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The Aesthetics of Responsibility in the Latest Post-Yugoslav Theatre Projects

Abstract: Theatre in the countries that emerged after the break-up of Yugoslavia is one of those areas of contemporary culture that respond very quickly to social and political issues, ongoing discourses in the public space and challenges facing the community and the individual. Directors coming from Serbia, but operating in many areas of the region, such as Andrés Urbán and Zlatko Paković, emphasise in their subversive theatrical treatises that at the root of the limitations of ethical, moral and intellectual freedom lies responsibility as a constant consciousness of determinism expressed in the fact that there are no events without consequences. They problematise the personal responsibility of the author, but also the responsibility of the audience and actors, and explore the theatrical situation (the relationship between actors and audience and the actor-character relationship). It turns out that unmasking criticism aimed at preventing the reproduction of the status quo produces discomfort among the audience (the performances based on Danilo Kiš's prose and in collaboration with Jeton Neziraj are specifically pointed out here).

Keywords: theatre, post-Yugoslav region, responsibility, socially engaged art, scandal

Abstrakt: Teatr w krajach powstałych po rozpadzie Jugosławii należy do tych obszarów współczesnej kultury, które bardzo szybko reagują na społeczne i polityczne problemy, na toczące się w przestrzeni publicznej dyskursy oraz wyzwania, jakie stoją przed wspólnotą i jednostką. Reżyserzy pochodzący z Serbii, ale aktywni na wielu obszarach regionu, tacy jak Andrés Urbán i Zlatko Paković, podkreślają w swoich subwersywnych traktatach teatralnych, że u źródeł ograniczeń wolności o charakterze etycznym, moralnym i intelektualnym leży odpowiedzialność jako stała świadomość determinizmu wyrażającego się w tym, że nie ma zdarzeń bez konsekwencji. Twórcy ci problematyzują osobistą odpowiedzialność autora, ale też odpowiedzialność publiczności i aktorów, oraz badają sytuację teatralną (relacje między aktorami a publicznością, a także relacje na linii aktor-postać). Okazuje się, że demaskująca krytyka, która ma zapobiec reprodukcji status quo, powoduje wśród odbiorców dyskomfort (wskazano tu przede wszystkim spektakle zrealizowane na podstawie prozy Danila Kiša i w współpracy z Jetonem Nezirajem).

Słowa kluczowe: teatr, region postjugosłowiański, odpowiedzialność, sztuka zaangażowana, skandal

Like Buridan's ass, a writer stands between two choices: either to throw himself into the struggle for principles, or cultivate his garden. If he takes the first option, in a sense he has betrayed literature; if he chooses the second, he will always reproach himself for living his life without purpose and for betraying his gift (Kiš 2011, 122).¹

The fact that a question about a writer's responsibility towards the state imposes itself with such force, not only in the course of the forty post-war years but ever since the 1920s, points both to the relevance of the question and to its apparent inconvenience, felt by writers of all continents in the form of pangs of conscience (Kiš 1998, 145).

The above words by Danilo Kiš (1935–1989), a renowned Serbian prose writer, do not appear here by chance. Important topics and traumatic experiences described with keen insight take ambiguous forms in his writing. They continue to inspire contemporary theatre artists, including directors with Serbian origins, such as András Urbán and Zlatko Paković. For such creatives, Kiš has been inspirational, not least because of his conception questioning the notion of one-dimensional, limited and unequivocal identity.² Thanks to this “last Yugoslav writer” (Arsenijević 2011, 120) those directors have been able to merge great literature with the unmasking of criticism, philosophical inquiry and socio-political involvement which, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann, comes in the form of presentation and perception (Lehmann 2006, 185). It is important to note that the hallmark of such like-minded artists is an aim to retain artistic and moral integrity, something also shared by Kiš – two of whose works are important for this study: *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča* [A Tomb for Boris Davidovich] and *Čas anatomije* [The Anatomy Lesson]. Prominent among the various similarities and links between Urbán and Paković is the fact that Bertolt Brecht's achievements had an important impact on the poetics of both of their theatrical projects.³ Moreover, they are both travelling (mobile) directors whose position is already established, and recognisable almost everywhere within the entire post-Yugoslav region. Their artistic pathways frequently coincide,⁴ leading them both – separately – to Kosovo and to Jeton Neziraj – a playwright known as the Balkan Kafka (of which more later in this article). Another important similarity concerns the main intention guiding both directors: to unlock theatre's power of detection

¹ D. Kiš, *Buridanov magarac ili Kakva je odgovornost pisca prema državi?* [Buridan's Ass or What is the Writer's Responsibility towards the State?], a speech given at the 48th International PEN Congress, New York, 12–17 January 1986, <https://fenomeni.me/buridanov-magarac-ili-kakva-je-odgovornost-pisca-prema-drzavi-tema-kis/> (access: 14.02.2023).

