

Where the Forest Thickens: Tools for engaging with memory questions through aesthetic experiences

M I C O M I C Ó N

Algo del pasado de Europa duerme dentro de la caja,
y ahora la caja va a despertar.

*Donde
es el Bosque
se Espera*

de Laila Ripoll y Mariano Llorente

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Introduction

Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe (UNREST) is a research project funded by the European Union. The project partners include three European universities (Bochum in Germany, Aarhus in Denmark and Bath in the United Kingdom) together with the Spanish Research Council and the Centre for Historical Research in Berlin of the Polish Academy of Science. The project also includes non-academic partners such as the Spanish theatre group (Micomicón) and the Ruhr Museum in Germany.

UNREST addresses Europe's current memory problem in relation to past wars and conflicts. On the one hand, there exists the foundational myth of the European Union as a harmonious, consensual story of reconciliation and peace between nations, which is often far removed from memory-realities on the ground. On the other hand, there are populist and nationalist movements across Europe, which are using the heritage of war and violent conflicts for their anti-democratic and divisive purposes. In response to these two approaches, UNREST proposes to explore and promote a third memory way, which acknowledges and engages with widespread memory discontent without losing sight of fundamental European ideals. We call this third way agonistic memory. It designates a new mode of remembering which embraces political conflict as an opportunity for emotional and ethical growth.

In the framework of UNREST we created a theatre performance with Micomicón theatre group: *Donde el bosque se espesa* (*Where the Forest Thickens*), which was world-premiered in Madrid in June 2017. This theatre performance interweaves different European sites and times (mainly the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the Yugoslav break-up wars) and tackles the question of memory through the intergenerational transmission of memory. Micomicón is one of Spain's leading theatre companies within the field of experimental, political drama, with extensive experience of bringing the memory of war and post-war repression to the stage. Among Micomicón's most important works in this field are *Los niños perdidos* (*The Lost Children*, 2005) about the case of the Francoist regime's abduction of Republican children, *Santa Perpetua* (2010) about remembrance and consciousness, and finally *El triángulo azul* (*The Blue Triangle*, 2014) about the experience of Spanish Republicans in the Mauthausen concentration camp. In 2015, *El triángulo azul* received Spain's most prestigious theatre prize, the MAX prize, in the categories of best script and best theatre set design. Laila Ripoll and Mariano Llorente, the playwrights and artists who lead Micomicón, agreed to collaborate on the project with the creation of a play that challenges the public ethically and politically on questions singled out as demarcation lines between the three major modes of remembering, antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic.

This pedagogical package aims to be a useful learning tool for all cultural agents, artists, scholars and students who engage –or would like to– with memory questions through aesthetic experience all around Europe and beyond. We encourage you to actively engage with the activities proposed in this package. In order to help you to make the most of it and to guide you to activate agonistic processes of self-reflection, throughout the document there are questions to be either completed individually or discussed as a group.

What is the play about?

EMILIANA, an elderly Spanish woman, dies and leaves a box full of objects to her two daughters, ANTONIA and ISABEL. ANTONIA wants to know the meaning of these objects and the importance for her mother whereas ISABEL prefers not to delve into the past. ANTONIA and her daughter, ANA, start a trip across Europe (Barcarés, Lourdes, Paris, Toulouse, Mauthausen, Roma, Sarajevo, Kravica, Jasenovac, and more). As their trip progresses, they find out that EMILJAN RUKAVINA, an Ustaše who joined Franco's faction during the Spanish Civil War, is ANTONIA'S biological grandfather and the man who she thought was her grandfather, Rafael Cobreces Galilea, was a

Republican and died in Mauthausen Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War. They also learn about their husband / father's past in Yugoslavia as a cruel war criminal. When they come back from their trip ZORAN is ready to leave, since he knows they know his secret. ANTONIA does not forgive him; she no longer cares about him. Once he has left, ANTONIA calls the police. The play ends in CHARLATANA'S pub, a dreamlike, grotesque place where the dead gather and drink. Ana, Antonia, Emiliana and others meet at the pub to make a symbolic toast: the three women –and generations– name Rafael Cobreces Galilea as their legitimate relative.



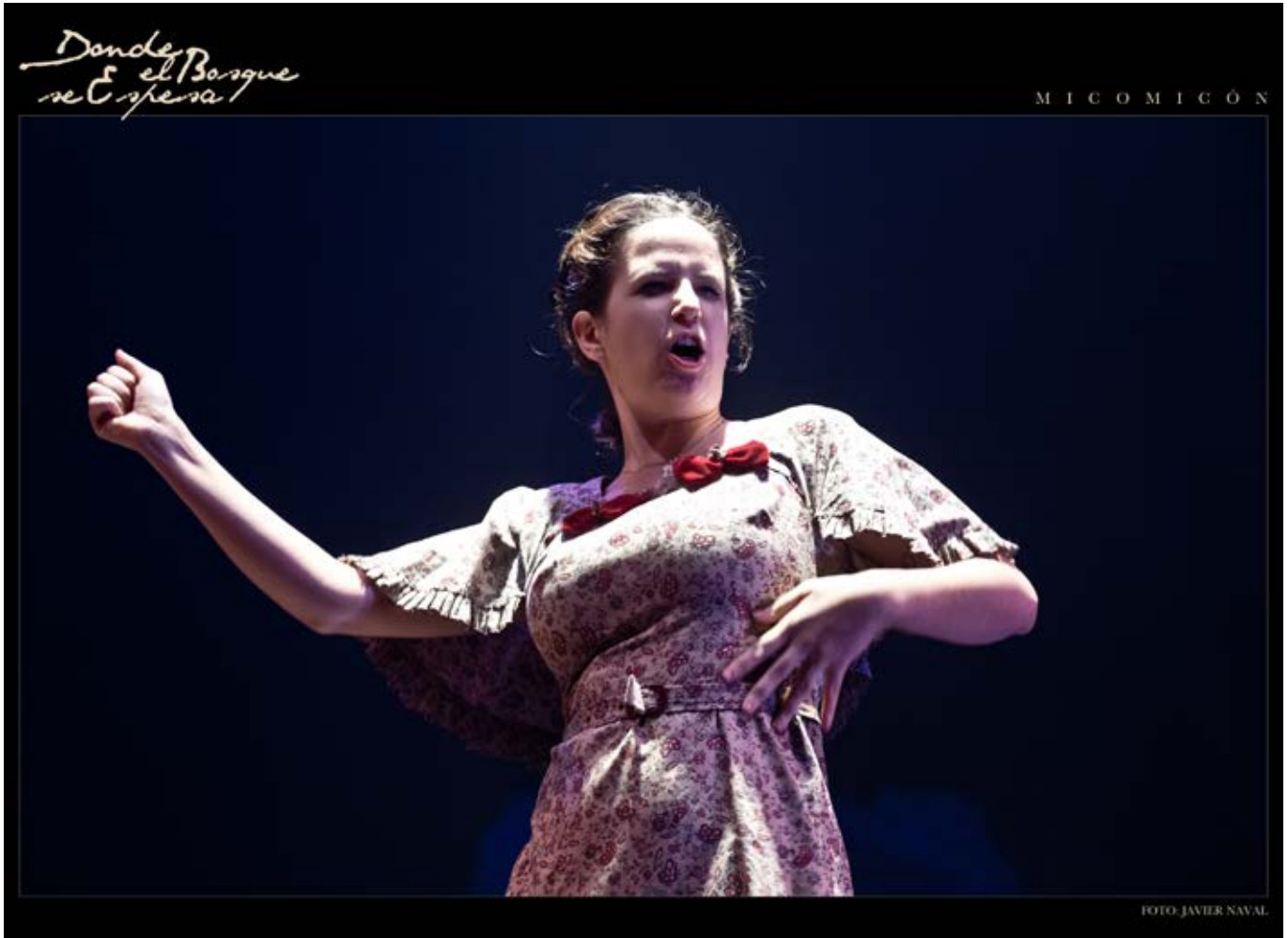
Poster for the world-premiere of Donde el bosque se espesa. ©Javier Naval



