

Playing with the Borders: Dramaturging Ethnicity in Bosnia

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It was a place to do something together, to meet people, to cross borders, and hear what others think through theater. Ana Marić, Bosnian Croat¹

You wanted us to improvise and be free. I didn't get it until the very end; I was too much in the borders. You wanted us to play with the people around us. I guess that's theater. Meša Begić, Bosnian Muslim²

Ten years ago when I began a brief career as a professional dramaturg and Literary Manager, my job centered on the text. I read hundreds of original scripts, worked with playwrights on the structure of their language, and offered rehearsal comments on what performance revealed about writing. Storytelling has always been the mainstay of western theatrical practice, and language and narrative tended to dominate my dramaturgical concerns. But theater also offers a language of presence, visceral experience, and live context that can vary the reception of the spoken word. Bert States notes that theater "is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that are what they seem to be."³ While every object on stage functions as a sign of something else, those objects are also things-in-themselves. Chairs maintain chair-ness even as they suggest a café, castle or bedroom. Similarly, human beings serve as embodied representations of characters. Yet, while bodies are both representative and present, the identity of the performing subject remains more elusive: performance seems to fix identity, but both its process and reception suggest greater elasticity. In the former Yugoslavia, where ethnic identity has been recently redefined, the performance process can offer insight into how the community constructs and the individual enacts ethnicity, and how the individual's relation to a more narrowly defined ethnic community can expand. My dramaturgical and directorial work with youth in Bosnia between 1996–1998 offers several examples of the elusive and essential nature of ethnicity.

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To speak of “ethnic identity” in the former Yugoslavia is somewhat misleading. Most of the youth with whom I work belong to the same ethnic group of South Slavs, the literal translation of “Jugo Slavia.” This group, which shares language, recent history, and culture, subdivides into religious affiliation. Serbians practice Orthodoxy, Croats Catholicism, and a large number of Bosnians converted to Islam under Turkish occupation. For the latter half of this century, however, absence of religious practice, intermarriage, and geographical diaspora loosened the ties of regional and ethno-religious identification. Before the 1991–1995 war, Bosnia’s population included residents affiliated with all three religious practices, many of whom self-identified as “Bosnian” or “Yugoslav” rather than Serb (Orthodox), Croat (Catholic), or Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim). Following the ethnic cleansing, killing, and para-military activity initiated by the political aspirations of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, much of the now segregated population affiliates along ethno-religious lines.

Ethnic identification and theater share the importance of meaning-making via signs and emotional connection, or what Bruce McConachie has identified as “structures of feeling.”⁴ McConachie’s reassertion of emotional as well as ideological aspects of belonging enhances theories suggesting that communities tend to maintain cohesion through symbolic or imaginary connections.⁵ Ethnicity, like theater, functions as a constructed though emotionally charged presence. Based on belief and daily practice, ethnic identification acts as both an essential (that is, important) aspect of the individual’s sense of self and belonging, and as a non-essential construction that can shift with changes in beliefs and practices. Werner Sollers observes that ethnicity is based in contrast; etymologically, the terms refers to “other people.”⁶ Yet, the border dividing otherness and belonging can change, and the theater-making process, dominated by human interactions through daily practices and the communicative importance of the sign, can operate as a site of that change. Theatrical performances in Bosnia’s two divided geographical regions—the Muslim-Croat Federation and Serbian Republic of Bosnia—illustrate both the markings and shifts of ethnic borders.

