

5 “Nothing to be done.”  
“Nista ne moze da se uradi.”  
—opening line of *Waiting for Godot*

1.

10 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  
15 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.

20 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  
25 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.

30 ...“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.

35 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: ...

40 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, ...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  
45 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.

50 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 ...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

55 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  
60 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 ...there was nothing odd or  
65 gloomy for the Sarajevan audience in the choice of *Waiting for Godot*. The other  
productions currently in rehearsal or performance in Sarajevo are *Alcestis* (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  
70 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  
75 theater ...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, ...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.

80 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. ....And beyond fear, there is  
depression—most Sarajevans are very depressed—which produces lethargy, exhaustion,  
apathy. ...

85 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  
90 represented nobody but myself), is that this is a great European play and that they are  
members of European culture..

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  
95 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...

100 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. ...

105 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

110 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.

115 I started auditioning actors the day after I arrived, one role already cast in my head.  
(Pozzo - a middle-aged woman.)

120 Three other roles were left: ...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.) ...

125 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. ... 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. ... Of the nine actors in  
130 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.

135 Pozzo: "There is no denying  
it is still day."  
(They all look up at the sky.)

140 "Good."  
(They stop looking at the sky.)

We rehearsed in the dark.  
145 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; ... 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  
150 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,  
155 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  
160 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.

165 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  
170 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.))

175 Not only could they not read their scripts; unless standing face to face, they could  
barely see one another....

180 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....

The set I had designed—as minimally furnished, I thought, as Beckett himself could have  
185 desired—had two levels....

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. ...

190 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.

195 Of course, there is a difference between Act I and the replay of Act I which is Act II....  
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,  
200 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.

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

210 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....

Sometimes I thought we were not waiting for Godot, or Clinton. We were waiting for our  
props. .... 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  
215 which I had approved in the first week—did not come until the day before we opened.

Of course this would be normal behavior anywhere else. Why not in besieged Sarajevo?  
220 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  
225 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.”

5.

230 Until about a week before it opened, I did not think the play would be very good....

I was also surprised by the amount of attention from the international press that Godot  
was getting. ...

235 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  
240 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. ...

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  
245 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. ... 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  
250 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.

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