

Klanica pet – Slaughterhouse Five

A coproduction of SET (Studio for Electronic Theatre), Academica,
Amsterdam Cyber Theatre, PVC, National Theatre Uzice
Uzice 2007, Belgrade, 2008, Serbia.

Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegovic, Tatjana Lujic, Vladimir Bojovic, Ranka Delic,
Boris Butorac, Matthias Oostrik, Paul Verity Smith, Janos Bus, Vahidin Prelic,
Andrijana Lubina, Mirjana Radovic, Jovana Rakic, Imer Mushkolaj, Danilo
Stojic, Marko Tesovic, Ramiz Vejsilovic Pauk, Milojko Knezevic, Milena
Radomirovic Comi, Aleksandar Djeric

TOTAL THEATRE IN AN EMPTY SPACE

By Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegovic

On 22nd April 1999, during the notorious war between NATO and Serbia, the Serbian city of Užice suffered the loss of its main post office. The building designed to connect people and help them communicate from afar disappeared in almost an instant. No other building in the neighbourhood was knocked down, nobody was hurt or died, nothing else changed – only the post miraculously vanished, as in a fairy tale. Instead of the post office, the citizens of Užice beheld the appearance of an empty space.

In his legendary book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook claims that for theatre to take place it is enough to have ‘a man [who] walks across [the] empty space whilst someone else is watching him’. In our second quest to reveal the great theatrical potential of the public spaces of the town of Užice, we decided to explore its most famous empty space where layers of meanings, riddles, and prophecies waited to be discovered and examined in

order to serve the well-being of the community of the future. Sadly, the empty space of Užice's post office is not the only empty space created in recent wars in the former Yugoslavia. Many other buildings disappeared, and many homes perished, leaving only the memories of the times when these empty spaces were anything but empty.

With *Slaughterhouse Five* we wished to pay tribute to all these empty spaces and raise awareness of their existence, not only in the sense of physical emptiness in the wounded cities and villages in the Balkans but more importantly about the emptiness in the souls of their former residents. We wanted to build, stone by stone, a theatrical monument, a reminiscence of human struggle against its own irrationality.

Dramaturgy

The novel *Slaughterhouse Five* is a small but multilayered and enormously complex book, with many characters, stories, and sub-stories. In our adaptation, many characters and events had to disappear, and sometimes a few of them merged into a single entity, but the general storyline remained more or less the same. One of the main goals in the process of dramatisation was to keep the plot clear and comprehensible. We wanted to defamiliarise all other elements of the performance and for that we needed to have a firm storyline. Otherwise we feared that the narrative might seem unintelligible and too abstract, causing the whole performance to fall apart.

In Vonnegut's novel, the central character, Billy Pilgrim, is a young American soldier who, as a prisoner of war in Germany, experienced the fire bombing of Dresden in February 1945. After he was captured and brought to a Dresden prison camp, Billy was enormously impressed by the look of the city that was considered to be a European architectural jewel. During a single night of fire bombing, Dresden was destroyed completely and transformed into an empty space. The psychological impact of this event on Billy was so strong that he got unstuck in time. He claimed that he was abducted by aliens and taken to the faraway planet Tralfamadore, where he was displayed in a zoo and examined by the extraterrestrials. On Tralfamadore, he learned about the *real* nature of time. After having this experience he started to unwillingly visit different periods of his life.

Besides its extraordinary plot, the novel also contains many self-reflective passages. Vonnegut's metafictional remarks about the art of literature sound uncannily familiar to the current debates in digital performing arts criticism and theory. The part where the writer speaks about the nature of novel on Tralfamadore served as an inspiration for our self-ironic comments about the modern interactive multimedia theatre.

There are no books on Tralfamadore. There is, though, something we call 'hyperelectric static dynamic theatre'. It is at once a book, cinema, theatre, and electrovision; and the actors are we – the audience. We, Tralfs, watch this theatre that happens in one moment. There isn't any particular relationship between the events shown, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life

that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no plot, no moral, no story, no action. What we love in our theatre are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.

(*Slaughterhouse Five* - performance 2007)

Shall we ever be able to 'produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep' and abandon the good old dramaturgy once and for all? Can such an instant dramaturgy ever be 'beautiful' and 'deep' outside the fictional context of a theatre performance on Tralfamadore? In the case of *Slaughterhouse Five* we consciously chose a more conventional and terrestrial one.

Scenography

I envisioned the scenography for *Slaughterhouse Five* as a labyrinth with high walls which would create not only a scenography for the performance, but would also arise as a huge sculpture on the place where the post office once stood. Before entering the stage, the audience was supposed to walk through this labyrinth and trigger different sound effects. Unfortunately, just a couple of days before the premiere, the weather conditions changed and the organisers decided to look for an alternative location. In spite of our great wish to present our project on the location, the risk was too high. Sudden and very intensive storms pushed our project from the outside location onto the main stage of the National Theatre. The whole

scenographic concept had to be rearranged for the new situation. We used all the elements of the original construction and adapted them to the requirements of the new location.

