of self-humour as 'a sense of emancipation, consolation, and childlike elevation' (Critchley, 2002, p.95), an experience that is both empowering and hopeful. This moment of emancipation from the expected narratives of

[85] In the auditorium, family members of ethnically mixed students attended, and there were no cases of anyone leaving the performance or protesting - the laughter echoed a sense of unity.
[86] Laughing together in theatre has additional significance because, as Bevis explained, 'we are prompted to consider our own laughs and sighs in relation to those we hear around us'(Bevis 2013 :102)

conflict offers consolation in the demonstrated potential of unity and results in a childlike uplift —a hopeful, almost giddy sense of possibility that filled the room. The response was a performative act of freedom, reflecting Critchley's belief that humour helps us step beyond our constraints.

Although the praxis demonstrated that the use of comedy worked effectively as an invitation, it is important to critically examine the potential challenges this approach may pose. In this analysis, I am focusing on two key ideas that are significant in the context of peacebuilding. The first issue relates to the account of ethnic humour and harmful stereotypes, which can perpetuate hostility. The second concern is that comedy often trivialises important subjects, allowing superficial engagement with complex topics. This concern is grounded in the critique that comedy can act as an emotional astringent, countering empathy (Greenberg, 2019, p. 21). Additionally, it is often viewed as a 'safety valve' for the critique, suggesting that while this genre may seem to challenge the political order, it ultimately reinforces the status quo (Snodgrass, 1996, p. 461)[87]. Furthermore, the Frankfurt School's concept of the 'culture industry', articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002, p. 106) argues that mass-produced culture pacifies audiences by transforming potential social critique into harmless amusement.

Ethnic humour, as a specific form of intergroup humour, acts as a discursive mechanism that both reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, often through the use of stereotypes, effectively defining boundaries between in-groups ('us') and out-groups ('them'). Anchored in various power dynamics, including ethnicity, class, and region, this type of humour acts as a double-edged sword; it unifies and offers a way to cope with collective anxieties while also perpetuating systemic marginalisation (Davies, 1990). In his seminal article 'Racist Act and Racist Humour' (1984), Michael Philips provided a philosophical framework for debate about accountability in comedy by defining racist humour as a form of 'put down' humour that has the potential to offend or mock individuals based on their ethnic identity. While humour frequently employs ethnic stereotypes to subvert existing power dynamics, its primary harm lies in enacting ridicule that intends to humiliate (Philips, 1984). This dynamic can be observed across historical and cultural contexts, from the antisemitic caricature propaganda in National Socialist Germany (Kessel & Marziger, 2012), dehumanising portrayals of African-Americans in USA cartoons, film and television (Mundy & White, 2017) and pejorative ethnic representations in former Yugoslavia, in particular the stereotype of the 'dumb Bosnian', which may entertain but also codifies a subordinate status (Vucetic, 2004). Drawing on Christie Davis' anthropological study, which concludes that ethnic jokes are told not about the group the teller

[87] For the problematisation of this notion see 'Satire as Safety Valve: Moving Beyond a Mistaken Metaphor' (2021) by DeClercq and Khachab.

despises but about the familiar group, much like themselves, who live at the margins of their culture, Morreall proposes a more comprehensive approach to understanding the harmful effects of humour. Acknowledging that 'by putting a 'play frame' allows prejudicial ideas to be slipped into people's heads without being evaluated' (Morreall, 2009, p. 107), he concludes that the offensiveness of jokes based on stereotypes isn't absolute; instead, it varies in relation to the potential harm those stereotypes may inflict. Adding that if a stereotype has little or no harmful impact, a joke that references it might be considered acceptable by the group affected, as it can symbolise their identity, 'where a stereotype leads to little or no harm, a joke based on it may even be acceptable to the target group as a badge of their identity. The objectionableness of jokes based on stereotype is not all-or-nothing but proportional to the harm those stereotypes are likely to cause' (Morreall, 2009).

Before engaging in my first piece of praxis *Baksuz*, I was concerned about the comedies' potential for offence and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes. I recognised that while humour often involves playful engagement with stereotypes, it was essential to acknowledge that certain forms of stereotyping can be detrimental. This notion is particularly important in the context of contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, where the justification of recent wars required a transformation of memory that reshaped the value system, heightened nationalism, and rigidly divided former citizens into hostile 'us' and 'others' (Chapter One). In rehearsal, I considered using the GIVE/GET/DETEST[88] exercise to facilitate a collaborative identification of topics deemed unhumorous by the group. I also considered hosting a workshop specifically focused on the intersection of humour and racism, similar to one on collaborative theatre-making. However, drawing from Morreall's observation that defining the ethical intention in humour is not always a straightforward act, as 'it may not be possible to decide on one interpretation of the joke, or any joke as the correct interpretation' (Morreall, 2009, p.99), I ultimately decided against these methods. This decision aligned with my broader methodological aim to minimise framework rigidity in the initial phases of the project. Similar to my reasons behind opting for single words as stimuli, my intention was to avoid preemptively constraining the subjects. Establishing guidelines that could be interpreted as a form of (self) censorship, potentially restricting the subjects and type of humour, or the imposition of taboos, seemed counterproductive. It seemed even paradoxical, as one of the social functions of humour and comedy as discursive space is to 'allow the mention of taboo subjects' (Palmer, 1994:60). By avoiding any predetermined restrictions, I opted for a more fluid approach grounded in

[88] This exercise involves placing three pieces of paper in the room, with each paper designated for different categories. Participants write down on each piece what the like, don't like and what they can offer to the creative process. This exercise is useful for inviting a conversation about ethics of collaboration and ways of being within the rehearsal room.

conversational pedagogy. Having in mind Holm's argument that humour functions by establishing several interpretive frameworks that align on certain points but remain in conflict on others (Holm 2017, p.191), I decided to consider the ethics of humour as an ongoing re-examination of the intentions behind jokes and the types of laughter they evoke. This nuanced understanding of humour as an ethical interaction, which is not absolute but requires ongoing questioning, required a few key considerations: (1) what is the context of the joke (who is telling it, the motivation behind it, and the audience it is directed toward), (2) is there a tendency to dismiss insults with a 'just joking' attitude, (3) are we laughing at someone or laughing with them, and (4) what is the power dynamic in the joke – is laughter used to critique places of power or to belittle the powerless (Personal Journal 2016). In the rehearsal room, humour based not only on ethnic but also gender stereotypes was always examined through the lens of context, intent and impact, as well as one of the power dynamics. Across all three pieces of praxis, audience reactions, evidenced by bursts of laughter and applause, indicate that the ethical and aesthetic quality of the work resonated strongly within the auditorium. Furthermore, several audience members have commented that the quality of these productions surpasses that of those in the professional theatre repertoire (MM Report, 2018).