² Kiš's father was a Hungarian Jew, and his mother was a Montenegrin christened in the Christian Orthodox Church; he himself was an atheist, but buried – according to his wishes – in the Orthodox rite.

³ Both directors express their fascination with Brecht. Their approaches to Brecht's legacy is insightful and they continue his mission as a precursor of epic theatre. Among their endeavours referencing Brecht in an overt way, the following should be noted: *Brecht – The Hardcore Machine*, directed by A. Urbán (Kosztolányi Dezső Színház, Subotica 2007) and *Ibzenov „Neprijatelj naroda“ kao Brehtov poučni komad* [Ibsen's “An Enemy of the People” as a Brecht's Teaching-play] directed by Z. Paković (Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju, Beograd 2014).

⁴ The artists chose the same artistic direction, and they respect and support each other. Paković was frequently invited by Urbán to the theatre festival Desiré Central Station organised in Subotica and to collaborate on such projects as *Kapitalizam, geometrijskim redom izložen* [Capitalism, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order], written and directed by Z. Paković, Kosztolányi Dezső Színház, Subotica 2016.

and unveiling truth, connected to a specific aesthetics of responsibility. For years, both directors have been faithful to the model of contextual art which encourages participation – or at least reflection. Their projects reveal them to be anarchist dissenters, rejecting the traditional bourgeois paradigms of theatre and human relationships. Urbán and Paković's "insufferable heresy of theatre"⁵ is widely commented on and sometimes raises not only extreme emotions, but also fierce polemics and even scandals. In this study, comprising elements of reportage, I will investigate work by both directors. In particular, I will focus on the conjoining of some aspects of their work with social responsibility, referenced by them on two different levels: endoreference, concerned with the content of a theatrical message, and exoreference, relating to the very matter of theatre – a social event which has a certain impact on the public sphere. Urbán's *modus operandi* is not always the same as Paković's artistic praxis, because each has created a distinct theatrical universe, but nevertheless their strategies have a common denominator.

The effectiveness of theatre as a potential initiator of social change is still being questioned, so theatre creatives are faced with greater scrutiny, and greater responsibility, regarding what is their *modus operandi*. However, many artists remain indifferent, thereby supporting the unethical status quo and strengthening the position of those who dominate and subordinate the unprivileged (Hauser 1999, 74–75). Together, both Urbán and Paković have extensively researched the configuration of responsibility from the point of view of the artist, the viewer and the community. However, they do not seek refuge in "spiritual haughtiness" or an "ivory tower," nor do they propagate idealised ethical norms, detached from reality; rather, they create their projects with due ethical consideration.

By awakening "heart and nerves"⁶ and clearing the path for new qualities in their projects, Urbán and Paković try to assess both the gains and losses brought to citizens by the multi-level changes following the breakup of federal Yugoslavia and the emergence of seven new states. Their sharp criticism is aimed at the illusionary nature and disguise of the alleged new order. The absence of any anticipated stabilisation in many spheres, unprocessed traumas, nationalist movements, human rights-violating regulations, accelerated capitalism and exploitation of the natural environment mean freedom is still perceived as an endangered value. In their theatre treatises, Urbán and Paković both affirm that the ethical, moral and intellectual delimitations of freedom are grounded in responsibility, evident in an ongoing consciousness of determinism, and finding expression in the fact that there are no events without consequences (Traczyk 2009, 121). They are not isolated in this endeavour,⁷ but each has created a particular experimental site in

⁵ The "Insufferable heresy of theatre" is the title of an article written by Benjamin Bajramović, an actor and member of the crew performing *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovića, kako je danas zidamo* [A Tomb for Boris Davidovich as We Build it Today] directed by Zlatko Paković: B. Bajramović, *Nepodnošljiva hereza pozorišta*, <https://ukontaktu.org/nepodnosljiva-hereza-pozorista/> (access: 12.07.2023).

⁶ This phrase was used by Antonin Artaud in *Le Théâtre et son double* (1938).

⁷ Their art corresponds with the aesthetic desires of other theatre directors active in the region, for example Bojan Đorđev, Oliver Frlić, Kokan Mladenović, Selma Spahić, Anja Suša and Borut Šeparović. This topic is further developed in Gabriela Abrasowicz's publication: (*Trans*)*pozycje idei*

which he explores connections between responsibility – not only in the legal, but also in a moral, conceptual and semantic sense – and the possibility to act and decide freely (Bartmiński, Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2015, 31). They are faithful to the interconnected notions of freedom, truth and equality, and pass on to their respective audiences their indispensable relevance.

