Introduction

The title *Playing Outside the Lines* has a double meaning. Actors were once more commonly known as *players*, and each of the ten works in this volume owes its vitality to their skill. All produced plays benefit from the actors who interpret them, but the title hints at a deeper connection. In almost all of these plays actors were integral to the actual writing of the play, through their work in *études*, the improvised scenes that form the foundation of *BoxWhatBox*. *BoxWhatBox* was the name I gave to the method I developed in 2004 for creating performance, the point at which my international work took precedence in my career. All but two of the plays were developed through *BoxWhatBox*.

This initial meaning is taken from theatre's primal relationship with play. If both players and plays feature in the spectrum of theatrical history, it's due to play's fundamental importance in creativity and art. Actors and playwrights are like child *savants*. What begins as play—mimicking, pretending, fantasies, and make-believe—becomes a way of creating worlds as real and authentic in their way as this one. Play also involves tossing received ideas up in the air, asking "what if?" and creating new formulations. This is as true for the art of playwriting and its conventions as it is for the actors for whom Stanislavski's *Magic If* forms a basis for creation.

The title's second meaning refers to dramaturgy, the way plays are constructed. The works included here play with established dramatic conventions, either in form or interpretive means. Most playwrights continue to work in the established way: writing several drafts of a text-based script, soliciting feedback, ceding control to producers, directors and actors once it reaches the production process. Increasingly, however, this model feels dated and needlessly restrictive. Individuals and groups operating outside the subsidised institutional structure of state and regional theatres—"outside the lines"—have created new models for performance texts. Many of the texts included here cross easily over to institutional theatre. The cross-pollination can be productive in expanding the reach of theatre to different audiences and artists. Non-conventional approaches can lack rigour as they find their formative feet, while state theatres benefit from the increased creative enfranchisement of their actors.

Even commercial theatre seeks to be relevant to its audience; the difference lies in the criteria applied at each level of theatre. Poor Theatre, in the Grotowskian sense of that term[1], has no more validity than any other monied form of theatre if it does not adhere to this principle. Plays must speak to people. *How* they speak is the crucial aspect of that dictum. Spoken text has long ruled as the dominant mode of theatrical communication. There are fascinating exceptions, from imagist work to the physical language of Artaud and Grotowski. Nevertheless people associate theatre with speaking, and the theatre they see usually ranges from excessively ornate to wastefully verbose.

Humans, for all our deficiencies in communication, are geniuses at expression. Playwrights seldom make use of the extra-verbal vocabularies ordinary people use every day. Non-verbal sound, postural and gestural vocabularies enrich and add depth to performance. These have traditionally not been seen as the province of the playwright but rather of a play's interpreters. This is now changing. Actors and directors will always have the final say in the use of some tools of communication, but

[1] Jerzy Grotowski, Polish theatre artist and thinker who coined the term "Poor Theatre" in the 1960s in his work with the Teatr Laboratorium. Poor Theatre describes a deliberately unelaborated form of theatre production in which actors are the central focus. This extends to the creation of their own properties and costumes. Poor Theatre utilises non-traditional spaces and blurs, or eliminates, the conventional border between performer and spectator.

playwrights can create, in the performance text of a play, indications where these vocabularies can illuminate or supersede text. They would rely less on verbal explanation and create worlds exponentially more authentic than the typical stage reality, where the characters often seem to do nothing more than speak, or wait to speak. In *Identity Theft*, for example, there is a character named Kafkav (pronounced "kaff kaff"), who coughs unconsciously when he is puffing himself up or evading a question.

Leaving cues for expressive vocabularies is a tricky business, because playwrights are, by definition, control freaks, and those who haven't worked closely with actors often know little about the communicative apparatus of the human body. This is one reason why words dominate traditional playwriting.

