

Making Bolero: Dramaturgies of Conflict

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Drip. Drip. Drip. 14 February 1984. Valentine's Day. I fall over outside a Fish and Chip shop in Nottingham. I get a black eye. My dad carries me home on his shoulders across the Golf Course. My mum gives me some ice cubes wrapped in an old tea towel to hold against my face and switches on the Black and White television set. I hear the music before I see the image fizzing into life. Torvill and Dean are dancing to Bolero at the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. When I hear the music now I remember the fall, the smell of fish and chips and the feeling of watching the world from my father's shoulders. I remember the tears rolling down my cheeks and the cold of the ice against my face as I watched two people from our home town dancing on ice somewhere very far away. I remember the pain. I remember the cold. I remember the ice melting. Drip. Drip. Drip.¹

This provocation reflects on *Bolero*, a multi-lingual, devised performance I directed in 2014 exploring war, conflict and music made both in the UK and the Balkans. I explore working in these contexts and weaving together dramaturgies of conflict and *about* conflict. I discuss the political conflict inherent in the way the multiple narratives of the piece are interwoven to address the way the Bosnian war was overlooked in the West at the time. I highlight strategies we employed and draw on Dragan Klaić's chapter 'Theater in Crisis? Theater of Crisis!' (2002), where he writes about the catalyzing role theatre plays in times of conflict and as resistance during war.² I ask what license we have to tell other peoples' stories. And what agency devised work gives people to narrativise personal experience.

Bolero was devised with an international cast, and toured to Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo after its premiere at Nottingham Playhouse in May 2014. It was performed in Sarajevo on the centenary of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. The performance features the assassination and follows the ricochet of the gunshot that triggered the First World War through 100 years of history, to the 1984 Winter Olympics to the Bosnian War to the present day. I sought to shine a light on the tragedy that consumed Sarajevo in the 1990s and I invited Bosnian actors, who lived through the war, to share their experiences. The cast included a German actor, two British actors, three

Bosnian actors and 20 local community performers who represented the company in the original ballet of *Bolero* in 1928, commissioned for L'Opera Garnier by Ida Rubinstein.

The style of the work was post-dramatic and devising theatre was a new experience for the Bosnian actors who usually work with directors on play texts. They prefer not to rehearse too much and devising felt like rehearsal to them. The Western model I employed was to generate as much material as possible and then share it as work-in-progress to gain audience feedback. As such, there was sometimes a *conflict of styles* as well as *narratives of conflict* implicit in the devising process. The role of the director in this context was to seek ways in which our theatre-making might find a shared dramaturgical language that cut across culture and theatre tradition. As Goat Island said 'The work is the dialogue'.³ We were always working to the music of *Bolero* and trying to stick to the tempo. For example, every day we would start by warming up to the music.

The original version of Ravel's *Bolero* takes 17 minutes to perform depending on the conductor's tempo. On 4 May 1930, Toscanini performed *Bolero* with the New York Philharmonic in Paris as part a European tour. Toscanini's tempo was significantly faster than Ravel preferred, and Ravel signaled his disapproval by refusing to respond to Toscanini's gesture during the audience ovation. An exchange took place between the two men backstage after the concert. According to one account Ravel said "It's too fast", to which Toscanini responded "You don't know anything about your own music. It's the only way to save the work". According to another report Ravel said, "That's not my tempo". Toscanini replied "When I play it at your tempo, it is not effective", to which Ravel retorted "Then do not play it". The dynamics in the score read 'Moderato' and Ravel always reminded conductors to 'stick to the tempo'. The only recording that does that is one he conducted himself. It lasts exactly 17 minutes and sounds like a train. It was inspired by the rhythm of machinery, factories and First World War gunfire. You can hear this in the beat of the side drum. Rat a tat tat. Rat a tat tat etc.

Robert Donia in *Sarajevo – A biography* (2006) writes about when Sarajevo was besieged in 1992 that ‘... the attacks were unmistakably directed against the city’s chief institutions of collective memory, leading some observers to characterize these attacks as “memoricide” ... shattering civic pride by wiping out records and physical manifestations of the city’s diverse history’.⁴ One of the first targets was the city hall, the place Archduke Franz Ferdinand visited before he was assassinated. A symbol of both the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires that overlapped in the city, it was the largest library in Eastern Europe housing five million books. The first few days of the war were waged in a fog as the dust of these burning books rained down on the city. To commemorate the centenary of the assassination in 2014, the City Hall was rebuilt and hosted a concert featuring the music Ravel wrote inspired by war.

5 February 1994. A bomb explodes in the main market square in Sarajevo killing 68 and wounding 144 people. It is the worst single atrocity in the conflict. The 120mm shell lands on a stall in the packed open-air market just before noon. The attack comes on the day leaders were meeting in the city to discuss its future exactly ten years after the Winter Olympics opening ceremony. It takes place during a ceasefire. There is now a memorial that marks the spot where the shell fell. When British journalists filed their stories about the bombing, it was relegated to second on the news after a royal divorce. It frustrated me that more people in Nottingham know Sarajevo for the Winter Olympics in 1984 than what happened next to the city and the Bosnian war that tore it apart. This conflict took place in a cultural and personal blindspot. *Bolero* is both a eulogy for lost lives and an apology for not knowing enough about them. We worked with the artist, Haris Pasovic, as a dramaturg on the project who was involved in a number of projects at the time of the Bosnian War. His input ensured we were more aware of historical and contemporaneous acts of remembrance that took place in Sarajevo.

