

Over the last two decades, theatre practitioners across Europe and beyond have turned to documentary modes of playwriting and performance-making to confront new socio-political realities. This has led to a vast range of performance styles, ways of working and modes of intervention in varied sites of theatrical production. As a form of documentary theatre, verbatim theatre aims at what is understood as a true and authentic presentation of the problems within the public sphere, which are inevitably reflected in the private lives of real people. This essay focusses on the play *Trpele* [They Suffered], which was staged at the Belgrade Drama Theatre (director and set designer Boban Skerlić) and addresses the issue of violence against women. The play is based on the documentary material and testimonies from the women victims of violence that have been collected as part of the research conducted in prisons by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. The imprisoned women represented in the performance are serving sentences for murdering their respective abusers. This paper explores the viability and resonance of various dramaturgical strategies of the documentary mode of performance-making known as verbatim. It looks at the specific strategies employed in the documentary theatre piece written by Milena Depolo and Boban Skerlić, a theatre piece that gives shape to, represents and performs the precarious condition in which these marginalised and dispossessed female victims of violence in the Western Balkans have found themselves, challenges its audiences' imagination and demands their affective engagement with this difficult social issue.

Keywords: documentary theatre, verbatim, violence, prison, gender, women, *Trpele* [They Suffered].

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Prison - an Absurd Space of Freedom

Documentary material as a basis for art theatre

The growing popularity of documentary forms probably stems from the need of the audience to recognise themselves in the lives of “ordinary” people rather than in fictitious characters. Documentary theatre or theatre of fact has a declared purpose and an evident factual base. As a form of documentary theatre, verbatim aims at what is understood as a true and authentic presentation of the problems within the public sphere, which are inevitably reflected in the private lives of real people. Next to documentary, this form of theatre has proven itself as an appropriate form for interpreting social conditions.¹

According to Tom Cantrell:

In its strictest form, verbatim theatre-makers use real people’s words exclusively, and take this testimony from recorded interviews. However, the form is more malleable than this, and writers have frequently combined interview material with invented scenes, or used reported and remembered speech rather than recorded testimony. There is an overlap between verbatim theatre and documentary theatre, and other kinds of fact-based drama, such as testimonial theatre (in which an individual works with a writer to tell their own story) and tribunal theatre (edited from court transcripts).

Judging by the production in the Western Balkans region, verbatim theatre stands out as one of the current trends in theatre.² Verbatim theatre is the answer to the need of the audience to face, through theatrical arts, the doubts, questions and answers surrounding various problems from the social and economic context that influence the life of an individual.

The 2010s have seen an increase and intensification of verbatim theatre in the Western Balkans. Not only are the countries in this region especially rich in the political reforms brought about by the fall of socialism and the establishment of neoliberal capitalism, nationalism, democracy, European unification, globalisation processes and various forms of discrimination, but they are also proactive in affirming and

¹ An earlier version of this text, *Prison - Absurd Space of Freedom, or the Impossibility of Deliverance*, was presented at the conference Crossing Borders – Theatre and Cultural Encounters in Helsinki and Tvärmine in May 2015.

² Verbatim is a type of documentary theatre that was first introduced in the Western Balkans region in Boris Liješević’s play *Waiting Room*, which opened a series of theatrical theatre performances inspired by this genre. Liješević has devoted a corpus of his plays to this form, including: *Čekaonica* [Waiting Room], Atelje 212 Belgrade and Cultural center Pančevo, 2010; *Povodom Galeba* [In Commemoration of the Seagull], Youth theatre Novi Sad, 2011; *Plodni dani* [Fertile Days], Atelje 212, Belgrade, 2012; and *Očevi su gradili* [Genius Loci], Montenegrin National Theatre, 2013. Other plays of this specific theatrical paradigm are Selma Spahić’s *Hipermezija* [Hypermesia], Hartefact fund and Bitef theatre, Belgrade, 2011; Dino Mustafić’s *Rođeni u YU* [Born in YU], Yugoslav Drama Theatre, Belgrade, 2010; among others.

protecting various human rights by offering a range of support services and public awareness campaigns.