The second criticism of comedy, which is important for this research, is that it often trivialises important subjects, allowing people to engage with serious topics in a frivolous way. Morreall (2009) explains this as humour's inherent epistemic irresponsibility which stems from its disengagement- we laugh, often neglecting the truthfulness of what amuses us, thereby fostering cognitive disengagement that leads to irresponsibility. [89] This perspective emerges from what Holm (2017, p.182) contextualises as a historically situated cultural anxiety that divides discourse into hierarchical categories of serious/non-serious and high/low culture, viewing popular amusement as inherently debasing. The relief theory of humour further substantiates this critique, suggesting laughter may serve as a psychological discharge that replaces meaningful engagement with pressing issues (Morreall, 2009). Historical exemplars demonstrate how political leaders, from Lincoln to Churchill, strategically deployed humour to deflect criticism and mitigate bad news (Morreall, 2009, 2009b). In contrast, contemporary populists like Johnson and Trump have weaponised humour to trivialise substantive policy debates and delegitimise opposition simultaneously (Beck, 2024, Basu 2024). This comedic deflection redirects the critical potential and uses humour's very accessibility and popularity as mechanisms for avoiding rather than prompting substantive engagement with complex issues (Holm, 2017). However, as an overview of the themes discussed in the praxis makes clear -

[89] According to Morreall (2009) playful disengagement is a distinctive aspect of humour, similar to play and artistic enjoyment, as it lacks practical or cognitive goals. In these moments, we are disengaged and not focused on others' needs, and this practical disengagement helps shed light on the difference between amusement and negative emotions.

including war crimes, censorship, harmful mechanisms of patriarchy or liberal capitalism, as well as the fraught relationship between diaspora and local community – comedic deflection did not redirect criticism.

What this section on Comedy as Invitation examines is the role comedy plays in dismantling barriers and fostering camaraderie among participants and with the audience. Humour serves as an essential mechanism for diffusing challenging situations and facilitating positive conflict resolution during the creative process[90]. Furthermore, comedy and humour contribute to the concept of cohesion, which redefines ethnic relationships traditionally grounded in segregation. The improved intergroup relationships directly follow the process of peacebuilding re-categorisation as defined by McKeown (2013). This social categorisation process focuses on developing a common in-group identity, where the 'representations of group memberships are transformed from two separate groups into one more inclusive group within a superordinate category' (McKeown, 2013, p. 121). This process reduces intergroup prejudices based on ethnicity are reduced, and perceptions of group identity evolve into that of a unified community of theatre makers. As a result, intergroup prejudices based on ethnicity diminish, and perceptions of group identity evolve into those of theatre makers. The invitational comedic framework served dual purposes: while generating laughter and entertainment value for audiences, it simultaneously functioned as a critical apparatus. The very popularity of the humour became its most effective political strategy, creating an atmosphere where otherwise antagonistic viewpoints could be effectively exposed. This aligns with Lockyer and Pickering's (2009) conception of humour as a 'social corrective', where laughter operates not merely as entertainment but as a mechanism for cultural negotiation. Building on James Palme's assertion that humour operates as a multidimensional cultural phenomenon, this analysis uses his framework to examine the comedic practice of the praxis. Palmer argues that while often dismissed aesthetically, humour is culturally significant because 'the subjects of laughter, the manner of laughing, and the timing of laughter are all crucial to understanding a culture' (Palmer, 1994, p.2). The following section applies this lens to demonstrate how comedy functioned as a useful channel for challenging discourse, making palatable what might otherwise be rejected if presented through direct confrontation. What follows is an analysis of what the young people decided to laugh at and how their comedic responses

[90] Apart from already mentioned conflicts between the students, comedic atmosphere helped defuse some conflicts between the facilitators too. A telling example occurred when one facilitator NM, initially refused to participate in the collaborative theatre-making workshop, expressing concerns about his professional status being undermined if he played games. He opted to observe the workshop. The situation shifted during a 'No, but...' improvisation exercise (a counterpoint to the standard 'Yes, and...' approach), when another facilitator humorously remarked that NM already excels at this game. This playful intervention, which provoked laughter from the group, created an opening for reconciliation. The joking facilitator then extended her hand, successfully bringing NM into the workshop space.

shifted their social authority within the community, redefining social dynamics and relationships in the process.

Comedy as a critical lens

As previously noted, the role of comedy within this PhD research extends beyond its invitational aspect. Evident from Chapter Three, the prominent characteristic of all three theatre pieces is their incisive reflection on various socio-political issues. This leads to the second function of comedy in this praxis, which is its critical aspect that not only critiques society but also provokes vital self-reflection.

In one of the initial workshops, when we had a conversation about whether comedy is an appropriate genre for addressing tragic events, one of the young people noted that 'comedy restores balance by approaching serious subjects from a different perspective' (Reflective journal, 2016). Historically, comedy and tragedy were seen as dichotomous, where comedy, in comparison to tragedy, was often placed in a lesser category, a genre considered light and insignificant (Morreal, 2009, p. 75). This traditional perception frequently describes comedy as frivolous and superficial, devoid of the depth and gravitas often associated with tragedy. However, more recent scholarly discourse has challenged this binary, revealing a more nuanced relationship between the two genres. As Bevis emphasises, 'comedy does not preclude tragedy; it presupposes it' (Bevis, 2014, p/ 96), suggesting that they are interconnected rather than opposed. Similarly, in his comprehensive analysis of the comic and tragic elements across various dramatic texts—from Greek tragedy to the Theatre of the Absurd, as well as contemporary works by authors such as Marina Carr and Ben Elton—Weitz observes that 'bad things have always happened in comedy, as malicious acts and outrageous misfortunes are visited upon its favoured inhabitants' (Weitz, 2009, p.132). This insight highlights the complexity of comedy and challenges its reductive classification as mere trivial entertainment.

