

Performing miracles

While fighting was tearing Bosnia apart, a group of actors remained in the besieged city of Mostar to devise and perform a play based on their own terrifying experiences. **Philip Watson** watches the remarkable results. Photographs by **Seamus Murphy**

TWO YOUNG MEN kneel before each other, their hands tied behind their backs. They are brothers and they are naked. At a given signal a soldier orders them to begin fighting. Using only their teeth they must inflict mortal injury by biting and tearing at each other until blood is drawn and wounds laid bare. They are made to bite harder and deeper. After some time, they slump on to each other in agony, exhaustion and death.

The two men are actors rehearsing a scene from a play they have performed many times, but for them the gap between art and reality is frighteningly narrow. While neither has suffered these specific horrors, both know witnesses to the atrocity they are re-enacting. Both fought in the war in Bosnia. One spent months incarcerated in a Croat detention centre, where torture and ritual humiliation were commonplace; the other saw violent action on the front line and was badly wounded and traumatised.

Armin and Sasa are members of an extraordinary theatre company which continued to perform during the brutal fighting and shelling that besieged their home town of Mostar in south-west Bosnia. Afflicted by the loss of members who had fled to the safety of other countries, and by the destruction of their theatre by a Croat army that overran the western half of their city, the actors continued to meet and rehearse.



BEHIND THE MASKS

Young members of MTM rehearse a scene from 'Beauty and the Beast' in the ruins of a bombed storehouse, the site of the company's new theatre complex

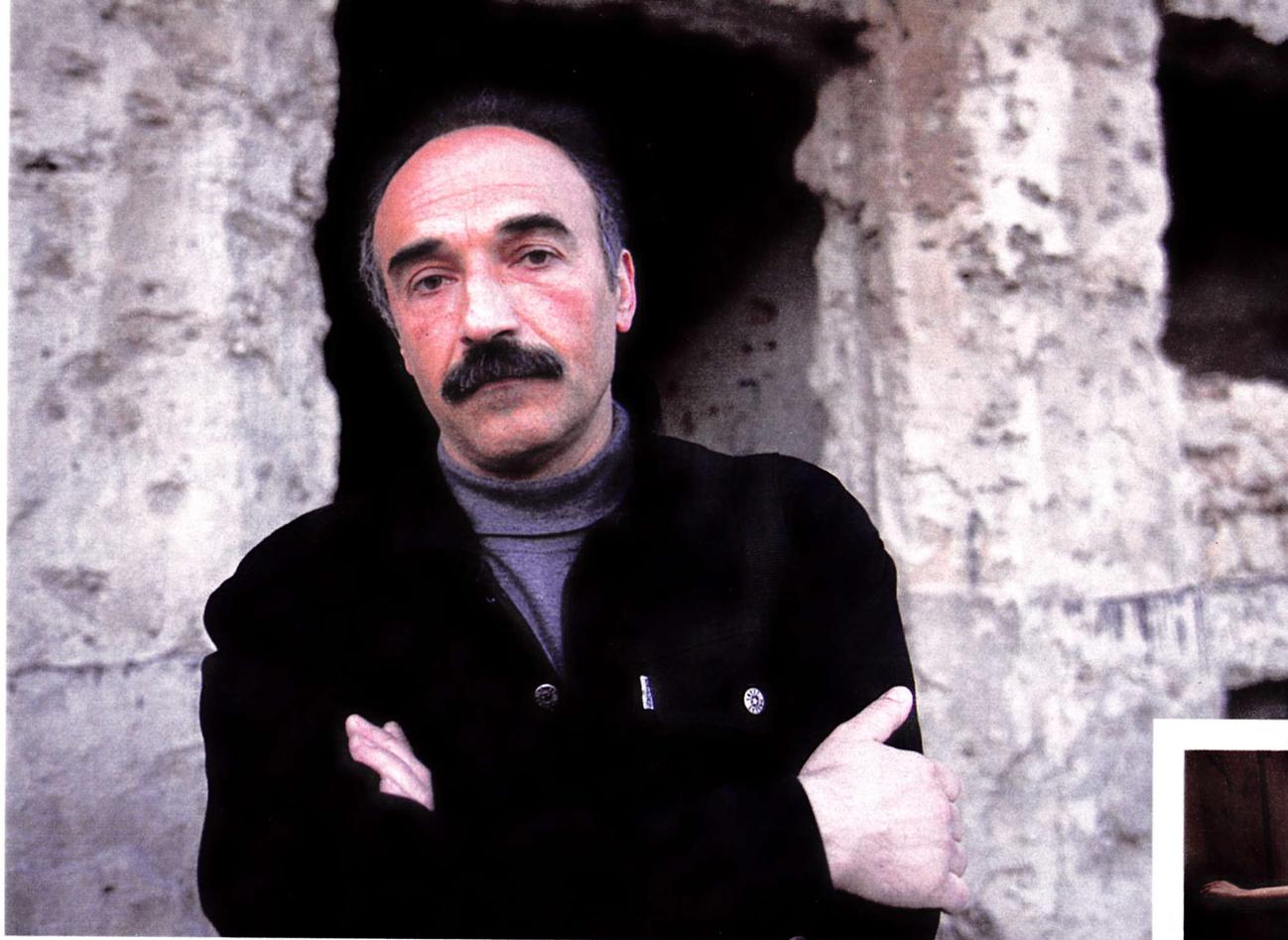
The result is a one-hour play (from which this scene is taken) that is one of the most moving and remarkable works to emerge from Bosnia during the conflict. Unlike the theatre that was imported into the country during the war by intellectuals such as Susan Sontag – who staged *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo – and the classical repertoire that was defiantly continued in the capital by groups such as the Sarajevo War Theatre, this performance, called *Pax Bosnensis*, grew out of the devastating experiences of the 22-strong company itself.