Each of the works included in this volume plays (that word again) in some way with the notion that text is only one of four expressive tools in communication, one which must be used with the greatest care and even wariness. People still read plays. In this most visual of ages we should say instead that plays should be written to be viewed on a person's internal screen, which is to say their mind. Such a play transforms the written word from mere speaking and exposition to a set of cues for seeing, hearing, and walking in the world of a play. Words should be stones tossed in water: creating ripples of thought, waves of images, for the person reading them.

All of the plays included here were produced in languages of which I possess some understanding but speak poorly, despite earnest efforts. Rehearsals took place in a mixture of Euro-English and the language of the host culture; included here are performances in Serbian, Croatian, Ukrainian, Hungarian and Albanian, but I've also produced work in Finnish, German, Bulgarian and Romanian. Narratives were created by me and then refined and altered by actors, both in rehearsal and in performance. I couldn't rely on the dominance of language, neither my own nor that of another culture. Translation is an imperfect art at best, and early on in the development of *BoxWhatBox* I embraced this notion of language's imperfection. I wanted to turbocharge the ability of actors to alter performance language in a scene, to use elements of their own intimate relationship with language when developing a character in addition to the clues given in the text. As a director, I concentrate equally on language, sound, gesture and posture. The objective is to create meaning beyond the spoken word. (Not pantomime; the spoken word is always present, often in silence, through its absence.) A fully expressive performance text creates a more truthful reality than the school of The Word ever could. Think of conversations you've overheard from another room, where you can't make out the words, but you hear the tones, the inflections, the cadences, and listened with a sure understanding of the nature of what was taking place.

The Plays

Aeneas Ghost

Aeneas Ghost was created in Kosovo, then a fledgling republic where the majority ethnicity is Albanian. Markers of a particularly fervent brand of nationalism were everywhere in the spring of 2006, independence having been newly won, its international status contestable. Albanians like to think of the region they have historically occupied as ancient Illyria, and its people as the descendants of Aeneas and the refugees he led there after the loss of the Trojan War. So, when I entered into talks with Jeton Neziraj, a playwright and the director of Qendra Multimedia, the story of Aeneas, writ anew, seemed like a logical artistic direction to pursue. We agreed to write plays in

tandem as I worked with actors in rehearsal, training them in *BoxWhatBox* and working through études I would create at night and test out the next day. Jeton was interested in the idea of a modern-day Aeneas, wounded by war in ways both visible and invisible. Memories of recent atrocities in the Balkan wars made this choice daring and evocative.

My choice was to place Aeneas in a No Man's Land, a kind of afterlife that is not coherent or contiguous. A soldier returning home, even a great one, faces the fact of his inability to control the narrative of a war or of his life. Larger forces are always at work; Aeneas comes to realise that his greatness as a warrior simply makes him a kind of figurine. I heightened the language, concentrating on rhythm and cadence, to create a sense of displacement from what we conventionally call reality. Aeneas' after-life, like Kosovo's independence, is unsettled, without guarantees, riddled with hidden causalities.

Cyrano XXI

Cyrano XXI was written in the more traditional manner—that is, in cafés, whose denizens would occasionally be disturbed by my weeping or laughter. The idea to make a modern day Cyrano an unrepentant romantic who wears seventeenth-century gear made the idea attractive to the new director of the state theatre in Niš. It was clear from the beginning that this iteration of Rostand's great story (though a terrible play, ponderous and verbose) would have communication as its central theme. After all, the play centres around the deceit of Cyrano supplying Christian's love poetry to Roxane, and his inability to communicate is own feelings (or her unwillingness to interpret them). The use of mobiles on stage, and digital projection to feature the texts, was a natural part of my approach to creating the altered world of Cyrano.