The overview of the themes explored in all three pieces of praxis, presented in the previous chapter, supports this more nuanced understanding of comedy, demonstrating that the issues addressed are not undermined; rather, comedy serves as a vehicle for articulating profound tragedy through laughter. For example, the direct consequences of war are evident in the portrayal of the Soldier in Baksuz (2016) or the character of Zglajzala Majka [Unstable Mother] in Brkići (2017), who oscillates between her present reality and the world of South American soap operas to escape her war-related trauma. Similarly, the character of Tetka iz Nemačke [Aunty from Germany] in *Zemlja* (2018)

embodies the displacement due to war, having emigrated in 1992 as a direct consequence of the conflict. Through these characters, the narrative underscores the profound impact of the recent war on individual lives and identities. Furthermore, discussions opened up a conversation that extended beyond the obvious ethnic segregation resulting from war. The themes chosen by young people highlighted social issues that flourished in the aftermath of the conflict and obstructed meaningful peacebuilding, such as corruption, imposed privatisation, and a decline in values like education, honesty, and hard work. Young people also raised important socio-political issues that may not have been immediately recognised as direct consequences of the conflict but are essential to address in a post-war reconciliation context. These included patriarchal patterns that perpetuate harmful traditions and new divisions between the diaspora and local communities, as well as challenges related to the exploitative realities of unrestricted liberal capitalism and worker exploitation. These issues represent the deep scars on the social fabric left after this ethnically motivated conflict, scars that obstruct meaningful peacebuilding. As depicted in *Baksuz* [2016], when people are exhausted from the daily survival, overwhelmed by social injustice, powerless in the face of corrupt and dysfunctional institutions, and engaged in a Quixotic battle against moral decay—when society is riddled with potholes—it becomes difficult to have meaningful conversations about the past trauma, let alone address these challenges.

The praxis revealed that in this case, comedy and tragedy are not opposites - instead, comedy served as a means for conveying profound tragedy. This was captured by one participant who stated, '[our] comedy is the art of telling tragedy through laughter' (Personal journal, 2016). This complex symbiosis between two genres also generated tension captured in the reflection of one of the facilitators, 'I thought we were focusing on comedy, and what we performed was not a comedy. We were too negative about our society.' (MM Report 2016, p. 6). This very complexity, where humour serves both to entertain and critique, enabled young people to engage with the socio-political complexities of contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina, avoiding oversimplified viewpoints. Their creative objective, as articulated in feedback, was clear, they want to examine real situations through jokes, 'to make people laugh, and discuss reality' (MM Report 2017, p. 4). Audience responses assert this approach, with one member describing the work as 'not just amazing, but real' (MM Report 2018, p.1). Another audience member praised its incisiveness, stating, 'the play is the dissection of our reality' (MM Report 2017, p. 3). They even suggest that it should be shown throughout Bosnia, including Milovan Dodic, the president of the Republica Srpska at the time (PP, p. 21)

In addition to arguing that comedy serves as a valuable lens for the critical examination of societal practices, the analysis of praxis shows that it also nurtured self-reflection. This was evident when we

toured the Muslim town of Kozarac with *Baksuz* [2016] show. In one of the scenes, there is a line in which the character of the aunt mentions preparing a roast pig for the feast. Before the performance, a Serbian student approached me with a request to modify this line so that the aunt would instead indicate that a lamb roast would be prepared, considering the cultural context of the Muslim community. This request was significant, as it reflected a thoughtful concern for the 'other' community, and it exceeded personal or conceited perception of the work. Moreall argues that humour can serve to cultivate moral virtues, particularly self-transcendence, which involves rising above personal concerns to appreciate the interests of others (Moreall, 2009, p. 115), helping us to interpret this encounter. According to Morreall (2009), humour helps inhibit negative feelings, such as fear, anger, and sadness, which can limit our creative thinking by keeping us in familiar patterns. It also facilitates cognitive shifts, as being in a humorous mindset encourages us to explore unconventional ideas and innovative combinations of concepts (Morreall, 2009). This frame of mind allowed young people (as well as facilitators and myself) to examine their own beliefs, biases, and behaviours in relation to the societal norms and challenges presented, fostering a deeper understanding of both themselves and the world around them. This creation of new perspectives and new possibilities also opens a space for deeper understanding to be formed and is crucial for a post-war reconciliation process that requires reimagining the future that overcomes ethnic segregation and rebuilds an inclusive society.

The examination of praxis demonstrates that the comedy simultaneously embodies enjoyment and criticism, invitation and critique. However, what distinguishes it from a tragedy isn't the themes that were discussed but the outlook present on life. In his excellent analyses of the aesthetics of humour, Morreall compares tragic and comic 'vision of life' (Moreall 2009, p. 77). He elaborates that a tragic vision of life, which is evoked in the epic and military attitudes, and rooted in the emotions of fear, pity, and admiration, can be understood as a response to past circumstances that required tribalism and military virtues. These tragic heroes serve as 'role models for mental rigidity in emotions [and] often faced problems with simplistic, standard conceptual schemes that divide the world into good and bad, honourable and dishonourable' (Moreall, 2009, p. 79). Furthermore, this mental rigidity is reflected in their stubborn preoccupation with revenge and a reluctance to offer forgiveness. The notion of tragic 'mental rigidity' corresponds closely with the mechanisms of reshaping collective memory into the desirable nationalistic narratives that disintegrated Yugoslavia and supported the armed conflict, as elaborated in the section on Dramaturgy of Memory. The strategic (re)formation of collective memory during the breakup of Yugoslavia relied precisely on such tragic mechanisms of amplifying emotions of fear towards the 'other' while simultaneously provoking self-pity for 'us.' This narrative construction necessitated the removal of nuance and complexity, resulting in a

reductionist dichotomy of 'good' versus 'bad.' Additionally, it is worth noting that the theatrical repertoire, which served to invigorate national pride, predominantly framed these narratives within the tragic genre, as discussed in Chapter One.