For more than two decades both directors have insisted on rejecting the old, anachronistic theatre, which constitutes a mainly aesthetic phenomenon, striving instead to replace it with theatre that focuses on ethical dimensions (Woźniakowska 2007). Their projects oppose political oppression, and the aridity of contemporary culture and technocratic civilisation, leading to the creation of a new mode of artistic expression, where shifting the emphasis from aesthetic to ethics clearly demarcates the trajectory of changes. The essence of such projects which remove inaction and constraint of thought is seen especially in the creation of new studio works for a smaller audience, organically connected to real life experiences (performances are riddled with references characteristic of the region, but are not hermetic, since they often cover global phenomena and include universal messages).

The hybridisation of different practices and social codes has a marked presence in such theatrical projects, though it is usually viewed as merely a gateway to proper labour, while much more important is the potential for multiple meanings offering a new perspective and allowing for a more modern take on the role of theatre. Andrés Urbán and Zlatko Paković go even further. Going beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, a symptomatic act of transgression evident in their progressive projects emphasises a sense of community with no passive observers (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 275). The attention of critics, teatrologists and an ordinary, non-specialist audience is drawn to the activist – or even activist – character of Urbán and Paković's initiatives, whose aim is to influence not just in the short-term, but with the long-term goal of enriching the counterculture. Although these eccentric (and ex-centric) directors do not belong to the general theatre landscape dominating the region, they refuse to bow to pressure or pursue a populist agenda. Instead, they prefer to navigate the rough seas of the audience's highly emotional agitation.

Andrés Urbán's lawless practices

It appears that Andrés Urbán's alleged nonchalance (where non-conformist attitudes can perhaps be identified), does not fit the traditional scale of perception shared by many theatre-goers. Even as a young director,⁸ this Serbian artist of Hungarian origin, born in Vojvodina (1970 in Senta), has treated theatre as a spe-

w postjugosłowiańskim dramatopisarstwie oraz teatrze (1990–2020). Perspektywa transkulturowa [(Trans)positions of ideas in post-Yugoslav playwriting and theatre (1990–2020). A transcultural perspective]. Katowice: WUŚ, 2021.

⁸ The 17-year-old Urbán established an independent theatre and literary studio in which he was active as an author, director and actor. Next he founded the art group Aiowa (aiowa maffia) and collaborated with theatre groups of a similar orientation – primarily Hungarian and one international.

cific – and at the same time all-encompassing – social-interventionist⁹ act. Viewers who are open to innovation keenly follow his (usually authorial and conceptual) theatrical projects and unique adaptations of the classics (often Hungarian and Serbian, aside from Shakespeare). It is, however, important to note that even though Urbán usually utilises existing literary works, his use of the literary canon is not reduced to a simple transposition for theatre.¹⁰ He uses the matrix of well-known cultural texts (audio/visual as well as performative), modernises them in a subversive way and weaves new content around plots or central figures (characters entangled within historical or political contexts). In this way, he connects the past with the present, always highlighting the need for constant vigilance against demagoguery.¹¹

For years, Urbán's aim has been to form and expand a theatre that integrates community and activates society in the public sphere (Jeziński 2012, 29). As a director, he always focuses on experimenting with expression, movement, or the poetics of a play. Special attention should be paid to his so called “lawless practices”¹² (Ilić 2018, 103), which violate old-fashioned, safe rules established within the art world in general, and which invest in modern theory and cultural dynamics. Actors must show personal involvement, express their own responses, and enrich the process with their own ideas and observations, creating a specific sense of responsibility for what is presented to the audience.

Outrage is central to Urbán's artistic statement, removing the audience's sense of ease, harmony and false sense of safety. Among his earlier accomplishments is an especially shocking performance of *Urbi et orbi* (2007). The following decade saw the emergence of an already iconic and spectacular production of *Neoplanta* (2014), and *Hasanaginica* (2018). Next, the director expanded his portfolio with more formally challenging initiatives, offering an innovative take on themes of violence and abuse, manipulation, bigotry and prejudice, in performances such as *U ime gospoda – Jedna brutalno politički nekorektna predstava* [In the Name of the Lord – One Brutally Politically Incorrect Stage Action, 2018] and *Vitezovi lake male* [The Wanton Lady's Knights, 2021].

