The audience begins the walk up the long and green ski slope, framed by forest on both sides. As they walk ghosts garbed in black robes flit from tree to tree, following, or fleeing; one can’t be certain. A tall ghost robed in black waits in the centre of the slope, his face masked by a hood. The crowd approaches; he halts them with a raised hand. Slowly he turns and begins to sing the traditional folk tune “Radule” as he leads the audience up the rest of the hill. In the woods we hear echoes of the song from the moving ghosts. The sound of a rhythm becomes gradually audible; the low beat of a drum, the ticking of hollow sticks and the washing of sand upon a shore.

At the top of the hill there is a clearing framed by bushes which give way to the trees farther up the mountain. In the middle of the clearing sits Lunjo atop a tree stump. Garbed in tattered burlap festooned with the evidence of his obsessive sewing, he gazes at the audience as they settle. He welcomes them to his home; he has lived on the mountain all his adult life. He offers a select member of the audience one of his cigarette butts as a welcome gift.

Lunjo tells the audience the mountain is a repository of stories, of people, animals, and elements. To illustrate his point he introduces five of his friends, Fox, Tree, Field, Stream, and Stone. Each appears out of the woods, a moving embodiment of their natural essence. Each tells a story of their life on the mountain. Fox, how she lost her first cub and learned she must keep moving; Tree, of the things he has seen under his branches; Field, of a little girl who played, and was buried, in her soil; Stream, of the power he felt when he was young and the way in which he used it; Stone, of being trapped in a boy’s pocket and being taken to a city.

When they depart Lunjo spies Milovan in the distance, heading for the clearing. He tells us to wait and watch and moves off to the side to watch, himself. Milovan, a tall youthful young man, walks resolutely into the centre circle, carrying a sack on a stick. It holds all his belongings, or at least the ones he could carry with him when his house was pillaged. It is the great Serbian migration of the late 17th century, and he is heading north, and west, to a land where he hears they speak Hungarian. He knows it is the last time he will see his home, even though he says he hopes to return. He rises, and walks off around a tall bush, disappearing from sight.

Lunjo tells the audience to follow Milovan and heads off around the bush. As the audience fills in the narrow space between the bushes and the forest we see that the young man has lost his sack and now wears the military hat of a Partisan. He bears an axe and is frozen in the act of cutting wood. With a scream his wife runs out of the woods and embraces him, bringing Miloš to life. She tells him she wishes to leave with him and fight the Chetniks as well, to defend their home together. They argue. He repeats her name, Olga, Olga, to calm her down. She cannot go; someone has to remain to guard the house. He walks over to the bush and picks up the axe he was using, and hands it to her. With a last embrace he heads into the woods to fight. Lunjo urges us to follow.

In the woods the audience finds Miloš crouched against a tree, dirty, tired, and frightened. It is the Balkans in the second great war, the 1940s. He talks about how when he went off to fight he believed that war was an orderly affair, but now he knows that it’s chaotic. He doesn’t know where the border is; it keeps changing, and he’s afraid to move for fear of being found by the German border guards. He dreams of Olga, of being able to go into town for a pint of beer or to watch a football match, and he becomes more and more angry at the loss and futility he sees around him. In an instant he is on his feet shouting in frustration at what he has been made to do. A moment later we hear the shouts, in German, of the border guards. Deep in the woods we see their flashlights approaching, dancing from tree to tree. Terrified, Miloš jumps behind a tree. The guards move off to the left of the audience, shouting to remain in contact with each other in the gathering gloom. Miloš runs up a small hill to the right. Lunjo, watching the scene from behind his own tree, peers out and tells us to follow him.

The audience marches along a path paved with pine needles, tree bark and broken branches, with the tendrils of trees on either side scratching at their faces and clothes like mendicants begging for attention. As they approach a figure in white can be seen, frozen in position over a bucket. It is Olga, but some centuries earlier. It is now 1389, the date of the definitive battle of Serbian identity, Kosovo Polje. Miloslav, the young man, sits on a tree stump, naked to the waits, waiting for his wife to wash him. It is a ritual act. When she is finished they both know he will leave for the field of blackbirds. The woman washes him carefully, lovingly, but without sentiment. She is sending him power and resolution. When his head bows momentarily she thrusts the rag into his hands to finish. They do not speak. She hands him his mace and returns to the bucket to wring out the rag she has taken back, turning away from her husband. He waits for her to turn around, to bid her adieu, but she does not turn. He leaves. Lunjo tells us to follow on into the woods.

The audience rises and moves through a clutch of young pines, leafless and skinny like a beardless young boy. Through them we can see a dark-robed figure. There are shouts, of hatred, fear and pain, and the figure appears to be battling a phantom amongst the trees. In the middle of a small clearing Miloslav stands frozen, holding his mace as it enters the ground. Behind him a second black-robed figure swings and sways at the air, grunting with exertion and the fear of an animal who recognises instinctively a fight that will end in death. Farther into the woods two more figures battle phantoms with increasing desperation.