A plethora of modes of communication, their fluctuating effectiveness, and a dearth of intimacy are hallmarks of the first era of social media in western life. In *Cyrano XXI* the clearest communicator is Nasiya. Clear expression is not a means, in her case, for changing the circumstances and restrictions created by her religion and gender. Cyrano remains, as in the original, a gifted lyrical romantic. But his gifts are, in the most elemental sense, wasted. He doesn't get the girl. I added cerebral palsy to augment Cyrano's challenges in communication, replacing his famous nose, which, in the modern age, seems less plausible to me as a source of romantic rejection. CP makes Cyrano's expressive challenge visceral. He alone understands that synchronous understanding is fleeting and misunderstanding inevitable. Christian, a callow young male, is tongue-tied and uneducated. Ironically these are not impediments to his successful pursuit of Roxane, until the deceit of Cyrano's ghostwriting unties his sense of morality. In an act of great moral character, he sacrifices himself. Rostand's Roxane is a cipher—conventional and unimaginative. The theatre owes her, and all women, far more liveliness than that. In *Cyrano XXI* alone of all the characters, Roxane distrusts anything but face-to-face communication. This insistence on physical proximity fails to shield her from heartbreak. Even the pompous De Guiche, by play's end, is a rueful victim of the limits of communication. All words and their forms are suspect.

As we approached the première I became aware the actor playing Cyrano was skipping a large chunk of text in the final scene. It was a romantic monologue about the nature of beauty and the quest for it, after Cyrano duels with Death in his fever dream. I really liked it. The actor, being the one who actually had to say it, felt the monologue was too much. He was right. A play about communication can afford no indulgences. The words were cut.

Identity Theft

Created with a tight-knit ensemble of actors in Zadar, Croatia, *Identity Theft* feels, like most of my work, distinctly Central or Eastern European in its style and themes. First, it's a clown show, of the *buffon* or black-nose variety. Second, it's a dark comedy riven with political allusions to the Serbian ("Shrimp" in the play) and Croatian ("Crustacean") conflict that has loomed for centuries over families and social and political life in the Balkans. A mix of influences can be glimpsed. The Czech clown Boleslav Polivka's brilliantly subversive *Deklaunizace* made a huge impact on me when I first saw it in pre-Velvet Revolution Prague. The determined and headstrong little girl is named Alice for a reason. The use of a head puppet for Mrs Krumpli's imaginary friend "Jodiefoster" came out of my appreciation for the dramatic value of puppets on stage. (The fact that Sanja Zalović was a puppeteer at the State Puppet Theatre in Zadar encouraged me, according to the aesthetic of *BoxWhatBox*, to make use of her skills.)

In the Balkans there's always a demagogue lying in wait for troubled times (and times are always troubled). Like Kafkav, they're always hypocrites; like Kafkav, and the child-tyrant Trump who came after him, such individuals are masters of a particular kind of theatre. The provocative insinuation. The evocation of a dastardly enemy. The earthy denunciations of the educated class. The imagery of virulent patriotism. Croatia has never totally freed itself from such influences. I wanted the audience to laugh and then have the laugh catch in their throats. The play has no happy ending, but the final scene embodies a kind of hope that Balkan peoples recognise: the clowns trudge forward in a disjointed line, bloodied, bowed, but still, in their sheer inability to be disciplined, themselves. They'll pass on their inability to be altered by tyrants to another generation.

East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon (The White Bear)

There were two books I read repeatedly when I was young: M.M. Dodge's *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates* and *East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon*. The latter was a collection of folktales by the Norwegian version of the Grimm Brothers, Asbjørnsen and Moe. I loved these folktales because, like those of the Grimms, they were devoid of the treacly sentimentality and cheap moralism that are the hallmarks of conventional children's writing. Bad things happen in these folk tales, and not just to bad people; life is challenging, and is meant to be. As in all great children's tales, pluck and composure eventually take the protagonists where they want to go.

When I was asked to choose a project to direct at the Vojtina Bábszínhaz, the State Puppet Theatre of Hungary in Debrecen, the first thing that came to mind was the title tale from Asbjørnsen and Moe's famous collection. It's not as grisly as some of their tales, but it's satisfyingly spare. The advice of the Four Winds is eminently practical, even the villains, Tarka and Barka, are pragmatic, and the Witch, neither a Glinda nor Miss Almira Gulch, is sanguine about the various mishaps of fate that befall her. Moderation and patience are the values in play, everyone is fallible, and life can be better if you work hard to make it so.