Performers

In my concept of (total) theatre, the performers are the core element and lend a distinct style to every performance. Therefore they should be trained both as verbal actors and physical performers or dancers, in order to maximise the use of their voice, body, movement, and facial expression. In digital performance, these elements are further emphasised and amplified by the use of technology. When it comes to the training methods for the performers, my personal preference is a combination of oriental physical theatre techniques and verbal exercises applied to the physical position and condition of the body. In this way relatively easily the necessary abstraction of expression can be achieved, which goes beyond the naturalistic or psychologically motivated methods of acting. Instead of having engaged only a verbal or only a physical aspect of the performer, using this technique allows the whole being of the performer to be expressive.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, I worked with both dancers and actors. The main challenge was to create the necessary balance and persuade actors to dance and dancers to act. The Butoh acting, with its dark nature and expressiveness, was the most appropriate reference point in our quest for the

unique language of this performance. We used unfamiliar body postures to intensify the horrific content of the outwardly normal and realistic dialogues between the tragically dehumanised protagonists of the war drama.

Technology

For this production we had plenty of digital equipment at our disposal. Yet, for the sake of the performance as a whole we did not want to be overwhelmed by the digital effects. We wanted to use them only when we had a very good dramaturgical reason. At the opening of the performance while the audience was entering the theatre they triggered the pre-recorded sounds of a walk over wreckage. The sound of broken glass and debris indicated that the audience was entering the ruins. The same sound reappeared after the fire bombing when Billy Pilgrim walked through the destroyed streets of Dresden. This effect, from the very beginning of the performance, was not designed to make the audience directly aware that they were 'really' walking over the ruins but rather to create an unconscious feeling of this. It was certainly not designed to be obvious that it was the audience themselves who were triggering the sounds interactively. The last thing we wanted was to inspire them to playfully engage in an interactive sound-game. On the contrary, we wanted a hidden interaction – something is provoked that is not immediately apparent. I hoped that this would work on an unconscious level but my belief is also that these invisible acts work as powerful generators of undertones which can determine the atmosphere of the play.

The other example is also very much connected to the hidden content of the play. When Billy Pilgrim is abducted and placed in the Tralfamadore's zoo, the extraterrestrial visitors of the zoo are called to ask him questions. In Vonnegut's novel, the Tralfadorians are mostly invisible creatures, and only their eyes sometimes can be seen. That idea appeared very straightforward, the easiest solution for staging our scene in the zoo. However, we decided to make a scene where the actual audience in the theatre would appear as the audience on Tralfamadore. We turned the camera towards the audience, captured a distorted image of the people watching our play and projected it onto the screen in the zoo on stage. We had a very good reason to do this. Very often during the play it is not sure whether the things are really happening in the way they seem to be happening or whether they occur only in Billy's confused mind. There are too many déjà vus and different characters from different times and spaces saying exactly the same lines of text. To make it even more confusing, single characters speak with the voices of three different people. Billy enters the boxcar of a German train and finds himself in a flying saucer. There exists constant and serious uncertainty about the credibility of Billy's universe. Yet, there is no alternative, no other rational possibility that would offer a way out. Billy is hopelessly caught in his world as is the audience that travels together with him. The moment they recognise themselves as distorted images of the audience on Tralfamadore's zoo, this whole confusing game is even more enhanced. What do they see on the stage – Tralfadorians or themselves?

My intention in this project was to test in a real situation all my abstract ideas about total theatre and the role that digital technology can have in this concept. My goal was to make a performance with elements of verbal theatre, documentary theatre, visual theatre, dance, physical theatre, novel, interactive sound installation and interactive multimedia theatre, where all these elements are combined to create a coherent theatre event. No single media mode was allowed to have a more important role than the other. Everything had to serve the idea of a balanced theatrical narrative where the audience is not especially aware of all of the different media but experiences the whole complex structure as a unified theatrical event. In *Slaughterhouse Five* we achieved, to a certain level, the particular style that we were hoping for. We worked hard to balance all the different media elements to create something which can be considered a unique style of performance. We used old documentary film footage about events described in the book, and combined them with the science fiction effects on the yet undiscovered planet. We mixed the dance parts with the verbal theatre and interactively created soundscapes with the composed music. If we succeeded throughout the whole piece in keeping all these different elements as part of a coherent whole then the digital technology definitely had a vital role in achieving this.

Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegovic

Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegovic is a theatre director, multimedia artist, set designer, and lecturer. He holds a postgraduate degree in Theatre and Dance Studies from DasArts, Amsterdam, and a PhD in Digital Theatre from Brunel

University, London, where he currently teaches Digital Performance. He is an artistic leader of the Studio for Electronic Theatre (SET), a collaborative artistic initiative aiming to promote the use of digital technology in theatre in South-Eastern Europe. He directed twenty-one stage productions, designed and made scenographies, created digital video/sound installations in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, England, Serbia, and Macedonia. He founded and led Amsterdam Cyber Theatre (ACT), an interdisciplinary group of artists and scientists dedicated to research, production, and education in the field of digitalised performing and visual arts. He taught theatre making practice at workshops and seminars in England, the Netherlands, and Serbia. Some examples of his theatre and video works can be seen on: [youtube.com/natonuno](https://www.youtube.com/natonuno)