

Haris PAŠOVIĆ

CITY THE ENGAGED

1.

On a summer day in 1993, I went to visit the National Library. It was dangerous to get there. Its entrance was exposed to Mt. Trebević from where it could have been targeted at any moment. I knew I could be seen quite clearly from the mountain above. But I took the risk. I don't know why. Risking my life to enter into a ruin? But I somehow had to do it. The entrance was partly buried under a heap of rubble, charred paper scattered all over the place. I took a piece – it was an old train timetable. I don't remember which. I got through to the main hall. Once there, I was shocked. Terrified. Petrified.

The building had been built in the pseudo-Moorish style during the era of the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its main hall was under a glass dome and the rays of light used to hit its marble pillars, its balconies with their stone-lace balustrades, its arches of various sizes and its shadowy lodges, from where dark corridors led in different directions. It all added up to a mystery, an exciting labyrinth. The very thought that somewhere in the interior of this monumental edifice there were millions of books, documents and manuscripts, gave the experience of entering into this library an almost mythical sense.

Now I was standing in the midst of this ruin, looking at the melted marble pillars. The burnt books had melted stone! I was standing there. Lonely. Helpless. For a moment, I was the last man in the world.

During the night of 25 to 26th August 1992, the Serb military and paramilitary forces, led by Radovan Karadžić, used artillery to shell the National and University Library, better known as the Vijećnica of Sarajevo. Mt. Trebević is only a couple of hundred meters from the Library as the crow flies, and from there an army of idiots showered their shells on its books. The National and University Library was not a military target. It was a strategic target –the aim was to kill the memory of collective life, therefore to kill a civilization. The siege of Sarajevo was under the command of political leaders led by Radovan Karadžić, a poet and psychiatrist; Nikola Koljević, a university professor of Literature, specialising in Shakespeare; Biljana Plavšić, a university professor of biology; Aleksa Buha, a university professor of philosophy and several other Serbs, all with university degrees.

In 1968, while hundreds of thousands youngsters across the world were fighting for justice and conquering the spaces of humanity and freedom, Radovan Karadžić (born in a mountain village) published a collection of poems that contained the following line: “Let’s get down to the cities and beat up the bastards.” In 1971, Karadžić published a poem with these lines: “The town burns like a piece of incense / In the smoke rumbles our consciousness. / Empty suits slide down the town. / Red is the stone that dies, built into a house. The Plague! / Calm. The army of armed poplar tree/ Marches up the hill, within itself. / The aggressor air storms our souls.” The poem’s title is “Sarajevo”.

2.

From 6 April 1992 to March 1996, Sarajevo was under siege. All major broadcasters of the world transmitted the images of the city relentlessly shelled, with hardly any electricity, food, telephone connections, and heating. Water was scarce and could only be found at a few wells in the city where - since there was not public transport - citizens had to walk, often several kilometres daily, to bring home some water. There was very little fuel in the city so that those who could drive their cars were very rare. All the major world media reported daily on the drama of our city where dozens of people were wounded on a daily basis. There was no medicine, nor anesthetics for serious surgeries, conducted in the hospitals without minimum conditions for even the simplest medical interventions. One of my students, now a renowned film director, Srđan Vuletić, made a film entitled “I Burned Legs” describing his job at a hospital ward the function of which was to incinerate amputated limbs

3.

Kovači is one of the oldest settlements of Sarajevo, set on a hill. From there, one gets perhaps the most beautiful view of the city. There was a big park in Kovači. On winter days the neighbourhood children used often to ride down the slopes of this park on their sleds. During the siege, many of them were buried in that very park. The cemeteries of Sarajevo had remained outside of the besieged city, so the parks, the areas between buildings, old cemeteries and even a football stadium became places where those killed during the siege were buried. In Kovači, what was once a park was turned into a cemetery located right next to people’s homes. I often think about fathers and mothers who can see the graves of their sons from their windows, just like they once used to watch them playing in the park.

4.