The production was a joy to be a part of.

Ghost Mountain

By 2011 my friend and colleague Vladan Slavković had risen to the position of Artistic Director at the State Theatre in Kraljevo. We had worked together twice previously and were eager to collaborate again, this time as scenographer and director. Slavko assembled a crack group of actors from the three top academies in Serbia, all about to embark on their professional careers. For most this was to be their first professional production. We trained them each morning in *BoxWhatBox* and its fundamental theatrical principles, and then worked through the searingly hot afternoons creating the show. In the evenings we'd congregate on the spacious veranda of our hotel, at the foot of the hill leading up to our performance area, chatting and singing, while I worked away in my little moleskin plotting the next day's études.

On the way up the mountain for the first time Slavko shared his idea for the subject: his Uncle Lunjo, a character among characters, who lived on Mount Goć a long time ago. Lunjo, it's said, communicated with all the animals on the mountain and was fiercely protective of them. I took mental notes as Slavko related some of Lunjo's legendary feats, because we needed to hit the ground running. A feature of *BoxWhatBox* is the almost unreasonable optimism and creative enthusiasm it takes to put a complete theatrical performance together in the time most casts take to find the coffee machine. We had nine days from conception to realisation and the process was intense, like living in a forge. We were welding together all the available skills of the actors with indigenous materials and the story. There was an intense feeling of spirituality when we were on the mountain. Lunjo and his menagerie had been waiting for us to bring their stories out of the shadows. So that's what we did.

Eurydika

Vladan Slavković once more supplied the impetus for the narrative in the *BoxWhatBox* project. By 2017 Slavko was running his own theatre group, Grupa Group, and had founded a theatre festival, A.N.F.I., in his hometown of Kraljevo. He invited me to a residency at the festival and to create the closing spectacle. Typically, he gave me nine days to do so, knowing that *BoxWhatBox* thrives in restrictive circumstances.

We were both intrigued by the story of Eurydice and Orpheus and the many ways it's been interpreted and contested over generations, and even within its initial period of genesis. Subsequent treatments, such as Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*, have restored some balance to the relationship. The objective of *Eurydika* was to present this contested narrative in a physical, psychologised form, embodied by the four competing forms of Eurydika in the play, retaining the austerity and unsentimentality of classical theatre.

Crucial to the performance was the interconnectedness of the four actors playing Eurydika. I had worked with them all, and the dramaturgy relied on their ability to think as one while finding distinctive aspects of Eurydika's identity to play. Similarly, the chorus members, all members of Slavko's theatre, could be directed as a single entity while, in the Vakhtangovian style, retaining elements of individuality.

The performance site, on the shore of the river Ibar in central Kraljevo, presented both challenges and possibilities. A paved walkway along one edge of the shore was a natural home for the Eurydikas. I decided that the audience, seated in the field just above this walkway, would find themselves in Hades. Thirty metres or so across the water lay two islets, nearly connected, on which

we could place the chorus and from which Orpheus could leave to ford the Styx with Charon. The simple image of a man, pole in hand, leading another across the water was among the most vivid images we created from the nature that was available to us. The performance took place at sunset, the crowd spilling far beyond the boundaries we'd set. An over-zealous aunt of one of the actors walked into the first scene snapping photographs. Stray dogs barked in protest at the temporary loss of their domain. A hush descended, growing stronger as the rituals of the chorus played out and the timeless nature of Eurydika's dilemma unfolded. For a brief moment, all shared her world.