The south-eastern city of Mostar serves as a microcosm of the symbolic and actual divisions now characterizing Bosnia-Herzegovina. Before the war, the most prominent symbol of Mostar was its centuries old bridge, the Stari Most (Old Bridge), connecting the older east side with the newer west side of the city. A pre-war Yugoslav guidebook emphasizes the importance of the bridge as a sign of unity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. “It is this bridge which became Mostar’s symbol. Around this magnificent Old Bridge, the nucleus of the town developed forming a single architectural entity.”⁷ The 1993 destruction of the bridge during fighting between Muslim and Croat forces within the city, now marks new divisions

between Mostar's Muslim east side, and mainly Croat west side. Other symbols of pan-Slavic unity, such as the Yugoslav flag, streets named for communist heroes, and a common language, have also been remarked. The west side sports the Croatian checkerboard symbol, barbers in the Croatian currency, the Kuna, has renamed streets for Croatian heroes, and has changed the language to reflect Croatian pronunciations. The east side flies the Bosnian lily, refers to streets by their old names, and uses the Bosnian Dinar as currency. These symbolic markers of division and community became aspects of several performances reflecting on the disunity and potential unity of Mostar and its citizens.

From 1996–97 I worked with U.S. director Scot McElvany to develop several original theater pieces with a mixed group of Mostarian youth. McElvany lived in Mostar for two years, working mainly in association with a youth center, Mladi Most, or Youth Bridge. As its name suggests, the center refers to the city's former symbol of unity, the Old Bridge, and opposes divisions within the city. Mladi Most offers a space where youth of Muslim, Croat, and mixed parentage can freely meet. The youth center is structurally integrated as well, run by a coalition of international volunteers and local workers from both sides of Mostar. The center supported most of our productions including *Mladi Most Carol*, an adaptation of Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, and two original shows, *Podrum (The Basement)* and *Pisma (Letters) or Where Does the Postman Go When All the Street Names Change?* These three shows exemplify the (re)construction of ethnic identity. In different ways, each performance reflected and attempted to redefine the symbols and structures of feelings creating ethnic difference within the city. As a way of noting the interaction of performance, reception, and community, discussion about the pieces integrates spatial, representational, sensory and emotional aspects. A locational, phenomenal dramaturgy seems better suited to analyze the meanings and experiences generated through the performative process in Bosnia.

Podrum: Unity in the Face of Otherness

Podrum (The Basement) evolved from workshops in a summer camp located outside Mostar. In 1996 Mladi Most worked with a German youth organization, Schüler Helfen Leben (Students Helping), to coordinate the camp outside of the city, in order to provide further opportunities for Mostarian youth to intermingle. Gathering together within Mostar presented a threat to the forces advocating ethnic division. As a supposedly neutral space on the west side, Mladi Most was often threatened by nationalist Croats and was frequently attacked with rocks and even gunfire.⁸ The coastal town of Zhuljana in Croatia offered a more neutral space for meeting. Even more than location, however, the presence of German youth at the camp impacted the enactment of ethnic difference and unity.

While divided in Mostar, when faced with an even more “othered” group, the Mostarians enacted unity through opposition to the Germans.

This unity also illustrates how a threat can bring together a previously divided group. While in Mostar, intimidations kept Croats and Muslims divided, yet threats against the youth center united the mixed participants against violent nationalists. While the German youth did not present any physical danger to the Mostarians, they represented a kind of patronization. The Mostarians attended the camp for free, while the German youth had paid for the “experience” of meeting Bosnian youth. Language differences and interests also contributed to separations between the two groups at mealtimes and leisure hours.

The creation of *Podrum* thus further united the Mostarian youth already marking their unity through difference from the Germans. The piece began as a kind of “fuck you” to the Germans, as a way to show-off the Mostarians’s experience during the war, and to make up for the fact that mostly German youth had participated in the workshops thus far. As Supa, one of the more cynical Mostarians remarked, “We want to show the Germans we can be involved too.”⁹ Though the piece began in this vein, *Podrum* transformed into a more complex representational and emotional experience that not only further united the Mostarians, but also temporarily broke boundary differences with the Germans.

