

## “The Day After”: Ex-Combatants Perform Live in Belgrade Theatre

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the organised civil society efforts to bring ex-combatants into the public sphere in Serbia, and investigates the potential for constructive use of ex-combatants’ war experiences in theatre. By staging the theatre performance *Tanatos*, the Group “Hajde da...” (the Group) from Belgrade aims to challenge negative views of this category of the Serbian population. So far, ex-combatants have been largely ignored, and as such, their capacities for contributing to transitional justice processes in the Serbian community have been neglected. Not only does the *Tanatos* bring four ex-combatants onto the stage to share their combat-related experiences with an audience, but it also gives the audience an opportunity to meet the ex-combatants after the performance in an open ‘question and answer’ session. As a qualitative case study, the paper draws from multiple sources: direct observation of the theatre performance in Belgrade in 2011, documentary research and fieldwork in Serbia undertaken during the summer of 2013, analysis of internal documents produced within the Group, and an interview with the dramaturge of the performance. The paper concludes that through *Tanatos*, the Group has opened public space for a dialogue about the recent past that acknowledges ex-combatants as an important factor in transitional justice processes in the region.

**Keywords:** ex-combatants, performance, theatre, alternative justice, civil society

Does your heart ache with the truth of the past? Do your joints creak at the pain of memories? Do your body cavities throb at the unsolved murders, the lost files, the buried remains in the bog? My very being shudders with it all. I know. You’ve said it before. I take on too much...you said, let it go...Move on...Yes, people do bad things to other people, but it’s in the past. I am trying

to let it go. I am trying to prise its steely fingers from around my neck, one by bitter one, left the nails out of the flesh, prise back the knuckles, loosen the wrist and unclamp the grip. So I can breathe my fullest again.<sup>1</sup>

*Setting the stage*<sup>2</sup>

The field of transitional justice has developed rapidly over the past twenty years, and while initially it was narrowly focused on justice and retribution, it has evolved to encompass the study of how human rights abuses are confronted by societies emerging from violent conflicts or transitioning from authoritarian rule to democratic forms of government.<sup>3</sup> The field today integrates the larger needs of post-conflict societies, including, but not limited to, reparations, memorializations, rebuilding of societal relationships and reintegration of former combatants.<sup>4</sup> There are various definitions of transitional justice, but the definition most commonly cited by scholars is the one given by the International Centre for Transitional Justice as ‘a response to systematic or widespread violations of human rights that seeks recognition for victims and to promote possibilities for peace, reconciliation and democracy.’<sup>5</sup> The term transitional justice does not refer to a particular form of justice but to activities and practices taken to address systematic abuses of human rights. These may come in various forms depending on the specific cultural and political context of the society in transition.

The goals of transitional justice vary along with the contexts of abuse or violence, but in general, they concern bringing an end to impunity by holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, while at the same time building and strengthening recently democratically constituted and peaceful states. The innovative elements of transitional justice are finding new and creative ways to address the past by taking a more comprehensive approach and implementing critical interventions. These new ways resulted out of general agreement among transitional justice scholars that prosecution of perpetrators alone is not sufficient, and should be complemented by various “extra-legal and non-executive domains”.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, in order to confront legacies of abuse, a variety of transitional justice mechanisms have been developed that fall within

<sup>1</sup> Duggan 2005: 22.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Marko Pejović for his valuable time and useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I would also like to thank Milan Colić for his continuing support and commitment to respond efficiently to all my questions with respect to projects with ex-combatants in the region.

<sup>3</sup> Crossley-Frolick 2011: 33.

<sup>4</sup> Tutu 2007: 6.

<sup>5</sup> ICTJ website, <http://ictj.org/our-work/transitional-justice-issues>.

<sup>6</sup> Bell 2011: 325.

two broad categories: judicial and non-judicial. The former focuses on prosecution of perpetrators, either at local, national or international level, while the latter encompasses activities such as truth and reconciliation commissions, amnesty, vetting, lustration processes, reparation, memorialisation, reconciliation, institutional reform, security sector reform and demobilization, disarmament and reintegration. The field of transitional justice is a result of interactions among lawyers, human rights activists and legal scholars, journalists, policymakers and others who are concerned with human rights and the dynamics of “transition to democracy”.<sup>7</sup> The term transition in this context refers to political regime change, from repressive governments to democracy, or from conflict to peace or stability.