In his “unpolished” and striking stage productions, Urbán advocates non-linearity. His storylines are full of digressions, direct and belligerent addresses to the audience, suggestive melorecitation and songs (musical scores play a prominent

⁹ It is important to add that Urbán has been organising an international modern theatre festival – Desiré Central Station – for years. His social involvement is noticeable not only on the level of strictly artistic endeavours. The director tries to have an impact on the functioning of existing structures which form the basis of the life of his compatriots and friends; thus, since 2021 he has been an active, decision-making member of the National Council for Culture (Nacionalni savet za kulturu).

¹⁰ Attention should be paid to the dramaturgic confrontations with the literary canon realised by Urbán's fruitful collaboration with the playwright Vedrana Božinović, the effects of which are unusual adaptations of literary classics.

¹¹ In this spirit, he successfully realised projects primarily in the progressive Theatre Dezső Kosztolányi in Subotica, which he ran from 2006 to 2023, and in The Novi Sad Theatre (Újvidéki Színház), where he became manager in 2023. He has also applied this method successfully in different contexts, in both domestic and international institutions.

¹² This phrase is used by a Serbian theatrologist Vlatko Ilić in his book *Savremeno pozorište: Estetsko iskustvo i prestupničke prakse* (Novi Sad 2018) in relation to shows and performances which transgress customary divisions (both social and artistic).

role here¹³), a useful device in the postdramatic performances he worked on in Serbia¹⁴ and neighbouring countries.¹⁵ Collective authorship and the process are celebrated here, while textual content is usually solidified during rehearsals and improvisations, as was the case for Urbán's 2017 project, based on a famous polemical¹⁶ essay collection by Danilo Kiš, *Čas anatomije* [The Anatomy Lesson, 1978]. Here, Urbán settles scores first with himself and then with the society in which he lives. After the premiere, the director faced a wave of disapproval from theatre-going morality guardians, engendering a paradoxical response in one of his interviews, where he claimed that in his opinion, "modern society has replaced the desire for freedom with the desire for safety, and the truth we have fetishised is not, in itself, an exceptional value anymore. It has been replaced only with such 'truth' as we are willing to accept and which provides us with safety or comfort" (Urbán 2022).

Kiš's book, as well as the mood around it, provided both the impulse and a model of poetics for the emerging performance (which was basically a wide-ranging experiment). Apart from Kiš's writings and his interview responses, there were other inspirational factors: Sándor Petőfi's and Damir Avdić's poetry fragments, and performative pamphlets (where gentle lyrical passages contrast with punk aggressiveness). An inspirational decision was to reference significant performances by two prominent directors: firstly, the enfant terrible Oliver Frlić, and an especially important fragment of his project *Kukavičluk*¹⁷ [Cowardice] in which the names of victims killed in the Srebrenica genocide are remembered; secondly, *The Ristić Complex*,¹⁸

¹³ The director often collaborates with the composer Irena Popović Dragović.

¹⁴ Special attention should be paid to the following performances: *Čas anatomije* [The Anatomy Lesson] (Srpsko narodno pozorište, 2017), *M.I.R.A.* (Bitef teatar, 2019), *Ibi The Great* [Ubu The Great] (Narodno pozorište, Sombor 2022), *Tit Andronik* [Titus Andronicus] (Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište, 2022).

¹⁵ Collaborations with regional groups have resulted in the following projects: *Životinjska farma* [The Animal Farm] (Hrvatsko narodno kazalište Ivana pl. Zajca, Rijeka 2015), *What is Europe? Ratni obred* [What is Europe? War Ritual] (Scene MESS and ART HUB Platform, Sarajevo 2016), *Bordel Balkan* [Balkan Brothel] (Teatri Kombëtar and Kosovës, Prishtina 2017), *Kapital* [Capital] (Kraljevsko pozorište „Zetski dom” Cetinje, 2018), *Don Quijote* [Don Quixote] (Gradsko pozorište Podgorica and Barski ljetopis, 2019), *History of Motherfuckers* (Народниот театар од Битола, 2021).

¹⁶ It needs to be underlined that the book *Čas anatomije* was written as an answer to the universal attacks on the short story collection *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča*. Kiš refuted the unfounded accusations of plagiarism. Moreover, he criticised the limitations of the realist technique in Serbian literature, and the artists' incompetence and provincialism. For more information on this topic, see Nowak-Bajcar 2010.

¹⁷ *Kukavičluk*, dir. O. Frlić, Народно позориште у Суботици/Narodno kazalište u Subotici/Szabodkai Népszínház, Subotica 2010.

