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Godot Comes to Sarajevo

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“Nothing to be done.”

“Nista ne moze da se uradi.”

—opening line of *Waiting for Godot*

1.

I went to Sarajevo in mid-July to stage a production of *Waiting for Godot* not so much because I'd always wanted to direct Beckett's play (although I had), as because it gave me a practical reason to return to Sarajevo and stay for a month or more. I had spent two weeks there in April, and had come to care intensely about the battered city and what it stands for; some of its citizens had become friends. But I couldn't again be just a witness: that is, meet and visit, tremble with fear, feel brave, feel depressed, have heart-breaking conversations, grow ever more indignant, lose weight. If I went back, it would be to pitch in and do something.

No longer can a writer consider that the imperative task is to bring the news to the outside world. The news is out. Plenty of excellent foreign journalists (most of them in favor of intervention, as am I) have been reporting the lies and the slaughter since the beginning of the siege, while the decision of the western European powers and the United States not to intervene remains firm, thereby giving the victory to Serb fascism. I was not under the illusion that going to Sarajevo to direct a play would make me useful in the way I could be if I were a doctor or a water systems engineer. It would be a small contribution. But it was the only one of the three things I do—write, make films, and direct in the theater—which yields something that would exist only in Sarajevo, that would be made and consumed there.

Among the people I'd met in April was a young Sarajevo-born theater director, Haris Pasovic, who had left the city after he finished school and made his considerable reputation working mainly in Serbia. When the Serbs started the war in April 1992, Pasovic went abroad, but in the fall, while working on a spectacle called *Sarajevo* in Antwerp, he decided that he could no longer remain in safe exile, and at the end of the year managed to crawl back past UN patrols and under Serb gunfire into the freezing, besieged city. Pasovic invited me to see his *Grad* (“City”)—a collage, with music, of

declamations, partly drawn from texts by Constantine Cavafy, Zbigniew Herbert, and Sylvia Plath, using a dozen actors—which he had put together in eight days. Now he was preparing a far more ambitious production, Euripides' *Alcestis*, after which one of his students (Pasovic teaches at the still-functioning Academy of Drama) would be directing Sophocles' *Ajax*. Realizing suddenly that I was talking to a producer as well as to a director, I asked Pasovic if he would be interested in my coming back in a few months to direct a play.

“Of course,” he said.

Before I could add, “Then let me think for a while about what I might want to do,” he went on, “What play will you do?” And bravado, following the impulsiveness of my proposal, suggested to me in an instant what I might not have seen had I taken longer to reflect: there was one obvious play for me to direct. Beckett's play, written over forty years ago, seems written for, and about, Sarajevo.

Having often been asked since my return from Sarajevo if I worked with professional actors, I've come to understand that many people find it surprising that theater goes on at all in the besieged city. In fact, of the five theaters in Sarajevo before the war, two are still, sporadically, in use: Chamber Theater 55 (Kamerni Teater 55), where in April I'd seen a charmless production of *Hair* as well as Pasovic's *Grad*; and the Youth Theater (Pozoriste Mladih), where I decided to stage *Godot*. These are both small houses. The large house, closed since the beginning of the war, is the National Theater, which presented opera and the Sarajevo Ballet as well as plays. In front of the handsome ochre building (only lightly damaged by shelling), there is still a poster from early April 1992 announcing a new production of *Rigoletto*, which never opened. Most of the singers and musicians and ballet dancers left the city to seek work abroad soon after the Serbs attacked, but many of the most talented actors stayed, and want nothing more than to work.

Images of today's shattered city must make it hard to grasp that Sarajevo was once an extremely lively and attractive provincial capital, with a cultural life comparable to that of other middle-sized old European cities, including an audience for theater. Theater in Sarajevo, as elsewhere in Central Europe, was largely repertory: masterpieces from the past and the most admired twentieth-century plays. Just as good actors still live in Sarajevo, so do members of this cultivated audience. The difference is that actors and spectators alike can be murdered or maimed by a sniper's bullet or a mortar shell on their way to and from the theater; but then, that can happen to people in Sarajevo in their living rooms, while they sleep in their bedrooms, or fetch something from their kitchens, or go out their front doors.

But isn't this play rather pessimistic, I've been asked. Meaning, wasn't it depressing for an audience in Sarajevo; meaning, wasn't it pretentious or insensitive to stage *Godot* there?—as if the representation of despair were redundant when people really are in

despair; as if what people want to see in such a situation would be, say, *The Odd Couple*. But it's not true that what everyone in Sarajevo wants is entertainment that offers them an escape from their own reality. In Sarajevo, as anywhere else, there are more than a few people who feel strengthened and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art. This is not to say that people in Sarajevo don't miss being merely entertained. The dramaturge of the National Theater, who began sitting in on the rehearsals of *Godot* after the first week, and who had studied at Columbia University, asked me before I left to bring some copies of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* when I return later this month, so she could be reminded of all the things that had gone out of her life. Certainly there are more Sarajevans who would rather see a Harrison Ford movie or attend a Guns n' Roses concert than watch *Waiting for Godot*. That was true before the war, too. It is, if anything, a little less true now.