Over the past twenty years, the Yugoslav successor states have experienced three simultaneous transitions: from war to peace, from single party rule to pluralist democracy, and from a communist planned economy to a liberal market economy. Serbia, one of the former Yugoslav republics, is a country affected by these processes. It suffers from “indirect” involvement in the wars and appalling socioeconomic and political conditions,<sup>8</sup> while its society still grapples with questions of justice, identity and memory. Lack of involvement of the Serbian government in transitional justice debates has prompted an eruption of civil society movements and actors that have initiated anti-nationalist and silence-breaking activities, including public speaking or commemorating and visiting genocide and massacre sites.<sup>9</sup> Many local civil society initiatives have attempted to change societal attitudes towards the past by developing and running campaigns and projects in relation to crimes committed by Serbs. These projects are aimed at raising awareness and acknowledgment of these crimes on behalf of the Serb population.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, many grassroots, arts-based projects have been developed in Serbia over the last decade. These practices often arise within societies that struggle with legacies of gross human rights violations and mass violence, and illustrate how the paradoxes and dilemmas that arise in the aftermath of violence enter into creative spaces of performance.<sup>11</sup> One of these innovative, informal or “unofficial projects”,<sup>12</sup> has been documentary theatre which serves to artistically express issues often repressed by the governments. These innovative

<sup>7</sup> Paige 2009: 324.

<sup>8</sup> Serbia has never admitted its participation in the wars in BiH and Croatia. Also, it has never been proven that it bears responsibility for the war crimes committed on the territory of these two countries, in particular, accountability for the genocide in BiH. See, International Court of Justice, *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro*, Judgement 26 February 2007. <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/91/13685.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Grujić 2013: 337.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: 329; Orentlicher 2009: 85.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen et al 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Lavinia Stan uses the term “unofficial projects” for those led by non-state actors. See Stan 2013: 205.

projects may also be called “justice alternatives“, or “outside of legal system” mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> In that sense, documentary theatre responds to crime in innovative ways by changing established forms of criminal justice; by doing justice “differently”.<sup>14</sup>

The arts, including the performative arts, can bring different approaches to questions of justice that are creative and more sensitive than judicial processes. As McAuliffe argues, a novel or play can give voice to the unacknowledged victim and to the vindications that a regime seeks to discredit.<sup>15</sup> They can “cut deeper” into the history of repression or violence, allowing more nuanced and even divergent understandings of the past, transitional processes and the future.<sup>16</sup> Art can also assist communities in negotiating the challenge of choice “between vengeance and forgiveness”<sup>17</sup> that transitional justice societies inevitably confront. Pauline Ross believes that, in times of peace, artists should use the space and time available to discuss atrocities committed by both sides and to seek out “opportunities to share narratives of our lives during conflict, painful as they may be.”<sup>18</sup> This is because, as Peter Rush argues, after atrocity the disputes of transitional justice can only be mediated by visceral notions of collective and personal responsibility.<sup>19</sup>

The transformative potential of ex-combatants in the region of former Yugoslavia is still under-researched and their role as drivers of change in their own communities has been largely ignored. The case study analysed in this paper highlights a performance-based project that highlights ex-combatants’ real-world contributions to social change. In the following section I will briefly discuss the efforts of civil society to engage ex-combatants in transitional justice processes. I will then turn my attention to the project “The Day After”, which saw its culmination in public presentation of a performance, *Tanatos* that brings four ex-combatants to the theatre stage to share their combat related experiences with an audience.

<sup>13</sup> Daly 2011: 2.

<sup>14</sup> Daly and Marchetti 2012:1.

<sup>15</sup> McAuliffe 2013: 93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Minow 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Ross 2011: xv.

<sup>19</sup> Rush 2013:vii.

*Engaging ex-combatants in transitional justice processes*

“The consequences of past violence are more difficult than violence itself.”  
(An ex-combatant, “War after War”, 2010)



**Figure 1:** Grupa “Hajde da...”, Original Scene from *Tanatos*. Reproduced with permission of “Hajde da...” . Actors: Novica Kostić, Goran Nikolić and Ljudevit Kolar.

According to unofficial records and “a rough estimation by some governmental officials”<sup>20</sup>, almost 400 000 people currently living in Serbia took part in wars which occurred from 1991 to 1999, in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, and during the NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro. Estimations by civil society organizations in Serbia are significantly higher. Jelena Grujić, for example, states that the actual number of ex-combatants in Serbia is anywhere between 400 000 and 600 000.<sup>21</sup> However, although their number is huge, their involvement as social actors in any public discussions of the past has been limited or, in some communities, non-existent.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Milan Colić, coordinator of the program “Constructive Use of Veteran’s Experience”, 11 December 2011, Belgrade, Serbia. All translations are the author’s except where otherwise noted. See also Radio Televizija Srbije 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Grujić 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Wils 2004.