¹⁸ Ljubiša Ristić (1947-) is an important avant-garde artist who has influenced the younger generation of directors. One notable outcome is Frlić's attitude to Ristić's conception, which finds expression in the performance *Kompleks Ristić* [The Ristić Complex] (Slovensko mladinsko gledališče Ljubljana, HNK Ivana pl. Zajca Rijeka, Bitef Beograd, MOT Skopje, 2015) and in Jasna Novakov Sibinović's monograph, *Političko pozorište Olivera Frlića: od empatije do simpatije*, Sterijino pozorje, Novi Sad 2020.

*Ljubiša Ristić*¹⁹ and a plot from *Misa u A-molu*²⁰ [Mass in a-minor], based on Kiš's famous 1976 book *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča. Sedam poglavlja jedne zajedničke povesti* [A Tomb for Boris Davidovich. Seven Chapters of a Common History] Here, Urbán manages to neatly capture both the text and the entire context, that is the moral and literary profile of society (Obradović 2018). The performance explicitly conveys the director's commentary, which accentuates ethical problems and argues for the necessity of deconstructing favoured artists' poetics to combat the underlying dominant ideology.

Despite the collage-like quality of the performance and his ensemble's notable contribution to the performance, Kiš's original message is preserved. The targets of his criticism is a subject of interest to contemporary artists: vanity, ethics, censorship, self-censorship and violence. Urbán decided to open up the question of the relationship between the creator-freethinker and the socio-political milieu that restrains her/him. During this curious autopsy of several ideas and values he and the actors reveal an associative chain of historical events. One of the scenes presents a large format reproduction of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* with Danilo Kiš on the table being insulted, beaten and humiliated by the "scholars." The performance's structure is interwoven with data on the 1942 antisemitic pogrom in Novi Sad (known as the Novi Sad raid), with ironic references to Yugo-nostalgia. Such dissident and allegedly ill-chosen displays irritated the audience who, according to the director, limited themselves to a rather shallow reception of the work.

Another performance directed by Urbán in Pristina in collaboration with playwright Jeton Neziraj received widespread attention within theatrical circles. *Bordel Ballkan* [Balkan Brothel, 2017] outraged the Kosovar patriots. It was created from *REST IN PEACE. The Saga of a Balkan Family*²¹ (2015) by Neziraj, who was at that time accused of a pseudo-artistic attack on Kosovo's fiercely-won independence. Exaggerated caricatures of the protagonists from Aeschylus's *Oresteia* suffer war losses and are not aware that their fates are marred by destruction. Overwriting the well-known myth, Neziraj draws a suggestive parallel between two continua: ancient Greece and the sharply criticised Kosovar post-1999 reality. The play about (post)war trauma exposing everyday life's absurdities provided the director from Serbia (which in Kosovo is a complicated matter) with an extremely intriguing and essential, although provocative, starting point. *Bordel Ballkan* was worked on under a cloud of scandal which climaxed on the day of the premiere.

¹⁹ In 1977 Ristić and Nada Kokotović – a director and choreographer – initiated in Zagreb a unique art centre KPGT. Its acronym consists of the first letters of the word "theatre" in each language of the post-Yugoslav states: Kazalište – Croatian, Pozorište – Serbian/Montenegrin, Gledališče – Slovenian, Teatar – Macedonian/Bosnian and Teatër – Albanian). Up until 1995, it had been connected with Subotica theatre life and shaped it in many ways.

²⁰ *Misa u A-molu*, dir. Lj. Ristić, Народно позориште у Суботици/Narodno kazalište u Subotici/Szabadkai Népszínház, Subotica 1991 (during Danilo Kiš YU FEST '91).

²¹ The original *o.REST.es IN PEACE* was staged in 2015 in Montenegrin National Theatre in Podgorica / Crnogorsko narodno pozorište(dir. S. Bodroža).

The Kosovo Liberation Army's veterans' protest was an ever-present danger,²² since they demanded that the performance, questioning the legitimacy of their actions during the armed struggle and ridiculing the freedom fighters' heroism, be removed from the National Theatre's programme. The author himself received death threats, while any performance was supposed to be boycotted and even prevented from being staged. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports reacted, the Kosovar Theatre Artists' Association showed support and eventually, thanks to police intervention, the audience was able to see the performance (presented with English subtitles) and no major incidents occurred.

Nevertheless, such direct pressure on the group's members was not merely an attack on freedom of speech, thought and creativity, but also had a negative impact on the artists' sense of integrity;²³ however, it did not weaken Urbán's resolve. Performances carrying his name still resonate artistically and socially, during which the audience is immersed in a process of releasing peculiar, uninhibited energy which must be utilised somehow once the act of communicating through theatre is over. The boundary between the audience and the stage is blurred and all the participants of such a theatrical event, deprived of a safe distance, are faced with feelings, thoughts and fears which are supposed to push them to action. Theatre ensembles are mobilised towards such focused and conscious intellectual and emotional work by Zlatko Paković, too. His projects likewise attack the community's complexes, myths and instances of collective unconsciousness, and challenge previously established means of shaping social relations.