And if one considers what plays were produced in Sarajevo before the siege began—as opposed to the movies shown, almost entirely the big Hollywood successes (the small cinémathèque was on the verge of closing just before the war, for lack of an audience, I was told)—there was nothing odd or gloomy for the Sarajevan audience in the choice of *Waiting for Godot*. The other productions currently in rehearsal or performance in Sarajevo are *Alceste* (about the inevitability of death and the meaning of sacrifice); *Ajax* (about a warrior's madness and suicide); and *In Agony*, the first play of the Croatian Miroslav Krleža, who is, with the Bosnian Ivo Andrić, one of the two internationally celebrated writers of the first half of the century from former Yugoslavia (the play's title speaks for itself). Compared with these, *Waiting for Godot* may have been the “lightest” entertainment of all.

Indeed, the question is not why there is any cultural activity in Sarajevo now after seventeen months of siege, but why there isn't more. Outside a boarded-up movie theater next to the Chamber Theater is a sun-bleached poster for *The Silence of the Lambs* with a diagonal strip across it that says DANAS (today), which was April 6, 1992, the day movie-going stopped. Since the war began, all of the movie theaters in Sarajevo have stayed shut, even if not all have been severely damaged by shelling. A building in which people gather so predictably would be too tempting a target for the Serb guns; anyway, there is no electricity to run a projector. There are no concerts, except for those given by a lone string quartet that rehearses every morning and performs very occasionally in a small room seating forty people, which also doubles as an art gallery. (It's in the same building on Marshal Tito Street that houses the Chamber Theater.) There is only one active space for painting and photography—the Obala Gallery, whose exhibits sometimes stay up only one day and never more than a week.

No one I talked to in Sarajevo disputes the sparseness of cultural life in this city where, after all, between 300,000 and 400,000 inhabitants still live. The majority of the city's intellectuals and creative people, including most of the faculty of the University of Sarajevo, fled at the beginning of the war, before the city was completely encircled. Besides, many Sarajevans are reluctant to leave their apartments except when it is

absolutely necessary, to collect water and their UNHCR rations; though no one is safe anywhere, they have more to fear when they are in the street. And beyond fear, there is depression—most Sarajevans are very depressed—which produces lethargy, exhaustion, apathy.

Moreover, Belgrade was the cultural capital of former Yugoslavia, and I have the impression that in Sarajevo the visual arts were derivative; that ballet, opera, and musical life were routine. Only film and theater were distinguished, so it is not surprising that these continue in Sarajevo under siege. A film production company, SAGA, makes both documentary and fiction films, and there are the two functioning theaters.

In fact, the audience for theater expects to see a play like *Waiting for Godot*. What my production of *Godot* signifies to them, apart from the fact that an eccentric American writer and part-time director volunteered to work in the theater as an expression of solidarity with the city (a fact inflated by the local press and radio as evidence that the rest of the world “does care”—when I knew, to my indignation and shame, that I represented nobody but myself), is that this is a great European play and that they are members of European culture. For all their attachment to American popular culture, which is as intense here as anywhere else, it is the high culture of Europe that represents for them their ideal, their passport to a European identity. People had told me again and again on my earlier visit in April: We’re part of Europe. We’re the people in former Yugoslavia who stand for European values: secularism, religious tolerance, and multi-ethnicity. How can the rest of Europe let this happen to us? When I replied that Europe is and always has been as much a place of barbarism as a place of civilization, they didn’t want to hear. Now, a few months later, no one would dispute such a statement.

People in Sarajevo know themselves to be terminally weak: waiting, hoping, not wanting to hope, knowing that they aren’t going to be saved. They are humiliated by their disappointment, by their fear, and by the indignities of daily life—for instance, by having to spend a good part of each day seeing to it that their toilets flush, so that their bathrooms don’t become cesspools. That is how they use most of the water they queue for in public spaces, at great risk to their lives. This sense of humiliation may be even greater than their fear.

Putting on a play means so much to the local theater professionals in Sarajevo because it allows them to be normal, that is, to do what they did before the war; to be not just haulers of water or passive recipients of “humanitarian aid.” Indeed, the lucky people in Sarajevo are those who can carry on with their professional work. It is not a question of money, since Sarajevo has only a black-market economy whose currency is German marks; and many are living on their savings, which were always in deutsche marks, or on remittances from abroad. (To get an idea of the city’s economy, consider that a skilled professional—say, a surgeon at the city’s main hospital or a television journalist—earns three deutsche marks a month; while cigarettes—a local version of Marlboros

—cost ten deutsche marks a pack.) The actors and I, of course, were not on salary. Other theater people would sit in on rehearsals not only because they wanted to watch our work, but because they were glad to have, once again, a theater to go to every day.