I had worked on the first two workshops in the camp, exploring ideas of home and waiting, using simple exercises juxtaposing movement and short texts. We presented these pieces mainly in English, the camp’s common language. After I departed from the camp, McElvany used similar techniques to develop *Podrum*, though this piece, generated by the Mostarian youth from its inception, was performed in Bosnian. Working together with the youth, McElvany put together movements developed from daily activities with texts created from questions such as “write about a time that you felt very safe during the war.” Because of the paucity of resources in the camp, human bodies enacted most of the representations in *Podrum*, including an island, a basement and Mostar itself. The actual bodies of the Mostarian performers, however, presented the most striking phenomenal images, as the youth stood in for themselves. Even more remarkable, in a piece explicitly representing the experience of a war centered on ethnic differentiation, the “Croat,” “Serb” and “Muslim” participants never ethnically distinguished themselves through either text or performance.¹⁰

The youth imparted their experience through evocations representing past sensory moments. Hajdi Hudec wrote about sitting in the basement with her family and friends while shells exploded everywhere outside. Someone picked up a guitar and they all began to sing loudly to drown out the sounds of the grenades. While the actual sound and experience of the grenades could not be repeated in the performance, Hajdi joined the rest of the group in singing “Volim Te” (I Love

You) to the accompaniment of a guitar following her story. Hajdi's narrative lent additional meaning to the performance, yet the actual experience of the music remained present as well as presentational, just as the bodies of the performers remained both representational and actual. Perhaps because of this phenomenal slippage and presence, the experience proved extremely emotional to those participating and witnessing. According to numerous reports, many in the mostly German audience cried while others looked on quietly. After a moment of silence, Supa (who, McElvany comments, was the most distant of the group, and felt the Germans "didn't respect him or any of the Mostarians ") called everyone in the camp into a circle to "howl in Peace together." That night, according to McElvany, "many new circles formed of people from Mostar and Germany, songs were sung from the different countries, and many of the Germans said this experience gave them a small window to peer through and begin understanding what had gone on in Mostar."

Victor Turner cites this togetherness, or loosening of boundary differences, as a moment of *communitas*. Turner locates this as a time in a ritual or performance when structures of differentiation momentarily disappear.¹¹ During the *Podrum* process, *communitas* occurred in two sites: within the Mostarian group, united through the workshop process, and between the Mostarians and Germans, united through the performance and its aftermath. Baz Kershaw posits that the production process engages people in a "meaning-making activity" that works to create community.¹² Bruce McConachie complicates Kershaw's theory, focusing more on the audience's reception to performance. McConachie suggests that mutual meaning-making between the performers and audience is less important than the visual, aural and emotional experience which engages community feeling.¹³ While McConachie asserts that community-based theater (such as *Podrum*) can not necessarily change the day-to-day routines of a people, he does suggest that it can spark possible images that precede more substantive changes.¹⁴ The movement of *Podrum* from the relatively safe space of Zhuljana to the more symbolically and emotionally charged space of Mostar illuminates the challenges of rethinking ethnic boundary differences in the city itself.

Location and Meaning: *Podrum* moves to the City

Zhuljana was removed from the symbolic context of Mostar, with its constant reminders of ethnic division and threats towards unity. Performing an ethnically unified piece in Mostar thus proved far more challenging and evocative to the participants involved. The youth had been invited to perform *Podrum* by an east-side theater sponsoring a small international festival. Because of the location of the festival in the Muslim east side, many of the Croat and Serb participants in

Podrum decided they could no longer perform in this more symbolically delineated locale. Several, however, did risk the danger. Representations, images, perceptions and emotions necessarily differed in this new locale. Though they were the same as in Zhuljana, the performers bodies were now marked with ethnicity. The city was small enough, and had been divided for long enough, that residents knew by sight who belonged to which side of the city and which ethno-religious group. The bodies could no longer remain merely “Mostarian;” or “not-German.” Marked by context, memory, and the consciousness of participants and observers, they now read as “Croat,” “Muslim” and “Serb.”