A majority of ex-combatants have been struggling, psychologically and economically, in post-war Serbia. As Serbia never officially declared the war nor admitted that it took part in the wars within former-Yugoslav territory, consequently, it has not recognized ex-combatants as a special category, nor has it put any mechanisms in place to assist this category of people. As such, ex-combatants in Serbia are invisible and marginalized; living with no legal status, nor any type of state welfare. The Serbian community also has demonstrated a tendency to cut ties with this cohort of people, who serve as symbolic reminders of the destruction and violence that brought death and forced exodus of populations. As constant reminders of the failures of Serbian politics, ex-combatants are undesirable and marginalized.<sup>23</sup>

Such attitudes to ex-combatants are connected to the prevailing silence and disengagement of the public from debates about the past; a majority of the Serbian public does not want to know about the past and denies it directly or interpretatively.<sup>24</sup> Since the end of hostilities, in 1999, ex-combatants have not only remained marginalised and ignored by the government, but have also felt rejection from their own community. They have been perceived as perpetrators of violence rather than as “an investment in peace and security”.<sup>25</sup> According to Beara and Miljanović, ex-combatants have a feeling that they have been manipulated, misused and then left at the edge of existential collapse.<sup>26</sup> Many of them feel that they were forcibly drafted into wars in BiH and Croatia:

My participation in the war is the participation of a man who was not led by his own will and who tried to understand the objective of that war, which I haven't been able to understand to this very day. My prevailing feeling about this war is the insult that war brings to an individual, taking his personal integrity away and turning him into a part of the multitude, a simple figure that one or the other general might need. I felt it as turning myself into a gun-carrying instrument.<sup>27</sup>

A majority feel humiliated and bitter about the state's ignorance and disinterest in their problems. As summarised by a few ex-combatants:

The state has rejected us completely. When they needed us we were there, went to the war ... when we came back they pretended nothing had happened, as if we didn't exist ... [today] no one talks about the war, no-one is interested in us ... as if there were no wars, no veterans ...<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Marković cited in Švarn i Rudić 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Toma 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Ginifer 2003: 42.

<sup>26</sup> Beara and Miljanović 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Nebojša Jovanović, ex-combatant from Serbia. Cited in Fischer 2006: 396.

<sup>28</sup> Film, “War after War” 2010.

When I got back to my home, happy that I am alive and healthy, I was hoping that state will give me something back for what I did for my nation...but nothing so far - no assistance, no pension, no respect. I have tried to find a job, but when employers find out that I am a war veteran, they close their doors.<sup>29</sup>

As Beara and Miljanović argue, many ex-combatants also feel rejected and abandoned by the community that they thought they were fighting for. As one ex-combatant noted,

It would suit the state much better if we had died, then it wouldn't have any responsibilities. You feel helpless, rejected by everyone. And we fought because they asked us. It's not like I wanted to go to war.<sup>30</sup>

Many ex-combatants develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of the traumas they experienced and caused, such as killing people. They have experienced sustained exposure to stressful experiences over weeks, months and even years.<sup>31</sup> As a result of the wars in the former Yugoslav territory, a significant number of ex-soldiers developed various types of psychological and physical disorders, during and especially after the wars<sup>32</sup>.

... We are bitter about things that were happening during the war and that are happening now. We are sensitive to social injustice. We are older, more experienced and look differently at world. I am nervous... I am explosive... I get into fights... War has changed me... My participation in war did not help me but rather harmed me.<sup>33</sup>

As Vladan Beara, a psychologist with the Center for War Trauma writes:

The traumatized veteran is tense, impatient, he reacts impulsively and aggressively to insignificant causes, he shows numerous anxiety symptoms, has difficulties in feeling and showing love, he perceives the future to be grim.<sup>34</sup>

According to Beara and Miljanović, in Serbia, one part of society condemns ex-combatants for losing the war, while the other blames them for going to war. Yet others relegate ex-combatants to the past, seeing them as inconsequential or irrelevant in the present, and in such a way, making them invisible.<sup>35</sup> Besides developing PTSD as a result of their participation in the war, ex-combatants

<sup>29</sup> Novović 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Beara and Miljanović 2006: 148.

<sup>31</sup> Balfour 2009: 3.

<sup>32</sup> This is also true of the general population living where war atrocities took place.

<sup>33</sup> Gordan, ex-combatant from Croatia. Cited in Rill and Šmidling 2010: 51.