Despite these services and attempts at protecting human rights in the region, violence against girls and women still represents the most common human rights violation worldwide and the Western Balkans is no exception. The statistics show that one in three women in the world is beaten, forced to have sexual relations, or has experienced some form of abuse, with the perpetrator usually being a closely related male.³ Violence against women is widespread throughout the world and knows no state borders, races, cultures, traditions, religions, economic status or level of education.

According to data of the Victimology Society of Serbia, every third woman in Serbia is a victim of physical abuse in the family, every second woman is a victim of psychological abuse while every fourth woman has at least once been exposed to physical abuse in the family. It is also noted that in the crime columns of daily newspapers, domestic violence is reported on every third day. The statistics are ruthless: 7.4 per cent of the perpetrators use weapons that can inflict serious bodily harm. In 74.8 per cent of the cases of violence against women, the perpetrator is the current or former husband. In 37.2 per cent of the cases, the perpetrator is under the influence of alcohol. From all the reported violent crimes in Europe, 25 per cent pertain to the abuse of a spouse or partner (for more, see national reports qtd. in Depolo "O nasilju"). The article "Eight women murdered in two months from intimate partner violence" from the daily newspaper *Politika* illustrates its pervasiveness in Serbia (Djordjević "Za dva meseca").

In recent years, we have seen plays arise from the research process based on documentary material on a specific subject, problem or event. Subjects and problems that pose a kind of taboo generate a lot of attention. Long hidden from the eyes of the public, the troubling subject of domestic violence has become more visible in the second decade of the third millennium.

The introduction of *Imagining Human Rights in the Twenty-First-Century Theater: Global Perspectives*, a book edited by Brenda Werth, Florian Nikolas Becker and Paola Hernández which explores the intersection of theatre and human rights, begins: "Human rights emerged as a core concern of the twenty-first-century theater and performance," and continues: "As the present volume will document, the phenomenon is both pervasive and truly global" (1).

This book paves the way to understanding the nature and significance of the meeting

³ Violence against women – particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence – are major public health problems and violations of women's human rights. Recent global prevalence figures indicate that about one in three (35 per cent) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Most of this violence, however, is intimate partner violence. Worldwide, almost one-third (30 per cent) of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner ("Violence against women").

between theatre and human rights in the last two decades, relying on the models of abundant practice from numerous countries on six continents. The authors note: “Human rights – both as a field of interrelated and often competing philosophical conceptions and as a network of actually existing social and legal practices and institutions – depend at every turn on acts of imagination” (3).

Further in the section entitled “Theater as Public Imagining”, the authors assert that the practice of representation and performance in front of an audience is particularly important for theatre and carry on to say: “Human rights theorists of many disciplines and orientations have long paid attention to the vast range of cultural practices and products that together compose what we might call a ‘human rights imaginary’” (3).

The play *Trpele* [They Suffered], which premièred 13 October 2013 at the Belgrade Drama Theatre⁴, co-written by Milena Depolo and Boban Skerlić, deals with the problem of violence against women. Different elements, aspects and techniques of documentary and verbatim theatre can be recognised in the structure of the play’s text, for example, actual confessions and interview quotes. In this way, the theatre has entered a sphere of art based on authentic stories. The play’s text arose through the dramaturgical shaping of documentary material and authentic testimonies from the women victims of violence that have been collected as part of a study conducted in prisons by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. All of the interviewed women suffered in abusive partnerships and ultimately murdered their abusers. They have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from nine to fourteen years. Prison bars are thereby a dominant part of the play’s set design, conceived by its director Boban Skerlić.