Zlatko Paković's theatre of qualms and confrontations

The second subject of this study, Zlatko Paković (born in 1968 in Belgrad), is also known for his frequently confrontational acts. This erudite and brilliant playwright²⁴ and director has authored post-dramatic performative lectures grounded in philosophical theses and revisionist oratorical performances. Theatre for Paković is a place of revolt – a space in which, as a result of engaging the audience into action, he can reconstruct public opinion.

Theatrical imagination in this context becomes a type of search for truth, normally hidden. Paković realises this on both a symbolic and surface level. He does not hide the source of his inspiration and artistic orientation; rather, he extracts plots from selected works and augments their meanings. Recognised authors and thinkers such as Miroslav Krleža, Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht, Radomir Konstantinović, Baruch Spinoza, Henry David Thoreau, and Pope Francis feature prominently in his work. His projects, viewed as a series, function as a kind of

²² UÇK (Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës) – an Albanian armed partisan and terrorist organisation active in Kosovo.

²³ Interestingly, Neziraj's play has also been staged internationally: *Balkan Bordello* (dir. B. Neziraj, Atelje 212, La MaMa Theatre, Qendra Multimedia, My Balkans, Prishtina/New York 2021).

²⁴ Paković's plays were issued in a 2021 collection *Jeretička liturgija: deset dramskih komada* [Heretical liturgy: ten dramatic pieces].

archive of the difficult experiences of the past decades. His endeavours are not limited to documenting facts, since Paković delves deep into any given issue, uncovering its hidden layers. Indeed, he has been ostracised for such journeys into the heart of atrocity. Moreover, this radical artist is always monitoring our era's two calamities: nationalism and capitalism.

Paković, a graduate of theatre-directing and philosophy, tirelessly develops his conception of a theatre of qualms (Govedić 2019), which on the one hand calls the audience to civil disobedience and on the other, to taking responsibility for the common good. Successive use of this method leads to him being perceived by eminent people from privileged elites as a problematic and rebellious creator who wanders post-Yugoslav countries with an arsenal of blasphemous truths, endangering what is most sacred. As a result, it sometimes appears as though more theatricality occurs around Paković's projects than in the theatre itself. His directing credo is simple; in his own words it is about "performing in front of the audience, presenting a piece of reality deformed by falsities, for which the very same audience is partially responsible; he expresses the content in a brusque form that enables him to achieve the effect of a maximum sense of responsibility, that is catharsis" (Paković 2023). The artist follows a principle that unmasking a judgment which does not cause discomfort is useless and will only maintain the status quo. Paković obsessively confronts public opinion focused on opposing political positions with the most inconvenient facts and testimonies, while not accepting any alternative, which for him means humiliating the cosiness typical of bourgeois theatre, and the triumph of immorality and superficial post-truth (Ivančić 2021).

Thanks to having joined The Center for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD)²⁵ in the 1990s, Paković's artistic manoeuvring is wide-ranging. The openness declared by the Belgrade-based Centre allowed him to collaborate with Jeton Neziraj (mentioned above), on a bilingual performance of *Enciklopedija živih/Enciklopedija e të gjallëve*²⁶ [The Encyclopedia of the Living, 2015]. Once again, Paković proved himself the author of a postdramatic compendium for those who believe that "to tell the truth is to be alive" (Paković 2016, 39). The project examines in minute detail the 100-year history of the complex Serbian-Albanian relationship, highlighting the 1990s war and its transformative effect. Jeton Neziraj co-authored the text and presented Paković's ideas in his own humorous style. The performative lecture is interwoven with "national mantras popularised by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts"²⁷ (Paković 2016, 39), quotations

²⁵ Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju, CZKD, is an interdisciplinary and transcultural institution uniting artists who fight against the governing regime. It was founded in 1994.

²⁶ *Enciklopedija živih. Umetnička intervencija u srbijanskoj i kosovskoj stvarnosti/ Enciklopedija e të gjallëve. Ndërhyrje artistike në realitetin serbo-kosovar*, text: Z. Paković, J. Neziraj, dir. Z. Paković, CZKD and Qendra Multimedia, Belgrad 2015. The title alludes to Danilo Kiš's book *Enciklopedija mrtvih* [The Encyclopedia of the Dead].