All the young men in the troupe fought for the Bosnian army, often in vicious shoot-outs in the streets that bordered the front line with the more powerfully armed Croat militia. Many bear the scars of battle; one has a deep shrapnel wound in his forehead. One young female member was raped and regularly abused in a notorious Croat camp. Others have lost mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. One member, a 19-year-old boy, was killed when a shell hit his house while he was sleeping.

Even the place where they are rehearsing has a powerful meaning for them. Just yards from the old







'WE WORKED ANYWHERE THAT SEEMED SAFE FROM SNIPERS AND GRENADES'

battle-line, the building is a gutted cinema in a once-graceful part of the city. The north wall, which once housed the screen, is punctuated with gaping holes made by shells fired from the surrounding hills.

It was here that the company, Mostarski Teatar Mladih (MTM), premiered *Pax Bosnensis* in October 1992 during a temporary ceasefire. Having been bombed aggressively for more than six months (this time by Serbian reservists from the JNA, the Yugoslav People's Army, which had surrounded the city), for many the play came as a strong and inspirational breath of fresh air. Most of the population had been forced underground into cellars and basements. No food, medicine nor ammunition had made it into the city. There was no running water and no electricity – the performance was candlelit.



Above left, MTM's artistic director Sejo Dulic. *Above*, actors perform a harrowing scene from 'Pax Bosnensis'. *Left*, The Last Supper tableau from 'Pax Bosnensis' lit courtesy of holes made by shelling

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and no electricity – the performance was candlelit. ‘It was magnificent,’ says Sead Dulic, 46-year-old director of the play and artistic director of MTM since its inception in 1974. ‘People said we were crazy because there was still occasional gunfire and it was far from safe – but 600 people came. The hall was dark and dirty, yet the men were clean-shaven and in suits and ties – in bow-ties, some of them – and the women had new hairstyles and wore wonderful dresses and hats.’

Dulic, more commonly known by his nickname ‘Sejo’, believes *Pax Bosnensis* is one of the troupe’s most profound achievements. A dynamic piece of visual theatre accompanied by music, it originated in workshops just three months after the first shelling had begun, and was inspired in part by Dulic’s refusal to allow the war to affect the work of the company. Although he had joined the Bosnian army as a volunteer and most members of MTM had fled the city – 12 are now in London – Sejo and his assistant Armin Hadzimusic (better known as ‘Joha’) recruited a new cast from the city’s youth clubs, arts organisations and even from the street. They rehearsed during breaks in the fighting or at night during the curfews.

‘We worked anywhere we could find a couple of square metres that seemed safe from snipers and grenades,’ says Sejo. ‘We rehearsed in basements, parks, the open street, even nearby caves. But it was

dangerous. Some had to cross the Neretva river to reach us and one grenade fell just two metres from their rubber boat. Luckily, it didn’t explode.’

Using the war as a starting point, ideas emerged and scenes were developed. Personal experiences of shelling, fighting, loss and death were offered and discussed; the company served as group therapy and the play as catharsis. ‘We talked more than we actually worked, and we began to express how the war was affecting us and how we could make sense of it,’ says Sejo. ‘Then we began to ask ourselves some bigger questions, about why this was happening to us and our city, and what was being taken away from us. So the themes of history and civilisation began to be included in the performance.’

Beginning with tableaux based on iconic moments from the past and the future, including The Last Supper, Delacroix’s French Revolution painting *Liberty Leading the People*, communist parade dances with banners and ribbons from Tito’s era, and Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the play travels through a mesmerising and disturbing series of *mises en scène* and ends with two remarkable episodes. A Prometheus figure, having cleansed himself and been carried to a new beginning on an ark, utters the only words spoken during the entire performance. ‘*Ova ruka kaze ti da stanesli zamislis se nad svojim rukama,*’ he says, as if learning to speak for the first time. The words are taken from a poem

by one of Bosnia’s most celebrated writers, Mak Dizdar, and roughly translate as: ‘This hand tells you to stop. Think about your hands.’