<sup>34</sup> Beara 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Beara and Miljanović above n 30.

in Serbia often suffer from what is referred to as the “secondary trauma of return”.<sup>36</sup> This form of PTSD is connected to the shock of returning home after the war and to lives that have been transformed from strain and stress. This has a profound effect since a large number of ex-combatants find themselves, after returning from war, in the situation of fighting “another” war as they face challenges such as: a lack of employment; failure of the government and community to acknowledge their suffering; lack of vocational skills and pension; struggling with substance abuse or dependence (alcohol and drug); and alienation, resentment and difficulties in rebuilding societal relationships and reintegration into post-conflict society.<sup>37</sup>

Since communities have been reluctant to accept the return of ex-combatants, there has been a dearth of services and organisations that this population can turn to for assistance. The Center for Non Violent Action (CNA) which was established in 1997 by Nenad Vukosavljević, a peace activist from Belgrade, is the first organization that aims to include ex-combatants in its peacebuilding work, recognizing the importance of their voices and significant contribution to peacebuilding processes.<sup>38</sup> The CNA activists have articulated why they are targeting former soldiers with their programs:

From the perspective of building peace, former soldiers represent a significant potential because many of them, in fact, have a need to contribute to the building of a more just society and feel the responsibility for all that happened and is still happening in our midst...[Their experience,] at the same time, offers a direct opportunity for confronting the motives, fears and ideals which prompted people to become actors in the war.<sup>39</sup>

CNA acknowledges that ex-combatants are deeply traumatised and represent a large cohort of individuals who have to re-socialize and reintegrate into a post-conflict society. However, they also, according to CNA, have strong potential to rebuild bridges between various religious and ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia.

<sup>36</sup> Miller and Read 1996: 385.

<sup>37</sup> Hazen 2007; Kees 1997: 151-165; Leff 2008; Nat 1997; Marković 2012.

<sup>38</sup> CNA 2004.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.



Figure 2: Grupa “Hajde da...”, Original Scene from *Tanatos*. Reproduced with permission of “Hajde da...”. Actresses: Jovana Rakić-Kiselčić i Jelena Stojiljković.

Recognising the potential of ex-combatants too, the Belgrade Group “Hajde da...” (Group) and the Center for War Trauma from Novi Sad decided to initiate a project that would use the experience of ex-combatants in the theatre setting, with the aim of engaging and challenging views that the public hold about this category of people. According to the Group, “only recently there has been some acknowledgment that the experiences of ex-combatants could be used in peacebuilding processes.<sup>40</sup> Although the Group has a tradition of working with marginalised groups (people with disabilities and other minority people such as refugees and Roma people) *Tanatos* was their first drama-based theatre play involving ex-combatants.<sup>41</sup> The play is also groundbreaking in bringing to the stage, as actors, the people who have lived the ex-combatant stories in real life, according to Marko Pejović, dramaturge and program manager of the Group.<sup>42</sup>

With *Tanatos* the Group aims to explore whether the experiences of ex-combatants could also be used for better understanding of the phenomenon

<sup>40</sup> Internal document on file with author.

<sup>41</sup> See official web site of the Group “Hajde da...”, <http://www.hajdeda.org.rs/>.

<sup>42</sup> Personal interview with Marko Pejović, Belgrade, 15 July 2013.

of death. Since ex-combatants have experienced the immediate threat of death for a protracted period of time, the Group believes that they have particular authority to speak to this subject. *Tanatos* was developed jointly by artists and ex-combatants. The form and content were not proscribed in advance, but rather, developed through mutual collaboration. The Group believes that ex-combatants have developed valuable insights concerning the past, coupled with first-hand experience of war and its side effects. Meanwhile, young artists tend to look more towards the future, reluctant to deal with the past atrocities in the region. As a result, bringing the two groups of ex-combatants and artists, with vastly different worldviews and experiences in their life, can be fruitful and rewarding. As Pejović reported,

It is important to start using experiences which both groups have: young people who are turned towards the future, while ex-combatants have a valuable understanding of the past and it seems that this blend is important for the present moment.

As a result of traumatisation, but also because of the lack of public interest and empathy, some ex-combatants are interested in taking part in activities that might enable them to communicate their experiences to the wider public.<sup>43</sup> For four ex-combatants who have taken part in the play, it is important to tell young people their story:

There is this prevailing image of Serb war veterans in our society... through work with young people we transferred our first hand knowledge about the combat experience and we want to change the stereotype about us.<sup>44</sup>

The compulsive impulse and desire to “tell the story” is common to many trauma survivors. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, traumatic memories as unassimilated fragments of overwhelming experiences need to be psychologically integrated and transformed into narrative language. It seems that in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it.<sup>45</sup> A sign of psychological recovery is therefore connected with the ability to tell the story, so that a person can look back at what happened and contextualise it within their life history, or autobiography, and thereby place it within the “whole of their personality”.<sup>46</sup> In that sense, storytelling on the stage can possess more power than the often fragmented official records since such storytelling is raw, immediate and real, and can help individuals make sense of their past.