In Dragan Klaić’s *Theatre of Resistance*, he writes about making a piece of work - *Sarajevo, Tales From a City* - casting the city as both a martyr and a hero. He describes that, ‘Instead of rehearsing with an international cast and performing to the audiences across Europe in a production about the war... he had an urge to create theatre in Sarajevo, with his colleagues and students,

for Sarajevans, as a form of spiritual resistance and moral encouragement'.⁵ This theatre, he realised, was not reaching 'to the very core of the pain and horror of the war' but 'developing a discourse around the catastrophe'.⁶ That discourse continued 20 years later, as the British Council's *Commemoration and Conflict* programme marked the centenary of the assassination and reflected on the role culture played during the siege of Sarajevo. It was in this artistic and political context that we show *Bolero*.

February 2012. Research trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is snowing when I visit the Sarajevo War Theatre for the first time. Up a steep hill not far from the ice stadium. A young man clears the snow from the theatre's doorway. I ask him if this is the theatre and he says 'This is the Sarajevo War Theatre so we are used to worse than this'. In England, when it snows the show is cancelled. In Sarajevo, the show must go on. He tells me that during the war, there was a show there every night of the 1425 day siege. There were gasps of pleasure in the audience when someone lit a cigarette onstage. There were three casts for *Waiting for Godot* in case one of the actors was killed during the run. If a shell fell they would wait for the dust to settle, the lights to come back on and carry on with the show.

Dragan Klaic writes about making his performance, 'It went further than just squeezing empathy from the audience; it reinforced the sense of responsibility and metaphorized the urban texture, and lifestyle and values being destroyed in Sarajevo. It did not attempt to compete with the gruesome television images that had by then become commonplace, but individualized the peril, reinforced and transmitted the anguish'.⁷ I was metaphorizing the music of *Bolero* to tell the story of how a piece of music, inspired by the First World War, could soundtrack both Olympic success and the sound of a city under constant fire. According to Jasenko, one of the actors who lived through the siege, there was never silence. The mountains around the city amplified every explosion so the city's destruction became its own heartbeat.

6 April 2012. Twenty years after the siege began. They close the main street in Sarajevo. More than 100 trucks filled with red plastic chairs enter the city. It takes six hours to set up 825 rows over nearly one kilometre. 11,541 red chairs.

One for every citizen killed under the Siege. 643 small chairs for all the children who died. On some of them during the event, passers-by leave red roses, teddy bears, ice skates, plastic cars, candy or toys. At 2pm a concert begins. Called *A concert for nobody*. An orchestra starts to play to the 11,541 empty chairs. On this bright, sunny day it starts to rain. One of the performers in Bolero told this story as part of the show. He helped to put out the chairs. They call it The Red Line. It was conceived by the artist, Haris Pasovic. They don't have enough red chairs in Sarajevo so they borrow them from Serbia.⁸

Dragan Klaic concludes that, 'Theatre needs time to distance itself from the event in the reality it wants to address. After the war, with some breathing space recovered, some time-distance built in, theatre would have more of a chance to dramatize wartime experience'.⁹ For *Bolero*, I told a story that used Ravel's music as a bridge to weave my childhood memory of falling over outside a fish and chip shop in Nottingham to Torvill and Dean, to Paris, to Sarajevo. The piece invoked a narrative of ruins, juxtaposing the destruction of Sarajevo with the premature decay of Ravel's neurological condition that led to his early death. The piece had a dramaturgy driven by the music and a century of creativity and conflict. I spoke to the actors from Sarajevo War Theatre about why they made so much theatre about the war and they said 'How can we not?'. Then they asked, 'What do you have to make theatre about?' I remember what Matthew Goulish wrote, 'Some words, speak of events. Other words, events make us speak'.¹⁰ These are the words events made me speak. Where shells fell across Sarajevo, holes in the ground have been filled with red wax to make them look like flower petals. The streets there bleed flowers. They call them Sarajevo Roses. *Bolero* ends with red roses onstage like flowers on a grave, like flowers at the end of an ice dance routine.

The ice stadium where Torvill and Dean won gold in 1984 was bombed during the Bosnian War. It was used as an army base. Used as a morgue. The seats were turned into coffins. The dead were buried there. Then moved to the nearby hills. Now children skate over where children died. As you leave Sarajevo by air you look down at the city from above and you see where thousands of bodies were buried during the war. You think about that gunshot fired in 1914 and how it is still being heard today. When I visit the ice

stadium in 2012 it is being used for skating but faded Olympic logos are riddled with bullet holes. The roof is leaking so there are buckets left out to catch the rain falling onto the ice. Drip. Drip. Drip.

¹ Michael Pinchbeck, *Bolero*, dir. by Michael Pinchbeck (first performance Nottingham: Nottingham Playhouse, 31 May 2014).

² Dragan Klaic *The crisis of theater? The theater of crisis!* in *Performance manifestations for a new century* ed Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

³ Michael Pinchbeck, 'The worship of detail, the detail of worship', *Dance Theatre Journal*, 22.3, 5-10.

⁴ Robert J. Donia *Sarajevo- A Biography* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006) p. 315.

⁵ Dragan Klaic *The crisis of theater? The theater of crisis!* in *Performance manifestations for a new century* ed Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) p. 150.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 150.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 150.

⁸ 'In pictures: Bosnia's war remembered', *BBC News* [online] (6 April 2012) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17640204> [Accessed 27 September 2016]

⁹ Dragan Klaic *The crisis of theater? The theater of crisis!* in *Performance manifestations for a new century* ed Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) p. 150.

¹⁰ Matthew Goulish, *39 Microlectures in Proximity of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 152.