Arantxa Aranguren as Antonia. ©Javier Naval

ANTONIA

A woman, 50 years-old. When her mother, EMILIANA, dies she inherits a metal biscuit tin full of objects that lead her and her daughter, ANA, to know about their pasts. She has a conflictual relationship with her sister ISABEL. They represent two well-differentiated ways of facing difficult pasts: while ANTONIA confronts her mother's legacy and makes all the necessary efforts to find out about the meaning of the objects in the box; ISABEL continuously rejects even hearing about it. ANTONIA is going progressively blind.



Carolina Herrera as Antonia (grandmother). ©Javier Naval

ANA

ANTONIA's and ZORAN's daughter. She is constantly eating something. She represents the third generation, those who currently question the Transition and Amnesty policies after the dictatorship. She is the driving motor of the journey around Europe she takes with her mother. She is ANTONIA's eyes.

Carolina Herrera, the actor who played ANA in Micomicón's production, declared in a debate with the audience right after the world-premiere in Móstoles, that she did not feel like she was acting, because she felt so engaged in the cause of the exhumations and the recovery of historical memory in Spain after the visits to Guadalajara and San Isidro cemeteries, that her interpretation of ANA just flowed. Herrera plays several roles in the performance. In this image we can see Carolina Herrera playing the character of ANTONIA (grandmother).



Arantxa Aranguren as Antonia and Puchi Lagarde as Isabel. ©Javier Naval

ISABEL

ANA's sister. She does not want to know about her family's past. She is constantly confronting ANA (and vice versa). She is an alcoholic. In Laila Ripoll's direction of *Where the Forest Thickens*, she represents ANTONIA's antagonist. Yet for agonistic memory, it is better to show complexity and grey zones than complete opposites, more a trait of antagonistic narratives.



Juanjo Cucalón as
Zoran. ©Javier Naval

ZORAN / MARKO 'THE POET'

He was born in Sarajevo. ANTONIA's husband and ANA's father. He is much loved and tender before ANTONIA and ANA's trip and a war criminal, a non-repentant perpetrator after their trip. He killed and raped several people during the Yugoslav Wars. In the play, the reasons for this are not political (not good for agonism), but emotional and vindictive (Bosniaks killed his Muslim girlfriend, his Croatian mother, his Serbian father and his grandparents during the Yugoslav Wars).

It would be a good activity to explore the character of ZORAN, perhaps highlighting his socio-political circumstances and putting them at the centre of his speech. This exercise would present him in a new, more agonistic, light to draw spectators' attention to the causes of perpetration instead of ZORAN's victimization or appearance as just 'evil.'

EMILJAN RUKAVINA (aka EMILANO)

Croatian. A convinced Ustaše, ideologically related to the Spanish Nationalist faction which he joined during the Civil War. Extremely handsome, a lady's man, has several 'girlfriends' and children around Europe. He is called by CHARLATANA "el ángel Satán" [Satan angel] and "basura ustacha" [Ustaše crap] by ZORAN.

He emerges as an important, constant presence during the play. He represents the fascination of those who we cannot actually get to know but appear in front of us under the cover of beautiful images. His silence is eloquent. His appearance is deceptive. And an important lesson: we should not be swayed by appearances.

EMILIANA

She is ANTONIA'S mother. She takes the name of her biological father, EMILJAN RUKAVINA.

RAFAEL COBRECES GALILEA

The husband of EMILIANA'S mother. In the family, the story was always circulated that RAFAEL joined the Nationalist faction, as a convinced nationalist and catholic, and was assassinated by Republican militiamen. As the plot develops, ANTONIA and ANA find out that he died in Mauthausen concentration camp during the Second World War. At the end of the play, they both declare him their legitimate ancestor (even though they are not biologically related).

Unlike Emiljan Rukavina, we do not see any images of Rafael Cobreces and therefore his presence is not as powerful as his opposite character. Why not include an image of Cobreces and see which tensions emerge?

BERNARDO ROIG

Historian. He helps Antonia and Ana to find out about their pasts (and present).

CARMEN

Social anthropologist. Around 60 years old. Conducts exhumations in Spain. Is another biological daughter of EMILJAN RUKAVINA.

CHARLATANA

Her name literally means 'chatterbox'. She always appears in a dream-like pub, where all victims (regardless of the conflict) end up after being killed. She was a victim herself in the Yugoslav Wars and rules the pub welcoming the newcomers. The pub only exists in Antonia's imagination.