<sup>43</sup> Wills 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Kolar 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 176.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Soshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that survivors of trauma live not with memories of the past, but with an event that "...has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as survivors are concerned, continuous into present and is current in every respect."<sup>47</sup> Felman and Dori remind that in order to recover from a trauma and regain a sense of normality and closure, an individual needs to reconstruct a narrative history of the event and transmits this story to someone else, to "literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside."<sup>48</sup> Without this process taking place, a situation of helplessness, such as exposure to the constant threat of losing one's life or witnessing the death of others, is not able to be integrated into the rest of the traumatised person's life experience and stays as an isolated act which draws constantly on the individual's energy reserves, and leaves him or her unable to invest energy into other life goals.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 3: Grupa "Hajde da...", Original Scene from *Tanatos*.  
Reproduced with permission of "Hajde da..." . Actress: Jovana Rakić-Kiselčić.

<sup>47</sup> Felman and Laub 1992: 69.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Grupa "Hajde da..." "O projektu i predstavi". Internal group document on file with author.

The Group believes that the theatre can assist ex-combatants to integrate their experiences in a constructive way. They perceive collaborative work between young artists and ex-combatants as valuable, and with *Tanatos*, the Group opens a dialogue about the possibilities of cooperation between young artists and ex-combatants through artistic projects and cultural moments.

### *The Day After*

“There are no winners in the war, only losers.”  
(An ex-combatant, “War after War”, 2010)

The theatre performance *Tanatos* is part of the project “The Day After” which started in 2010 as a joint collaboration of the Group and the Centre for War Trauma from Novi Sad. This project had the aim to create a public realm where ex-combatants could publically share their war related experiences. The idea for the play came after Pejović attended a conference about constructive usage of ex-combatants’ experiences in late 2009 in Grožnjan, Croatia. He was invited by Milan Colić to inform himself about peace activism in the region:

One evening [during the conference] we were talking about post-war society and what happened to ex-combatants, and someone from the Center for War Trauma asked me would it be possible to do something with ex-combatants in the theatre. At that moment the idea seemed too complex, but when I returned to Belgrade, that idea started to ripen slowly.<sup>50</sup>

The aim of the project initially was to stimulate dialogue between dancers and choreographers of contemporary dance from Belgrade on the one hand, and ex-combatants on the other; to support ex-combatants to engage with artistic processes; to promote contemporary theatre among ex-combatants as well as the wider community; to create and perform a theatre dance play which would include artists in the field of contemporary theatre and integrate combatants’ experience; to research possibilities for proactively and collaboratively addressing building the future.<sup>51</sup>

The culmination of the “The Day After” project was a theatre play *Tanatos*, but prior to this, there were a series of workshops and trainings organised for young artists, ex-combatants and other people interested in working with ex-combatants. The training was led by the experts from the Center for War Trauma and explored a range of issues such as trauma, its consequences, and the status of ex-combatants in contemporary Serbia. There were also

<sup>50</sup> E-mail correspondence with Marko Pejović, 20 October 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Text from the performance *Tanatos*. On file with author.

workshops for young artists and activists, ex-combatants and other interested citizens in the praxis of physical theatre, with an aim to explore a plethora of experiences from the happiest to the most destructive moments in one's life.

As Pejović explains,

As artists we had undergone training about PTSD and war related experiences. Then we started workshops and worked on play called *Tanatos*. We were interested in the question of death and what happens when a man is surrounded by destruction and death, and ex-combatants are the people who have authority to speak about these experiences.

Pejović notes that the title of the project comes from the fact that although war is over, the consequences are still visible and present, "I don't have an impression that much has been done in the process of mutual understanding what the war did to us. So, I have a feeling like the war ended yesterday, not almost twenty years ago". Indeed, as Thompson et al argue, the post-war times may be better called the "aftermath" in recognition of the fact that "post-war" may seem rather optimistic or over-simplistic for many people living in contexts where the war *feels* [author's emphasis] far from over.<sup>52</sup>

The performance has been presented about a dozen times since its release in December 2010. Until today, the play has only been staged in Belgrade and Pančevo. Although the Group sent numerous offers to bring the play to other parts of Serbia and BiH too, they have not received invitations to stage the play elsewhere. Pejović is not certain why no-one has expressed interest, since nobody rejected the play explicitly or provided any explanation for not being willing to invite the Group to perform. He reports,

Although we always have a full theatre when we play this performance, mainstream theatre is not interested in it. I think they don't know what to do with it... they may be uncertain about the form of the play which is very unusual and difficult to deal with especially when veterans start to talk... I am not clear whether the performance is not good for theatres in BiH, or if this topic is still not ripe and ready to be explored in the Bosnian theatres. For example, one ex-combatant actor in the play went voluntarily in war and that may be perceived as a problem... But we need that communication; we need the other side to hear this man who may now say that after all he believes it was a bad idea.