In Mostar, the performance also took on greater contextual meaning. In the outdoor coastal town of Zhuljana, the actual experience of war could only be imagined by the German audience. The performance in Mostar took place in the bombed-out Hotel Ruza, a decayed physical remnant of war in the city. The space no longer merely represented Mostar during the war, it *was* Mostar—a city literally destroyed by its own factionalism. At the same time, the space no longer maintained its pre-war function as a hotel, but served as a somewhat dangerous children’s playground. Thus, the space’s phenomenal significance was rendered less striking by the public’s inability to view it as a performance space; many in the “audience” were pedestrian passersby and children engaged in their own forms of play. McElvany describes the experience: “People milled about disregarding any segmenting of the performance and audience space. All the performers were freaked out, and justifiably so.”

Though less responsive to the presence of the piece, the Mostarian audience who attended to the performance had a greater experiential context to read the images of the war, such as the basement as a metaphor for both safety and confinement. Festival organizers ultimately applauded participants for representing the first mixed-ethnicity performance in the city since the war. The fact that this differentiation had been noted, however, seemed merely to affirm ethnic difference rather than to join together the larger community of Mostar. Experiences producing *Mladi Most Carol* later in the year and *Pisma* the following summer (1997) provoked a similar marking of difference, as well as generating possibilities for participants and observers to think beyond ethno-religious identification within the city.

Text and Context: Symbolic resonances in *Mladi Most Carol*

As an adapted text, *Mladi Most Carol* provided numerous dramaturgical resonances between story and context. Nominally still about the tale of Scrooge and his journey discovering the joys of human connection and open-spiritedness, the script and performance also suggested sites where audiences could read further localized meaning. A group of mixed Croatians, Muslims, and international

volunteers working at Mladi Most enacted the piece throughout the Mladi Most house, which itself had great significance for participants and the audience consisting mainly of young visitors to the center. Mladi Most was a site of unity. Donated by a Serb, situated on the Croatian west side, this “youth bridge” aligns itself with Mostar rather than with any particular ethnic group. This lack of differentiation among visitors ironically made the performance on the west side dangerous to participants, a fact rendered appallingly clear to us in a late rehearsal moment. Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* perhaps already seems an odd choice for a group of youth which included numerous Muslims; Muslims who traditionally celebrate Christmas, but Muslims nonetheless.¹⁵ Co-director McElvany and myself thus decided to make the performance more inclusive. At various times, five different performers played Scrooge, including two American males, a Muslim woman, a Japanese male and a Croatian female. We also included a Muslim moon and star as well as a Catholic cross on Scrooge’s gravesite, located outside the Mladi Most house. Due to a shortened rehearsal time, we did not finish the gravestone until the dress rehearsal on the day of the performance. At the moment of its revelation a collective gasp arose from the mixed group of participants. “Do you want to have us killed?” several yelled. The youth later explained their reaction. By revealing this highly charged symbol (the Islam moon and star) in the public space of the Croatian-dominated west side, outside Mladi Most, we had endangered all of the youth. Ana Marić, a Bosnian Croat commented, “at first I thought it was all right, then I understood the situation. People in a higher [political] position will think it’s not all right and some jerk will do something to us.”¹⁶ The house had in fact remained the target of nationalist aggression in the town. In this west side public space, we had to erase the moon and star.

Within the house, the performance united participants and audience by invoking the more common experience of life in Mladi Most and Mostar. References to fire in Dickens’ original changed in our adaptation to electric heaters (the only heat available at that time in Mostar). Dickens’ charitable fundraisers transformed to an international representative of one of numerous volunteer organizations flooding the city. Twins Nino and Dino represented Ignorance and Want with recruitment-age Nino in a camouflage army uniform bearing a plastic rifle, and Dino dressed as a gypsy beggar of a sort frequently seen on the streets of Mostar. The language of the show reflected that of the house—a mixture of Bosnian and English, while the words suggested more specific resonances within the Mostarian and Bosnian context. An early exchange between Scrooge (at that time played by a Muslim woman who worked at the youth center) and the International Volunteer (played by a woman of mixed Croat-Muslim

parentage who frequented the center) indicates how meaning and emotional response derives from narrative, context, and the performers' presence.