Mélida Molina took inspiration from Marlene Dietrich and the cabaret vaudeville-style entertainments so popular in Berlin during the inter-war years.

She is definitely the character who most obviously addresses the audience, in comparison with the others. In the first stage direction in the script we read:

THE TAVERN

A very old tavern, possibly tables and a wooden bar. On a small stage, a man plays an accordion. Some customers are having coffee, drinking from bowls with handles. Some of them are smoking. A woman mingles with the customers, moving gracefully between the tables.

*Donde
el Baroque
se Espera*

M I C O M I C Ó N



FOTO: JAVIER NAVAL

Background on historical setting(s)

The aftermath of wars are multiple and can be approached in different ways depending on the socio-political and cultural contexts. No matter how different these contexts are, it is crucial that societies actually engage with their difficult pasts as the only way to achieve lasting peace and a cohesive way of living together. These processes of engagement are not easy and often put off. Spanish and Bosnian societies for example, are still deeply unsettled by past conflicts. Mass grave exhumations of different scales and implications are being carried out in these three settings in order to reconstruct, rewrite or fill in the gaps in collective remembering depending on who is in charge of the exhumations and how the remains are treated afterwards. Mass graves are 'crucial testimony of the wounds of history, and a key element in understanding both the foundations and consequences of violence' (Ferrándiz and Robben, 2015: 1). In addition, in an era of information and communication technology, mass grave exhumations are public events that are quickly disseminated through the Internet and digital social networks. Furthermore, as a public act of mourning, conflict, pain and revelation, mass grave exhumations inspire many cultural professionals and artists. This is the case for Micomicón. The whole theatre company attended one important exhumation in Guadalajara, a city near Madrid, in Spain, during the spring of 2017, when they were rehearsing for the world-premiere of *Where the Forest Thickens* on 22th June, and the emotional and artistic impact on them and the play was enormous. In Micomicón's own words:

They killed them right in the walls of the cemetery. Still today you can clearly see the impact of the bullets in the walls. During the exhumation many people showed up –they had serious concerns about their relatives who were buried there.

It is important to note that just on the cemetery's front gate anyone can read an enormous, perfectly preserved inscription, which pays homage to the fallen for God and for Spain. For eighty years, the victors receive all the honours, while the losers are thrown into a mass grave like dogs.¹

You can learn more about the exhumation in Guadalajara here: <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/s5-documentos/c46-libros-de-visitas/exhumacion-guadalajara-2017/>.

Q: Have you ever been to an exhumation? Or have you heard about any close to your hometown?

Exhuming human remains in Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) cannot be separated from issues of justice. In Spain, the so-called Civil War started in July 1936 with a coup d'état by Nationalist military troops against the legitimate Republican government. After the Republican front's defeat in April 1939 the Nationalists took power and imposed a highly repressive and violent dictatorship led by General Francisco Franco that drew a line between the 'victorious' and the 'undesirable defeated'. The latter were not only the political opponents of the new regime (Republicans, communists, anarchists, Masons, leftists in general) but also anyone considered as not belonging to the new idea of Nation according to National Catholicism, the new regime's ideology (for example, homosexuals). The dictatorship lasted until Franco's death in November 1975. From 1936 until the end of the 1970s, victims were estimated at 200,000 even though historians disagree on the exact number. Furthermore, it is impossible to find out this number because of the loss of documents and the deliberate decision to rewrite the past according to the discourse of the 'victorious' during more than 36 years of repression of the 'defeated'. An intimidating monument constructed by prisoners and regime opponents was founded in 1959, called *El Valle de los Caídos [The Valley of the Fallen]*. In 1975, it served as a mausoleum for Franco. It was only in 2018 that a socialist government decided on the the exhumation of Franco's remains and the dispossession of his honours. You can find out more about *The Valley of the Fallen* here: <http://www.bluffton.edu/homepages/facstaff/sullivanm/spain/madrid/fallen/fallen.html>

¹Original excerpt in Spanish of an interview with Diana González Martín, October 2018: 'Los asesinaron en la tapia del mismo cementerio, todavía se pueden apreciar en las paredes los impactos de bala con toda claridad. Durante la exhumación, fueron apareciendo muchas personas que tenían serias sospechas de que sus parientes estuvieran allí. Pues bien, es importante reseñar que nada más entrar por la puerta del cementerio se puede ver una enorme inscripción en perfecto estado que rinde homenaje a los caídos por Dios y por España. Los vencedores, desde hace ochenta años, con todos los honores. Los perdedores, arrojados como perros a una fosa común.'

In the Balkans, after the fall of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence and were internationally recognised as independent nation-states. However, the possibility of independence in BiH was regarded as problematic by the ultranationalist, far-right Serb Democratic Party (SDS), which wanted to control the areas with a majority Serbian population. The war broke out on March 1992 in BiH, coinciding with the referendum for independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, boycotted by Serbian nationalists. The armed conflict engaged several factions: the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Army of Republika Srpska, the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Croatian Defence Council. As front lines shifted, so did alliances: after the signature of the Washington Agreement in 1994, the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Croatian Defence Council fought together against the Army of the Republika Srpska and retook swathes of territory controlled by the Republika Srpska forces. The war officially ended in December 1995 through the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH, commonly known as the Dayton Peace Agreement, after the city of Dayton in Ohio, USA. Nearly 100,000 people died in the course of four years of war and over 31,000 went missing (cf. Jugo and Ferrándiz, 2017: 3-8).

The Second World War is another historical episode before 1991 that is relevant to the Balkan's process of remembering as well as to understanding *Where the Forest Thickens*. Of particular relevance is General Ante Pavelić's loyalty to Hitler's ideology, Croatian military dictator, Pavelić, founded the fascist ultranationalist organisation known as the Ustaše in 1929. From 1941 to 1945 the Ustaše ruled the Jasenovac extermination camp, located in today's Republic of Croatia, just at the border with BiH. The main victims were Serbs, Jews, Roma and ethnic Croats and Muslims. After the German defeat and the advance of the Communist troops, Pavelić fled to Italy, and later South America to end up in Spain, welcomed by the Francoist regime. The Ustaše leader died in Madrid and his remains are buried in the cemetery of San Isidro. Together with his wife and children the family grave is situated in a mausoleum which can be visited today, as Micomicón actually did during the company rehearsals to get ready for the premiere in June 2017. In their own words:

Ante Pavelić's case should not surprise us. The only fascist regime in the whole of Europe at that time hosted Nazi criminals, who enjoyed retired life on our coasts and our islands. The former president of Ustaše Croatia chose a safe place when things became complicated for him in Argentina. And here he died. And there is his grave, just one kilometre away from where we rehearsed.