In the midst of the chaos and shouting Miloslav rises, the mace dangling from his hands. He tells of the brutality of hand-to-hand combat, of the utter lack of nobility in battle, of trying to find nobility and a reason to keep fighting before death or despair overcomes you. With a shout he answers his own question of the value of war, “Ništa!”, nothing. At the sound the four warriors sprint from their places to take the positions of one of the others, initiating a new fight with a new phantom. When Miloslav says. “Can there be anything more noble than to fight for one’s country?” and answers himself “Yes”, the warriors sprint from one position to another once again, changing position but not their fate, trading phantom enemies but not their despair. Miloslav throws down his mace and strides through the middle of the crowd to the edge of the forest. Lunjo has disappeared. The two ghosts playing rhythm accompaniment to each scene, with recorder, hollow sticks, and triangle, silently indicate to the crowd that they should turn.

They find the third incarnation of Olga, seated on a rock as the slow-motion figure of Miloslav gradually disappears through the tree line and down a small hill. It is the 1990s. She holds a letter of draft notice; her husband was not going to tell her that he is required to go and fight. She rages in the room of her home as if he is still there, crying at the injustice of being made to fight for something they should not have to defend, for the tearing of the sanctity of their home and lives. She tears off her white dress and throws it on the ground as he recedes further and further from view. He disappears. She sits, defeated. The rhythm players move through the audience and down the ridge at the edge of the forest, and the audience rises to follow, silently filing by the still, grieving figure of the woman.

The late evening sunlight greets them as they emerge from the trees, gingerly picking their way down the slope. They are greeted by the site of a young woman washing clothes at the bank of a river. She seems lost in thought, or dreams, as she wrings the clothes. A young man appears in the thicket of trees behind her, watching her. She slowly becomes aware of his presence and turns to face him. Boldly, he walks by her, smiling, and washes his face in the river. She steals glances at him as he does so. Rising, he takes off his shirt and begins to wash it. The woman intentionally drops a piece of her clothing into the quick-flowing stream. As it passes by him he sees it , moving quickly into the water to pick it up. She follows along the bank and extends her hand outward, signalling that he should return it to her. As she reaches for it he pulls it away, forcing her to step into the stream to take it back. They are connected through the piece of clothing; he pulls it, and pulls her to him, and for a few moments they are face-to-face, their bodies touching. She closes her eyes, waiting for the first kiss of a lifetime of kisses.

It never comes. The young man disappears. When she opens her eyes she is confused; she wanders down the stream as if to find him. When she turns back she sees a figure in the distance, garbed in the black robe of those who have passed to another realm. It is her lover, Radule, and he has left his young love to wonder what to do with rest of her life without him. She begins to sing the folk song first heard by the audience as they walked up the mountain, calling Radule’s name. Behind the audience, five ghosts with lanterns quietly begin to sing along with her. When she stops, unable to sing any longer, they continue, walking past the edge of the audience and leading them back into the clearing where they first met Lunjo. The audience files by the frozen figure of the woman, gazing hopefully, fearfully, into the distance.

The ghosts place the lanterns around the edge of the clearing and Lunjo takes his seat at the stump. He tells the audience of the secret of the mountains, of how human and animal, water and earth are all part of one entity, and often, even the same. As an illustration he describes a party he once held on the mountain for his friends. He turns and barks like a dog. From the upper woods we see various animals tentatively peering out from the scrub. He urges them to come out; it’s safe, these are friendly people, he says. From their movement we can recognise two rabbits, a squirrel, a bumble bee, a mosquito, a snake and a cow. A deer uncertainly prances into the circle. At the far edge of the clearing Cockroach frowns and turns away, preferring to pronounce judgment rather than risk exclusion. Lunjo encourages them to take their human forms; he barks again, and a bit reluctantly, or perhaps bashfully, they transform into the human versions of their animal psyches.

Lunjo walks from one to the other, introducing them. These animals often walk amongst you, he says to the audience; you just can’t recognise them. They are all terribly excited to be at the party. The squirrel stammers, the female rabbit urges Lunjo to introduce her to the male rabbit over on the other side. Snake sizes up the situation while Cow moos out a version of Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face”. Bee buzzes with excitement to be at her first dance and Mosquito talks incessantly in a high-pitched whine. Lunjo tries to introduce Cockroach, but she spits at him and she retreats. Bear hasn’t arrived, he notes; he’s always late. Lunjo has forgotten how this story turns out. He signals that the party has begun.

Bee bumbles over to Cow, buzzing excitedly around his head, while the female Rabbit quickly corners the cowering male. Snake traps Squirrel into a dance that we know will end badly, while Lunjo transforms into a dog and lies on his side, accepting a scratching from Mosquito. It’s another dance, filled with hormones, misunderstandings and energy.