Iris Besker, playing the volunteer, enters Scrooge's chambers (the Mladi Most lounge) and brightly asks in English whether he is Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley. Scrooge/Indira answers, "Mr. Marley je gotovo." When the volunteer seems confused by the use of Bosnian, Scrooge repeats in loud, overly-enunciated English "He died seven years ago, this very night." The slippage between representation (optimistic, though naive, English-only volunteers) and presence (fluent Mostarians), and the parody of the actual volunteers present, bonded the Mladi Most audience. While marking this shared contextual understanding, the performance also placed the volunteers as "other," temporarily erasing the Croat/Muslim markings of the performers and uniting them as "Mostarians" and "Bosnians." The continuing script suggests additional criticism of international relief organizations, as well as larger political concerns in the city, and further erasure of ethno-religious differentiations within a common "non-international" identity.

After the volunteer learns that Mr. Marley is "gotovo" (finished or dead), she continues to assert her purpose to Scrooge:

Iris/Volunteer: At this time of year, we like to help those who suffer, who have been evicted from their apartments, or live without heat, meat or enough new socks and shirts.

Indira/Scrooge: Are there no prisons?

Iris/Volunteer: Plenty of prisons

Indira/Scrooge: And the THW? UMCORE? Radite? (*realizing the volunteer doesn't recognize the word*) Do they work still?

Iris/Volunteer: They do work. I wish I could say their work was more successful

Indira/Scrooge: The European Administration? War Child? The Irish Refugee Trust? IFOR? Shüler Helfen Leben? Mladi Most?

Iris/Volunteer: They are very busy sir. *Pause.* Most of the time.

Indira/Scrooge: Oh! I was afraid from what you said at first that the Dayton agreement had broken down or was not being completely enforced!

These few lines of dialogue communicate layers of meaning to the Mladi Most audience. Most prominent is the titillation of watching a Mostarian reclaim subjectivity through mimesis of the international volunteers. The youth at Mladi Most often expressed their frustration at dependency on outside organizations.

The center's German parent group tried to resolve this in part by hiring both local and international workers. Though the workers made decisions through consensus, the perception remained that internationals had more control in Mladi Most's operation. The use of English rather than Bosnian as the more common language of the house reinforced these perceptions. The dominance of English in the dialogue, with embedded critique of its usage, acknowledged, reinforced and poked fun at this convention. Thus, the lumping of the youth center together with the other international relief organizations communicated a self-referential critique. Finally, the reference to the Dayton agreements, the "peace" accords brokered by the U.S. in 1995, referenced political circumstances outside of the house. The fact that McElvany and I had written the adaptation was decentered and reclaimed in part by the presence of the Mostarian performers, their embodied parody, and the line and story changes they suggested. By effectively setting international volunteers against Mostarians, "othering" the volunteers, the text and performance united the youth, temporarily erasing ethno-religious boundaries of difference. At the same time, the rehearsal process revealed the tremendous emotional content contained in symbolic markers of differences, such as the Muslim moon and star. However much they enacted cultural unity within the context of Mladi Most, the Mostarian youth understood that just outside its doors in the Croat-dominated west side, ethno-religious differentiation was consciously and prominently marked.

Despite, or perhaps because of this perceived danger, many of the youth participants expressed excitement about the potential power of performance in Mostar. Kenet Bakamović, a Muslim living on the west side, noted, "it's a big thing, like the beginning of theater from the ashes."¹⁷ Ana Marić, a west-side Croat added, "nobody knows what we are doing—we should do something more people would see. You cannot do anything if you are hiding. I am ready to go to [the east side.]"¹⁸ The most recent performance we worked on with the Mostarian youth occurred on the east side, with a mixed group of participants and audience. Ironically, or significantly, Ana did not participate as she had become too involved in a Croat-only theater group on the west side.