Unlike the process of remembering in Spain, which could only count on institutional support from 2007, and where, even in democratic times, it has not been possible to prosecute former criminal perpetrators due to the Amnesty Law approved in 1977 and still in force, in BiH investigations about war crimes started in 1996 and from the beginning counted on international funding and support. Despite this support, Bosnian society is still going through a painful process of remembering, where many surviving victims who suffered rape, abuse, losses, have not yet found a voice in the nation's political arena. In Spain, the tardiness of the institutional support for the 'defeated' during the war and the dictatorship has seen many survivors die in their eighties or nineties without receiving any kind of return to dignity or reparations. The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) founded in 2000 has been one of the most prominent bottom-up groups compensating the victims. While in BiH the relationship between bottom-up memory activism and governmental institutions, from both the inside and the outside remains complex, in Spain it has been non-existent until very recent times. Despite this apparently pessimistic scenario, in both societies activist movements are flourishing with the aim of achieving lasting peace and a more democratic way of living together.

²Original excerpt in Spanish: 'Lo de Ante Pavelic no debe sorprendernos. El único régimen fascista que permanecía en Europa acogió criminales nazis que vivieron una retirada vida en nuestras costas y en nuestras islas. El que fuera el presidente de la Croacia Ustacha eligió un lugar seguro cuando las cosas se le complicaron en Argentina. Y aquí murió. Y allí está su tumba, apenas a un kilómetro de donde ensayamos.'

How does *Where The Forest Thickens* put agonistic memory in practice?

Artistic creation differs from academic practice. They should both be creative, but artists have the possibility of framing their work within fiction. Fiction gives them an immense freedom that is crucial for experimentation with new and different ways of dealing with difficult pasts in the present. The joint forces of the academic and the artistic are extremely powerful in giving shape to the concept of agonistic memory since they combine the freedom of fantasy with the rigour of academic explorations. Both the artistic and the academic nurture each other in UNREST. It is not by chance that the work of cultural anthropologist and UNREST researcher Francisco Ferrándiz (CSIC) and his presentations on the 'scenographies of violence' within his research project Subtiero (<http://www.politicasdelamemoria.org/>) inspired Laila Ripoll and Mariano Llorente, who were already conscious of the memories of Spain's violent past.

Agonistic memory is a concept elaborated by UNREST researchers Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen. Bull and Hansen take Chantal Mouffe's critique of cosmopolitanism as a starting point for agonistic memory. Cosmopolitanism has proved unable to prevent and successfully confront the rise of populist neo-nationalist movements throughout Europe and the reinforcement of antagonistic relationships between different ideological groups. Cosmopolitan memory, according to Bull and Hansen, emphasizes human suffering of past atrocities and human rights violations and represents 'good' and 'evil' in abstract terms, whereas antagonistic memory, constructs 'rigid symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them", as well as a Manichean division of the historical characters into good and evil' (2015: 390, 393). In Bull and Hansen's words, 'right-wing populist nationalist movements, like the French Front National or the Austrian Freedom Party, have rearticulated the memory of nation-states in open antagonism to cosmopolitanism' (2015: 393).

Q: Can you identify any antagonistic or cosmopolitan approaches in political parties in your homeland?

In reaction to these two approaches, agonistic memory acknowledges and engages with widespread memory discontent without losing sight of fundamental European ideals and embraces political conflict as an opportunity for emotional and political growth. By avoiding the use of moral categories of good and evil, agonistic memory aims to re-politicise the remembrance of the past and create a symbolic space where, instead of enemies, ideologically different actors are considered legitimate adversaries.

From the perspective of artistic creation there are many ways of giving agonistic memory artistic shape. The theatre play *The Death and the Maiden* (1991) by Argentine-Chilean-American author Ariel Dorfmann or the film *The Reader* (2008) by Stephen Daldry contain some 'agonistic moments', in Hans Lauge Hansen's words, that mainly consist of a complex, multiperspectivist approach that makes it difficult to ascribe 'evil' or 'good' categories to characters and encourages audiences to be self-critical. Far from being monsters, perpetrators are part of the plot as well as victims and bystanders.

Q: Are you familiar with *The Death and the Maiden*? Roman Polanski directed a film inspired by Dorfmann's text in 1994. The theatrical script and the film end in different ways. How different are these endings and what do you think is the reason for this difference? Can you think of other works of art that could be described as agonistic?

Furthermore, role reversal between victims and perpetrators and again with spectators is used as a powerful resource to raise audience awareness about the fact that any violent conflict finally engages all society's actors. In this sense, agonistic memory works as a device to problematize the memory of past events and review the present in order to reconsider your own position towards the immediate future.

EMILJAN and ZORAN

The way the perpetrators are portrayed and / or included, and how this activates processes of self-awareness and self-criticism in spectators, are important aspects for the agonistic approach. Two perpetrators appear in *Where the Forest Thickens*: Emiljan Rukavina, Antonia's biological grandfather and ZORAN, Antonia's husband. The first, a convinced Ustaše who fought for the Spanish National Front during the Civil War, does not have his own voice. We find out about him through the words of other characters, ANTONIA, CARMEN, ZORAN, CHARLATANA, who present him in antagonistic terms.

Q: Take a look at the allusions to Emiljan Rukavina that appear in the play script and at his projected images in the staged performance's video. How can readers / spectators get to know him? Who is Emiljan Rukavina?

Conversely, ZORAN is one of the prominent figures in the play. We are able to listen to him without the filters of other characters. At the same time, he is one of the characters who best synthesises the authors' political thesis. At the end of the play, in the penultimate scene, ANTONIA, directly after returning home following her trip with her daughter, asks him:

Why, Zoran? Why? (Silence) Why was Zoran Stankovic Marko, the poet? (Silence) Why?