Far from it being frivolous to put on a play—this play or any other—it is a serious expression of normality. “Isn’t putting on a play like fiddling while Rome burns?” a journalist asked one of the actors. “Just asking a provocative question,” the journalist explained to me when I reproached her, worried that the actor might have been offended. He was not. He didn’t know what she was talking about.

2.

I started auditioning actors the day after I arrived, one role already cast in my head. I remembered, at a meeting with theater people in April, a stout older woman wearing a large broad-brimmed black hat, who sat silently, imperiously, in a corner of the room. A few days later when I saw her in Pasovic’s Grad, I learned that she was the senior actor of the pre-siege Sarajevo theater, and, when I decided to direct *Godot*, I immediately thought of her as Pozzo. Pasovic concluded that I would cast only women (he told me that an all-woman *Godot* had been done in Belgrade some years ago). But that wasn’t my intention. I wanted the casting to be gender-blind, confident that this is one of the few plays where it makes sense, since the characters are representative, even allegorical figures. If *Everyman* (like the pronoun “he”) really does stand for everybody—as women are always being told—then *Everyman* doesn’t have to be played by a man. I was not making the statement that a woman can also be a tyrant—which Pasovic then decided I meant by casting Ines Fancovic in the role—but rather that a woman can play the role of a tyrant. In contrast, Admir (“Atko”) Glamocak, the actor I cast as Lucky, a gaunt, lithe man of thirty whom I’d admired as Death in *Alcestis*, fit perfectly the traditional conception of Pozzo’s slave.

Three other roles were left: Vladimir and Estragon, the pair of forlorn tramps, and *Godot*’s messenger, a small boy. It was troubling that there were more good actors available than parts, since I knew how much it meant to the actors I auditioned to be in the play. Three seemed particularly gifted: Velibor Topic, who also plays Death in *Alcestis*; Izudin (“Izo”) Bajrovic, who is *Alcestis*’s Hercules; and Nada Djurevska, who has the lead in the *Krleza* play.

Then it occurred to me I could have three pairs of Vladimir and Estragon and put them all on the stage at once. Velibor and Izo seemed to me likely to make the most powerful, fluent couple; there was no reason not to use what Beckett envisaged, two men, at the center; but they would be flanked on the left side of the stage by two women and on the right by a woman and a man—three variations on the theme of the couple.

Since no child actors were available and I dreaded using a nonprofessional, I decided to make the messenger an adult: the boyish-looking Mirza Halilovic, a talented actor who happened to speak the best English of anyone in the cast. Of the other eight actors, three

knew no English at all. It was a great help to have Mirza as my interpreter, so I could communicate with everyone at the same time.

By the second day of rehearsal, I had begun to divide up and apportion the text, like a musical score, among the three pairs of Vladimir and Estragon. I had once before worked in a foreign language, when I directed Pirandello's *As You Desire Me* at the Teatro Stabile in Turin. But I knew some Italian, while my Serbo-Croatian (or "the mother tongue," as people in Sarajevo call it, the words "Serbo-Croatian" being hard to utter now) was limited when I arrived to "Please," "Hello," "Thank you," and "Not now." I had brought with me an English-Serbo-Croatian dictionary, paperback copies of the play in English, and an enlarged photocopy of the text into which I copied in pencil the "Bosnian" translation, line by line, as soon as I received it. I also copied the English text line by line into the Bosnian script. In about ten days I managed to learn by heart the words of Beckett's play in the language in which my actors were speaking it.

The population of Sarajevo is so mixed, and there are so many intermarriages, that it would be hard to assemble any kind of group in which all three "ethnic" groups are not represented—and I never inquired what anyone was. It was by chance that I eventually learned that Velibor Topic (Estragon I) had a Muslim mother and a Serb father, though his name does not reveal that; while Ines Fancovic (Pozzo) had to be Croatian, since Ines is a Croat name, and she was born and grew up in the coastal town of Split and came to Sarajevo thirty years ago. Both parents of Milijana Zirojevic (Estragon II) are Serb, while Irena Mulamuhic (Estragon III) must have had at least a Muslim father. I never learned the ethnic origins of all the actors. They knew them and took them for granted because they are colleagues—they've acted in many plays together—and friends.

The propaganda of the aggressors holds that this war is caused by ageold hatreds; that it is a civil war or a war of secession, with Milosevic trying to save the union; that in crushing the Bosnians, whom Serb propaganda often refers to as the Turks, the Serbs are saving Europe from Muslim fundamentalism. Perhaps I should not have been surprised to be asked if I saw many women in Sarajevo who are veiled, or who wear the chador; one can't underestimate the extent to which the prevailing stereotypes about Muslims have shaped "Western" reactions to the Serb aggression in Bosnia.