Pisma: Bringing Together Text, Context and Presence

Pisma (Letters) or Where Does The Postman Go When All the Street Names Change? evolved over several months in 1997. We presented the piece at the 1997 International Youth Theater Festival in Mostar. While *Podrum* had communicated the direct experience of participants, and *Mladi Most Carol* had situated that experience within an adapted context, *Pisma* explored what it might take to reconstruct Mostar as a unified city, to "re-member" the place the youth participants knew before the war. In content and context, the piece included

familiar markers of division and unity within the city, with additional complex theatrical detail, and with seemingly greater impact on a larger, more diverse, and more emotionally engaged audience base.

Because of the stronger socio-political commentary of the piece, participants decided they wanted to set the performance in a place that was not ever directly referred to as “Mostar” but only as “the city.” Like Mostar, this city suffered through an event that changed its geography and inter-personal relationships. These changes were mainly represented through maps, signs, and a bemused postman, trying to make his way through the re-named landscape.¹⁹

Though only half an hour in length, the show was aesthetically dense, combining numerous theatrical tools developed over a year of working together with participants. Performers created characters that ranged from the archetypal, to the personal, to neutral masks. Acting styles encompassed comic realism, physical metaphor, the carnivalesque, and direct audience address.²⁰ The script incorporated character introductions, original poetry, participants’ letters, and a Joseph Brodsky poem set to music. The styles of play and explicit theatricality suggested a transformational aesthetic reinforcing themes of the city’s remembering. The diverse audience responding to the show’s presentation reflected this thematic bringing together. Attendees included numerous international relief workers and artists, Mostarian residents from the east and west sides, and youth from the Serbian Republic of Bosnia who had not crossed the border to the Muslim-Croat Federation since the beginning of the war.²¹ Performed mainly in Bosnian, but with much non-linguistic action, the piece communicated to various audience members in different ways. Two moments early in the show established a context for both international and Bosnian audience members.

Pisma began with a Brechtian style introduction—the creation of archetypal city characters including a Housewife, Streetkid, Banker, Café Owner, Mapmaker, Signmaker, and Postman, who functioned as a kind of Everyman character. Selected significations represented each character: the Housewife received a curler, kerchief and house dress, the Streetkid, a squirt gun and cap, the Signmaker, a paint bucket, and the Mafioso style Café Owner sported a wad of cash and sunglasses. These characters had resonance within and, in some ways, outside of Bosnia. A poem following the character introductions created a more specific context for those who spoke and understood Bosnian, particularly for Mostarians. The poem asked the question “What is this city?” and defined it historically, “built in the 15th century;” socially, as a “city of poets, writers, painters, jokers, and of ordinary people working;” geographically, “of river and rock;” and culturally, as a city that is “a combination of Austro-Hungarian and Turkish culture/ Combination of east and west.” The poem, written by one of the cast members, promoted a common history of The City/Mostar marked by social

integration. The east of Turkey and west of Austro-Hungarian obviously resonated with the now divisive “east” and “west” sides of the city. The poem continued, obliquely critiquing this division, while underlining the possibility of reunification:

[This city] today is crippled

It is true that the city is being reconstructed,
but bridges, buildings, and parks never made a town;
what made it was the people living in it.

This latter part of the poem proved resonant in numerous ways, linguistic, semiotic, phenomenal and contextual. The piece’s set was constructed of junk from the city rescued from numerous outdoor garbage piles amidst the rubble of destroyed buildings. Thus, the set “reconstructed” the city. *Pisma’s* action reinforced this idea by including a destruction and reconstruction of its own set during “the event” occurring with the performance. We presented the piece outdoors on the east side of the city on a hill, with the audience facing the west side. Thus, from the audience’s point of view, the performance offered a view of the entire city, rather than of one side or the other. The sounds of the city, including church bells, children playing, and the Muslim call to prayer, functioned as an inclusive sonic backdrop to the production. Finally, the audience, particularly the Bosnian-speaking Mostarians, became implicated at the end of *Pisma* when the performers repeated the final lines of the piece directly to the audience, “what made [the city] was the people living in it.”