In contrast, the 'comic version of life' (Morreall, 2009) is defined by the adaptability of thoughts and behaviour in response to events. This perspective fosters a more critical and creative mindset, promoting various intellectual virtues, such as open-mindedness, divergent thinking, and critical thinking. Consequently, unlike tragic figures who perish defending a rigid principle or tradition, the comic protagonist finds ‘a new way to look at things, wriggle out of the difficulty, and live to tell the tale' (Moreall, 2009, p. 80). This adaptability is crucial for post-conflict societies, where reconciliation demands transcending entrenched narratives and finding new ways of coexistence. Within the praxis, this outlook was evident in the final invitation to the Soldier (*Baksuz*), the embracement of the new rituals initiated by Multi-Kulti priest (*Zemlja*), the celebration of the new beginnings (*Brkići*) and the wedding scene of reconciliation (*Zemlja*). Ultimately, as the analyses of the themes that emerged through the praxis illustrates, comedy as a genre of cognitive play and subversive critique facilitates nuanced engagement with difficult and conflicting subjects. By promoting the intellectual and moral flexibility necessary for societal healing, it moves beyond merely mocking societal vices to actively create a discursive space in which new possibilities for peaceful coexistence can be imagined.

Comedy as authority disruption

As theatre history shows, comedy has long functioned as a vehicle for socio-political critiques, enabling marginalised voices to disturb and question authority (Bakhtin, 1984; Weitz, 2009; Bevis, 2013; Holm, 2017). The analysis of the praxis reveals how young people have tapped into comedy’s disruptive potential to interrogate their socio-political reality, aligning with this longstanding tradition. In the following section, I will examine three key aspects of comedy as a site for the disruption of authority. First, its capacity to challenge the established socio-political power structures. Second, its role in empowering young people to assert authority within their communities. Last, it function as a transitional mechanism that enables the relinquishing of one form of authority in exchange for another.

The previous section illustrated how the praxis engaged in the critical conversation, through themes and creative choices, with dominant socio-political authorities. Through the lens of comedy, young people depicted, interrogated, and subverted various representations of authority figures.

Characters representing traditional power, including parents, politicians, religious leaders, and police officials, are often depicted in exaggerated, absurd, or inverted roles, which diminish their assumed seriousness. Therefore, they were characterised as Baba-sa-jednom-nogom-u-grobu [Granny With One Foot in Her Grave], Deda Brk, the man with the largest moustache ever seen, or Multi-Kulti pop [Multicultural Priest]. Furthermore, the work critiqued the authority of institutions as well as abstract concepts, such as the hegemony of the free market. Institutions traditionally regarded as pillars of society, such as the family (*Brkići*), the military (*Baksuz* and *Brkić*i), and religion (*Zemlja*) were subjected to critique, highlighting the necessity of engaging with (and at times dismantling) entrenched norms. Customs like mandatory military service and arranged marriages are portrayed as outdated and oppressive, with their enforcement made ridiculous through a comedic lens. These artistic representations serve not merely to ridicule authority but also to challenge its legitimacy, prompting the audiences to reassess the foundational assumption upon which such authority is given. While comedy's potential to challenge authority was expected, its capacity to actively (re)form the authority of the participants and to establish the authority of young people emerged as a new discovery. However, before embarking on further analyses of the (re)formation of authority through comedy, I would like to clarify the concept of authority, as it is an inherently complex term that encompasses personal, social, and political dimensions of human existence and resists straightforward definition.

Sociologist Richard Sennett characterises 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' (Sennett, 1980, p. 3, 19). 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' (Krieger, 1977, p. 251). Building on this tension embedded in the notion of authority, Sennett, much like Hannah Arendt (1954/1961), 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 observes, 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' (Arendt, 1954/1961, p. 97) - 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 can't be just replaced, but it needs to be willingly modified by communities[91]. These insights into the role of trust and free will in legitimising authority bring us back to the reconciliation process that similarly can't be imposed and needs to rebuild trust between opposing sides. Devised comedy emerged as a valuable methodology in this context, as it fosters the atmosphere of trust and voluntary engagement. This approach directly addresses the central challenge of reconciliation: how to support emotional change that will lead 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. Therefore, this approach demonstrates that devised comedy is not just a vehicle for socio-political critique but also a crucial mechanism for creating the conditions necessary to rebuild an inviting and discursive space needs to be created where the one-sided narratives can be challenged.

The possibility of this complex conversation happening was directly evident in the praxis. As already mentioned, through the lens of comedy, young people examine and confront traditional authorities that were also advocating for war ideology and segregation. The institutions of family, military, and religion, which serve as the foundational pillars of society, undergo significant re-evaluation and critique, highlighting the necessity for a dialogue with traditional precedents and established norms. The poetics of comedy [poetika komedije] facilitate political intervention by exposing societal dissonance, aligning with philosopher Simon Critchley's assertion that humour 'is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke […] suddenly and explosively, it lets us see the familiar defamiliarised, the ordinary made extraordinary' (2002, p. 1). This defamiliarisation not only critiques existing power dynamics but also reconfigures perceptions of authority, positioning comedy as both a disruptive and generative force in the social discourse.

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. They frequently described the shows as superb and inspiring. Many audience members emphasised the enlightening value of the

[91] This corresponds with Gramsci's proposition that effective resistance requires not only the exposure of authority's contradictions but the collective construction of alternative frameworks (Gramsci 1971). This aligns with Žižek's thoughts on authentic political act: 'the task is to not simply to reject authority but to expose its contradictions and, through radical action, construct new symbolic frameworks' (Žižek 2008).