During the preparations for working on the play, the actresses visited roundtables organised for that purpose. In an interview with Danijela Regoje, the actress Milena Pavlović Čučilović stated:

At the roundtables, we talked with people from safe houses and a woman psychologist, who explained why violence mainly occurs and why the victim feels that they are guilty for what is happening to them and thus doesn’t take the right measures on time. One woman psychologist stated that the woman sometimes even identifies with the perpetrator and tries to justify his actions. We didn’t personally speak to the prisoners since that wasn’t an option, we just watched documentary videos from Požarevac. (6)

⁴ The play was also translated as *Abused* for some English announcements. The literal translation, however, is closer to *They Suffered* and this translation will be used in the essay. All of the text from the play and the theatre programme that appears in this article was translated by N. Glišić and Branko Šehovac. The partner of the Belgrade Drama Theatre in this project was ADRA Serbia.

Living in a society deeply rooted in traditional patriarchal values means the abused woman is not protected from the abuser and is not shielded from societal prejudices, particularly those against women. The process of tearing down the myth of the family as a private entity is slow, in the legal as well as in the cultural sense. Hence many abused women do not have adequate legal protection and social support. The Criminal Code in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) has only recently recognised domestic violence as a violation of the law (for more see different references qtd. in Zrnić).

Confessions from family hell

In the play *They Suffered*, seven convicts introduce the audience to the families where relations are deranged and violence is part of everyday life. The convicts symbolically have the names of sour-tasting fruit: Dunja (Quince – played by Paulina Manov), Grozda (Grape – Danica Ristovski), Jagoda (Strawberry – Jadranka Selec), Kupina (Blackberry – Milena Pavlović Čučilović), Malina (Raspberry – Nataša Marković), Nerandža (Orange – Slađana Vlajović) and Višnja (Sour Cherry – Milica Zarić) and they share the same fate: being imprisoned behind bars. In contrast with the Latin proverb *Nomen est omen*, they have exchanged the anticipated nectars of life and sun for prison. Seven confessions of women who represent different milieus, profiles, personalities, backgrounds, social roles and educational and economic statuses have one common trait: their protagonists have all suffered from physical violence and killed when they could no longer endure it. Each of the seven stories is conceptualised to follow the victim and her abuser. Most accounts are characterised by a romantic relationship in which the couple initially lives together without violence. In every story, some sort of “trigger” initiates the cycle of abuse. The first beating is usually followed by the perpetrator’s remorse, with the promise that it will not happen again. Not long after, however, something else triggers a new wave of abuse. The abuse becomes more frequent, with shorter intervals between its episodes, culminating when the partner endangers the woman’s life or the life of some other family member. The title of the play (*Trpele*) points to the suffering that these women have endured.⁵ This is when a turn of events happens, thus switching the roles and transforming the perpetrator, who committed violence against the woman, from the abuser into the victim.

⁵ When you say “suffered” in the Serbian language, it is not clear what is meant, and hence a longer title of the play would be *They have Suffered from Violence*. This is how the play is advertised in Croatian language. In the Serbian language, the verb *trpeti*, meaning “to suffer”, forms the composite past for the third person plural with the participle (*trpele*) and the present tense of the verb “to be” (*su*), “they suffered”. The composite past tense in Serbian expresses an action finished in the past, which implies that an end has come to the suffering and that the suffering was in the past, in contrast to the moment the play *Suffered (from Violence)* begins. The title refers to epic theatre, which will be discussed later, since the play contains confessions and reconstructions of events that had already happened before the women ended up in prison.

Drama and theatre take place in the present. They live off of this here and now in front of an audience. The confessions of the seven women, victims of violence, reach the audience through the characters' feelings, whereas the events they speak about have already passed. Thereby the women have stepped outside the role of the victim and swapped it with the role of the perpetrator by taking their abusive partner's life. The act of episation in the title of the play (the Serbian title is in the past tense, characteristic of storytelling) indicates that the dramatic act of domestic violence does not only happen at the theatre, but that the society in which this play is performed, a place where we belong, is the place where this violence occurs.