Pisma’s transformational aesthetics reinforced its message regarding the city and its residents’ potential for change. Scenes, and the actors’ bodies, morphed from The Housewife’s home, to locations within the city, from a fight to the Postman’s nightmare. A window frame found on a junkpile transformed from the Banker’s mirror to a picture frame in the Housewife’s home to the doorway of a new home after “the event.” A ladder functioned as the Housewife’s window and as a giant chicken in the Postman’s nightmare. The piece also made use of what Augusto Boal terms the telemicroscopic potential of theater to depict large scale events through local embodiment.²² Through this transformational process, and play with scale, two scenes evoked the destruction of the Old Bridge and the event of the war. During a slowed-down group fight, two characters lifted wooden boards in an arc to strike at each other, just as characters on either side of them lifted chairs above their heads. The momentary resemblance of the boards and chairs as “towers” to the Old Bridge was reinforced when the Streetkid shot at the structure with her water pistol. At that point the “bridge” collapsed, as did all the

characters around it. Later in the performance, after the scene had transformed to the Postman's Nightmare, and back again to the fight, the Streetkid picked up her paper airplane and began to move through the crowd. In mid-flight, co-director Scot McElvany entered the scene, and took over the flight of the plane, moving into the people, who at first waved at the plane, then covered their faces in horror, falling to the ground. The scene derived from a story cast members had told us of how they used to wave at Yugoslav army planes before the war, proudly thinking of them as "our army." During the war, these same planes, now controlled by the Serbian military, returned to force mainly Muslims and Croats from their homes in Bosnia.

The response from audience members exemplified the emotional impact of the piece and its potential for re-membering the community of Mostar and Bosnia beyond specific ethno-religious differentiations. Days afterwards cast members reported that internationals had stopped them in the streets to repeat how moved they had been by the piece. The ensemble of actors won a special award from the Festival Judges for their "theatrical promise and bravery." The responses that seemed most important to participants, however, came from Mostarians and Bosnians. At a cast feedback session following the performance, Mesha Begić (who had played the Postman) located the success of the show in its ability to bring together an audience. "We gathered a community from seven to seventy-seven." He spoke particularly of one member, Sasha, a vocal teen and member of another youth theater in east Mostar. "Sasha *is* Mostar. He's been through so much and if he liked it, understood it, then I think we did a really good thing." Another participant, Bambo Azderović, referred to a young woman from Sarajevo who had attended the theater camp in Romania and come to Mostar to witness the show. "Najda was surprised by performance [sic]. She is Sarajevo, but she has something in her soul like all of us." In both instances, audience members were directly associated with their city of origin. Their reactions seem to represent a cultural, as well as individual, point of view. The integration of the individual and collective suggests Frederic Jameson's notion of "situational consciousness" in which the individual experience or story comes together with that of the nation or community.²³ The comments also propose that the performance brought people together on an emotional and almost spiritual level. Bambo claims that Najda has "something in her soul like all of us." This comment calls forth a line from the show written by a young Mostarian (and former police officer), Roki, who worked for Mladi Most. "I will always be after crossing the borders of politeness, one human being with its own pure mind, heart, and soul."