Finally, in *The Death List of Photos*, the company assembles upstage, each actor recreating the photographic pose of someone they knew who died during the war. As lights flash on and off and it seems a group portrait of the dead is being taken again and again, the company remain implacably in their death poses until the applause has subsided and the last audience member has left the theatre.

It is an unsettling experience for an audience, an act of remembrance that challenges the viewer not to forget those who have suffered and never to turn their backs on the dead. It can also be perplexing – is the performance over, or isn’t it? Some audiences have continued clapping for 20 minutes or more.

Pax Bosnensis was performed seven times during the war, both in Mostar and surrounding villages, and around 50 times since in Bosnia and throughout Europe. ‘It is hard to say that the young people in MTM are acting by conventional standards,’ wrote writer, critic and drama professor Ljubica Ostojic in *Oslobodjenje*, the Sarajevo-based newspaper. ‘It’s more that they are living an intense stage life without recourse to defence mechanisms. These images do not belong to fantasy or art theatre or the theatre of the absurd; they belong to their own reality.’

But it is the role of *Pax* as a potentially healing

force that has proved one of its most important. Brought to the north-west Bosnian town of Bihac last Easter by Roger Chamberlain – an English theatre-in-education worker with the international relief agencies CARE and the Ryder Trust UK – the play is, he says, a symbol of the role theatre can play in the social and cultural rebuilding of the country. Bihac was encircled by Bosnian Serb forces for 1,201 days between 1991 and 1995, and this was the first theatre performance in the city for six years.

‘We staged two performances, one in the evening for adults and another in the afternoon for children, and both affected the audiences very, very deeply,’ says Chamberlain. ‘The strange irony is that the absolute horror of the war has made MTM even more committed and determined and successful. I don’t really want to use the cliché, but it’s real phoenix from the ashes stuff.’

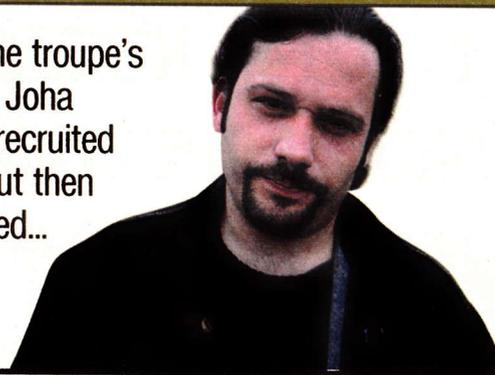
MTM even took their work to the enemy: just before Christmas they performed *Pax* in Croatia’s capital, Zagreb. Although one member refused to go and the trip proved the most traumatic test yet for the cast, Sejo believes it was a success – for cast and director alike. Dulic himself had personal battles to overcome – he was wounded when a bullet passed through his thigh, and his mother and brother were imprisoned in Croat camps. Yet he is a man for whom the notion of a multicultural state is so central that he will never stop fighting to maintain it.

‘I don’t recognise national names or characteristics because in the trenches with me were Bosnian Croats fighting against the Croat army, and Bosnian Serbs fighting against the Serb army,’ he says. ‘Another thing is that my wife is Croatian [she was sent to Zagreb at the start of the war and has stayed there]. How can I forget her and my children?’

Dulic is standing by the banks of the Neretva river looking out over a city in which he has spent almost all his life. Once the most cosmopolitan and sophisticated town in the Balkans, with the highest percentage of mixed marriages in Bosnia and a theatrical tradition that dates back to the early 1600s, Mostar is now divided by an invisible wall. All checkpoints and barricades have been removed, yet there is little freedom of movement between the two sides.

Joha’s story

When many of the troupe’s cast fled Mostar, Joha Hadzmusic, 30, recruited new members, but then the soldiers arrived...



EARLY IN the morning of May 9, 1993, when the war with the Croat army in Mostar started, soldiers came to my door. They had socks on their heads with holes cut out around their eyes. They demanded that I show them my ID. I have a Muslim name, although my family is part Muslim and Croat and has lived in Mostar for more than 400 years. So they said I must go with them to get it checked.

‘I was taken to a Croat concentration camp 20 kilometres south of Mostar. At any one time there were about 1,500 prisoners there, but the numbers changed constantly because many were given papers for the border and encouraged to leave Bosnia. They were given 24 hours to pack their possessions in one bag and go. I was given the chance to leave, but I never thought twice about it. Mostar is my town.