According to Carol Martin:

Theatre of the real, also known as documentary theatre as well as docudrama, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact, has long been important for the subjects it presents. More recent dramaturgical innovations in the ways texts are created and productions are staged sheds light on the ways theatre can form and be formed by contemporary cultural discourses about the real both on stage and off. (1)

As Carol Martin further notes:

Theatre of the real's strategies are often postmodern, especially in asserting that truth is contextual, multiple, and subject to manipulation; that language frames perception; that art can be objective; that perspectives proliferate; that history is a network of relationships; that things occur by chance; that the performer can be a persona and not necessarily a character in the theatrical sense [...]. (3)

Višnja, a quiet and dear woman, the mother of two children, who works as a nurse, begins to suffer from violence at the hands of her husband from the moment he loses his job; his failure and frustration are replaced with the physical and psychological abuse of his wife in fits of jealousy. From an ideal marriage, Višnja's life becomes unbearable, with the hospital where she works becoming her only safe haven. However, the abuse leaves "the four walls" and enters the only place where she has not been beaten – her workplace.

Jagoda had lead a harmonious life with her partner for twenty years and the only thing missing in their life was a child. However, when the child was born, "everything went sour". Her immense wish to become a mother turned into her biggest nightmare from the moment it came true. Through the eyes of her husband, her giving birth, her enjoyment of motherhood and her unselfish love towards the child were her biggest sins, for which he begins to make her suffer.

Even after the murder, Malina, a hairdresser, still justifies her abuser and takes the blame for having a “big mouth”; hence it is not strange that her husband beat her up on occasion. A student of English Studies, Kupina, justifies the beatings with her emotional immaturity and passion in a pathological relationship with a considerably (36 years) older university professor.

Roma Grozda, a cleaner, does not recognise the beginning of her abuse. For her, it is simply “one of life’s burdens”; the beatings are inevitable when he drinks. The culmination happens at the moment when her husband kicks her out of the home, in which she invested everything and to which she devoted her whole life. Dunja, a city girl, a divorcée and the mother of a child, maintains her free way of life, which further fuels her partner’s pathological jealousy. She cannot even believe that this is happening to her. Nerandža, a simple woman who was in her second marriage (her second husband came to propose to her sister, who did not want to get married, so her father gave away Nerandža; this was considered the only chance to “get rid of her” since she was divorced) blames brandy for everything. After torture and abuse, she sees through what is going on.

The family murders are usually committed on the spur of the moment and are accompanied by strong emotions. Viewing physical violence and hearing traumatic memories inspire a range of emotions in the spectators, including hope, and can serve as a first step towards working outside the theatre for social justice. Deranged family relations over many years, personality disorders and the abuser’s alcohol addiction lead to “reduced consciousness” at the moment of the murder, and hence the women perpetrators often do not remember their actions. The women who are in prison serving a sentence, whose life stories we see, had put up with and then murdered their abusers. The director’s arrangement of a Brechtian announcement of each story with subheadings and in front of the microphone (Rock Bottom – Nerandža; Herz Novel – Višnja; Only One Mother – Jagoda; Splendid Job by the Pen – Malina; Eks Katedra – Kupina; A Girl Got Up Early to Feed the Pigeons – Grozda; Hello, Hello – Dunja), opens up the opportunity for every actress to individually express and bring forth a study of reality. By way of the *V-effekt* others can be arranged and created in a different way. Social gesture and Brechtian epic structure function as a platform. The acts function as independent, closed, while the intermittent events are mutually contradictory and based on the difference between what they are not and what they could be.

The epic then only interprets the dramatic; it becomes a necessary intermediary between the viewer and the viewed object, by way of a strong psychological act as well as reduced and stylised methods, especially in showing scenes of violence. The actresses in this play conducted diligent research, watched documentary films and went through a long working process in order to faithfully depict the characters

they play with their simplicity and acting expression. The material from the original transcripts with the confessions of seventeen women from the research of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, upon the basis of which Milena Depolo and Boban Skerlić “created” these seven characters, were available to the actresses. They had a difficult task and subject ahead of them, which was until recently taboo, and it posed a great challenge. The role of the author of the text was given to the director and the dramaturg, who shaped a “new” text from the collected material. They “moulded” a new piece based on confessions, statements and the material drawn from court transcripts. In the editing process of the play’s text arrangement, a challenging and demanding task was put forth for the actresses to play real people and say their real statements. In this way, theatre entered the sphere of art based on authenticity. Hence the director and dramaturg take on the role of the author. Questions arose as to which answers were needed, that is: How, or better yet, should they justify their characters? And the eternal question: Does all of this in theatre make sense, when reality contradicts and exceeds it on a daily basis?