In fact, the proportion of religiously observant people in Sarajevo is about the same as it is among the native-born in London or Paris or Berlin or Venice. In the prewar city, it was no odder for a "Muslim" to marry a Serb or a Croat than for someone from New York to marry someone from Massachusetts or California. Sixty percent of the marriages in Sarajevo in the year before the Serb attack took place between people from different religious backgrounds—a strong index of secularism. The Sarajevans of Muslim origin come from families that converted to Islam when Bosnia became a province of the Ottoman Empire, and they look the same as their southern Slav

neighbors, spouses, and compatriots, since they are, in fact, descendants of Christian southern Slavs.

What Muslim faith existed throughout this century was already a diluted version of the moderate, Sunni faith brought by the Turks, with nothing of what could be called fundamentalism. When I asked friends who in their families are or were religiously observant, they invariably said: my grandparents. If they were under thirty-five, they usually said: my great-grandparents. Of the nine actors in *Godot* the only one with religious leanings was Nada, who is the disciple of an Indian guru; as her farewell present she gave me a copy of the Penguin edition of *The Teachings of Shiva*.

3.

Pozzo: “There is no denying
it is still day.”

(They all look up at the sky.)

“Good.”

(They stop looking at the sky.)

We rehearsed in the dark. The bare proscenium stage was lit usually by only three or four candles, supplemented by the four flashlights I’d brought with me. When I asked for additional candles, I was told there weren’t any; later I was told that they were being saved for our performances. In fact, I never learned who doled out the candles; they were simply in place on the floor when I arrived each morning at the theater, having walked through alleys and courtyards to reach the stage door, the only usable entrance, at the rear of the free-standing modern building. The theater’s façade, lobby, cloakroom, and bar had been wrecked by shelling more than a year ago and the debris still had not been cleared away.

Actors in Sarajevo, Pasovic had explained to me with comradely regret, expect to work only four hours a day. “We have many bad habits here left over from the bad old socialist days.” But that was not my experience; after a bumpy start—during the first week everyone seemed preoccupied by other performances and rehearsals or obligations at home—I could not have asked for actors more zealous, more eager. The main obstacle, apart from the siege lighting, was the fatigue of the malnourished actors, many of whom, before they arrived for rehearsal at ten, had for several hours been queuing for water and then lugging heavy plastic containers up eight or ten flights of stairs. Some of them had to walk two hours to get to the theater, and, of course, would have to follow the same dangerous route at the end of the day.

The only actor who seemed to have normal stamina was the oldest member of the cast, Ines Fancovic, who is sixty-eight. Still a stout woman, she has lost more than sixty pounds since the beginning of the siege, and this may have accounted for her

remarkable energy. The other actors were visibly underweight and tired easily. Lucky must stand motionless through most of his long scene but never sets down the heavy bag he carries. Atko, who plays him (and now weighs no more than one hundred pounds) asked me to excuse him if he occasionally rested his empty suitcase on the floor throughout the rehearsal period. Whenever I halted the run-through for a few minutes to change a movement or a line reading, all the actors, with the exception of Ines, would instantly lie down on the stage.

Another symptom of fatigue: the actors were slower to memorize their lines than any I have ever worked with. Ten days before the opening they still needed to consult their scripts, and were not word-perfect until the day before the dress rehearsal. This might have been less of a problem had it not been too dark for them to read the scripts they held in their hands. An actor crossing the stage while saying some lines, who then forgot them, was obliged to make a detour to the nearest candle and peer at his or her script. (A script was loose pages, since binders and paper clips are virtually unobtainable in Sarajevo. The play had been typed once in Pasovic's office on a little manual typewriter whose ribbon looked as if it had been in use since the beginning of the siege. I was given the original and the actors the nine carbon copies, the last five of which would have been hard to read in any light.)

Not only could they not read their scripts; unless standing face to face, they could barely see one another. Lacking the normal peripheral vision that anybody has in daylight or when there is electric light, they could not do something as simple as put on or take off their bowler hats at the same time. And they appeared to me for a long time, to my despair, mostly as silhouettes. At the moment early in Act I when Vladimir "smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly"—in my version, three Vladimirs—I couldn't see a single one of those false smiles from my stool some ten feet in front of them, my flashlight lying across my scripts. Gradually, my night vision improved.

Of course, it was not just fatigue that made the actors slower to learn their lines and their movements and to be, often, inattentive and forgetful. It was distraction, and fear. Each time we heard the noise of a shell exploding, there was not only relief that the theater had not been hit. The actors had to be wondering where it was landing. Only the youngest in my cast, Velibor, and the oldest, Ines, lived alone. The others left wives and husbands, parents and children at home when they came to the theater each day, and several of them lived very close to the front lines, near Grbavica, a part of the city taken by the Serbs last year, or in Alipasino Polje, which is near the Serb-held airport.