Susan Sontag would say: “The 20th century began in Sarajevo with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and it ended with the siege of Sarajevo.” Susan visited Sarajevo many times during the siege. She was the first great public figure who, interviewed by a German TV station, stated: “What is happening here is genocide.” After the Sarajevo premiere of Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” that she directed, The Washington Post published on its front page the text entitled “Waiting for Clinton, Waiting for Intervention.” Jean Baudrillard criticised her for her trips to Sarajevo, writing that an intellectual can’t speak in the name of anything or anyone. Susan Sontag responded: “Baudrillard is a political idiot. Maybe a moral idiot too. ... I don’t think I would call him nihilistic, I think he’s ignorant and cynical.”

5.

I arrived in Sarajevo on New Year’s Eve of 1992/1993. Before that, I had tried for months to get in, but it was as difficult to get into the besieged city as it had been to get out of it. There were several reasons why I came here; one of them was my respect for Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Anna Akhmatova and the artists from the Warsaw ghetto. Once I was in the besieged Sarajevo, I learned that the city was an absolutely special universe of its own. It lived a mythical time. Killing, hunger, horror... but there was also a kind of everyday life, in a strange way both mad and normal. There were artistic activities, several theatre productions were staged, an occasional concert was played, there were exhibitions and some documentary films were produced. The city lived, died and was resurrected at the same time. Beware - No romance here! It was ghastly.

I joined those artists. First I staged the production entitled “The City”. I composed the text for this production putting together the poems of a few poets. Among them were the poems “The Town” by Constantine Cavafy and “Report from the Besieged City” by Zbigniew Herbert.

You said I'll go to another land, to other seaways wandering,
 Some other town may yet be found better than this,
 Where every effort of mine is a writ of guiltiness;
 And my heart seems buried like a corpse.
 My mind-How long is it to be in this decay confined?
 Wherever I turn, whenever I lift my eyes
 The blackening of my life arise,
 Where I have spent so many years spoiling and squandering.
 "You'll find no other places, no new seas in all your wanderings,
 The town will follow you about. You'll range
 In the same streets. In the same suburbs change
 From youth to age; in this same house grow white.

No hope of another town; this is where you'll always alight.
 There is no road to another, there is no ship
 To take you there As here in this small strip
 You spoiled your life, the whole earth felt your squanderings -"

C. Cavafy (John Mavrogordato's translation)

I avoid any commentary I keep a tight hold on my emotions I write about the facts
 only they it seems are appreciated in foreign markets
 yet with a certain pride I would like to inform the world
 that thanks to the war we have raised a new species of children
 our children don't like fairy tales they play at killing
 awake and asleep they dream of soup of bread and bones
 just like dogs and cats

Z. Herbert (translator unknown)

Preparing this production, I went out to gather the cast. I met Izudin Bajrović on a street; he had lost a lot of weight (just like everyone else who lived in Sarajevo). He was returning home from the front-line. His wife and their newborn baby girl were waiting for him. I told him to come to my rehearsal the following day. I inquired about other actors for whom I believed had remained in the city; I sent messages to come to the rehearsals. I found out that one of the oldest actresses in Sarajevo, the seventy-year old Ines Fančović, refused to leave her apartment. I went to visit her. Ines was a woman of style; her hair impeccably done, always elegantly dressed. When she heard my voice, she opened the door. She looked miserable. Desperate, with disheveled hair, she was stoking fire in a small makeshift stove, burning catalogues of the theatre productions she had once played in. We looked at one another and she told me: "In one of the theatre plays the character I played had these last words: *And finally, when I make the account of my life, it turns to zero, zero, nothing but zero...*" I told her that I was preparing a new production and that I could not do it without her. She replied, "When does the rehearsal start?" "Tomorrow at ten", I said.

Ines played Sylvia Plath in "The City". At one point in the performance, she said, "I'll put my head into oven and disappear". Another character responded to her briefly, "But there is no gas."

6.

In the spring of 1993, I proposed to the then -Mayor of Sarajevo to let me take over the Theatre Festival MES. It had once been one of the most important theatre festivals in the former Yugoslavia; now it was abandoned, since nobody cared about the festivals of art. He accepted, perhaps mainly because it was so irrelevant and because he did not care for a lengthy discussion with some mad artist who dreamt about a festival in the besieged city.