Without slipping into pathos, and occasionally departing from the character, each of the stories is conceptualised to follow the victim and her abuser from their first meeting until the tragedy; the actresses play the victims and the abusers, as well as the neighbours, the police and the social workers. They also play a host of other characters, while each sequence is decomposed at the moment it is constructed in order to be translated into another episode. The play also consists of songs (composed by Anja Đorđević) and dance (choreography by Marija Milenković).

Documentary theatre - a step towards reform of social awareness

A society that does not protect its most vulnerable members is not a humane society. In the already mentioned book *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First-Century Theater* the authors note:

A commitment to the universal realisation or fulfilment of human rights is consistent with a reflective attitude about how best to frame individual human rights or how to conceptualize human rights in general, and how to understand the relationship between human rights concerns and other problems of political or social justice. (Werth et al. 2)

The play *They Suffered* represents a theatrical view on this serious social problem and points out the flaws in the judicial and police systems when dealing with domestic violence. By accepting violence as a dominant model of behaviour, society has lost

interest in “small” tragedies which stay hidden in the privacy of the family unit and becomes an accomplice in the violence by its inaction. By contextualising problems of violence against women and domestic violence and exposing this problem in all of its layers, the play draws attention to a serious abnormality that should be prevented. Through the language of theatre, it prompts our social engagement by raising awareness of a problem that is happening around us, but about which we are silent. The statistical data are disturbing; behind those metaphoric bars of prejudice, social condemnation, shame, fear, misunderstanding and their own misconceptions many women still suffer. Even more worrisome than the statistics, however, is the attitude of the community towards the victims of violence and the belief that the woman has done something wrong to deserve the beating and the abuse. The Depolo – Skerlić playwright team illustrates the attitude of the community towards the abused women with the neighbours’ chorus:

NEIGHBOUR:

*Every morning a shot of brandy
You don't have to brush your teeth
You cleanse your mouth and ease your soul*

NERANDŽA:

*Don't give him brandy
He drinks and beats me up*

NEIGHBOUR:

*It goes down easy, it's like medicine
Cures diseases, wakes up the dead
Wedding, funeral, whatever it is
As long as there is lots of brandy.*

NERANDŽA:

*Don't give him brandy
He drinks and beats me up. (Depolo and Skerlić 27)*

Or in another case:

NEIGHBOURS:

*That's the one we know
That's the one from apartment six
She doesn't greet anyone
And looks no one in the eyes.*

JAGODA:

*I'm sorry about the noise
That you hear from my apartment
What can I do*

*When the insulation is bad
That's how they make them now.*

NEIGHBOURS:

*She wears black sunglasses
No one's seen her without them
When she takes them off you can see bruises
Blue and big
Sometimes even black. (38)*

They have tried in various ways to resist the harassment as well as the psychological and, ultimately, physical abuse. The vicious circle in which they find themselves between social workers, policemen, family members and friends, always boils down to the socially embedded fact that they are the “property” of their husbands and boyfriends and have caused such a reaction, under the principle that the victim attracts the abuser. Director Skerlić answers the question when a man has a right to beat a woman by listing the “reasons” that lead to violence:

*When does a man have a right to beat a woman? / If a woman makes a mistake /
If he is nervous / If he drinks, inevitably / If he gets up before six / If he feels like
it / If a woman is reluctant / If it excites him / If he loves her / If he hates her /
If she pretends to be nice / If she is a boor / If it suits him / If she complains / If
she is disinterested / If she doesn't help him / If she doesn't mind her business
/ If she hasn't given birth / If he is infertile / If she has expectations / If she is
unsympathetic / If he is tired / If he has an excess of energy / If he doesn't have
enough money / If she looks out of the window / If she doesn't want to put out /
If she put out once / If he is jealous. (Programme book 5)*

The characters speak about the chronic passivity of patriarchal society, gender stereotypes and the indolence of legal police protection.

