

**Talons of Desire: BoxWhatBox and HAWKS in southern Serbia
by Michael Devine**

Over the past five years I have developed the tools of my performance workshop, BoxWhatBox (BWB), in two directions: performance training and production. In the summer of 2007 I was invited by the Open Arc Theatre of Serbia to stage an environmental piece in a village in southern Serbia. The *HAWKS* project grew out of the production of *BoxWhatBox: I Forget*, which I created and directed at the National Theatre of Serbia – Užice in 2005. In Užice I had worked with actors in the company for 28 days to create an original production, in Serbian, meshing actors' personal recollections of the circumstances surrounding photographs they had brought me, together with my own reflections on the themes of voluntary and involuntary memory.¹ The following summer, in 2006, I was invited to work in Mokra Gora, a small town in the mountains of the same name in southern Serbia. Over five days with a group of ten actors, working outdoors, we were able to create an original 35 minute piece entitled *BoxWhatBox: I Dream*.

The BWB process contradicts many established conventions of modern western theatre. Using the three phases of the methodology – Demechanisation, Rhythm, and Non-linear Text and Image Creation – actors and animateur create theatrically resonant narratives and performance in days or weeks, rather than months, without a pre-established text. The performance is linked to the location and culture of the participants, yet is intercultural in its utilisation of alternative vocabularies. Thus, a production like *HAWKS* can be considered Serbian, in that it utilised the bodies and minds of Serbian actors, was thematically linked to events of importance in their home culture, and was played before a Serbian audience. Furthermore, BWB is a Poor Theatre technique that makes use of local materials and landscape. In working from larger classical themes, however, and in creating a performance language based on the sounds and movements of hawks and humans, the production takes its place in that category of theatre which defies cultural compartmentalisation. The actor is always the central focus of the performance, as a fulcrum for the leveraging of meaning. There are no intermissions or breaks, and actors are nearly always visible, whether preparing for a scene, performing, or providing the live soundscape by playing indigenous instruments or constructed instrumentation.

The logistical challenges of *HAWKS* were daunting – to create a performance piece with six professional actors, two designers and two stage assistants in fifteen days, working outdoors in searing summer heat. A small village, Tripkova, had recently built an eye-shaped outdoor stage set in the hills outside the town. Adding to the difficulty of rehearsing in 42 degree heat was the fact that a village politician had covered the wooden stage with sheet plastic, as the new wood was oozing resin. The plastic acted like a cooking griddle. (We ended up covering the stage with hay borrowed from a local farmer.) Creating an ensemble environment would be an issue, though not in the sense of overcoming unfamiliarity or combining disparate levels of experience or training; in Serbia actors know of each other and are trained in essentially the same way. The environment in which these actors would be working, however, presented particular challenges outside their range of experience. For fifteen days they would be housed amidst the local population, eating, training and rehearsing up to twelve hours a day, spending all their time together in a village with no television, no bar, and no internet access, working in English to produce a play with a language comprised exclusively of hawk and human cries.

The initial challenge in BWB productions is to find a unifying theme and a coherent, non-traditional mode of storytelling. The narrative is built from the theme. Exercises and games are created for the actors on a daily basis, based on narrative objectives, identifying the core needs and motivations of characters and playing them out in primal, fundamental (and playful) contexts. Out of these the material for the show is structured and refined. The title for *HAWKS* appeared first, a year previously, when it suggested itself to me in a daydream. As my thoughts developed over the coming months the explosive situation in the Balkans, with its recurring episodes of ethnic violence perpetrated by Croats, Albanians and Serbs alike, presented itself as a central element in a larger trope. There is a significant minority population in each of these cultures that supports an aggressive ethnocentrism rooted in a belief that politics and race are zero-sum pursuits where compromise is weakness. The talking democracies of the earnest West appear in this landscape as twittering, ineffectual birds.

Thus, while *HAWKS* would be about raptors and buteos, agents of controlled ferocity in the kingdom of birds, it would also be about the strutting generals, plotting politicians and enthusiastic thugs who have contributed so materially to the hard times of the people of the western Balkans. Such subject matter would have to be handled with subtlety, not because of the risk of condemnation or alienation of the audience, but for aesthetic reasons. Generally there is far too much theatre that dwells in sentimentality (“the poor children!”, “those corrupt politicians!”) and overt didacticism. A bald metaphor is simply bad art, and there is much devised and applied theatre where the predictable bogeymen or ingrained biases of the participants run unchecked.

To avoid these traps, a BWB performance is guided by an animateur. It has no pretence to being a collectivist enterprise. What is required from each artist is investment: responsibility taken within a structured creative environment. The actors are provided with a series of *frames* which encapsulate the events of the narrative. Within each frame there are a series of *posts* which stand as the active objectives of the characters. Each frame has a title. Actors must know where they are going in a frame; they cannot be asked to improvise without objectives. I call this principle *targeted improvisation*. The sequence of the frames, and the events themselves, can be created from rhythm, demechanisation and image creation games in rehearsal, or by the animateur after initial work with the performers. In my practice this is never completed in advance of the rehearsal process, and is almost always revised throughout rehearsal, as new events and new revelations occur. For each frame exercises are created that challenge the actors’ scenic perspective, eschewing conventional psychological realism and promoting primal urgency within highly formalised movement. This urgency was gained in *HAWKS* through the use of hunting and nesting games which produced a gradual anthropomorphic transformation linked with the descent from innocence.

The theme of *HAWKS* was identity: personal, national, universal. Two clusters of hawks have fought a war and the six surviving hawks find themselves together on an open plain. Three are from one *genus* of hawk, three from another. Unable to fly, surrounded by broken husks of dead comrades, they forge an uneasy truce. The aggressive cries of hawks soaring far away in the distance call them to a battle they can no longer fight. Speaking mutually incomprehensible languages of harsh cries and gestures, they are unsure what to do. Events take place which force the hawks to act. The two clusters vie for territory and grudgingly accept the presence of the others as an unalterable fact. Two hawk Lovers, each

from a different cluster, demonstrate an attraction to each other; a Leader hawk assumes authority over both clusters and banishes the Lovers for their tribal transgression. Two Rebel hawks conspire to murder the Leader. When the Leader is killed, the Lovers return, under the protection of the Mother hawk. The Mother and the male Lover are killed by the Rebels, who resent the social order they represent; the Rebels then turn on each other and die locked in each other's talons. The sole survivor, the female hawk Lover, appears from hiding and warily inhabits a rock above the audience, guarding her egg. The ending of the show is deliberately ambiguous. The narrative of inter- and intra-cultural rivalry clearly has classical overtones, and applies specifically to the context of the Balkans, past and present, without further denotation or explanation.

Training always accompanies creation in BWB. The three guiding principles are Power, Control, and Joy. All must be present in nearly equal amounts for successful creation and theatrical performance, and training in these principles is required even for – especially for – the most experienced actor. Training begins with demanding physical work in Neutralisation and Demechanisation, which focuses on identifying and undertaking the process of 'unlearning' physical and emotional habits which limit creativity. Exercises in Rhythm establish three links: between the actor's natural rhythm and that of his/her character, that of the character and other characters, and between the characters and the rhythms of a moment, a scene or a play. At all times the focus is on *play*, on assisting the actor to bring out what she already possesses in her body and spirit, which can be held back by convention, fear or injury. No actor is too old to play.

Notes

ⁱ An account of the experience creating *I FORGET* in Serbia, "I FORGET, I Remember," appeared in CTR 125 (Winter 2006): 29-34.