On my first working day, I came to the Festival offices and found a secretary and an accountant who did not know what to do and why were they there in the first place. There were neither telephone calls to answer, nor any money to count. The office was in a very poor state. A group of theatre people used to hang out here at the very beginning of the war as long as there were stocks of alcohol around. They left behind quite a mess. The worst thing was that they shattered the toilet stool into pieces so that the whole office was flooded, stinking unbearably. I invited several young people to work with me and the first Festival project was to clean the premises from... well... dirt. This was quite an undertaking, since we needed a lot of water that had to be carried from one of the city wells and find detergent, itself not an easy task. We cleaned what could be cleaned, changed what could be changed and soon it was an office where a lively stream of young people, artists and friends never stopped flowing. At moments, it looked as if we were in the offices of the Avignon Festival, for example. Though only at moments.

We changed the name of the Festival, which was until then the 'Festival of Yugoslav Theatre MES', into the 'International Theatre and Film Festival MES'. Of course, it was impossible to bring international theatre productions, but I promised myself that the Festival would last until freedom came.

Two friends, Hrvoje Batinić and Zdravko Grebo, proposed to do a programme to commemorate Hiroshima. At that time, Zdravko was in charge of Radio-Zid, a local radio station that could be heard by everyone who had batteries in their transistors. We called the event "Hiroshima 45 -Sarajevo 93."

We asked our friends Maria Black Belair and John Fawcett, who worked with the humanitarian organisations A.I.C.F. and IRC, to help us send out messages announcing the event to several addresses, using the satellite fax-machines they had in their offices in Sarajevo.

The number of replies that soon arrived from different countries exceeded all our expectations-- all the messages of support. It was exciting to learn how many people in the world were with us in their

thoughts. On 6 August 1993, these messages were read for a whole day on Radio-Zid.

A profound, thoughtful message came from David N. Dinkins, the then Mayor of New York:

“As the world leading multiethnic city, New York has a tremendous stake in the survival of multiethnic Sarajevo, for what is under attack there is the very idea that different people can live together in peace. If we sacrifice the principles of multiethnicity and diversity to “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia today, we legitimize ethnic and religious separatism, with potential disastrous consequences for troubled regions throughout the world – not to mention the places like New York, where 178 different groups live and work together successfully. Indeed, it is fitting that New Yorkers are in the vanguard not only of American relief efforts, but also of those calling for action to stop aggression in Bosnia. And so, on behalf of eighth million New Yorkers, I send the people of Sarajevo this message of support on Hiroshima Commemoration Day. Please, cling to your multiethnic ideal – for our sake as well as yours. We will continue to do all we can to help.”

We staged a performance at the Chamber Theatre, where actors read the UN Human Rights Declaration as if a comedy. After the performance, Susan Sontag, who was at the time rehearsing “Waiting for Godot”, addressed the audience.

I had sent out an invitation to receive a message from two scientists I respected highly: Steven Hawking and Carl Sagan. I considered it very important to get their opinions.

I already knew then that what was happening in Sarajevo, before the eyes of the whole world – in the first global reality show ever – without adequate political and military reaction could only mean that the world was in such a huge trouble that could lead to a very bad future. Nevertheless, I wondered whether my reaction may have been exaggerated. Or perhaps, I had gone mad. That is why it was so dramatically important for me personally to get reactions from people whose reasoning I trusted.

Steven Hawking sent this message through his personal assistant Sue Masey:

“The attack on Sarajevo is an atrocity that should not be allowed in what claims to be a civilized world. I am very disappointed in the reaction of Western governments. It is almost as bad as Munich. I send my best wishes and support to the people of Sarajevo.”

Carl Sagan ended the essay he sent us with the following words:

“...Forceful measures, preferably by the United Nations, to prevent further cruelties would serve to protect the innocent; to demonstrate to people all over the world that there is a limit beyond which ethnocentrism and xenophobia may not go; and to show that we really mean it when say ‘Never again’.”

These messages were both good and bad news. Good news because they proved that I was not mad. Bad news because the world would be even in the deeper trouble in the times to come.

7.