I FORGET

This was the first *BoxWhatBox* project to take place at a major institutional theatre, the State Theatre of Serbia in Užice. We had the relative luxury of a month of work leading up to the première. It didn't feel luxurious. The costume and props people at the theatre were used to developing scenic design over a period of months. The actors, all part of the rep company in Užice, were rehearsing a different production at the same time and performing various shows from the theatre's repertory in the evening. Adding to the pressure was that the actors, featured multiple times a year at the region's major theatre, were all local celebrities. They'd been asked to take on an as-yet-unwritten play, rehearsing in a style that was far from conventional theatre practice. Early on, I decided to make use of their local celebrity, by placing the actors as witnesses in the performance. Each of them were asked to bring in a personal photograph, one which evoked vivid memories but which also raised at least one question. Their photos became the basis for the transition scenes in between the three frames of the play. An actor addressed the audience directly, without artifice, telling the story of the photo and its question.

I had a room within the theatre, which added to the cloistered effect. Each night I would write new exercises and études, make adjustments to the scenes or structure we had begun developing, and write copiously in my theatre journal. I was determined not only to make the most of this first big test of BWB, but to record my experience. There wasn't a lot of time for sleep. My assistant, and the artist who had created the possibility of the project, was Stefan Džeparoski. I've worked with many outstanding talents and wonderful people. Stefan would be near the top of that list. He was fundamental to the project's functioning, navigating the opaque politics of the administration even as he directed his own production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at the same theatre. It was my introduction to the multi-tasking mania of Serbian theatre.

Serbia had just come out of a war, perhaps the most damaging of its long and troubled history. Yugoslavia had shattered, and the Serbs' privileged place in that polity along with it. Even far from the war's fronts, every citizen experienced the war in a visceral way. The Serb leader Milošević had distorted Serbian history for populist purposes. Now the Serbs were dealing with distorted narratives about "evil Serbs" coursing through European and North American culture. Memory—what we wish to retain but forget, what we wish to forget but remember, what we question as time erodes fact—seemed to me to be the only subject worth exploring at that moment in Serbian history.

The opening night was electric. In the transition scenes the audience watched the actors as simply people like themselves, relating bits of personal experience that tied them to their community. Sitting onstage, with no curtain or obscuring blackouts, the actors could then be observed transforming, becoming recognisably Serbian characters. Going to America, protecting your daughter as American bombs drop on your city, commemorating the death of an enemy who saved your family, slowly going mad from loneliness and despair, clowning in the face of black despair,

sitting at the edge of a river gazing in wonder as a fish changes its colour. These are human and Serbian things. The crowd rose as one and applauded the actors as artists, and as friends.

Of course, I could be wrong. Memory plays tricks.

I DREAM

I conceived ***I DREAM*** as a series of disconnected images. Over six days, it's possible to create an evocative narrative using alternative dramaturgy, but the approach must be crystal clear and the artistic team fully invested. Conventional dramaturgy is a lengthier, and not always more refined, process. Even when more refined, the result may have all the nutritive value of refined white bread. The theme of dreams gave us a chance to explore études and games of every conceivable type without the time-consuming responsibility of piecing them together into *something meaningful*. People are cussedly stubborn about dreams. Since Freud we look for some connected narrative we're missing in our physical reality. Most often there isn't one. Dreams are an alternate reality. They should be enjoyed like a day trip. Get out of town, see some sights, breathe in fresh air.

WALLS/STINY

WALLS/STINY marked my second time working in Ukraine, after an earlier, spectacular and enjoyable flameout with a mad group of iconoclasts named Theatre Oxymoron in Kyiv. Iulia Sulima, the group's director, had recommended me to Oleh Savchenko, the founder and driving force behind the young Odessa International Theatre Festival. When he asked me to create the final performance of the festival I agreed immediately, even with all the caveats he'd been careful to embed in the offer. *There's no money for scenography, the actors are going to be pulled from volunteers, you have nine days*. My sole condition was that they allow me to bring an assistant who could help translate when English broke down in rehearsal, and to provide her accommodation. Oleg agreed. Moriana and I only discovered we were to live together on our first day at the festival.