It seems that the public is still not ready to listen to those who not only carry the burden of wartime pain and destruction, but who also represent the living embodiment of past "war enemies". It also may be that Bosnian and Serbian theatres, as Sanja Nikčević claims for Croatian theatres "don't like to stage war plays" because "people want to forget it [war]" rather than be

<sup>52</sup> Thompson, Hughes and Balfour (eds.) 2009: 201.

constantly reminded.<sup>53</sup> Although the Group does not have the financial means to present the play widely, they are willing to do so as long as ex-combatants are willing to participate and there is an interest and possibility to organise dialogues between actors and audience after the performance.

### *Tanatos*<sup>54</sup>

War is the most terrible thing that man can experience in his lifetime... It is the worst thing that can happen to any community or nation. The war destroys everything: from the top of your hair till the toes on your foot...it destroys your soul, your physical, and psychological well being...The war is one horrifying thing and I would never want that my kids experience any sort of an armed conflict in their lifetime.<sup>55</sup>

*Tanatos* is a play that brings to light the issues of death and destruction through a close examination. It is a combination of contemporary dance theatre and powerful testimony and witnessing. Four ex-combatants<sup>56</sup> who had undergone the trainings and workshops voluntarily decided to take the part in the play. The text of the performance which considers ex-combatants directly was developed in collaboration with them. They had been consulted throughout the whole process: about the themes they wanted and felt comfortable to talk about, but also what the performance would look like. Ex-combatants were asked how they see themselves in the play and which parts they would feel comfortable to be engaged in.

In *Tanatos*, ex-combatants challenge audience values and beliefs with their stories, reminding of recent past wrongdoings and speaking of hope for the future. In the theatre, the audience faces ex-combatants for the first time on stage, and this forces the audience to question their own prejudices, fears and sectarianism in positive and creative ways. The theatre and art can expose war by laying bare violence and its products to be examined, explored and debated. Through *Tanatos*, the theatre stimulates and supports processes of healing by bringing those affected together inside their communities “to witness the pain and start an often uneasy discussion about grief and painful past.”<sup>57</sup>

For ex-combatants, the theatre serves as an important platform that offers a public sphere for powerful testimony and witnessing. The audience is invited to witness and engage with the experiences and lives of ex-combatants.

<sup>53</sup> Nikčević 2013: 161.

<sup>54</sup> In a Greek mythology *Tanatos* is the God of Death.

<sup>55</sup> Žuna, ex-combatant from Croatia. Cited in Rill and Šmidling (eds.) 2010: 154.

<sup>56</sup> Ljudevit Kolar, Miodrag Tasić, Novica Kostić and Željko Vukelić. Goran Nikolić has joined this group of ex-combatants recently.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, Hughes and Balfour (eds.) 2009: 261.

However, the purpose of the play is not simply to include the marginalised, or subvert the national master-narrative, but also to stimulate conversations about the past. The performance prepares the ground for a safe, public discussion of very private stories of pain and grief.



Figure 4: Grupa “Hajde da...”, Original Scene from *Tanatos*. Reproduced with permission of “Hajde da...” . Actors: Ljudevit Kolar, Novica Kostić, Miodrag Tasić and Jovana Rakić-Kiselčić.

After the performance, audience members express a range of emotions, including uncomfortableness and sadness. As Pejović told me, one of the reasons why he thinks that the play is not popular and the Group has faced difficulties in persuading others to invite them to perform the play in the region is because,

The public seems tired and exhausted of war-related, trauma stories. They seem to have difficulties listening to such stories. They probably need something cheerful to go home with rather than destruction and war. Some audience members told me that the play is a difficult and dark to watch causing them to feel sad and uncomfortable afterwards.