On July 30, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Nada, who was often late during the first two weeks of rehearsal, arrived with the news that at eleven that morning Zlajko Sparavolo, a well-known older actor who specialized in Shakespearean roles, had been killed, along with two neighbors, when a shell landed outside his front door. The actors left the stage and went silently to an adjacent room. I followed them and the first to

speak told me that this news was particularly upsetting to everyone because, up till then, no actor had been killed. (I had heard earlier about two actors who had each lost a leg to the shelling; and I knew Nermin Tulic, the actor who last year had lost both legs at the hip and now was the administrative director of the Youth Theater.) When I asked the actors if they felt up to continuing the rehearsal, all but one, Izo, said yes. But after working for another hour, some of the actors found they couldn't continue. That was the only day that rehearsals stopped early.

The set I had designed—as minimally furnished, I thought, as Beckett himself could have desired—had two levels. Pozzo and Lucky entered, acted on, and exited from a rickety platform eight feet deep and four feet high, running the whole length of upstage, with the tree toward the left; the front of the platform was covered with the translucent polyurethane sheeting that the UNHCR brought in last winter to seal the shattered windows of Sarajevo. The three couples stayed mostly on the stage floor, though sometimes one or more of the Vladimirs and Estragons went to the upper stage. It took several weeks of rehearsal to arrive at three distinct identities for them. The central Vladimir and Estragon (Izo and Velibor) were the classic buddy pair. After several false starts, the two women (Nada and Milijana) turned into another kind of couple in which affection and dependence are mixed with exasperation and resentment: mother in her early forties and grown daughter. And Sejo and Irena, who were also the oldest couple, played a quarrelsome, cranky husband and wife, modeled on homeless people I'd seen in downtown Manhattan. But when Lucky and Pozzo were on stage the Vladimirs and Estragons could join together, becoming something of a Greek Chorus as well as an audience to the show put on by the master and slave.

Tripling the parts of Vladimir and Estragon, and expanding the play with stage business, as well as silences, was making it a good deal longer than it usually is. I soon realized that Act I would run at least ninety minutes. Act II would be shorter, for my idea was to use only Izo and Velibor as Vladimir and Estragon. But even with a stripped-down and speeded-up Act II, the play would be two and a half hours long. And I could not envisage asking people to watch the play from the Youth Theater's auditorium, whose nine small chandeliers could come crashing down if the building suffered a direct hit from a shell, or even if an adjacent building were hit. Further, there was no way five hundred people in the auditorium could see what was taking place on a deep proscenium stage lit only by a few candles. But as many as a hundred people could be seated close to the actors, at the front of the stage, on a tier of six rows of seats made from wood planks. They would be hot, since it was high summer, and they would be squeezed together; I knew that many more people would be lining up outside the stage door for each performance than could be seated (tickets are free). How could I ask the audience, which would have no lobby, bathroom, or water, to sit so uncomfortably, without moving, for two and a half hours?

I concluded that I could not do all of *Waiting for Godot*. But the very choices I had made about the staging which made Act I as long as it was also meant that the staging

could represent the whole of *Waiting for Godot*, while using only the words of Act I. For this may be the only work in dramatic literature in which Act I is itself a complete play. The place and time of Act I are: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” (For Act II: “Next day. Same time. Same place.”) Although the time is “Evening,” both acts show a complete day, the day beginning with Vladimir and Estragon meeting again (though in every sense except the sexual one a couple, they separate each evening), and with Vladimir (the dominant one, the reasoner and information-gatherer, who is better at fending off despair) inquiring where Estragon has spent the night. They talk about waiting for Godot (whoever he may be), straining to pass the time. Pozzo and Lucky arrive, stay for a while and perform their “routines,” for which Vladimir and Estragon are the audience, then depart. After this there is a time of deflation and relief: they are waiting again. Then the messenger arrives to tell them that they have waited once more in vain.

Of course, there is a difference between Act I and the replay of Act I which is Act II. Not only has one more day gone by. Everything is worse. Lucky no longer can speak, Pozzo is now pathetic and blind, Vladimir has given in to despair. Perhaps I felt that the despair of Act I was enough for the Sarajevo audience, and that I wanted to spare them a second time when Godot does not arrive. Maybe I wanted to propose, subliminally, that Act II might be different. For, precisely as *Waiting for Godot* was so apt an illustration of the feelings of Sarajevans now—bereft, hungry, dejected, waiting for an arbitrary, alien power to save them or take them under its protection—it seemed apt, too, to be staging *Waiting for Godot*, Act I.

4.