‘I spent ten-and-a-half months in the

camp; the Croats were very thorough at checking my papers. Every day and every minute is etched in my mind. We slept in soldiers’ beds at first, but after a week they took them away to make more room and we slept on the floor. There were more than 200 of us in a former classroom.

‘Near the beginning of my detention I was registered by the Red Cross, which meant that I wasn’t put to work on the front line digging trenches or carrying sandbags for bunkers. I worked on the second or third lines. Many prisoners working at the front line were wounded or killed because it was so dangerous.

‘Yet being in the camp was often safer than remaining in Mostar. Nine days after I was arrested, my cousin was murdered. He was abducted from his flat on the west side and eventually found in a rubbish skip. He had 32 breaks to bones in his body. There was a huge hole where

his face should have been because he was shot in the back of the head. His father couldn’t recognise him. He was my age, and like a brother.

‘I was lucky not to be treated badly. I used techniques I had learnt in the theatre to help me and others survive. When we were alone, I ran sessions to help concentration and relaxation. It was like collective therapy. They were similar to the exercises you do before a performance to relax the body and discipline the mind.

‘And I used acting techniques to confuse the guards. When somebody has a weapon in their hand and more power than you, when he tells you to do something that is not right, that you must clean his shoes or make a hole in the plaster on the wall with your head or you will be killed – if he sees fear in your eyes you are dead. I learned to look that person directly in the eyes and ask as normally as possible, “Why?” and act a little bit and repeat, “Why, come on, don’t joke with me, it is not possible for me to do that”, and laugh a little at the absurdity of it without mocking him.

‘I acted normally – not as someone defeated by my situation, with my head bowed and ready to obey. The guards were more likely to choose people they could control, but I was more difficult. They couldn’t work out my body language and my mental attitude; they thought I asked too many questions.

‘All this comes from the theatre. But it was a big role – 317 days – perhaps the longest in the history of theatre.’

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barricades have been removed, yet there is little freedom of movement between the two sides.

The west bank is controlled by the Croats, many of whom swear allegiance to hard-line nationalists who are determined to live in a separate Bosnian-Croat state – Herceg-Bosnia – or even be absorbed into Croatia, rather than co-operate in the Muslim-Croat federation set up by the Dayton peace accord. While two prominent mafia leaders were arrested recently and forcible evictions of Muslim families have become less common, this part of the city has a reputation for gangsters, heavy weaponry, prostitution and intimidatory action – a Muslim man was



A war victim passes by the Pavarotti Music Centre in Mostar, to which the opera singer has given more than £2 million

shot dead here in February while attending a funeral.

Parts of the east side are so devastated – in 10 months it is estimated that 100,000 shells fell on this part of Mostar – that it looks more like the Afghanistani capital Kabul than a city in central Europe. Much of the infrastructure, schools, health centres and electricity supplies – on both sides of the river – has been rebuilt and a fragile peace is enforced along the front line and in the central safe zone by Spanish troops acting for NATO.

‘It will take many, many years for the people of this city to reconcile and forget,’ says Olivier Delarue, a repatriation officer with the UNHCR in Mostar. ‘Thirty-four per cent of the Bosnian population has been displaced by the war. We didn’t expect the Jews to go back to Germany after the Second World War, and you can’t expect the Muslims to return to west Mostar.’

One of those not returning is Sejo Dulic. Because of his many activities during the war, he is a wanted man on the west side. Yet from his position here on the east bank of the river, he can see the west-side flat he once shared with his wife and family. Behind Sejo is the shell of a former JNA storehouse, bombed by the Croats, that has been designated the site for a new theatre complex for MTM. Although the building has no roof and sandbags still line the windows, there are plans to build theatre, dance and video studios here, as well as a coffee bar, art gallery and accommodation for visiting companies.

MTM aim to perform Aristophanes’s *The Peace*

in the rubble (‘We will play it here, and they can watch,’ says Sejo defiantly, pointing to the other side of the river). Some municipal money has been set aside for the new building, but the company’s dream is a long way off. MTM need at least another £400,000 to complete the project.

A mile down the road, also in the eastern half of the city, lies the near-completed Pavarotti Music Centre. Developed and part funded by War Child and by proceeds of Pavarotti concerts, CD and video sales (he has donated more than £2 million), the centre will provide rehearsal and performance spaces, music education and therapy units, and house a commercial recording studio.

Dulic looks along the river past the site of Stari Most – the celebrated medieval footbridge that stood for more than 400 years as a potent symbol of the unification of the city, and that was destroyed by Croat tanks in November 1993 – and gives a rueful smile. ‘The centre is a good thing, and thanks to Pavarotti’s name they have managed to get lots of money,’ he says. ‘But there was no music centre before the war – only a great music school and a symphony orchestra. However, there *was* a Mostar youth theatre and centre. We kept going during the war, we performed, we started the healing years ago. Where is *our* Pavarotti?’

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