But is it possible to make a cheerful play about war and trauma? About people who have been scarred for life by their experience? I was among the audience in Belgrade in December 2011, watching a presentation of the play in the Cultural Center Rex. My friend, the director of the Dah theatre Belgrade<sup>58</sup>, had told me about the festival and invited me to go with her. She in-

<sup>58</sup> I have been following the work of “Dah Theatre” for a few years now. Please see Simić 2010: 117-133; Simić and Milošević 2013: 99-113.

formed me about the performance *Tanatos* and thought that I might be interested to watch it. And I was, indeed. The theatre was packed that night. It was the opening night of the first regional ‘Off Frame Festival’<sup>59</sup> and *Tanatos* was the play to open the festival. I was curious about a performance which would bring ex-combatants to the stage and was waiting with anticipation for the start of play. I was sitting in the second row and could see the stage well although it was fairly dark. Occasionally, the lights would switch on to reflect the Group’s two actresses and dancers.<sup>60</sup>

My feelings were mixed as the performance developed and I was trying to make sense of the electronic music that occasionally followed the movement and dance of the actresses and the scarce text and dialogue the two actresses would engage in. The rarely spoken text introduced the issues of death and war, for example, with one actress reciting out important dates that marked key war events such as the beginning of war in BiH and the siege in Sarajevo. However, since the actress was reciting the dates using only numbers (“one nine nine two” for the year 1992 that marks beginning of the war in BiH) it was not clear to me during the performance what these numbers were about. I could not connect the spelling of the numbers with years and dates, and it was only when I had an opportunity to read the scripted text of performance<sup>61</sup> that I understood the significance of this scene. The play was rich with symbolism and metaphor, while using movement, electronic music, text and video to connect the public with issues of death and trauma.

The play’s dramatic tension rises and culminates with the first and last verbal interaction between the actresses and ex-combatants, which Pejović calls “the moment of truth”. That moment comes when four ex-combatants come to the stage from the darkness and sit on four wooden brown chairs facing the audience. Until that moment, the two actresses have been playing opposing characters: one that seeks the truth, and another that tries to sweep the truth “under the carpet”, by lying or ignoring or discrediting events from the recent past. Up until that moment, though the ex-combatants have been present on the stage, they have been limited to a few scenes in which they do not talk but rather make a few bodily movements on their own or together with the actresses. They assume a more tangible stage presence when they begin to talk, but their roles are “private roles” and are not a product of imagination, nor really acted. It is dark in the theatre and I can feel the anticipation rise. Everyone is fixed on the scene, waiting impatiently for the ex-combatants to start to speak. Jovana Rakić Kiselčić, one of two female actress/dancers,

<sup>59</sup> This was the first festival in the region that aimed to create a cultural space that would provide the possibility for some social questions to “open”. It aims to include “voices who could not be heard” and to promote inclusion of people with disabilities, minor convicts, war veterans, among others. See, [www.off-frame.org/#!\\_english](http://www.off-frame.org/#!_english).

<sup>60</sup> Jovana Rakić-Kiselčić i Jelena Stojiljković.

<sup>61</sup> As a researcher and author of this paper.

dressed in a military uniform, takes up a microphone, raises her head and voice and asks a question: “I am interested to know how you as a war veteran look at victims of war today?”

Novica Kostić, an ex-combatant who went to the war in Croatia from Serbia, took a microphone from Jovana and started to talk:

In 1991, as a member of the reserve force of ex-Yugoslav army, I participated in war on the territory of Republic of Croatia. Today I cannot erase from my memory the worst images of murdered children, old powerless people and women. I live with the label of ex-combatant and I have difficulties with being labelled as such. I want to accept my personal accountability for the war events and I wish to condemn all crimes that happened back then... Together with other ex-combatants I go and visit the places where the war crimes took the place... In this way I can acknowledge other victims and go out of my victimhood. I often hear in these places from other ex-combatants that we, war veterans, are the biggest victims of all... But I don't want to stay buried in my victimhood...

After Novica, Jovana asked each ex-combatant a question. Ljudevit Kolar put up his hand to answer the following question: “How do you live today and what do you think of war now?” He replied: “After I came back from war, I moved on with my life. But this war is always with me... somewhere deep inside me...”

The questions are different in each new play, according to what the director, dramaturge, actresses and ex-combatants think may be important to reflect on at the particular moment and in the particular community in which they are performing.<sup>62</sup> Some of the questions that ex-combatants have been asked to reply to during the performance include:

What are the most difficult images that are engraved in your memory?  
What do you think now about victims of war?  
How did you manage to survive the war?  
How do you live now and what do you think about war now?

Ex-combatants are always consulted about the questions before the performances and thus know in advance what they will be asked by actresses.