“Alas, alas...”/”Ovai, ovai...”
—from Lucky’s monologue

People in Sarajevo live harrowing lives; this was a harrowing Godot. Ines was flamboyantly theatrical as Pozzo, and Atko was the most heart-rending Lucky I have ever seen. Atko, who had ballet training and was a movement teacher at the Academy, quickly mastered the postures and gestures of decrepitude, and responded inventively to my suggestions for Lucky’s dance of freedom. It took longer to work out Lucky’s monologue—which in every other production of *Godot* I’d seen (including the one Beckett himself directed in 1975 at the Schiller Theater in Berlin) was, to my taste, delivered too fast, as nonsense. I divided this speech into five parts, and we discussed it line by line, as an argument, as a series of images and sounds, as a lament, as a cry. I wanted Atko to deliver Beckett’s aria about divine apathy and indifference, about a heartless, petrifying world, as if it made perfect sense. Which it does, especially in Sarajevo.

It has always seemed to me that *Waiting for Godot* is a supremely realistic play, though it is generally acted in something like a minimalist, or vaudeville, style. The Godot that

the Sarajevo actors were by inclination, temperament, previous theater experience, and present (atrocious) circumstances most able to perform, and the one I chose as a director, was full of anguish, of immense sadness, and toward the end, violence. That the messenger is a strapping adult meant that when he announces the bad news Vladimir and Estragon could express not only disappointment but rage: manhandling him as they could never have done were the role played by a small child. (And there are six, not two, of them, and only one of him.) After he escapes, they subside into a long, terrible silence. It was a Chekhovian moment of absolute pathos, as at the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, when the ancient butler Firs wakes up to find that he's been left behind in the abandoned house.

During the production of *Godot* and this second stay in Sarajevo it felt as if I were going through the replay of a familiar cycle. Some of the severest shelling of the central city since the beginning of the siege took place during the first ten days I was there. On one day Sarajevo was hit by nearly 4,000 shells. Once more hopes were raised of American intervention, but Clinton was outwitted (if that is not too strong a term to describe so weak a resolve) by the pro-Serb UNPROFOR command, which claimed that intervention would endanger UN troops. The despair and disbelief of the Sarajevans steadily mounted. A mock cease-fire was called, which meant just a little shelling and sniping, but since more people ventured out in the street, almost as many were murdered and maimed each day.

The cast and I tried to avoid jokes about "waiting for Clinton" but that was very much what we were doing in late July, when the Serbs took, or seemed to take, Mt. Igman, just above the airport. The capture of Mt. Igman would allow them to fire shells horizontally into the central city, and hope rose again that there would be American airstrikes against the Serb gun positions, or at least a lifting of the arms embargo. Although people were afraid to hope, for fear of being disappointed, at the same time no one could believe that Clinton would again speak of intervention and again do nothing. I myself had succumbed to hope again when a journalist friend showed me a dim satellite fax transmission of Senator Biden's superb speech in favor of intervention, twelve single-spaced pages, which he had delivered on the floor of the Senate on July 29. The Holiday Inn, the only functioning hotel in Sarajevo, which is on the western side of the central city, four blocks from the nearest Serb snipers, was crowded with journalists waiting for the fall of Sarajevo or the intervention; one of the hotel staff said the place hadn't been this full since the 1984 Winter Olympics.

Sometimes I thought we were not waiting for *Godot*, or Clinton. We were waiting for our props. There seemed no way to find Lucky's suitcase and picnic basket, Pozzo's cigarette holder (to substitute for the pipe) and whip. As for the carrot that Estragon munches slowly, rapturously: until two days before we opened, we had to rehearse with three of the dry rolls I scavenged each morning from the Holiday Inn dining room (rolls were the breakfast offered) to feed the actors and assistants, and the all-too-rare

stagehand. We could not find any rope for Pozzo until a week after we started on the stage, and Ines got understandably cranky when, after three weeks of rehearsal, she still did not have the right length of rope, a proper whip, a cigarette holder, an atomizer. The bowler hats and the boots for the Estragons materialized only in the last days of rehearsal. And the costumes—whose designs I had suggested and the sketches of which I had approved in the first week—did not come until the day before we opened.

Some of this was owing to the scarcity of virtually everything in Sarajevo. Some of it, I had to conclude, was typically “southern” (or Balkan) mañana-ism. (“You’ll definitely have the cigarette holder tomorrow,” I was told every morning for three weeks.) But some of the shortages were the result of rivalry between theaters. There had to be props at the closed National Theater. Why were they not available to us? I discovered, shortly before the opening, that I was not just a visiting member of the Sarajevo “theater world,” but that there were several theater tribes in Sarajevo and that, being allied with Haris Pasovic’s, I could not count on the good will of the others. (It would work the other way around, too. On one occasion, when precious help was offered me by another producer, who on my last visit had become a friend, I was told by Pasovic, who was otherwise reasonable and helpful: “I don’t want you to take anything from that person.”)