experience, while others reflected on the aspect of joy and entertainment (MM Report, 2016, 2017, 2018). These responses marked a pivotal shift. This moment of listening, in which the audience actively engaged with and acknowledged the perspective of young people, challenged the marginalised position of young people in Bosnian society (Brankovic et al. 2017). As one student observed, 'we always listen to older people, but this time, they listened to us' (MM Report 2016, p.5). This reversal of traditional discursive dynamics underscores comedy's capacity not only to bring people together but also to disrupt conventional hierarchies of authority, enabling marginalised voices to claim space in public discourse. This authority disruption was also evident in the rehearsal room. During the creative process, the facilitators, who initially occupied a position of guidance, began actively listening to the young people, leading to a shift in their perception of youth competencies. As one facilitator noted: 'the young people have had a good influence on us - they show us they can do great things. Some people look down on students- but without much guidance, they can achieve so much.' (MM Report 2017, p. 9). This comment resonates with broader sociological findings which highlight the marginalisation of youth in Bosnia-Hercegovina where young people frequently lack meaningful representation in the sociopolitical structures that govern their future (Brankovic et al., 2017). Yet, within the creative process, the conventional adult-youth power dynamic was disrupted, allowing for a meaningful exchange of ideas and agency. This brings me back to comedy and Bakhtin's (1965/1984) understanding of carnival as a participatory disruption of social hierarchies temporarily overturned through humour, chaos, and grotesque exaggeration. This temporary disruption creates a space where dominant ideologies can be questioned, even if order is restored afterwards. The necessity of fundamentally disrupting authority, rather than simply reforming it, is a theme that bridges the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Richard Sennett (1980). Gramsci's advocacy for an authentic political act that dismantles the existing framework of authority rather than just replacing one form with another aligns with Sennett's argument that disrupting hierarchical 'chains of command' is essential to remove the 'quality of omnipotence' from authority figures (Sennett, 1980, p. 168). For Sennett, this intrinsic link between authority and disorder is not an obscure idea but a fundamental principle of a serious democratic ideal, which requires challenging entrenched power structures. Furthermore, in my praxis this disruption carried an additional dimension as authority was not concentrated in a singular figure but shared within a group, generating the collective authority of young people[92]. Throughout the collaborative creative process, the collective authorship was cultivated. This was characterised by the rotating recognition of participants as authorities, each lending their unique expertise to

[92] While I'm typing this section, student-led protests are happening in Serbia that are manifesting a similar thing: students are being recognised as social and political authority. Youth voices are no longer relegated to the margins but instead positioned as catalysts for change.

different aspects of the production. In this way, the group collectively embraced a distributed form of authority.

The last observation of the relationship between comedy and authority is the one that enables the relinquishing of one form of authority in exchange for another. While I agree with Arendt's assertion that laughter possesses the capacity to effectively undermine authority, I would like to share an example of how it enhanced the facilitator's authority with students. As noted in the previous chapter, teacher N.S. engaged in an improvised exercise during the first practice *Baksuz*, where he portrayed a pregnant woman (PP, p.36). The students responded positively to his comedic and humorous portrayal, which elevated his standing in the group. Throughout the process, by embracing the playful aspects of improvisation, N.S.'s authority underwent a critical transformation: it shifted from being predicated solely on his institutional role of teacher/facilitator to being grounded in his actions, knowledge and engagement. This dynamic became more evident during the third piece of praxis when a new facilitator, who also held a formal teaching position, refused to participate in a game that ended with a 'mooing contest'[93]. His reluctance stemmed from concerns about appearing silly, ultimately leading to concerns about losing his authority in the classroom. During a break, N.S. advised him that participating in such seemingly silly activities could surprisingly enhance his authority by fostering relatability and trust[94](Journal 2018). This situation highlights how facilitators navigate the delicate balance of risk and trust in devised comedy (as discussed in the section on Improvisations as a mode of being). This also aligns with Max Weber's (1922/1978) view of authority, which hinges on perceived legitimacy not coercive power — a concept Arendt (1954/1961) similarly distinguished from genuine power. In this context, the creative process serves as a vital opportunity for building trust, requiring both facilitators and young people to embrace vulnerability and spontaneity. For N.S., embracing the ludic moment was a calculated risk that ultimately through disruption, reframed his authority, as the students' trust was cultivated through shared laughter rather than mere institutional respect. This case exemplifies this paradox that by embracing the 'silly' and surrendering rigid institutional authority, N.S. achieved a more sustainable legitimacy rooted in authentic relationships. These findings resonate with Sennett (1980) and Ardendt (1954/1961), who conceptualise authority as a contested and evolving construct that requires consent rather than coercion. In this light, comedy emerges not only as a tool for subversion but also as a space where authority is continuously reimagined. The destabilisation of old hierarchies paves the way for new, more equitable forms of collective agency. Thus, comedy

[93] Moo Off is drama game where the goal is to elicit laughter from the opponent by playfully 'mooing' right in their face.

[94] While this teacher initially refrained from participating in the 'mooing game,' he gradually became more willing to engage in playful activities and embrace humorous self-presentation as the process progressed.

functions as both a mirror reflecting societal tensions and a laboratory for their democratic transformation.

This analysis illustrates how comedy serves as a dynamic site for the reformation of authority by its disruption. It does not merely dismantle existing power structures, but it can actively reshape the very conditions of authority itself. Through its capacity to challenge socio-political norms, empower marginalised voices, and facilitate transitions between various forms of authority, comedy emerges as both a disruptive and generative force. The praxis revealed that young people wield humour to critique traditional socio-political authorities —such as patriarchy, the military, and religion—while also renegotiating their own position within these frameworks. Crucially, the collaborative creative process cultivated the atmosphere of fluid redistribution of collective authority. Not only was this process more fruitful in terms of creativity—since multiple perspectives generate more unforeseen ideas—but it also created a space of discursive authority that rejected a singular voice to embrace the polyphonic foundations. Comedy allows for socio-political authorities to be de-ossified and to be (re)formed not from the position of stasis and single power but as a contested site of collaboration and flux, one that invites interrogation, flexibility of thought and participatory reimagining. In this light, comedy emerges not only as a tool for subversion but also as a space where authority is continuously reimagined. The destabilisation of old hierarchies paves the way for new, polyvocal forms of collective agency.

Comedy as a catalyst for hope

The last function of comedy explored in this chapter is its ability to cultivate a sense of hope. This section critically assesses the significance of comedy's intrinsic sense of hope, particularly within the context of peacebuilding initiatives. To begin, I will present a concise definition of hope, recognising that this term is often nuanced and complex.