The first premieres of the newly named - International Theatre and Film Festival MES, were Euripides’ “Alcestis”, which I directed, and Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot”, directed by Susan Sontag. Then followed Sophocles’ “Ajax”, directed by Pjer Žalica, and my “Silk Drums”, an adaptation of the Noh plays. People came, sometimes walking for ten kilometers, to see the performances. Both artists and audience risked their lives for the sake of art.

The most difficult thing was to find enough candles to secure lighting for the performances.

8.

There was a point in time when I started wondering what new films were being shown in the world. I wanted to see a film and decided to organize a film festival. Through my friends from humanitarian organisations I sent out a letter to several film directors asking them to send us VHS copies of their new films. We decided to bring a TV set and a video-player to the Festival offices, to try to borrow a power generator and to call the operation “Sarajevo Film Festival”. I figured we would get some ten or so films, and that some thirty people would come to watch them.

The first letter I sent was to Wim Wenders. I loved his film “Until the End of the World”, that I had seen on the eve of the war. He soon answered my letter with the message, “I am sending to you my new film ‘Far Away, So Close’. I love you!”

News about the film festival flew very quickly first across the city, then to the rest of the world—which is what we called everything beyond the frontiers of the siege of Sarajevo.

From 23 October to 3 November 1993, we held the Sarajevo Film Festival. We subtitled it “Beyond the End of the World”. In the three available cinemas we showed over 140 films and had more than 20,000 viewers!

“Oslobodjenje”, the newspaper which, against all odds, put out eight daily pages (of which at least four were reserved for obituaries) gave us eight extra pages to publish the Festival catalogue. On the front page, we put the photograph taken by Annie Leibovitz in Sarajevo in the summer of 1993. The black & white photo showed a young man, diving from a ten-meter high point into the Miljacka River to whose shores people would come for a ‘holiday’. From the edge of river, other divers were watching his perfect dive.

Most of the world media correspondents wanted to talk about the Film Festival. And all of them, literally all of them, asked, “Why a film festival during the siege?” To some I answered with a counter-question: “Why a siege during the Film Festival?” To others, I responded more simply: “Why are they killing us?”

9.

One day, Srđan Vuletić brought a book to my office. He said he got it from a journalist, but didn’t have the nerve to read it. He thought I might find it interesting. It seemed to him that it was about a city struck by some strange kind of disintegration. I looked at the paperback edition with a short note about the author and his photo on the cover. The man was handsome and well kempt. His name was Paul Auster and he lived in New York. I had never heard of him. I thought, “What could a New York yuppie possibly know about a disintegrating city?” And left the book sitting on my desk. Yet, I liked the title a lot - “In the Country of Last Things.”

10.

In the winter of 1994, Sarajevo was visited by the New York architect Lebbeus Woods. We made an exhibition of his works and called it “Restoration and Reconstruction.” The city was under heavy siege for almost two years already and there was no end to it on the horizon. Lebbeus’ projects were utopian and could hardly be realized even in paradise. But we wanted to point the arrow of time towards the future, and to put the City, which had gradually been thought of as written-off, back into the game.

We mounted the exhibition in the destroyed Olympic Museum. On its staircase, looking in the direction of Mt. Trebević, we played a

performance in which Ines Fančović recited the lament of Goddess Iris over the City of Ur:

Indeed, all my birds and winged beings have flown away –
 “Alas, my city!”, I would say.
 My daughters and my sons taken way–
 ‘Alas, my husbands’, I would say.
 ‘My city that doesn’t exist any more, my city
 Attacked without a reason,
 “Oh my city, attacked without a reason!”

We watched the magical Ines while she talked to the mountain, with its winding road on top, where we could see the armoured vehicles and trucks of the Serb Army moving.

The audience entered into the destroyed Olympic Museum with Lebbeus’ designs displayed on the walls. We served tea. People watched the drawings, in groups, standing on a heap of rubble, drank tea and chatted, more or less as if they were at the opening of an exhibition, say, at the Whitney in New York. There was not a single glass in the Museum’s windows. I withdrew for a moment and watched the scene. And thought of Duchamps.