Of course this would be normal behavior anywhere else. Why not in besieged Sarajevo? Theater in prewar Sarajevo must have had the same feuds, pettiness, and jealousy as in any other European city. I think my assistants, as well as Ognjenka Finci, the set and costume designer, and Pasovic himself were anxious to shield me from the knowledge that not everybody in Sarajevo was to be trusted. When I began to catch on that some of our difficulties reflected a degree of hostility or even sabotage, one of my assistants said to me sadly: “Now that you know us, you won’t want to come back any more.”

Sarajevo is not only a city that represents an ideal of pluralism; it was regarded by many of its citizens as an ideal place: though not important (because not big enough, not rich enough), it was still the best place to be, even if, being ambitious, you had to leave it to make a real career, as people from San Francisco eventually go to Los Angeles or New York. “You can’t imagine what it used to be like here,” Pasovic said to me. “It was paradise.” That kind of idealization produces a very acute disillusionment, so that now almost all the people I know in Sarajevo cannot stop lamenting the city’s moral deterioration: the increasing number of muggings and thefts, the gangsterism, the predatory black marketeers, the banditry of some army units, the absence of civic cooperation. One would think that they could forgive themselves, and their city. For seventeen months it has been a shooting gallery. There is virtually no municipal government; hence, debris from shelling doesn’t get picked up, schooling isn’t organized for small children, etc., etc. A city under siege must, sooner or later, become a city of rackets.

But most Sarajevans are pitiless in their condemnation of conditions now, and of many “elements,” as they would call them with pained vagueness, in the city. “Anything good

that happens here is a miracle,” one of my friends said to me. And another: “This is a city of bad people.” When an English photojournalist made us the invaluable gift of nine candles, three were immediately stolen. One day Mirza’s lunch—a chunk of homebaked bread and a pear—was taken from his knapsack while he was on the stage. It could not have been one of the other actors. But it could have been anyone else, say, one of the stagehands or any of the students from the Academy of Drama who wandered in and out of the rehearsals. The discovery of this theft was very depressing to the actors.

Yet although a lot of people want to leave, and will leave when they can, a surprising number say that their lives are not unbearable. “We can live this life forever,” said one of my friends from my April visit, Hrvoje Batinic, a local journalist. “I can live this life a hundred years,” a new friend, Zehra Kreho—the dramaturge of the National Theater—said to me one evening. Both are in their late thirties.

Sometimes I felt the same way. Of course it was different for me. “I haven’t taken a bath in sixteen months,” a middle-aged matron said to me. “Do you know how that feels?” And of course I don’t; I only know what it’s like not to take a bath for a month. I was elated, full of energy, because of the challenge of the work I was doing, because of the valor and enthusiasm of everyone I worked with—while I could not ever forget how hard it has been for each of them, and how hopeless the future looks for their city. What made my lesser hardships and the danger relatively easy to bear, apart from the fact that I can leave and they can’t, was that I was totally concentrated on them and on Beckett’s play .

5.

Until about a week before it opened, I did not think the play would be very good. I feared that the choreography and emotional design I had constructed for the two-level stage and the nine actors in five roles were too complicated for them to master in so short a time; or, simply, that I had not been as demanding as I should have been. Two of my assistants, as well as Pasovic, told me that I was being too amicable, too “maternal,” and that I should throw a tantrum now and then and, in particular, threaten to replace the actors who had not yet learned all their lines. But I went on, hoping that it would be not too bad; then, suddenly, in the last week, they turned a corner, it all came together, and at our dress rehearsal it seemed to me the production was; after all, affecting, continually interesting, well-made, and that this was an effort which did honor to Beckett’s play.

I was also surprised by the amount of attention from the international press that Godot was getting. I had told few people that I was going to Sarajevo to direct *Waiting for Godot*, intending perhaps to write something about it later. I forgot that I would be living in a journalists’ dormitory. The day after I arrived there were a dozen requests in the Holiday Inn lobby and in the dining room for interviews; and the next day; and the

next. I said there was nothing to tell, I was still auditioning; and after that, the actors were simply reading the play aloud at a table; and after that, I said, we've just begun on the stage, there's hardly any light, there's nothing to see.

But when after a week I mentioned the journalists' requests to Pasovic, and my desire to keep the actors free from such distractions, I learned that he had scheduled a press conference for me and that he wanted me to admit journalists to rehearsals, give interviews, and get the maximum amount of publicity not just for the play but for an enterprise of which I had not altogether taken in that I was a part: the Sarajevo International Festival of Theater and Film, directed by Haris Pasovic, whose second production, following his *Alcestis*, was my *Godot*. When I apologized to the actors for the interruptions to come, I found that they too wanted the journalists to be there. All the friends I consulted in the city told me that the story of the production would be "good for Sarajevo."

Television, print, and radio journalism are an important part of this war. When, in April, I heard the French intellectual André Glucksmann, on his twenty-four-hour trip to Sarajevo, explain to the people of Sarajevo who had come to his press conference, that "war is now a media event," and "wars are won or lost on TV," I thought to myself: try telling that to all the people here who have lost their arms and legs. But there is a sense in which Glucksmann's indecent statement was on the mark. It's not that war has completely changed its nature, and is only or principally a media event, but that the media's coverage is a principal object of attention, and the very fact of media attention, sometimes becomes the main story.