²⁷ Paković has been critical of the functioning of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, SANU, founded in 1886 as the Belgrade-based Serbian Royal Academy of Sciences), and judged it especially severely in the 1980s. In his work and in interviews, the artist underlines how harmful SANU's cultural policy was, which galvanised the awakening of nationalist impulses and aggressive demands for constructing the state; see: Z. Paković, *Srpsko*

from scholarly works denigrating the Albanian nation, and useful fragments of biographies of local politicians and media celebrities. The historical-revisionist lecture is intersected by surrealist and shocking scenes, such as a tango-striptease by an Albanian and a Serb, a Kosovar hymn sung in Serbian, a Serbian hymn sung in Albanian, and preparations for the ritual killing of a lamb. Paković is not only the initiator and producer, but also the master of ceremonies who performs on the stage.

The members of the artistic group led by Paković usually bond in a specific way. The actor's role is not limited to fulfilling the director's orders and realising his ideas; it is also to engage in the creative work and impact the development of the process of public condemnation and stigmatization of the evildoers.²⁸ Paković's art confronts the past but most importantly faces the impossible, difficult, suspended future, which – according to him – will appear on the horizon only if it is activated via appropriate means, different from those which led the citizens to inertia and an historical impasse. The most characteristic of such ventures is the performance of *Srebrenica. Kad mi ubijeni ustanemo*²⁹ [Srebrenica. When We, the Killed, Rise Up] – a “theatrical lawsuit” arranged for those SANU members who were responsible for the conceptual preparation of the 1990s wars. In the play, they are known as “the academics of the atrocity.” Such a move was supposed to encourage the Serbs to exit the vicious circle of denial, but instead it caused ostracism, accusations and real danger – Paković has received death threats and though their intensity has lessened with time, his freedom of artistic articulation is still jeopardised. What is most disturbing, according to the author, is the ongoing silence of cultural institutions and theatre artists (although this is now changing, as explained below).

Delegating or delaminating any responsibility from political, economic and cultural elites to the general public is, in Paković's opinion, the greatest difficulty of our times. In these circumstances, attempting to arrive at the truth as a fundamental means of artistic expression makes one prone to hatred, and Paković generates more or less continuously any number of scandalous situations. Sometimes this may even appear farcical, as in the case of his latest endeavour, *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča, kako je danas zidamo* [A Tomb for Boris Davidovich as We Build It Today]. The basis for this performance is a short story collection by Da-

pozorište i njegovo nasilje (II), “Danas,” 29 September 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/kolumna/zlatko-pakovic/srpsko-pozoriste-i-njegovo-nasilje-ii/> (access: 12.07.2023). SANU *Memorandum* (1986) is controversial even now; indeed several SANU members identify “problems endangering not only the Serbian nation, but the stability of entire Yugoslavia” within its pages. The document caused a scandal and was responded to by other SANU members with an *Antimemorandum*. See: Simić, *Memorandum SANU, crna tačka srpske istorije*, “Radio Slobodna Evropa,” 1 October 2016, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mirko-simic-sanu/28024025.html> (access: 12.07.2023).

²⁸ The author names those guilty of violating civil rights and crimes, and tries them for their crimes in such stage productions as *Bojte se Allaha: Smisao života i smrti Čamila Sijarića* [Fear Allah. The Meaning of Life and Death of Čamil Sijarić, 2017] and *Vox Dei – Gradanska neposlušnost* [Vox Dei – Civil Disobedience].

²⁹ The performance was prepared in collaboration with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Serbia. More information on this project can be found in Abrasowicz (2021).

nilo Kiš, which the director calls an ode to human protest and courage to oppose the state and ideological terror. While preparing the show, Paković was able to enjoy a greater freedom in reinterpreting this work, so he decided to accentuate the problems faced by the contemporary reader. His vision was first presented to the public in February 2023 at the Bosnian National Theatre in Zenica, where it was mostly well received. However, members of the Intellectuals' Club of Zenica³⁰ reacted negatively; they deemed the performance disgraceful and blasphemous. Their religious feelings were wounded even by the poster showing a woman wearing the full niqāb (which was interpreted as a psychological mechanism of projection and was supposedly associated with imposed constraint). According to the Zenica intellectuals, Paković only appeared in their city because all the state theatre doors in Serbia were closed to him and – as a representative of his nation – he aims to continue the aggression towards Bosniaks and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was said to be disparaging state institutions and the public prosecutor's office, disgracing women wearing traditional outfits and the martyrs' wives, and all that under the pretence of artistic freedom and the right to free speech. Members of the Club claimed that the play clearly propagates the chauvinist Bosnian Islamic narrative. The PEN Center of Bosnia and Herzegovina, of which Paković is a member, did not express an opinion on this matter, and the representatives of the International Theatre Festival, MESS, also remained silent. The management of the Bosnian National Theatre in Zenica issued a statement condemning the abuse directed at Paković, but other theatres offered no such support. However, fellow writers and theatre artists such as Selvedin Avdić, Benjamin Bajramović, and Viktor Ivančić also came to his defence.