Here, Dunja turns to the police after “he” beats the hell out of her:

POLICEMAN: *When precisely did it start?*

DUNJA: *Four months ago.*

POLICEMAN: *Let me see the messages.*

Looks at the text messages on her phone.

POLICEMAN: *We can't deal with your love problems.*

DUNJA: *What love problems, what are you talking about?*

POLICEMAN: *Wait, were you with him or not? (Depolo and Skerlić 18)*

The realisation of not being able to strip away misconceptions and find a way out of the violence, fear, passion and suffering in their lives is defeating. When nurse Višnja is beaten up once more, she is late for work, so Dr. Jovan asks her if she has

problems at home and advises her to report it to the police.

POLICEMAN: *Alright lady, how serious are those beatings?*

VIŠNJA: *They are serious ... Actually ... What do you mean?*

POLICEMAN: *Only a slap or something harder?*

VIŠNJA: *It can be harder.*

POLICEMAN: *Do you provoke it somehow?*

VIŠNJA: *Well, no ... We get into a fight ... I don't provoke.*

POLICEMAN: *Talk to your husband, he'll calm down. If you just knew all of the things reported ... (20-1)*

Nerandža's husband starts threatening her with a knife, so she decides to turn to the police:

NERANDŽA: *I'm calling because my husband is beating me up.*

POLICEMAN: *Where are you located?*

NERANDŽA: *I ran away. I'm with some friends.*

POLICEMAN: *Why are you calling then?*

NERANDŽA: *To tell you.*

POLICEMAN: *Call social services.*

NERANDŽA: *My husband is beating me!*

SOCIAL WORKER: *He's beating you now?*

NERANDŽA: *Not now. I ran away to a friend's house. I've been here for a month or so.*

SOCIAL WORKER: *Why are you calling then?*

NERANDŽA: *The police told me to call you.*

SOCIAL WORKER: *Go home. We'll come.*

NERANDŽA: *I can't go home, if I do he'll beat me up. Head on tiles. On a wall. With a bottle.*

SOCIAL WORKER: *If that happens, it is a case for the police.*

NERANDŽA: *It already happened.*

SOCIAL WORKER: *So, did the police come?*

NERANDŽA: *No.*

SOCIAL WORKER: *Well, they have to come.*

Nerandža calls another number:

NERANDŽA: *Police?*

POLICEMAN: *Yes.*

NERANDŽA: *You have to come. My husband is beating me.*

POLICEMAN: *Where are you now?*

NERANDŽA: *I ran away.*

POLICEMAN: *How can we respond if you ran away?*

NERANDŽA: *He's there, in front of the house, standing and watching.*

POLICEMAN: *Well, it's not forbidden to watch. (25)*

These situations, in which no one can shield the woman from violence at any location, show the helplessness of the victim as well as the helplessness of those in charge of protecting citizens from all forms of violence. The picture is frequently one of total

inferiority and unconcern for domestic violence. Faced with a lack of protection mechanisms, understanding and support from the community, friends and family, the woman becomes isolated and marginalised at work and by her friends. The victim is forced to put up with violent behaviour up to the moment when she confronts the abuser. The confrontation often has only one outcome – the murder of the abuser. In the words of the director, published in the play’s programme book:

They are doing hard time. / They aren’t thieves or bandits. They aren’t murderers. / But they have murdered. / They murdered when they couldn’t put up with it anymore. / Why did they put up with it until then? Who is guilty for that? / They are guilty. The murdered are guilty as well. They are guilty for beating them, degrading them, raping them. I am guilty writing this and you reading this, if for nothing else, then for being part of a society that deems women ‘property’ of a man, that everyone has a right to do whatever they wish between four walls, that divorce is a shame, that a man cannot be weak nor the woman free. We are guilty for looking away because we shouldn’t take part in those things, because small beatings are acceptable, because we accept that there is at least one acceptable reason for a man to beat his wife. (*Programme book 6*)