Emiljan Rukavina and Antonia's grandmother projected on the background ©Javier Naval



Juanjo Cucalón as Zoran, Arantxa Aranguren as Antonia and Carolina Herrera as Ana. ©Javier Naval



Carlos Jiménez-Alfaro as Marko and Puchi Lagarde as Irena. ©Javier Naval

Then ZORAN, who as a young man experienced the Siege of Sarajevo and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, explains the most obscure episode of his life through his own lens.

and in complex artistic works and events. There is however a lucid distinction that helps us to see whether a perspective is fundamentally cosmopolitan or agonistic:

Analysing the media representations of the Eichmann trial, Torgovnick discusses two different modes which she terms 'Eichmann is in all of us' and 'anyone could be Eichmann'. Whereas the former approach universalizes the potential for perpetration and bypasses the social circumstances in which perpetration becomes possible, telling us that we all have some evil inside, the latter gives priority to the historical contingencies of perpetration, forcing us to reflect upon our own way of responding to certain social circumstances. In this way, the two modes of remembrance lead the audience to two different kinds of reflection and self-reflection. (Bull and Hansen, 2015: 397)

³All excerpts from *Where the Forest Thickens* are from Elizabeth Hutchings' translation.

Q: Reflecting on ZORAN / MARKO's answer to Antonia, which memory mode do you identify his account with: antagonism, cosmopolitanism or agonism? Torgovnick's distinction may be useful here.

While in ZORAN / MARKO's discourses the three modes of remembering are represented, the cosmopolitan one is highlighted. It is only in the interaction of different social actors –between ANTONIA and ZORAN, the authors of the script and the readers, the actors on the stage and the spectators– that the aesthetic and ethical choices of *Where the Forest Thickens* can emerge and have an impact in the political domain. In other words, to find out how the three memory modes at stake take shape in *Where the Forest Thickens* we need to link at least two actors, because agonistic memory is a concept that makes us question the ways we see others and behave with them. An 'other' is therefore needed.

a) ZORAN and ANTONIA

They are married and, until ZORAN's revelation that he is a former war criminal at the end of the play, they show a strong and supportive relationship.

Q: Do you agree? Can you find early signs of ZORAN's past identity? Can you observe any visible signs that show that Antonia, Isabel and Ana are affected by the violent past and family trauma?

Everything seems to take a drastic turn when ANTONIA finds out about ZORAN's past as a war criminal in the 1990s in BiH. After his confession, when he explains how he organised the massacre of many Muslim compatriots following his extreme suffering because of the violent massacre of several members of his family by Bosniak armed men, ANTONIA does not take him seriously. She thinks that ZORAN has invented the episode with the Bosniak girl called Irena, like ZORAN's mother, when she refers to it with CHARLATANA:

'He's gone. Disappeared forever. I suppose he'll find somewhere else, another identity, another family. He'll invent another past and when he gets found out he'll recite his litany again, of little girls with their throats slit who had his mother's name and died in his arms with his father's eyes.'

ANTONIA also feels betrayed, as her following words reflect:

'He never repented. He just wanted to stay in his hiding place; carry on with his lies for a few more years, tainting us by making us his accomplices. Tainting me, and, what I'll never be able to forgive him for, tainting his daughter. I waited a few hours and called the police. I don't know if he had time to get away. Nor do I care.'

Even though ZORAN has not been presented as a monster, ANTONIA does not consider him as such but simply as a liar, there is no possibility of empathy or reflection by ANTONIA on ZORAN's speech. The socio-political circumstances, which, from the agonistic perspective, are crucial in disarticulating evil as a moral category, are irrelevant for ANTONIA, who feels betrayed in the most personal and intimate way. In this sense, from the perspective of agonistic memory we need to broaden the scope, because this mode of remembering also needs to operate in the collective arena. ANTONIA calls the police but she is alone in judging ZORAN's evil acts. Like thousands of Spaniards of her generation and the two previous ones –corresponding to ANTONIA's mother and grandmother in the play– she lacks the governmental and judicial support to democratically prosecute war criminals.

b) ZORAN and the authors, Laila Ripoll and Mariano Llorente

As mentioned before, ZORAN synthesises the authors' political thesis, which logically also carries aesthetic implications. At a round table convened on the occasion of the premiere of the performance of *Where the Forest Thickens* in the Teatro Español in Madrid in May 2018, Laila Ripoll referred to ZORAN in similar terms to ANTONIA, as a liar. According to Ripoll it was not until she was rehearsing the scenes corresponding to ZORAN's speech about his assassinations and the episode with the Bosniak girl named Irena with the actors Juanjo Cucalón and Arantxa Aranguren –ZORAN and ANTONIA respectively– that she realised that ZORAN actually invented that story. Taking this into account, ZORAN's following confession is highlighted without any counterbalance:

'I came to have limitless contempt for the Bosniaks. Killing a Bosniak was like crushing a worm'

ZORAN then becomes evil, above all, in the eyes of the audience. As Bull and Hansen illustrate with the figure of Hitler in the film *Downfall* (2004), the cosmopolitan mode shows the human part of the perpetrator but ‘when the perpetrator exceeds certain unimaginable ethical limits, in this case when Hitler decides that the German people must be destroyed because they had proved unable to realize his vision of the Thousand-Year-Reich, the spectator feels assured that he or she would never be able to do that’ (2015: 398). Throughout the audience analyses carried out in Spain, BiH and Poland, it has proven very difficult for people to empathise with the character of ZORAN and extremely challenging to activate self-critical processes taking his figure as a starting point. No stakeholder has on their own initiative felt compelled to put themselves in ZORAN’s shoes either because they considered him evil in antagonistic and / or cosmopolitan terms or because they put themselves in ANTONIA’s shoes and empathise with her feeling of being betrayed. There are also aesthetic reasons for this reluctant position like the excessive length of his speech, as some stakeholders pointed out, which made them detach from the plot. There are, however, ways to work with the character of ZORAN in agonistic terms, as we will see in the sections ‘ZORAN and yourself’ and ‘Activities to carry out with audiences after the performance’.

c) ZORAN and his daughter ANA

Putting ZORAN’s speech and ANA’s reaction side-by-side opens up a possibility not explored in the play and that is relevant for agonistic memory. Indeed, the relationship between them is that of a father and a daughter. Referring to collective memory in Spain, Ana belongs to the fourth generation –the ‘generation of postmemory’, after Marianne Hirsch’s concept– and the children, sons and grandsons of perpetrators have to face other challenges than the previous generations. In the play ANA is the main driver of the initiation journey she begins with her mother. Commonly in perpetrators’ children it is possible to distinguish a two-sided, split position towards their fathers: on the one hand, they remain loyal to them as close relatives, ignoring their fathers’ crimes during their childhood; on the other, they condemn their crimes once they find out about them but do not reject the perpetrators as fathers. This is what happens to ANA in the play, she seems very emotionally attached to ZORAN and incapable of breaking contact with him as ANTONIA does.

