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## **Strategies of Challenging Official Mythologies in War Trauma Theatre Plays**

### *MIREES' Open lecture*

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On June 10, 2016, Darko Lukić, professor at the Academy of Drama Arts at the University of Zagreb, a playwright and novelist, delivered a lecture on the importance of theatre to promote reconciliation and contribute to collective memory after war. In a post conflict situation, as the one that former Yugoslav countries still face, there are two important fields of analysis: first of all, how those who were enemies are today dealing with each other, but also how each of the sides previously involved in the war is facing the trauma. The former is usually part of the diplomatic approach and bound with time, and for this reason is probably more analysed than the latter. As visible in history, many cultures are not able to deal with their experiences and loss during a conflict. But, as highlighted by Lukić, without this, it is impossible to be free from the conflict mentality. In Yugoslavia, this effort was made first of all by artists and culture, demonstrating how civil courage is often superior to diplomacy and policy, and how it is possible to deal with what is called war trauma through cultural experiences.

Before discussing the Yugoslav artistic world during the 90s, Lukić gave us a clear overview of how the concept of war trauma changed meaning in history. In ancient Greek literature, it is possible to find a similar idea in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, but these canonical works have not been analysed as reflections on war trauma. The first official recognition of strange behaviours among soldiers and civilians that could not be expressed using the existing medical knowledge occurred during the Civil war in America. Unable to explain the behaviours in term of post traumatic syndrome, the doctors of the time decided to call them "strange behaviours". During the First World War, the similarities of patients' syndromes were evident, and British doctors connected them to the use of chemical weapons by the enemies. When the German doctors accused the British army of using the same kind of weapons because their patients were demonstrating similar symptoms, everyone started to connect these syndromes with the shocking experiences occurred during the conflict. Finally, the devastating experience of Vietnam war demonstrated

definitely the existence of the so-called war trauma. Only later this trauma was also recognized among patients suffering other deeply stressful experiences as well as abuses.

When the conflict started in Yugoslavia, it of course produced the same kind of trauma, not only among soldiers but also in civilians. War trauma hits all people involved with conflicts, on different levels. At the same time, different countries had different ways to deal with it. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, had the opportunity to deal with the problem – from a medical point of view - very soon, thanks also to the International Community that provided specialists and medical help. On the other hand, from the artistic point of view, the involvement was not as intense as in some neighbouring countries. In contrast, in Serbia the problem was completely neglected from the political and medical aspect. However, the war trauma was approached as a topic by the artistic community: artists such as Milena Marković started very soon to deal with the traumatic experiences. In Croatia the situation was completely different: initially the war trauma was ignored but when its magnitude became really evident, the problem could not be neglected anymore and it was defined as nervous breakdown. When the PTSD entered the public discourse in Croatia, it was too late: the trauma was too deep, and it already has started to be transmitted to the second generation. Also in this case, art became fundamental: Croatian artists started already during the war to produce performances on war trauma.

The production of this kind of plays during the war time was very complicated. During the conflict all the artistic experiences are considered unimportant, and the space is given only to propaganda. For this reason, the plays dealing with war trauma were performed in alternative spaces and received little support. Government did not approve this kind of plays, so institutional theatres were not interested at all in their production. Also the audience was reduced: people were continuously dealing with war issues and theatre was seen as a space of freedom from war, not as another way to experience it. As a consequence, also journalists and the media were not interested in the performances and the playwrights started to experience a real *inner exile* that in many cases ended only after the war.

For these reasons the plays on war trauma were few. Professor Lukić in his research counted only 17 plays about this topic, while there were other plays that mentioned war in sporadic way. To better understand this difference, it is important to analyze what is a play about war trauma and why it is different from other plays about war. First of all, the plays on war trauma describe individual stories and approaches on historical documents. The performances regard personal traumatic

experiences that have nothing to do with common knowledge about war and mainstream meanings. In this sense the importance of these works on the construction of a real, common and non idealistic memory is fundamental. In principle memory is constructed by the winners, often forgetting the individual trauma and suffering, and instead highlighting the role of heroes and selected mythological events. This knowledge is challenged by artists. The war trauma plays are outside ideology; they do not express political attitudes and are not celebrating pride, braveness or victories. The trauma is represented in different ways, for example with the depersonalisation of characters that are named just as their functions (soldier, mother etc.). War destroys identities and dehumanizes people, and this should be represented also on stage.

In conclusion, professor Lukić affirmed that nowadays the countries of former Yugoslavia have entered the stage of post-war literature and theatre, and so the topic of art works is changing. The themes are still connected with the war trauma, but not directly, as they mostly deal with issues such as transition, social issues, drug abuses, and asocial behaviours. The role that the playwrights had during and after the war is fundamental, and should be recognized as such also by institutions in order to promote a theatre on war trauma. The contribution of the war trauma plays to literature, theatre and art should remind us that historiography, diplomacy and politics can also gain depth by paying attention to these productions.

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