In his book 'A Philosophy of Hope', Lars Svendsen traces the history of philosophical dimensions of hope. Influenced by existentialist and phenomenological traditions, he reviews perspectives of various thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Ernst Bloch while advancing his own insights into their nature and significance. He perceives hope as a fundamental human capacity that empowers individuals to shape their futures, arguing that 'hope takes place in what's possible: in freedom, in our ability to create one future instead of another' (Svendsen, 2024, p. 14). Similar to Ernest Bloch (1959/1986) who understands hope as an active force, 'superior to fear, neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness' (Bloch, 1986, p. 1), Svendsen frames hope as a dynamic

engagement with possibility, distinct from mere wishful thinking. Emphasising that, while wishing entails passive longing, hope demands action: 'a person who really hopes will act, reflect, and express themselves differently from a person who only wishes' (Svendsen, 2024, p.14). Hope as a political practice is also emphasised in Gallagher's (2022) exploration of hope as critical and intentional engagement with the world rather than naive optimism. Furthermore, Gallagher underlines that hope is also a collective and relational practice rather than an individual feeling. It is an emotion cultivated in community and involves reimagining futures outside dominant, oppressive systems. This underscores hope's intrinsic link to freedom—the capacity to imagine and pursue alternative futures. Svendsen further explores the political implications of hope, contending that 'only a society based on hope rather than fear will be capable of being free' (Svendsen 2024, p.61). Here, he positions his 'liberalism of hope' in direct contrast to Judith Shklar's 'liberalism of fear', a philosophy that recognises fear as a fundamental motivation. Shklar argues for setting aside positive goals to instead prioritise agreement on ideas that should be avoided, such as tyranny and cruelty (Svendsen, 2024, p.67). While acknowledging the legitimacy of fear as a political motivator, Svendsen argues that a politics anchored solely in fear risks fostering resignation rather than agency. For liberal democracy to thrive, citizens must believe in their collective capacity to shape society in alignment with shared values. Without this hope, political apathy prevails — an atmosphere evident in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina[95]. The conception of hope relevant here, as an emotion arising from uncertain outcomes yet grounded in agency and trust, is directly related to sustainable peace. This form of peace requires reconciliation that fosters inclusive identities and a collectively envisioned futures. Starting from the notion that emotions significantly influence the formation of both individual and collective identities, particularly in the wake of trauma and conflict, Hutchison and Bleiker argue that peacebuilding initiatives should explore 'how personal and collective feelings of fear and outrage can be transformed into more constructive emotions, such as optimism and hope, which may help confront and alleviate conflict (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2013, p. 85).

This need for a hopeful politics that catalyses action rather than resignation was a third initial motive for establishing comedy as a genre of performance - alongside its invitational and critical aspects. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, all three pieces of praxis concluded with a happy ending, a

[95] As presented in Chapter One, political apathy in Bosnia-Herzegovina is deeply rooted in the country's post-war political structures. The complex ethno-territorial system established by the Dayton Peace Agreement has created a political environment in which nationalist parties perpetuate ethnic divisions to maintain their power. As a result, many citizens feel that their votes cannot bring about meaningful change (Belloni, 2008). Consequently, voter turnout is often low, and a pervasive sense of disillusionment prevails, as individuals perceive the state as serving personal interests rather than the public good (Mujanović, 2018). This apathy is not simply a lack of interest; it represents an active withdrawal from a political sphere that is viewed as corrupt, dysfunctional, and unresponsive to everyday needs (Toal & Dahlman, 2011).

resolution where characters are able to move beyond their struggles and fully embrace the possibilities of transformations –*Baksuz* culminated in political change that allowed for societal repair and suppressed stories to be told, *Brkići* ended with a song and refrain 'novo je vrijeme, nova generacija, promenila se sada cijela situacija' [It's a new era and a new generation; that has changed the entire situation]; and *Zemlja* closes with a song that invites audience to a new show, emphasising that these young people will be here again. These endings do more than provide a relief of tension for the characters and great enjoyment for the audiences expressed through long-lasting applause, they model a hopeful stance towards the future, one that acknowledges uncertainty while resisting despair. This aligns with Matthew Bevis's argument that comedy is a 'form of life-affirming purification' (Bevis, 2013, p.8) that immerses the audience in a dark and tragic world where characters confront injustice and hardship only to. When a fortunate resolution occurs, these tragic tales shift into comedies, creating 'a story in which people can believe their luck' (Bevis, 2013, p.53). In all pieces of praxis, the intersection of comedy's disruptive criticism and transformative conclusions exemplifies a politics of possibility. By resolving tensions between characters while preserving the complexity of the narratives, the work showed how hope rooted in agency, play, and collective vision can break cycles of conflict. Thus, by offering a hopeful ending, the work asserts a world where human choices can make a difference. Comedy, with its subversive yet generative nature, provides a potential pathway for this emotional transformation, aligning with the dramatic archetype of the fool. According to Tim Prentki, the fool is society's quintessential negotiator, employing playfulness to challenge entrenched positions and 'get life going again' (Prentki, 2012, p. 4). This transformative potential arises from two key aspects of foolery. First, there is a methodological approach that prioritises experimentation over strict dogma, allowing for the exploration of alternative realities via fiction and imagination. Second, there is a perceptual stance that sees reality as dynamic, 'in flux, of becoming rather than of being' (Prentki, 2012, p. 4). In contrast to tragic figures who succumb to fate, the fool represents a survival strategy that transforms deadlocks into possibilities through strategic improvisation. Rigid ideologies often result in stalemates, whereas the fool adeptly navigates the system, uncovering interstitial spaces for the emergence of new narratives. The fool's practice transcends mere comic relief, embodying a form of active hope that corresponds with Gallagher's (2022) characterisation of a political alternative to a deteriorating world. The fool's methodology offers a framework for reconciliation, demonstrating how performative interventions can disrupt conflict narratives and exemplify more hopeful forms of coexistence. This hope is dynamic and communal, defined by the capacity to empower through subversion, mobilise through playful interaction, and reinterpret social possibilities beyond existing limitations.

Conclusion

This exploration of comedy's role in the reconciliation process presented in this chapter reveals its profound ability to transcend mere entertainment and serves as a dynamic force for social transformation. While comedy and reconciliation may initially appear incongruent, as one is rooted in laughter and the other in trauma, this research demonstrates that their intersection offer a generative space for addressing entrenched hostilities, reshaping collective memory, and envisioning alternative futures. Through the lens of practice research, this chapter has examined comedy's four key functions: invitation, critical reflection, authority transformation, and hopefulness, each contributing to a framework where comedy and humour become not just a coping mechanism but an active agent in reconciliation processes. The first function of comedy, its ability to serve as an invitation, was crucial in overcoming the barriers of distrust and fatigue that often obstruct peacebuilding efforts. In post-war Prijedor, where ethnic divisions persist, political narratives remain polarised and reconciliation initiatives frequently face resistance, comedy offered an engaging and accessible entry point. Furthermore, the shared laughter among participants and audiences created a sense of community that temporarily dissolved the rigid distinctions of 'us' and 'them.' The analyses of praxis in Chapter Three highlighted how humour created an inviting atmosphere of trust, allowing difficult conversations about ethnic division to occur in a space that felt enjoyable rather than confrontational. Additionally, the playful nature of comedy disrupted traditional power hierarchies, transforming the relationship between facilitators and participants into a collaborative one. This authority reformation from top-down institutional authority to a more discursive one empowered young people to assert their voices, challenging the marginalisation they often face in post-conflict societies (Branković et al. 2017).