The memories of perpetrators’ children and their discourses are extremely relevant today because they appear in a new light in relation to current political debates and social movements. In Argentina, for example, the movement *Historias desobedientes* [Disobedient stories/histories] (<http://www.historiasdesobedientes.com/>), set up by children of military officers during the last dictatorship in the country (1976-1983), aims to actively participate in the broader feminist movement that has been strengthened and globalised in the last years. Perpetrators abused women in very particular ways, which are now denounced by their children, who are active adults and demand new laws that end male chauvinism and violence. In the example of the Second World War collective memory in Germany, the case of Rolf Mengele, the son of the Nazi doctor who used prisoners in Auschwitz as guinea pigs for his medical experiments, is a paradigmatic one. While he rejected Mengele’s crimes, Rolf publicly defended his support to his father as a man and helped him escape justice during his exile in Brazil. You can find out more about this dual position in The New York Times article of June 1986: <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/18/world/mengele-s-son-admits-engaging-in-cover-up.html>.

d) ZORAN and yourself

An important level in understanding agonistic memory and in active engagement with *Where the Forest Thickens* is to apply the internal issues brought up in its plot to one’s self. Chantal Mouffe’s states this clearly when, among other artists, she refers to Alfredo Jaar’s street installation *Questions, Questions* in her book *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (2013):

What is particularly interesting in this form of intervention is its mode of unsettling common sense by posing apparently simple questions, albeit questions that, in the specific context of the intervention, are likely to trigger reflections that will arouse discontent with the current state of things.

You can find out more about Jaar’s project on his website <http://www.alfredojaar.net/index1.html>. Among the questions Jaar asked the citizens of Milan we can highlight the following one: ‘Abbiamo dimenticato la cultura?’ [Have we forgotten culture?]. Who is the WE in this question? To try to answer this kind of question is a good self-reflexive exercise. Without self-reflection there is no way nor political agonism either agonistic memory can deploy its transformative potential and impact social actors.

Why was this play commissioned and how was it developed?

Academic research projects in the Humanities need to engage more actively with society's most relevant matters. The European Union set out as a prerequisite for all funded research projects on its Horizon 2020 programme that they include a whole section dedicated to social impact. UNREST applicants decided that artistic initiatives should play an important role in this dimension of the project, being coherent with Mouffe's ideas on agonistic interventions in society, such as Jaars' installation *Questions, Questions*. When putting together the impact section, Francisco Ferrándiz, who already had a close friendship with Laila Ripoll and Mariano Llorente, asked Micomicón to be part of UNREST's application. They accepted.

For Micomicón it was challenging to become part of an academic project and to create a play with the prerequisite of giving shape to agonistic memory, a term they had never heard about before. They talk about their work with the concept of agonistic memory in the following terms:

[The most challenging thing] was to come to understand what was behind the concept, after having realised many contradictions in many positions, we became familiar with what agonistic memory actually means during the creation of *Where the Forest Thickens*. In the end, the text and the show –this is a fact– provokes an intense commotion and great unrest, it is not indulgent, questions some hegemonic truths, irritates, reveals some truths, raises harsh questions and entertains.⁴

From the concept to the stage, intense coaching between UNREST researchers and Micomicón took place during the first, embryonic idea, and the writing of the play.

Potential benefits of working with agonistic memory practices in the theatre

Theatre is a laboratory for life and life enters the theatre as soon as spectators appear. Thus political art is not about topics but aesthetics. No matter how artists play with the concept and create inspired by agonistic memory, this mode of remembering requires a high interaction between social actors. Theatre, in its staged form, is interactive by all means, since the theatrical event always implies at least two people who relate to each other in some way. The renowned British theatre director, Peter Brook, defines theatre in the following succinct and helpful way: 'A man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him'.

Accordingly, theatre practice as an event that happens in the here and now of actors and spectators offers agonistic memory a suitable format to emerge and use its potential to appeal to social actors.

⁴Original: 'Pues acertar a comprender lo que había detrás del concepto, después de apreciar enormes contradicciones en muchas de las opiniones al respecto que íbamos recabando durante los meses de creación del espectáculo. Al final, el texto y el espectáculo – esto es una constatación– produce una enorme conmoción y un enorme desasosiego, no es nada complaciente, cuestiona algunas verdades hegemónicas, levanta ampollas, revela algunas verdades, plantea duros interrogantes y entretiene.'

Cultural challenges of showing the play in different contexts

Using a Theatre of the Grotesque

Through the audience analysis of the live performance and the video of the world-premiere in Spain, BiH and Poland, it has been possible to identify some cultural challenges of showing the play in different contexts with various ways of dealing with difficult pasts. Even though we cannot generalise about these challenges and understand them as cultural identity attributes that define a whole society, some insights into the different responses to the play in different European settings can orient us through the cultural imaginaries that frame stakeholders' reactions to the same event.

If we look at the above-mentioned characteristic use of the grotesque by Micomicón, in Poland this kind of grotesque humour when referring atrocities is often taken as a provocation. However, such a provocation does not necessarily work in a dissuasive way, but as a warning about the play's aesthetics and as a reminder of a similar aesthetics in the Polish theatre tradition. Informed Polish spectators will be aware of Tadeusz Kantor's Absurdist theatre and his Theatre of Death. You can find more about Kantor's aesthetics here: <https://culture.pl/en/article/kantors-theatre-of-death-in-five-scenes>. Kantor plays an important role in the Polish cultural imaginary. This theatrical source, with which Polish stakeholders can identify, eases the introduction to agonistic memory in *Where the Forest Thickens* and paves the way for the activation of self-reflective and self-critical processes in audiences. However, grotesque and Absurdist aesthetics are not in principle theatrical forms that advocate the transformative power of art and, in a broader, ultimate sense, aim for the political transformation of society and contribute to it.