While I was in Sarajevo, for example, my best friend among the journalists at the Holiday Inn, the BBC's admirable Alan Little, visited one of the city's hospitals and was shown a semiconscious five-year-old girl with severe head injuries, whose mother had been killed by the same mortar shell. The doctor said she would die in a few days if she could not be airlifted out to a hospital where she could be given a brain scan and sophisticated treatment. Moved by the child's plight, Alan began to talk about her in his reports. For days nothing happened. Then other journalists picked up the story, and the case of "Little Irma" became the front-page story day after day in the British tabloids and virtually the only Bosnia story on the TV news. John Major, eager to be seen as doing something, sent a plane to take the girl to London.

Then came the backlash. Alan, unaware at first that the story had become so big, then delighted because it meant that the pressure would help to bring the child out, was dismayed by the attacks on a "media circus" that was exploiting a child's suffering. It was morally obscene, the critics said, to concentrate on one child when thousands of children and adults, including many amputees and paraplegics, languish in the understaffed, undersupplied hospitals of Sarajevo and are not allowed to be transported out, thanks to the UN (but that is another story). That it was a good thing to do—that to try to save the life of one child is better than doing nothing at all should have been

obvious, and in fact others were brought out as a result. But a story that needed to be told about the wretched hospitals of Sarajevo degenerated into a controversy over what the press did.

This is the first of the three European genocides of our century to be tracked by the world press, and documented nightly on TV. There were no reporters in 1915 sending daily stories to the world press from Armenia, and no foreign camera crews in Dachau and Auschwitz. Until the Bosnian genocide, one might have thought—this was indeed the conviction of many of the best reporters there, like Roy Guttman of Newsday and John Burns of The New York Times—that if the story could be gotten out, the world would do something. The coverage of the genocide in Bosnia has ended that illusion.

Newspaper and radio reporting and, above all, TV coverage have shown the war in Bosnia in extraordinary detail, but in the absence of a will to intervene by those few people in the world who make political and military decisions, the war becomes another remote disaster; the people suffering and being murdered there become disaster “victims.” Suffering is visibly present, and can be seen in close-up; and no doubt many people feel sympathy for the victims. What cannot be recorded is an absence—the absence of any political will to end the suffering: more exactly, the decision not to intervene in Bosnia, primarily Europe’s responsibility, which has its origins in the traditional pro-Serb slant of the Quai d’Orsay and the British Foreign Office. It is being implemented by the UN occupation of Sarajevo, which is largely a French operation.

I do not believe the standard argument made by critics of television that watching terrible events on the small screen distances them as much as it makes them real. It is the continuing coverage of the war in the absence of action to stop it that makes us mere spectators. Not television but our politicians have made history come to seem like re-runs. We get tired of watching the same show. If it seems unreal, it is because it’s both so appalling and apparently so unstoppable.

Even people in Sarajevo sometimes say it seems to them unreal. They are in a state of shock, which does not diminish, which takes the form of a rhetorical incredulity (“How could this happen? I still can’t believe this is happening.”). They are genuinely astonished by the Serb atrocities, and by the starkness and sheer unfamiliarity of the lives they are now obliged to lead. “We’re living in the Middle Ages,” someone said to me. “This is science fiction,” another friend said.

People ask me if Sarajevo ever seemed to me unreal while I was there. The truth is, since I’ve started going to Sarajevo—this winter I plan to return to direct *The Cherry Orchard* with Nada as Madame Ranevsky and Velibor as Lopakhin—it seems the most real place in the world.

Waiting for Godot opened, with twelve candles on the stage, on August 17. There were two performances that day, one at 2:00 PM and the other at 4:00 PM. In Sarajevo

there are only matinees; hardly anybody goes out after dark. Many people were turned away. For the first few performances I was tense with anxiety. But there was a moment, I think it was the third performance, when I began to relax. For the first time I was seeing the play as a spectator. It was time to stop worrying that Ines would let the rope linking her and Atko sag while she devoured her papier-mâché chicken; that Sejo, the third Vladimir, would forget to keep shifting from foot to foot just before he suddenly rushes off to pee. The play now belonged to the actors, and I knew it was in good hands. And I think it was at the end of that performance—on Wednesday, August 18 at 2:00 PM—during the long tragic silence of the Vladimirs and Estragons which follows the messenger’s announcement that Mr. Godot isn’t coming today, but will surely come tomorrow, that my eyes began to sting with tears. Velibor was crying too. No one in the audience made a sound. The only sounds were those coming from outside the theater: a UN APC thundering down the street and the crack of sniper fire.

—September 7, 1993