The imprisonment becomes an absurd space of freedom, a respite from the torture and a refuge from their previous life outside of prison. The freedom of these women has become a negation of the life of their abusers. The whole system puts the victims of violence in an absurd situation. An attempt to escape the domestic violence and the suffering that it causes is exchanged for the “freedom” of prison. In the text “Život iza rešetaka” [Life Behind Bars], based on the play *They Suffered*, Ana Tasić writes: “In the second, shorter part of the play, the effects of the violence which they have endured are portrayed, their striking back and the prison experiences which have secured them some sort of bizarre safety, offered them order in life and given them a chance to repent for their sins and discover their own selves.” In a tragically absurd moment, a victim of violence goes door to door looking for help. With the responsibility shifting between the police and the social services, the victim is disoriented in the vicious circle of the state’s institutions. The representatives of the system’s institutions are also put in an absurd situation since they cannot react if there is not a serious crime, including murder, in order to respond to the behaviour of the perpetrator and abuser. Therefore, prison is obtruded as the only space of freedom which offers the possibility of escaping the abuser and a sanctuary from “insensibility towards violence”.⁶

⁶ “Insensibility Towards Violence” is the title of Srđan Vukadinović’s text about the play *They Suffered*. The author states: “The story of women who have endured violence committed by their spouses and who couldn’t get adequate help, which they sought from the institutions before murdering their spouses, makes this problem more complex and shifts responsibility from personal to institutional. When the institutions are helpless, the individual takes matters into their own hands; these are signs of a risk society of Dionysian type, where chaos, lawlessness and a total disregard for the individual rule” (12).

Conclusion without borders

The play *They Suffered* is a step in reforming social awareness of domestic violence; it points out what happens when the line is crossed through violence. According to Jill Dolan, these theatrical experiences of pain, not sentimental or apolitical in nature, offer transformative possibilities. “I believe”, notes Dolan, “that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that’s more just and equitable” (457). Violence against women knows no state borders, races, cultures, traditions, religions, economic status or level of education. Violence against women has no borders and extends to all spheres of life and all layers of society. The victims have crossed boundaries in the impossibility of finding a way out, exchanging the role of a victim for the role of a murderer. Milena Depolo and Boban Skerlić crossed a boundary between reality and fiction, between documentary material and theatrical imagination. Unscrupulous neighbours who offered brandy, chronic alcoholism, taking pleasure in primitive comments – and indifference towards another’s suffering crossed boundaries as well.

The play has toured outside of Belgrade and has played in cities in Serbia and in almost all the former Yugoslav Republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro), leaving the audiences breathless and winning awards at festivals. All these countries share the same problem; the audience, however, stops being a passive observer and is left pondering this taboo social problem, the one no one talks about, yet we all witness. “The festival audience in Kragujevac demonstrated that it was mature and venerable for this repertoire and selection move. A full theatre greeted the actors of the Belgrade Drama Theatre with applause, ovations and genuine shouts of: bravo, bravo”, states the text “Social and Theatre Mission” in Newsletter 3 JoakimInterfest. The article ends with the following sentence: “... the festival audience which attended the conversations didn’t hide their impressions, emotions, even anger which *Trpele* roused in them. That is the best testimony that the play succeeded in its social and theatrical mission” (Cvetković 2).

After having performed the play in Brčko, Milica Zarić talks about the reactions of the audience: “The reactions are different from place to place. I didn’t sense a great feedback and I saw the applause wasn’t grand,” while the reporter Ivkić continues: “As we have said, the reaction of the audience is always anticipated, but it is always different. It all depends on how much people are desensitised to the pain and suffering that we inflict upon each other” (Ivkić 8). At the roundtable, the selector of Encounters of Theatre in Brčko, Hazim Begagić states: “I belong to that group of people who believe that theatre should and can make the world a better place and that just because we don’t discuss things doesn’t mean that they don’t happen. The violence that you talk about in the play doesn’t only happen in

Serbia but here in BiH as well; hence it is necessary to talk aloud about this topic” (Obradović 11).