In *Where the Forest Thickens*, humour is used to lighten serious moments, but it does not necessarily lead spectators to a feeling of hope or willingness to transform themselves ideologically and change their reality. Chantall Mouffe (2005) designates 'hope' and 'indignation' as agonistic passions. Spectators' emotions and ability to be self-critical and question their assumptions depend on multiple factors. Here it is worth mentioning a double cultural challenge in this regard: On the one hand, the degree of implication felt by a given spectator in the historical events in the play depends on the extent to which a given spectator's collective is named and if it plays a prominent or minor role in the plot. On the other hand, the collective narrative that is hegemonic in a given spectator's society at the time he or she attends or watches *Where the Forest Thickens* influences his or her reception. In the case of Polish stakeholders, the degree of implication was much smaller than in the case of Spanish and Bosnian stakeholders. Indeed, Polish stakeholders were able to allow themselves distance from the play's historical account and grotesque humour aesthetics which was not possible for spectators from Spain and BiH.

Dealing with the rawness of recent history

Spanish audiences feel directly addressed by *Where the Forest Thickens*'s plot, characters and political message. Regarding the above-mentioned difficulties for giving dignity to the victims of the Civil War and Francoism in Spain the fact that the play gives the floor to a perpetrator like ZORAN, even though he committed his war crimes in BiH, he is often questioned and felt to be morally and politically objectionable by Spanish stakeholders. Paradoxically, in BiH, where the war is so recent, a character like ZORAN, so problematic for Spanish audiences, is understandable and familiar to many Bosnian stakeholders. Even though the appearance of ZORAN, born in Sarajevo to a Serbian father and a Croatian mother, alerts spectators from BiH in a much more intense and conscious way than in the case of Spain and Poland, where many recognised not knowing much about the Balkan Wars, Bosnian spectators are much more familiar with perpetrator discourses. The generation that has first-hand experience of the war is still relatively young in BiH. Many of them were still children in the 1990s. Memories of the war in BiH are transmitted through only two generations. Although there is still a long way to go before giving absolute dignity and reparations to victims, finding those who disappeared, living together in a satisfactory way, and the desire to build lasting peace and not repeat recent past crimes is a priority for audiences in BiH. This approach partly explains why ZORAN is a much more understandable character in BiH than in Spain.

Despite the predisposition of Bosnian audiences described, there have been some stakeholders who considered the character of ZORAN as inaccurate, irreverent and out of place from a moral perspective. Above all, Bosnian audiences were mainly grateful and surprised that a Spanish theatre company actually showed such interest in their history and were inspired by it to create a new play. This is a very obvious trait in Bosnian citizens nowadays: they feel so abandoned by the EU that any attempt to account for their history is appreciated. For Bosnian and Polish audiences Micomición is a foreign theatre company and therefore they do not make high demands of them. This attitude would probably be repeated in other European contexts.

Finally, the way that a given stakeholder reacts to the challenges of the play also depends on his or her understanding of fiction. Some stakeholders from the three European settings took fiction 'too seriously' in the sense that they expected a certain political statement according to their ideological assumptions and felt disappointed when their assumptions and the play's message did not correspond. Such a disappointment can become very fruitful for political agonism because it also creates a kind of unsettling feeling.

HOW TO STAGE THE PLAY

'Total freedom when faced with a complex text, with lots of information which needs to be assimilated. You stage a text because you love it. From then on...'⁵

This is Micomición's main piece of advice for anyone who aims to stage the play.

What are the key issues to consider?

Lots of information

In the words quoted above, Laila Ripoll and Mariano Llorente point out the volume of information that directors and actors need to assimilate in order to perform *Where the Forest Thickens*. The play interweaves many different time periods and European settings and contains specific historical episodes, that are told by the actors. During the audience interviews several stakeholders made comments on the length of the performance. Many of them found it too long and difficult to follow, precisely because of the high number of dates, historical events and characters involved, and the excessive length of ZORAN's speech in the final scenes. To stage the play it would be important to consider cutting down some fragments to make the chain of events flow. In this process, highlighting the detective story-like structure of the play would be very useful to keep the spectators' attention. Adding some signs of ZORAN's obscure past at the beginning would cause the spectators to be curious about the outcome of the plot. This strategy would enhance suspense and dramatic tension.

Many characters

Another aspect to consider when the staging of the play would be how to deal with the high number of characters. There are eighteen characters, most of them with small roles. As mentioned in previous sections, Emiljan Rukavina and Rafael Cobreces Galilea are also crucial characters for the plot's progression and a company that plans to stage the play needs to find out how to play all of them. A technique, which is very popular in theatre traditions from all over the world, is to make each actor play different characters, as Laila Ripoll has done in her staging of *Where the Forest Thickens*.

Tone: Humour and atrocities: How to handle unsettling moments

The theatre group Micomición has wide experience in representing violent and difficult pasts on stage. The blending of serious and light tone is one of the most characteristic traits of Micomición's aesthetic. They merge grotesque farce with the seriousness of violent, tense moments where atrocities are represented without the counterbalance of humour. Micomición's aesthetics are influenced by expressionist and symbolist theatre (Rasilla, 2013: 12), but above all, Micomición's theatre is fuelled by the unique aesthetics of one of the most important playwrights in the Spanish tradition, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), and his genre of esperpento (a theatre genre created by Valle-Inclán that resembles the European Grotesque). The use of humour is definitely an effective way of staging violence and gives the audience the opportunity to release the tension of serious scenes through comical ones.

⁵Original in Spanish: 'Libertad absoluta para enfrentarse a un texto complejo, con mucha información que sí hay que tener asimilada. Los textos se montan porque se aman. A partir de ahí...'

Q: Have you ever heard about the theatre genre of esperpento? Can you think of any similar artistic forms in your own cultural tradition?

Persuading the audience (to be self-critical, to act)

Finally, and crucial to agonistic memory, how to find strategies to persuade spectators and make them feel directly involved is one of the challenges of staging *Where the Forest Thickens*. Laila Ripoll uses CHARLATANA as a prominent figure to address spectators, but there are other characters, like ANA and ANTONIA, and definitely ZORAN, who could be more fruitfully used in this way. The script does not contain many fragments where the audience is directly addressed, for example, when CHARLATANA says:

All of you, I'm talking to all of you, including those of you who bombed your own people and blamed others, and to you, the illustrious intellectuals who taught emotion and sowed hatred; to the journalists who manipulated images and laughed at other people's victims; to the paraplegia of the European leaders, and to the calculated greed of the powers that devour the Balkans and convert a sick man into a prosperous client.