That began an absolutely bonkers nine-day period where we spent approximately 16 hours a day in each other's company. I'd never had an artistic assistant quite like Moriana. I've had brilliant ones, matey ones, mind-readers: I've never started with a translator who became a movement coach, then a photographer, and finally production dramaturg. Each morning we'd breakfast together and plot the training session. After the training we'd lunch together in the courtyard at "Underground," the nightclub where the festival was headquartered, and assess the morning while I plotted the afternoon's études. Each day presented a new set of obstacles. We learned that Oleh hadn't told any of the actors they needed to commit for the entire process, so the composition of participants was changing every day. Rehearsals took place behind a curtain while the regular daily business of the club went on. We soon got used to the noise, with people and dogs wandering in and out. We needed to select a cast that would stay with us when things got intense. Moriana was instinctively trusted by everyone from the group to Oleh. She could see things I could only dimly glimpse and get a sense of who could do what and whom we could rely on. This was crucial.

It helped that I'd arrived with a narrative structure: three interweaving stories, reminiscent of the structure of *I FORGET*. I'd done a lot of research on Ukraine, past and present, and chosen some Ukrainian poetry to use. The festival's over-all theme was "Walls", and Oleh had been adamant that the show should in some way extrapolate that theme. This tied in neatly to the *BoxWhatBox* aesthetic and its tendency to reflect both current preoccupations and the more universal aspects of a culture

in performance. Ukraine in 2016 was only two years removed from the Russian annexation of Crimea and the occupation of the Donbas region by pro-Russian forces. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants were crossing into mainland Europe from the Middle East and the Balkans. People were struggling. There were a lot of walls going up, visible and invisible.

I created three sets of characters from different cultures, each dealing with barriers of different kinds. In the "Ukrainian" frame, childhood friends watch one of their own turn into a demagogue. Later, a young couple reluctantly separate over the issue of leaving one's country behind for a better economic future. In the "East German" frame, two young lovers find themselves on opposite sides of the wall that rises in Berlin. Much later, much older, they re-unite. In the final, "Albanian" frame, a family of refugees wanders unluckily into the clutches of the Ukrainian demagogue and the anti-immigrant sentiment sweeping the region, as they make their way in search of a better life.

HAWKS

HAWKS occupies a special place in my heart. For two weeks in the typically fierce Serbian summer the creative group was housed with the villagers of Tripkova, in southern Serbia. We spent all our time together. Breakfasts were communal, generally leavened by the offer of homemade *raki* as a "digestive" from a proud local. Lunches were an opportunity for a North American vegetarian to witness just how much meat and bread hungry young Serbs can put away. The local women would anxiously ask my assistant Maja, "he's not eating. Is the food not good?" Dinners were a celebration of the day's work, followed by guitar and Serbian folk songs around a campfire.

We worked meticulously over two weeks to create a complete, multi-dimensional narrative that featured no spoken language except the sounds of hawks. The actors were divided into brown hawks and grey hawks, two warring clusters which are forced to co-exist after a catastrophic battle. In southern Serbia, memories of the Balkan war of the nineties and early oughts are still raw, and in some pockets a festering nationalist grievance remains. But *HAWKS* was not meant to be merely an allegory. Or, at least, not just on one level. At every juncture of human interaction, we find affinities, collect in like-minded groups, create grievances, identify "others" and define identities. *HAWKS* is about finding a way to live together when one can no longer afford to be alone.

The producers, or our resourceful costume designer Ranka, would arrive from Užice to drop off supplies. After a week they were startled by the *Lord of the Flies* quality we had all taken on. A little shaggy, social graces slightly eroded, a band of people with burnt-brown tans, matted hair and a slightly wild look as we climbed over pavilion roofs, banged on our homemade instruments and laughed. So much laughter. It was a communal event. The villagers, who had treated us with so much kindness for two weeks, were our main audience for the show (a bus of spectators came from Užice as well). As the hawks gamboled, fought, and loved in front of them, above them, and mingled amongst them, these non-traditional spectators didn't look fazed in the slightest. They knew that the show had been made for them. That's an equation the theatre should never forget.