11.

Auster’s book may have been sitting on my desk for several months. One evening I took “In the Country of Last Things” home. I started reading it and from the very first page I could not believe what I was reading - it was as if it was my own unwritten diary of the siege! I checked the year the book was published – 1987! I read parts of the book to my mother and sister who were impressed as well, yet a bit less than me. Since I was reading it under the candlelight, my eyes hurt and I had to stop halfway through the book.

The next day, 5 February 1994, was the fifth anniversary of my father’s death. I finished the book whose ending I had anticipated. I went to a barber to have my hair cut, then to the Festival offices where my students were waiting. Suddenly, we heard a thundering shell landing nearby. At that moment, I was talking to the students about Greek mythology. Soon our colleague from the office told us that the shell had landed in the main market and that there were probably a lot of casualties, since there were trucks, loaded with the bodies covered with blood, passing by our building overlooking the main street. My students were apprehensive. We could hear the vehicles below and it could only mean that something very bad had happened, since, usually there were only a couple of cars passing by

our offices daily. I continued with my lecture. I felt that I needed to slow down the first blow of terror, which was overtaking us. I did not allow the students to lean over the windows to see what was going on. I kept talking and talking and talking. The theme I discussed was Psyche.

It was one of the worst massacres during the siege of Sarajevo. The Serb forces killed 68 and wounded 144 civilians at the Markale marketplace with one shell.

12.

“These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. I can tell you of the ones I have seen, of the ones that are no more, but I doubt there will be time. It is all happening too fast now, and I cannot keep up.”

This is how “In the Country of Last Things” begins. We translated and published the book in 1994. We printed it in a thousand copies and distributed it for free. We launched the Bosnian edition entitled “U zemlji posljednjih stvari” on a very hot summer day in the courtyard of Svrzo’s House, a patrician Bosnian residential complex built in the 18th century, at the time an abandoned museum. There were some thirty people at the launch. Before the launch, I was standing on the street hoping that some more people would come. No one was. Then some twenty women came out from the nearby mosque where they had attended the tawhid prayer. It was an unusual sight: all these women, young and old alike, white scarves on their heads. There is no custom or tradition that requires women attending the tawhid prayer to wear white headscarves. It was just a coincidence. Their headscarves were snow-white, as if there had been no shortage of water or lack of decent detergent in the city. As they approached, I invited them to come to the book launch. They looked at me and without uttering a single word walked into the courtyard.

The actors read fragments from the book and I spoke about the novel and its author. The literary public, mainly our friends, and the women in the white headscarves, were sitting or standing around the courtyard listening in absolute silence. The afternoon was strangely quiet. No shell or bullet could be heard. The cobblestones of the courtyard were blindingly white and different plants and flowers were climbing on the white courtyard walls.

It seemed as if a sacred text was being read.

“These are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today.

Even the weather is in constant flux. A day of sun followed by a day of rain, a day of snow followed by a day of fog, warm then cool, and then today, in the middle of winter, an afternoon of fragrant light, warm to the point of merely sweaters.”

13.

We produced a play based on sections of “In the Country of Last Things”. Some parts were sung in the tune of the “Amazing Grace”. We played it in the spacious room, *halvat*, on the ground floor of Svrzo’s House. The production had narrators; I was the narrator in the Bosnian version, while Vanessa Redgrave in Sarajevo on a humanitarian mission and whom I invited to join us, narrated the English version.

In another book by Auster – “The Invention of Solitude”, a section describes what he feels listening to Billie Holiday’s “Solitude”. In our show, I staged a scene that expressed the transcendental nature of the event bringing together Sarajevo, Auster’s novel, the ideals of Civil Rights Movement, us... Under a wooden arch there was Anna Blum, the central character in the novel, played by Lejla Pašović, standing. She carried two canisters with water in her hands. The snow was falling from the wooden ceiling and she sang “Solitude”.

14.

Since then I have visited Paul Auster and his wife Siri Hustvedt many times. When I first came to their home in Brooklyn, and when Paul opened the door, I felt as if I was seeing my brother.

Sarajevo, April 15, 2009

Translated by Senada Kreso