A more explicit, physical interaction between the stage and the audience would be relevant for agonistic memory's aim to activate self-reflection and self-criticism in spectators as well as to enhance actors and spectators' live experience to make the most of the possibilities of interaction between stage and audience.

Activities to carry out with audiences after the performance

Activities directed at enhancing the audience's agonistic experience are worth highlighting here. The activities aimed at fulfilling this goal, not only in the case of *Where the Forest Thickens*, but in any theatrical event, should focus on breaking the fourth wall between the stage and the audience to enhance interaction and stimulate role reversal in order to encourage each spectator to put him or herself in the shoes of ZORAN / MARKO, ANTONIA and ANA.

In the UNREST project, we have used the following activities:

- **Open debate directly after the performance**

After the world-premiere on 22 June 2017 in Teatro del Bosque (Móstoles, Madrid), the entire theatre company, UNREST academic researchers and about 80 spectators exchanged their impressions, doubts and critiques on the performance. It is always fruitful for spectators as well as director and actors to be able to talk and receive feedback about the project.

On this occasion, UNREST researchers led the debate to drive it to key issues addressing agonistic memory, but it could be organised in alternative ways. Structuring the debate according to concrete goals such as a key concept or a relevant topic for the understanding of the play is highly recommended. A moderator who poses questions and guides the debate is also important to achieve the aimed goals. Unstructured debates are discouraged.



Micomición, researchers and audience at open debate right after the world-premiere at Teatro del Bosque. June 22, 2017. ©Javier Naval

- **Interviews**

In the UNREST project, we have conducted individual interviews in person, where proximity and trust between interviewer and interviewee have proven to be extremely important. Effective questions to enhance aesthetic experience and exercise role reversal are, for example:

- a) Did the performance fulfil your expectations?
- b) Was there a particular scene and / or character that attracted your attention? Why?
- c) If you had to play any of the characters, which one would you choose? Why?
- d) Do you remember any lines from the play? Which ones? Why?
- e) If you were ANTONIA, what would you have done to ZORAN after hearing about his past crimes in the Balkan Wars?
- f) If you were ANA, what would you have done to ZORAN after hearing about his past crimes in the Balkan Wars?
- g) Do you consider ZORAN a victim, a perpetrator or something different?
- h) Does ZORAN deserve your compassion, your contempt, perhaps your rage? Are any other emotions raised by ZORAN's performance?
- i) Did you laugh during the performance? What do you think about the use of humour in *Where the Forest Thickens*?

- **Using personal objects**

Ask interview participants to bring personal objects with them that they can relate to their own past. It is an effective way of considering the relevance of each person's background and to include it in their account of the performance. Personal objects trigger emotions and allow them to be expressed in words in an easier way. Emotions, no matter what kind, are always at stake when it comes to expressing aesthetic experience.

- **Short encounters, right after attending the performance**

Many spectators are keen to share their experiences immediately after the performance. If they liked the experience, they are also willing to share their impressions with strangers. Short encounters, mini-dialogues, between interviewer and interviewees in the theatre or just outside can also be fruitful. These encounters cannot go as deep as qualitative interviews in exploring personal experiences of the theatrical event, but they constitute a fresh, direct way of grasping the initial reactions and comments of a large number of spectators.

- **Online surveys**

Digital tools, like smart phones, tablets or kiosks with touch screens, can be very valuable in enhancing audience experiences and interacting with them even if it is in deferred time. These digital devices can contain short questions about any aspect of the performance. Spectators can choose to answer them straightaway at the theatre or take them home to give feedback later. These tools are very valuable in following up audiences' reactions and thoughts over a period of time. People's impressions change over time and often these changes are difficult to keep track of. Digital tools provide effective means for keeping a record of even the most apparently impulsive, superficial comments, which can become relevant a few months later.

- **Postcards**

It can be a good idea to leave postcards with just one question in the theatre to let people freely share their first impressions of the performance in a written, confidential way. Museum visitor books are not usually used with theatre audiences, but they can also work well in this context.

Other activities could be:

- **Focus-group interviews**

Any topic debated in small groups shows collective dynamics that are important in enhancing experiences at the theatre. It can be beneficial to interact with other small groups like the theatre company. Unlike the large group debate which can be organised directly after the performance, small group discussions are more manageable for going deeper into relevant topics.

- **Theatre talks**

Theatre talks are a method for working with theatre audiences developed by the theatre scholar Willmar Sauter. They consist of accompanying small groups of spectators when they leave the theatre after the performance to ask them about their experiences that evening at the theatre and listen to their responses. Sauter designed this method because he observed that sometimes spectators are reluctant to share their experiences and opinions on a given performance with strangers, but they usually do it with friends or relatives in a confident and honest way. Sauter uses restaurants, bars and even peoples' private homes to carry out these talks. You can find out more about this method here: https://eprints.usq.edu.au/2454/2/scollen_excerpt.pdf

- **Working in groups**

Conducting workshops with groups of spectators can be an effective way of making audiences interact and activating self-reflection and self-criticism in them.

The re-staging of particular scenes selected by spectators, choosing some actors and spectators to play different characters and others to serve as an audience allows them to exercise role reversal. Role reversal opens the door to working with several key aspects: self-reflection and self-criticism because it allows people to play others and therefore to act and feel like others, understanding them from their own perspectives. It also empowers spectators who are no longer protected by passivity or anonymity but who become actors playing a role, thus enhancing their theatrical experience.

Another activity to carry out in groups consists of giving a few sentences to each group as a starting point for a debate or a future staging of the play. These sentences can vary and have different aims, for example 'Where the Forest Thickens's performance moved me in a way...'; 'I felt bored sometimes in the theatre because...'; 'I wish ANTONIA would have...'; 'If I were ZORAN, I would ...'; 'The performance made me think of my own family because...'; 'Exhumations of human remains resulting from collective violence are...'; 'Theatre should provide accounts of...'

All the suggested activities aim to engage you with *Where the Forest Thickens* and its potential for agonistic memory. However, it is your own creativity what will allow you to make the most of this pedagogical experience!

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M I C O M I C Ó N



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