Paković fights for theatre as the last stand for ideas and opinions that are repressed and eliminated from the public sphere. Interdisciplinary theatre acts organised by him are characterised by their simplicity and minimalism, but they also ask the audience to intensify their consciousness and emotions. Such involvement in the creative process engenders personal reactions which are not shaped in advance and do not spring from any prior modes of behaviour.

Conclusions. Involvement is responsibility and the fight for a new form

Theatre offers the ability to situate all elements which a performance comprises of within the same time and space, and with the presence of the Other in a common (intercorporeal) experience. It allows the perceiver to have a real impact on the object of perception (and vice versa), inherent in every idea of responsibility (Antal 2011, 51). Comparing the two directors' achievements reveals convergences between their theatrical visions. In their practices, which can be considered in parallel, a reflexive mode is successfully conjoined with creation and invention. Such variants of reactive art encompass a wide spectrum of complex visions of responsibility – on the level of both form and content. Historical and contemporary events, often of ground-breaking nature, which the directors reference, con-

³⁰ Klub zeničkih intelektualaca „Sudija Gradiša.”

stitute a depository of forms and means of expression that have a great energetic and critical potential. In Urbán and Paković's projects, the attacks on taboo and hypocrisy located in different spheres of life are executed through the same theatrical convention. These directors claim that a classical approach, reproducing schemes of perception, thinking and acting, deprive the audience, i.e., participants in the theatrical process, of any responsibility, because then words and images remain in suspension.

Starting from the assumption that theatre has always been an elitist artistic form, omitting those whose interests it should represent (Frlić 2013), both directors attempt to invent a new form of expression, whilst strengthening the platform for dialogue and partnership with the audience. Such aesthetics are visible in post-Yugoslav theatre not through any virtuous declarations or engaging only in politically correct viewpoints, but through organising a space which allows for the verbalisation of real problems. This is because in theatre, the importance of political momentum relies on finding a balance between an awakening figurativeness and a paralysing generality. In their aim to create live theatre which can overturn social reality, Urbán and Paković base their performances on the dialectics of game and participation, the past and present. Such an approach aids in deconstructing dominating stereotypical discourses which preserve conservativeness and derivativeness, whilst also being relevant for exposing the reality of a transcultural melting-pot. In the projects analysed above, read as examples of generational narratives, some consistencies can be observed, together with repetition of motifs, and the obsessive reappearance of certain narratives and components of history. By fragmentising reality and compiling selected segments (mostly critical points), the artists open further interpretative possibilities for past events, whilst re-contextualising the past and updating its significance. In their case, historical knowledge is treated in an anticipatory way; it is less about the resentments of the past, and more about a retroactive reconciliation, responding towards a communal denial; thus it enhances an understanding of the mechanisms coding the past which impacts the perception of the present reality, and outlines the future.

Starting from the assumption that moral responsibility is a competence which plays an extremely important role in the human constitution, any retrospective responsibility relates to the past events, but we must also face up to prospective responsibility – for what might happen in the future (Gajewski 2009). Urbán and Paković note that in the process of artistic montage, material can be arranged to create any message, but it is the authors who take responsibility for presenting the essence of it and its consequences, as well as who exactly should work in the interest of what is called objective truth. The director and the group's task is to construct a mirror for social reality, whilst also revealing what had previously been hidden from the audience. At the same time, traversing registers and moments of irreducible excess make it clear that the audience co-creates this event, which means that roles are assigned to all – to everyone present. In this way the audience is also burdened with a responsibility for the message being presented.

The theatre of Andrés Urbán and Zlatko Paković is not created in a void, but within a network of dynamic relations in the present social reality. It abolishes

any mediation of the process of sign transmission and reception, and develops an aesthetics of understanding and experiencing responsibility. Such theatre irritates, disturbs and revives and can be compared to the act of discovering a new, unknown land which had been searched for with impatience, and in the hope that, to paraphrase Brecht, in the future people will say: the times were dark, but they won't ask why their poets were silent.³¹

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³¹ This is a reference to Bertold Brecht's poem "In dark times": "But they will not say: the times were dark / But rather: why were their poets silent?". Trans. Tom Kuhn & David Constantine.

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