We have never tried to influence the choice of stories ex-combatants want to tell for a particular play... We may help with bringing the essence of the story to light and to reduce details. Also, if an ex-combatant wants to say something that we as an organisation do not agree with, we ask them to go ahead but then that they would need to explain themselves to the public. For example, if

<sup>62</sup> Text of the performance, on file with author.

ex-combatant want to say, “I think it was a great thing to go to war”, we would ask him to explain why he thinks so and what he thinks about it today. We think it is important for such statements to be explained, not to be left to hang in the air, because an audience would want to know the reasons behind such arguments.<sup>63</sup>

For ex-combatants, their experiences are often jarring and transition time – the time from war to peace - is unavoidable and may seem endless. Art can provide an important space for relief and decompression; for taking a breath before going back to haunting thoughts. As Ljudevit Kolar, an ex-combatant from Novi Sad, reported,

The work on this performance, the rehearsals and preparations, exclude you from the thoughts that follow you all the time. I guess these are the only moments when we disconnect ourselves from the flashbacks which we have as a consequence of war. I was in Vukovar as a forensic in team for identification and I survived many things... You know, when in ten months you pass 1,600 dead bodies through your hands, imagine how that may feel.<sup>64</sup>

After the performance, the audience is invited to stay for informal talks with ex-combatants and to ask more questions. Pejović reported that for the Group it was important to hear the audience’s thoughts about play and whether they would be interested to talk about the issues that were raised in performance. In that sense, the play serves as an open public forum for dialogue; as a stimulus for discussion about issues that audience finds important. Usually, Pejović, would invite the audience to stay and share their views and opinions about the play. Often, there would be a break of five minutes after the play before conversation opens up. The Group then invites conversation and explains that the actors may not be able to answer all questions, but that the audience is welcome to ask anything. The discussion is usually opened with a question aimed at audience “What do you think about the play?” According to Pejović, very often among the audience there are young people whose fathers, uncles, or cousins were in war and they tend to ask questions they probably could not ask their relatives, such as, “Did you kill anyone while in the war?”

For ex-combatants, it is not easy to act and talk with an audience, but they believe that the importance of telling their story is stronger than their fears and any anxiousness they may have about the play.<sup>65</sup> The drive not to be “passive” about past, but to prove that they can do something for their community and for the future, is overwhelming. *Tanatos* enables ex-combatants to

<sup>63</sup> Personal interview with Marko Pejović, Belgrade 15 July 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Radio Televizija Pančevo, “Muskarčine” i “Tanatos na “Ex teatar festu”, <http://rtvpancevo.rs/Vesti/Kultura/mukarine-i-tanatos-na-ex-teatar-festu.html>, 8 June 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Personal interview with Marko Pejović, Belgrade 15 July 2013.

articulate their feelings and experiences and, as Pejović reports, “make sense from nonsense”.<sup>66</sup> It is an opportunity to transfer their knowledge and experiences of war, and what war has done to them to younger generations and others in the audience. They enter into this space with a clear mind and consciousness that they were part of that war and that is why as Pejović reports, “this process is difficult but sensible and significant”. However, it is a constant negotiation between the Group and ex-combatants how far they can go with the play and whether they feel comfortable and healthy to play the next performance at all.

### *Closing notes*

Art provides spaces which can hold divergent truths and in which the assumptions of transition are opened up for critical reflection. Theatrical space can create alternative public records and create a platform for dealing with the past outside of often contested and politicized official processes. Such processes often exclude the voices of the individuals that they are presumed to engage. As a result, arts and cultural movements have created their own responses to human rights violations, and theatre can facilitate a broad societal shift away from past violence to a sustainable future. The theatre becomes a site in which an audience may be invited to hear something other than the official account and bear witness. *Tanatos* is a play that clearly juxtaposes the past and present; ex-combatants as living legacies of violent historical events contrast with young artists’ exuberant energy and hope for the future. It offers a public space for people who live on the periphery to be transferred into a position of appearance and focus. *Tanatos* examines the consequences of war and the inner struggles that people have when deciding whether to enter into war or not. The play is founded on the inner, almost compulsive, desire of affected people to be listened to.

Although a majority of people in Serbia are still in denial of past wrongdoings committed by their own government, watching the play and meeting ex-combatants shatters this denial and makes it impossible to refute the past. The theatre, through plays such as *Tanatos*, can serve as a mechanism of “collective reparation for war trauma”, rather than waiting for the state to offer to heal open wounds and help people integrate their difficult experiences into the everyday life.<sup>67</sup> As this paper has discussed, many ex-combatants suffer from personal losses and traumatisation and it is difficult to predict the future of this play. A few who took part in *Tanatos* are in weak health and it is questionable whether and for how long they would be able to perform. It is also not certain whether this play will be able to cross regional borders since in

<sup>66</sup> Email communication with Marko Pejović, 28 October 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Email communication with Marko Pejović, 28 October 2013.

neighbouring countries they would not be perceived as victims but rather as perpetrators. The play provokes discussion on the question of Serb accountability for war, and in that sense, it is an important informal, alternative mechanism of transitional justice.

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