Though theater can create a potential for change, for playing with and crossing the borders, this emotional coming together or imagined ideal community, can not completely alter the contextual significance, the political

threat, under which Bosnians live. At a Mladi Most party following the production, a nationalist Croat from the west side pulled a gun on the street, threatening youth entering the party. In the Serbian Republic of Bosnia where we had conducted a workshop earlier in the summer, youth participants feared leaving the country with a Bosnian rather than Serbian passport. A map recently published by west Mostar officials does not mark any of east Mostar, even erasing municipal buildings supposedly common to the entire city. Playing with the borders, dramaturgically, ethnically, or geographically is never permanent, nor completely satisfying. This kind of play does, however, reveal the possibility for transgression, for remapping, for revelation and cohesion. As performer Meša Begić might say "I guess that's theater."

Notes

1. Ana Marić, personal interview, 3 January, 1997.
2. Meša Begić, personal interview, 5 September, 1997.
3. Bert O. States, "The World on Stage," *Great reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985): 19–47.
4. In his recent *Theater Topics* article "Approaching the 'Structures of feeling' in Grassroots Theatre," McConachie cites the term first described by Raymond Williams as the emotional bonding shared by groups, class or culture. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1984): 64; quoted in *Theatre Topics* (March 1998): 33–54.
5. In *The Symbolic Construction of Community* Anthony Cohen emphasizes the essential function of symbols in creating a feeling of group belonging. (New York: Youngstock, 1985). In his seminal study on *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson asserts that community belonging exists in the imagination of its members (New York: Verso, 1991).
6. Werner Sollers, "Ethnicity," *Literary Terms for Critical Study*, Frank Lentriccia and Thomas McLaughlin eds. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990): 288.
7. *Guidebook to Mostar and Hercegovina*, Mostar, 1989: 22.
8. E-mail correspondence from my partner Scot McElvany describes several incidents threatening Mladi Most's declaration of ethnic neutrality. In one, a "crazy drunk bastard roam[ed] the streets shouting, 'this is Croatia! I want to see a Croatian flag in front of your house in fifteen minutes or I'll call everyone I know in the [Croatian military organization]!'" (2 February 1997). Earlier in the week, another nationalist had shot a dog at the center claiming "I'll shoot that dog, the other dogs, you and everyone else [in this house]" (31 January 1997). In December 1997 yet another Croat nationalist threw live hand grenades at the center shouting "There'll be no new Yugoslavia here!" (30 December 1997).
9. This and all other quotes are from Scot McElvany's July 1996 performance notes.
10. Though mainly Muslims and Croats live in Mostar at this time, a few Serbians remained and one participated in the camp performances.
11. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969): 94–130.
12. Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992): 30.
13. McConachie, 33–35.
14. McConachie, 38.
15. "Muslims" in Mostar also drank beer and coffee, ate pork, and smoked copious quantities of cigarettes.

16. Marić interview.

17. Kenet Bakamović. Personal interview. 3 January 1997

18. Marić interview.

19. We developed and presented our performance before Kevin Costner's 1997 film release of the post-apocalyptic *The Postman*, which explored some similar ideas.

20. Co-director Geoff Sobelle had recently completed a year's study in Paris with the Jacques LeCoq Institute which concentrated on commedia-style physical theater and mask work.

21. The Dayton accords called for a unified Bosnian government with free border crossing between its two regions—a Bosnia Serb Republic and a Muslim-Croat Federation. Conflict within the Muslim-Croat Federation is illustrated by the divisions in Mostar. Border-crossing between the regions is still considered dangerous at this time in 1998. We worked in both areas, organizing a theater summer camp in Romania to bring together youth from all over Bosnia and also traveled throughout the region leading workshops in small towns. We hoped to use these connections to bring youth together in Mostar and throughout Bosnia. Kile, a Bosnian Serb from Banja Luka, who had served in the Bosnian Serb army, swore, he would never enter Mostar without a battalion of tanks accompanying him. Much to our surprise, he became an enthusiastic member of the Pisma audience, later remarking how profoundly moved he was at the way the Mostarians, whom he knew from various theater camps, warmly greeted him and immediately accepted him into their company.

22. Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (Routledge: New York, 1995): 27–28.

23. Frederic Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* (Fall 1986).