In the distance we hear a hearty shout. Here comes Bear. Everyone moves ever so slightly away from the centre; they don’t want to leave, but they don’t want to be the focus of Bear’s injuriously friendly style. He rolls and sways into the circle with loud greetings for all. He slaps Lunjo on the back, flattening the dog. He moves to Cow and Bee, winking at the fact they are a pair and crushing them together in a big hug. He cries out in recognition of his buddy Snake, who is busy groping the terrified Squirrel. Bear detaches them from each other and as squirrel runs to the edge of the forest Bear tries to give Snake a big hug. Snake slithers through his grasp, in and around his feet, before rising and saying he’ll catch him later, he’s a little busy with a pet project at the moment. The pet project stands cowering in the trees. Bear moves on to the rabbits, who have moved to a bush and bend over with their bottoms facing the circle, both shaking in fear. Bear mimics their quivering bottoms and reluctantly they have to acknowledge that they have been discovered. They smile too quickly and speak in paroxysms of strained politeness, desperate for him to leave. Bear is aware of none of this. He moves on to say hello to cockroach, who hisses and sprints, arms and legs waving madly, across the circle to the far edge of the trees.

Bear looks around for someone to talk to. Deer stands, frozen, aware all along that sooner or later she would have to greet him. She is tall, graceful, and lonely, the kind of girl we remember from the high school dance who is too beautiful to be liked by the other girls, and too intelligent and refined to be sought after by the boys. Consequently she is defenceless as Bear sees her. He is stunned. After a silence he greets her warmly. He extends his hand and, reluctantly, she shakes it. He takes this favourable signals permission to yank her into a dance. She resists immediately, pushing him away forcefully. He is abashed. They stand, looking at each other.

Deer quickly decides she must do something before Bear approaches her again. She moves to the trees where much rustling and tree branch-breaking indicates that Snake has been mauling Squirrel. She jerks Snake away from the bewildered rodent and begins to dance with him. Squirrel, her hair wildly askew, moves in little starts and stops, totally disoriented. Snake slicks back his hair and begins to seduce Deer. In an involuntary moment she looks at Bear, silently wishing she had not begun this dance. Bear, boiling with anger since the dance with Snake has begun, moves to the dancing couple, detaches Snake and punches him, toppling him to the ground. Snake hisses in fury as Bear roughly pulls Deer to him once again. She slaps him in the face and the sound makes his humiliation clear to all the animals, watching avidly from the fringes of the circle.

Bear strides away, intent on going home. Snake quickly rises, collects Dog and Cow and runs after Bear, determined to exact revenge. It’s the fight outside the hockey arena in northern Ontario. Bear turns to see his assailants coming. He flips Snake effortlessly onto his back and clips Dog on the back of the head, sending him howling down the road. Cow has been slower in coming and as Bear rounds on him he puts up his arms as if to say “no harm” and sidesteps the angry Bear. The posse of three disappear around a corner in the road.

Bear is now determined to return to the dance. As he does, all the animals rush away. He and Deer are alone. She stands, defiant and a bit afraid, in the centre of the clearing. Bear moves toward her uncertainly. He apologises for his roughness, his crude ways; he doesn’t want to hurt her, he just wants to dance with her. He moves towards her but the movement is again too quick and too forceful and she backs away.

Fighting his humiliation, and his certainty that she is the One, Bear announces that, as she will not dance with him, he will dance alone. He begins to dance a bizarre mélange of folk steps from various courting dances, with great gusto and energy. Every few moments he glances at her to see if she is watching. He tries ridiculous steps; he knows he looks foolish and grins. He is not going to stop dancing until she gives in. Already she is smiling, the door to her heart opened by his vulnerability, rather than being torn off its hinges by his force.

He does a particularly ludicrous step, and, laughing, she steps in to save him from himself. She takes his hands and places them in a proper dancing position, and she begins to lead him in a slow waltz. He is happy, but unsure; he doesn’t know the steps, as one never does in love. One merely follows as best one can. They dance.

In the distance she spots the posse. It has returned, and the three animals stand menacingly at the edge of the clearing, armed with thick branches. As Deer stops dancing Bear turns to look at what she is watching and sees Snake, Dog, and Cow. He shouts at them to come and do what they want to do; he is not afraid. But as the sprint towards him he runs off into the mountains, never to see his Deer again.

Along the road, as Snake and Cow disappear into the gloaming, Dog transforms back into Lunjo. He slowly returns to the clearing. Deer has disappeared. He tells us the ending of the story of the Dancing Bear. Bear, he says, wandered the mountains, always looking for his love. Whenever he saw a deer, or humans who might be deer in disguise, he would rise on his hind legs and begin to dance. Behind Lunjo we see Bear, who has lumbered through the scrub and now sees the audience. He rises on his hind legs and dances in the awkward way of a circus animal. Lunjo regrets the part he played in this tale, but, like all stories, it is both past and present and it is what it is. He calls the Bear into the circle, where it sits, regarding the audience.

The darkness is gathering, Lunjo says, and now it’s time for the animals to take back the mountain. You’ve been welcome, but now you have to go. He calls out his friends to say goodbye, and Fox, Field, Stone, Cow, the Two Lovers, the Warrior and his love, and Deer return to the periphery of the clearing. Lunjo joins them amidst the low glow of the lanterns, and they bow.