The second function of comedy was to provide a critical lens that allowed participants (and audience) to question dominant socio-political narratives and reflect on themselves. The subversive power of comedy was particularly clear in its challenge to traditional authorities, whether political, religious, or patriarchal. By critically examining figures of power and their bonds, the performances destabilised rigid hierarchies, revealing the absurdity of harmful social constructs and encouraging audiences to question the legitimacy of established norms. Importantly, this critique was not merely destructive; it was also generative, creating space for alternative narratives of political change (*Baksuz)*, reconfigured patriarchal dynamics (*Brkići*), or transformed inter-ethnic relationships (*Zemlja*) to emerge. The praxis also demonstrated comedy's capacity for self-reflection, particularly

in rehearsal moments where participants reconsidered their own biases. As one participant remarked, ‘At first you get offended when you see that your work was not a good idea—but you see things differently when you see the big picture’ (MM Report 2018, p. 2). This experience of individual contributions being redefined for a collective objective was essential for transcending rigid, individual classifications and conceptualising more inclusive identities. The success of this laborious process was evident in the profound sense of collective achievement, with the final performance recalled as 'enjoyable and a result of collaborative effort' (MM Report 2018, p. 2). Ultimately, participants recognised the work not merely as a personal pursuit, but as possessing the transformative capacity to alter collective thought processes and to reawaken the community to valuable yet overlooked shared values. arguing that ‘the play could change the direction in which people think’ by reminding them ‘to remember what is valuable but forgotten’ (MM Report 2018, p. 2). This demonstrates a conscious shift from a fixed, conflict-based worldview to one orientated toward critical hope and collective values.

This brings its last function within reconciliation theatre praxis - comedy as a space for politics of hope. The ability to foster hope is not about naive optimism but about the active and collective practice of reimagining the future. In contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovian society, characterised by disillusionment, the hopeful resolutions presented in these performances serve as a counter-narrative to defeatism. As argued, these endings did not overlook the realities of trauma, instead, they emphasise the possibility of collective action. Nonetheless, using comedy also carries ethical complexities. Reflecting on the potential for ethnic humour to reinforce harmful stereotypes required careful consideration of both intent and impact. By situating humour within its context and examining power dynamics - questioning who laughs, at what, and why - the approach avoided trivialising trauma while still allowing for subversive critique. Striking this balance was crucial to ensure that comedy did not become a tool for evasion but rather a means of engaging with difficult truths in a manner that was both palatable and meaningful. The second issue raised concerns about whether comedy would diminish the serious consequences of the recent war. However, the praxis demonstrated that comedy and tragedy are not opposing forces. Rather, they are interwoven genres, with comedy often acting as a vehicle to convey deep tragedy. This duality allowed young people to explore themes such as war trauma, corruption, and social decay without falling into despair, fostering a critical yet hopeful engagement with reality. By engaging with tragedy through the fool’s subversive outlook, young people shared vulnerability essential for rebuilding trust and collectively confronted painful histories without becoming paralysed by them. This atmosphere of trust and hopefulness was necessary to navigate the polyphony of the individual voices and identities in order to create a coherent collective piece of theatre.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis has explored a central question: what role can devised comedy play in the complex process of post-war reconciliation in Northern Bosnia, especially in a context where conflicting narratives contribute to ethnic hostility? Starting with the contemporary situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, marked by public discourse constrained by conflicting ethnic narratives regarding the 1990s war and institutionalised selective memory politics that reinforced divisions rather than fostering reconciliation, I argued that devised comedy, as a critical and discursive practice, can disrupt fixed cultural memory formations by enabling the coexistence of multiple voices within a single polyphonic space. Through the lens of memory transformation that challenges social and ethnic divisions, this inquiry examined a collaborative theatre-making approach as a valuable tool for critical conversation that allows for conflicting voices to be heard and ensures that no single voice dominates the conversation. Additionally, it considered comedy as the genre that invites critical scrutiny of social authority while offering space for reimagining coexistence. The directorial approach developed in this study was founded on a core set of principles: comedy as a genre, a single-word stimulus as a creative starting point, and collaborative theatre-making strategies rooted in discursive authority. This creative methodology has proven to be an effective way to engage youth in Bosnia-Herzegovina in complex discussions about identity, trauma, and reconciliation.

As elaborated in Chapter One, reconciliation is a long and complex process requiring the rebuilding of trust and transformation of hostile beliefs between former enemies by challenging negative stereotypes, fostering mutual recognition of past wrongs, and restoring the ability to trust and hope (Ackerman, 1994; Kriesberg, 2004; Lederach, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2019). A crucial element of this emotional transformation is the creation of a discursive space that acknowledges the existence of multiple narratives (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004). Devised comedy achieves this by creating an inclusive space where multiple perspectives can coexist, allowing for dialogue to happen rather than the imposed domination of a single voice. By integrating peacebuilding, comedy, and theatre studies, this PhD enquiry demonstrates that devised comedy is not merely an aesthetic choice but a transformative methodology that cultivates inclusive dialogue, reshapes collective memory, and envisions hopeful futures, thereby offering a new model for participatory theatre in post-conflict contexts. This research expands upon existing studies of theatre in post-conflict settings, which frequently view theatre space as an ethical laboratory that enables communities to contemplate personal experiences, examine collective memories, renegotiate social norms, and reconfigure moral frameworks (Dolečki et al., 2018; Gluhović, 2013; Thompson, 2013; Kuftinec, 2009; Schinina, 2004). Building on these existing studies, my practice research incorporates collective authorship,

investigating more thoroughly the starting point of potential praxis and conducting a comprehensive examination of comedy as a genre absent from this methodological discourse, with the aim of expanding practices and methodologies.