Verbatim theatre arises by using personal confessions and statements from real interviewees gathered through interviews, social networks, forums and other places for putting forth personal attitudes on certain issues of public interest. The growing need for social and political reality in art opens up the sociological aspect of interest for documentary achievements. The theatre becomes a venue for the theatricalisation of such issues due to a lack of public space for discussion or a lack of representation of certain subjects in the media.

The life stories of these heroines are like the stories of ancient tragedies. Having realised that we must not avoid this difficult subject by ignoring domestic violence, theatre has not only given an answer in the form of a play, but also with roundtables and discussions after it. Having this play on has shown that the audience will react sincerely to this painful subject of absurdly gaining freedom behind prison bars. I have seen a few performances of this play in different cities. In Belgrade at the Belgrade Drama Theatre, in Novi Sad at the 59th Sterijino Pozorije festival, where the play won the audiences’ prize with an average mark of 4.73, in Banja Luka at the Teatar Fest, where the prize for best actress was shared among the actresses of the play *They Suffered* (Paulina Manov, Danica Ristovski, Jadranka Selec, Milena Pavlović Čučilović, Natasa Marković, Slađana Vlajović and Milica Zarić), as well as in the Brčko District at the Festival of Drama BiH.

The reception of the audience in different places was more or less the same. From their complete astonishment with the subject matter, a silence which almost awkwardly spreads throughout the theatre to a complete hush when the play finishes and then a deafening applause which ensues at the end, where the audience comes to their senses after an excellent collective performance from the actresses who blend into one while individually creating their characters. The audience then applauds and often shouts: “Bravo! Bravo!”

The roundtables and discussions after the play uncover the suppressed fears of the audience, give answers to many questions that the play elicits and decidedly point out the links between the individual, the society and the institutions as well as our responsibility in that chain. The play is socially engaged and requires audience engagement. That becomes evident at the roundtables and discussions after the play.

The media in Serbia have been reporting on violence towards women and domestic violence more often in the last fifteen years. Various non-governmental organisations throughout the Western Balkans have been dealing with this problem, as well as women’s groups. Since the mid-1990s, there has also been an increased activity in

counselling centres against domestic violence, safe homes have been built, help lines, psychological support, etc. However, the significance of the play *They Suffered* and its social and theatrical mission is immeasurable. The tragic truth catapults from the stage straight to the audience, making the viewers face the stereotypical model of male-female relationships in the patriarchal Balkan society. The preview of the play, interviews with the director and the actors and theatre reviews were all published in the media. "The Performance 'Trpele' – Seven Stories of Beatings" is the title of an interview with Boban Skerlić prior to the première of the play. The director states "that it is always good to write in the media about these kinds of cases," and continues: "If they are ignored, it doesn't mean that they don't happen. The perpetrators should be vilified. Our theatrical goal is for people to question their own lives after the play. [...] It is another issue that the media portrays these things as press pornography rather than serious analytical texts. Therefore, the question is not if it should be written about them, but how to do it" ("Komad 'Trpele'").

Working on this play was a big theatrical challenge. Among the numerous interviews with the actresses, let us only mention the title of an interview with Milica Zarić "Actresses on a mission of waking up abused women", conducted by Mario Ivkić. To the question "if there is an effect from the messages of the play *They Suffered*", Zarić replied: "I hope there is. For me as an actress it is an exceptional honour and opportunity to say something about this problem in my way. And the best way is through a play, onstage. This is why I'm pleased to have an opportunity to take part in this play. If I awaken, change or question one person, I think we have done a good job" (8).

Many television shows have opened up discussions about this subject, while the theatre has become socially engaged and has provoked society to confront this significant problem through the play. In all of the media pieces and texts, a clear message has been sent to the public that only with the support of the immediate surroundings and all relevant institutions can something be changed. The play has raised awareness in citizens of the region and beyond, warning the audience that the subject of domestic violence must never be ignored.

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