This thesis identifies two significant intersections between theatre-making and peacebuilding. The initial intersection relates to the comprehension of multiple narratives. Theatre offers a platform for an open-ended creative conversation that examines conflicting viewpoints without a need for immediate resolution. It provides a space for the coexistence of diverse post-conflict narratives, fostering shared understanding and holding multiple personal and collective memories. The second important intersection between theatre-making and peacebuilding involves their engagement with conflict itself. Theatre provides a space where conflicting truths collide without imposing forced resolution, similar to peacebuilding, which does not require resolving conflict but rather transforming it into non-violent and constructive relationships, as articulated by Galtung (1998). This thesis examines the application of these intersections in practice through three original theatre pieces, *Baksuz* (2016), *Brkići* (2016) and *Zemlja* (2018), devised with youth from ethnically divided communities in Prijedor. The proposed directorial methodology deliberately avoids a simplistic understanding of conflict and post-conflict conversations. Instead, a single-word stimulus serves as an entry point for collaborative storytelling, allowing for unexpected and complex narratives to emerge. Employing devising, which embraces the uncertainties inherent in creative collaboration with a sense of trust and shared responsibility, moves away from traditional hierarchical roles and promote shared authorship, displacing individual ownership of ideas in favour of collective creativity and constructive discussion. Central to this process were structured improvisations that emphasise listening as both a practical and socio-psychological act as noted by scholars like Frost & Yarrow (2016), and Lipsitz (2015). This approach encouraged a transformative, trust-based dynamic where ideas were refined through ongoing dialogue. Feedback from young people highlighted the effectiveness of this approach in resolving conflicts, building cohesion, and fostering collaborative storytelling, demonstrating how improvisation and open dialogue can challenge dominant narratives and strengthen group dynamics. The established methodology of discursive authority ensures that no singular voice prevails in the discourse. This approach was crucial for enabling participants to feel ownership over the process and the stories they created. From a reconciliation perspective, this creative process embodies considerable potential, considering its political, social and emotional implications. It critically interrogates dominant authoritarian socio-political frameworks and advocates for the exploration of a diverse array of individual voices and identities. Moreover, by embracing the principles of improvisation, the process highlights the importance of interpersonal listening, essential for cultivating understanding and empathetic responses. Throughout the process,

young people engaged in active listening with one another. In the theatre, the audiences listened to them, uncovering fresh insights in what was familiar.

Comedy, as the final aspect of the proposed directorial methodology, is identified as an interstitial space that exists both outside and between established peacebuilding categories. It connects the primary goals of reconciliation: creating a polyphonic narrative, fostering critical examination, and envisaging a hopeful future. It operates as a space of flux and a site of possibility, where rigid boundaries blur, allowing for negotiation and transformation. In conclusion, the genre of the story we select profoundly influences the recollection and comprehension of the past. As Assmann and Shortt argue, while past events remain unchangeable, 'our perceptions, narratives, and memory constructs of these events can change, as can the identity of a state, a society, or an individual' (2012:13). This highlights the power of storytelling in transforming collective and cultural memory. By carefully selecting our genre, we not only influence how stories are received but also open space for new meanings and perspectives to emerge. The investigation into comedy's role in reconciliation reveals its significant capacity to go beyond mere entertainment and act as a catalyst for social transformation. Despite the seemingly contradictory nature of comedy and reconciliation – one rooted in humour and laughter, the other in trauma and tragedy - this research demonstrates that their intersection creates a productive space for confronting entrenched hostilities, reshaping collective memory, and envisioning alternative futures. This practice research makes a distinct contribution to the field of theatre and peacebuilding by introducing devised comedy as a new methodology, a significant genre currently absent from the field, thereby expanding its practical and analytical scope.

This research underscores the transformational potential of comedy in the reconciliation process, which is notable, however it is essential to recognise its limitations. The research demonstrates that devised comedy functions not as a solution to dismantle systemic injustices or eliminate profound trauma, but as a distinctive catalytic tool. Its power lies in its ability to create openings, spaces where dialogue becomes possible, where authority can be questioned, and where a hopeful future can be collectively envisioned. The laughter shared in Prijedor's theatre did not erase the past, reconstruct homes or bring war criminals to justice. However, by momentarily suspending the weight of history, it did something similarly important, it fostered open-mindless and divergent thinking (Morreall 2009) 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. The effectiveness of comedy relies heavily on the delicate interplay of context, timing and delivery, which determines the fine line between its success and its risks. A humour that serves as liberating subversion within one context can be severely misinterpreted as an offensive provocation when taken out of that

particular social and political context. This potential for misinterpretation underscores that the 'opening' comedy creates is inherently unstable. Rather than a secure gateway to dialogue, it is a precarious space that can be violently shut down, destabilising fragile peace processes and making both performers and participants vulnerable to retaliation. Therefore, the very aspect that endows comedy with its potency—its ability to provoke and disturb—also represents its principal limitation, necessitating a strategic and profoundly contextual understanding from those who seek to employ it as an instrument for peacebuilding. This practice research existed within a context of engaging with a second generation that has not experienced war directly but lives with its consequences. The possibility of applying devised comedy with participants from the multiethnic generation who directly experienced war warrants further exploration. Moreover, future research should continue to map these nuanced dynamics, particularly through studies that examine how comedy's role differs across various post-conflict landscapes and cultural settings.

This dissertation advocates for a directorial approach that uses comedy not as a means of escapism but as a critical instrument for engaging with contentious narratives. The findings indicate that humour's distinctive ability to create interstitial space is crucial for allowing new collective understandings to emerge from division. Looking forward, this methodology presents a substantial avenue for future application beyond the post-conflict context analysed here. A promising avenue for future research involves using this framework to address the contemporary issues that similarly evoke feelings of despair and political stagnation, such as the climate crisis. The primary inquiry for future interdisciplinary and intercultural exploration becomes: how can devised comedy recontextualise the pervasive narrative of climate change? The aim is to examine if this approach can convert passive anxiety into a feeling of collective agency, thus facilitating new, more empowering conversations that inspire tangible action. Consequently, the principles delineated in this study not only elucidate post-conflict contexts but also provide a constructive framework for addressing other intractable issues of the present.

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